## Skin Deep

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## Skin Deep

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### Summary

Data wanted emotions his whole life, but now he has them can his programming adapt to handle the strain, or has he become a liability to Starfleet and his friends? Picard, Troi and Riker aim to find out during a horseback riding adventure that goes terribly awry. Why would alien raiders target an ancient stairway leading nowhere? What mysteries lurk in the ruins of Nineveh IV?

This story is in progress. Comments, reviews, and opinions are welcome and much appreciated! :)

### Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own Star Trek: The Next Generation. Please don't sue me or steal my story. Thanks! :)

NOTE: This story takes place shortly after the movie First Contact.

NOTE II: This story is still in progress. If you're reading it, I'd really appreciate it if you let me know what you think so far! Please review. :)
Chapter 1

Skin Deep
by Rowena Zahnrei

Lt. Commander Data strode into Deanna Troi's office and slapped a padd down on her desk.

"Good morning, Data," the counselor said, looking up from her computer terminal. "We're not scheduled to meet today, but if you—"

"Are you aware that I am a threat to the Federation?" Data said, pushing the padd toward her. "Perhaps a greater threat even than the Borg? It says so, right here, in this opinion piece, published today in the Federation Standard Times. That, and a great deal more."

Troi's pleasant expression fell into a confused frown.

"Data…I'm afraid I don't understand…?"

Data snatched the padd back in frustration and pulled up a chair.

"This man, this Jake Sisko, blames me – me personally – both for the destruction of the Enterprise-D and, more recently, for allowing the Borg Queen to tamper with the timeline."

"Data, you know that's ridiculous," Deanna said. "No one person could possibly—"

"That is not what Sisko says!" Data interrupted, gesturing to the padd as if it were the offender in person. "According to him, my decision to install the emotion chip my father created for me makes me culpable for all the destruction that followed. He argues that installing that chip was the equivalent of installing a fatal virus, a flaw or weakness that has since made me a dangerous and unstable element, and that the Federation would have been safer and better off if I had just stayed as I was: a machine that intellectualized its experiences instead of feeling them!"

Deanna winced.

"Data," she tried, "you had every right to—"

"No, you are wrong, Counselor," Data said. "For, according to Sisko – who casts himself as an unerringly authority because, as a child, he lost his mother in a Borg attack – as a Starfleet Officer, it is my responsibility to put the good of the Federation's citizens before my own selfish desires. I, therefore, had no right to expect time to adapt to the chip's emotional input, to come to grips with my new emotions, or to heal, emotionally, following my experience with the Borg Queen. If I wished to conduct cybernetic experiments on my positronic brain, I should first have resigned my commission."

"That is hardly a fair conclusion, Data," Deanna said.

"Is it not?" Data said. "It was my choice to install the chip – I did not have to do that. And, you must acknowledge, my situation has altered since. I have become as Sisko says: volatile. Unpredictable. Perhaps even dangerous. And the more integrated these emotions become, the more my programming adapts to handle all this complex, contradictory emotional input, the more I…"

"Yes?" Deanna leaned forward, her brow furrowed with concern. "Don't stop there, Data. What's really worrying you?"
"Never mind," Data said, and she actually felt him deactivate his emotion chip. His expression
smoothed out and his posture straightened as he rose to his feet. "I apologize for barging into your
office, Counselor. If you will excuse me—"

"Oh no, you're not getting out of here so easily," Deanna said, pushing away from her desk and
striding over to cut him off before he made it to the door. "I've felt this before in you…this terror you
fight to hide away from me, from your friends, even from yourself. Now, this article has brought it to
the surface. You know you can talk to me, Data. Tell me: what are you so afraid of?"

Data's calm golden eyes seemed offputtingly cold.

"If you do not move out of my way, I can move you."

Deanna felt a peculiar chill, but swallowed it back.

"But you won't," she said.

"What makes you so sure?" Data retorted. "I am stronger than you. Faster. You cannot stop me if I
do not want to be stopped."

Deanna straightened.

"All right, do it," she said. "Make me get out of your way."

Data's eyes widened for a moment - just a moment - then he smoothly dodged around her and
through the sliding doors.

"Data!" the counselor called after him as he marched down the corridor, noting the tension in his
shoulders even though he had not switched his emotion chip back on. "You're not like him, Data.
You never will be."

Data turned to face her as he entered the turbolift.

"I wish I could be as confident as you, Counselor," he said, and was gone.

Deanna returned to her desk and rubbed her arms, as if cold. She started to go back to her work, then
sat back and tapped her communicator.

"Troi to Captain Picard," she said.

"Picard here," the captain answered.

"Captain, it's Data," she said, and sighed. "I think we have a problem."

To Be Continued…
Chapter Two

Captain Picard, Counselor Troi, and Commander Riker sat together around the coffee table in Picard's quarters. Troi cradled a mug of hot chocolate between her hands, as if warming them, but Riker's coffee and the captain's cup of Earl Grey sat steaming on their coasters, untouched.

"Are you sure you're not overreacting?" Riker said. "Data's had mood swings like this before. He's had plenty since he installed that chip of his, but his job performance has been consistently excellent."

"He has, yes, but not like this," Troi said, her eyes focused on her mug. "What I felt from him, in my office…even after he deactivated the chip... It concerned me. And, as much as we all care about Data, as ship's counselor, I have to put the good of the crew first."

"Just what are you trying to tell us, Deanna?" Picard said, his deep concern evident in his use of her first name.

Troi sighed and looked up.

"I'm considering recommending Data take an extended leave of absence," she said grimly. "A year, perhaps. Maybe two. Now, Will," she held up a hand, "before you say anything, I want you to stop and think. These past few years have been a chaotic, uprooting time, and none of us have really had a break. I'm afraid the stress of enduring so many transitions so quickly has started to take its toll on Data. He needs some time, time to decompress, to reflect, to get to know himself – not as the efficient, dispassionate officer he used to be, but as the emotional being he has become. And I'm not sure he can do that with the pressures and obligations of his command position constantly hanging over him. He is Chief of Operations, the Second Officer of the Enterprise-E. If he should suffer an emotional break…"

"I…I understand what you're saying, Counselor," Picard broke in, "and you may be right. Considering his outburst this morning and all you've told us here, there can be no doubt Data has reached yet another fragile point in his emotional development, and I would be willing to recommend he take some time for himself, away from his duties. If that's all this was. But, apart from any Starfleet repercussions, my concern is that Data would interpret your suggestion of a leave of absence as a rejection – a rejection that would only reinforce the accusations made by that ridiculous article. If he comes to believe that installing that damned chip has lost him the trust and respect of his colleagues, his friends… I fear we may lose him. Lose him to the same bitterness that twisted his brother, Lore."

Riker sipped his coffee, his eyes averted.

Troi's expression hardened.

"Captain, Lore's legacy is one of the main reasons I think Data should get away from us and this ship and immerse himself in a different environment, different experiences," she said. "He has to learn he can be passionate and still be himself, still be Data, without the memory of Lore or our expectations getting in his way." Her grip tightened around her mug. "Since he installed that chip, there's not a
session I've had with Data where I haven't wanted to curse Dr. Soong and his colossal narcissism for making both Lore and Data look and sound so exactly like him."

Riker fidgeted in his chair.

"I have to admit, there have been times, seeing Data smile or hearing him laugh...I have been reminded of Lore," he said. "I'm sure Data's picked up on that, and not just from me. God," he shook his head. "I hadn't really considered it from his point of view before. Just my own embarrassment for feeling that way."

"It's not your fault, Will, or any of ours," Troi said, including the captain in her gaze. "Lore made it his business to taint Data's dream of sharing human feelings from the moment he opened his eyes on the Enterprise-D. Lore claimed he was more 'perfect' than Data, more 'human,' because he had the strong emotions Data believed he lacked. He impersonated Data to undermine our trust in him, to show him how easily human friendship could turn to suspicion and fear. The next time they met, Lore stole Data's emotion chip from Dr. Soong – making it his. Meaning if Data ever got it back, it would be second-hand goods. The feelings Data would feel, the memories Dr. Soong had given him, they would have been Lore's memories, Lore's feelings first. But, that wasn't enough. Lore later used that chip to brainwash and manipulate Data into harming his closest friends, tainting it further. Then, Lore attacked Data, forcing Data to fire at his own brother. He made sure that, if Data was to have emotions, he would first have to 'scavenge' them from Lore's dead body. Lore wrapped that chip up in so many layers of violence, cruelty, and pain it was years before Data was able to ready himself to finally claim it as his own. And what happened? As soon as he let himself go, the chip malfunctioned. Data was forced to watch as Geordi, his best friend, was kidnapped by a mad scientist and tortured by Klingons, then used as an instrument to destroy the Enterprise-D. Our ship. Our home. It took me months to help him stop blaming himself for that. Then, just as he was getting back on his feet, Data was kidnapped and tormented by the Borg Queen. The tactics he used to defeat her – deceit, manipulation – were not dissimilar from tactics Lore had used against him and against us, and Data later admitted to me, quite reluctantly, that he had derived satisfaction from being the instrument of her destruction."

Picard furrowed his brow, remembering that terrible day in Engineering, the look in Data's lone, remaining eye as he pulled the Borg Queen off his captain and into the dense cloud of corrosive gasses he had released from the ship's engines. Picard had seen the pale flesh melt from the Borg Queen's face, heard her horrific screams...

And, he knew Data's positronic brain had recorded every moment of her gruesome demise.

"All this has made Data afraid," Troi went on. "Afraid of himself, of the expressive, animated face he now sees in the mirror. It's Lore's face. Soong's face. Not his. Not Data's. And now, this article, coming at him from an outside source...it only intensifies the blame he's already piled on himself for installing that chip in the first place. It puts into sharp relief the uncomfortable fact that he is no longer who he was. The chip has changed him, altered his neural pathways, caused his brain to develop to the point where, even if he removed the chip now, today, it wouldn't make a difference. Data is acutely aware he will never again be the Data we used to know. And he's terrified of disappointing us."

"Hm," Riker said, running a thoughtful hand over his beard. "After we lost the D, didn't you put Data through a series of psychological tests...?"

"To ensure his continued fitness for duty, yes," Troi said.

"And his emotional age then...you pegged it somewhere between six and nine?"
She nodded.

"I also said that was to be expected, given his limited experience handling emotional stimuli. His rational nature and exceptionally high intelligence have helped him cope, so far, but—"

"Yes, I read the report," Riker interrupted, "but didn't Starfleet evaluate him again, after his experience with the Borg?"

"They did, and he passed," she acknowledged. "I also gave him several tests, which pegged his current emotional age between fifteen and seventeen. That's remarkable developmental progress, given the short time frame, but I still—"

"Then that's it, isn't it?" Riker said, his expression beginning to brighten with something like amusement.

Picard regarded him.

"Explain."

"Data's behavior," he said. "His moodiness, angry outbursts, all that sulking about the changes he's been going through lately. Don't you see? We've got a teenager on our hands!"

"It's not that simple, Will," Troi started, but Riker shook his head.

"No, that's it," Riker insisted. "You said yourself Data's brain is still developing, still growing. And, while he may have reached intellectual maturity long ago, emotionally, he's just a kid. A super-smart, highly self-critical, fifteen year old kid, caught between the childlike understanding of the human experience he used to have and the more shaded, adult world he's just started to enter."

"Merde," Picard muttered into his tea, and set his glass on the table. "You might have something there. But if it's true, how should we handle this? Data is not a child, and he is growing more perceptive by the day. Even if he is…emotionally, at least…a teenager, we cannot treat him as one. If he should think we've begun to patronize him…"

Troi pursed her lips.

"Data needs to feel that we accept him and like him for who he is now. He has to know he won't disappoint us by acting against type – that it's OK for him to smile and laugh and even get angry in front of us. But if he smiles, he has to see that it's Data smiling. If he loses his temper, it must be Data losing his temper, separate and apart from the shadow of Lore's cruelty. With this in mind, it is still my considered recommendation that Data take some time off."

Picard's eyes narrowed and he nodded slightly, as if he'd just come to an internal decision.

"Very well," he said. "The Enterprise is nearly due for a maintenance check, and Geordi has been wanting to upgrade the dilithium chamber. I had planned to put it off for a few months, until we'd finished cataloging the Cochrane Nebula, but you've just convinced me a few weeks shore leave will improve efficiency all around, for ship and crew. Number One," he said to Riker, "have the helm set course for Starbase 74. I'll join you on the bridge in fifteen minutes."

"Very good, sir," Riker said, and strode out of the captain's quarters.

Troi turned her dark eyes toward Picard.

"Something more, Counselor?" the captain asked.
"You're looking forward to this leave time," the empath observed. "Do you have something special in mind?"

"Now that you mention it," he said, "I have been wanting to take a trip to Nineveh IV, explore the ancient city…perhaps acquire permission to volunteer at the new archaeological dig."

Troi smiled.

"That sounds perfect," she said. "I'm sure you and Data will have a wonderful time."

Picard opened his mouth, then closed it and narrowed his eyes.

"Counselor…" he said warningly.

"You know if we dock at Starbase, Data will just stay in Engineering with Geordi. He hates to be alone, and he doesn't want to feel like he's intruding on others' fun. But, if you invite him to join your expedition…?"

"I see," Picard said, and sighed. "So, you want me to take our moody, teenage-minded android on a camping trip away from home, is that it?"

"I wouldn't have put it quite that way, but yes," she said through her smile. "If you won't approve an extended leave, then I think a 'camping trip' would do you both good. And, if you like, Will and I can join you. I'd like to be there to monitor Data and track his progress."

Picard seemed to consider.

"You know there are no ground vehicles allowed near the ruins," he said. "We'll have to do most of our traveling on horseback. And, this isn't a resort world. There'll be no hotels, no hot baths, no fresh food…"

"Sounds like a regular adventure," she said. "What do you say?"

Picard raised his eyebrows.

"You mean I have a choice?"

"Of course you do," Troi said innocently. "You're the captain. If you don't want us to come—"

"No, no, it's all right, Counselor," Picard said. "The four of us do usually go our separate ways on leave, don't we. It might be good to spend this time together, away from the ship."

"Great, then I'll tell Will," Troi said. "I'll leave it to you to invite Data. And, sir... If, at the end of this trip, Data's emotional state still concerns me."

"Then I will consider supporting your recommendation for an extended leave of absence," Picard said. "Though, I hope it will not come to that. Starfleet does not tend to react kindly to emotionally unstable androids…"

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes
References include TNG: Datalore, Brothers, Descent I/II, 11001001, and the movies Generations and First Contact.
Chapter Three

Engineering was humming with activity, but it was always that way, even when not preparing for extensive upgrades. Data strode through the bustle straight to Geordi's office, where the Chief Engineer sat busily tapping away at his console. Only, he didn't go in. He just stood there, his eyes averted, as if uncertain he should be there at all.

Geordi paused his tapping and started to turn—"Farrell, could you –oh!" he exclaimed. "Data! What's up?"

"Geordi…" Data said. "How do you know…if you are in trouble?"

Geordi furrowed his brow over the blue-irised optic implants that had replaced his VISOR some months before. The blind engineer had made the decision to undergo the operation to replace his eyes with cybernetic implants shortly after they had lost the Enterprise-D. Most people thought it was because Dr. Soran's tampering had damaged the VISOR, but Geordi had confessed a deeper reason to Data. Optic implants couldn't be snatched away like a VISOR…and he never wanted to feel that vulnerable again.

Data knew Geordi didn't blame him for the abuse he'd suffered on that Klingon ship, he had reassured the android of that on one hundred sixty three separate occasions since the incident. But, Data also knew Geordi would not have been kidnapped if Data hadn't talked his friend into installing that emotion chip in his positronic brain just a few hours earlier. To Data, Geordi's sudden decision to have the operation he had avoided for most of his adult life, and his subsequent altered appearance, were further reminders of how much gaining emotions had changed him, and his relationship with his friends and colleagues…for the worse.

"What do you mean 'in trouble?'" Geordi asked the nervous android. "Have you done something, Data?"

Data seemed to shrug.

"I…got angry," he admitted. "In Counselor Troi's office."

"What, and you're afraid she'll tell the Captain?" Geordi asked, a trace of amusement creasing his lips. "This isn't high school, Data. You're not going to get sent to the principal's office for getting mad."

"This is not the first time I have lost my temper in her presence," he said. "But it was a rather…intense…episode. I am afraid she may think me…unstable…"

Geordi sighed and stood up, letting his friend see he had his attention.

"Data, if this is about that article, you should know—"

"Picard to Commander Data," the captain's voice blared from his combadge. "Please report to my ready room."
Geordi couldn't be sure, but it looked like Data actually paled. His white-gold skin took on a grayish hue, and his whole expression tightened.

Slowly, the android tapped his combadge.

"Aye, sir," he replied, and his hand fell limply to his side.

"You're not in trouble, Data," Geordi tried to assure him.

Data nodded.

"Thank you, Geordi. But I fear androids are not given the same amount of emotional leeway as organic humanoids. If I should be dismissed—"

"Now you're overreacting," Geordi said. "Captain Picard is not going to fire you, no matter what you may have said to Counselor Troi. Everyone has the right to blow off some steam now and then, androids included. And I'll tell you right now, if someone had written an article like that about me, Counselor Troi's ears wouldn't be the only ones burning. I'd set the Federation's entire subspace network on fire! -Not literally, of course," he said in response to Data's wide-eyed expression.

"No," Data acknowledged. Then, he glanced at his friend, a touch of mischief glinting in his golden eyes. "But it would be satisfying, would it not?"

Geordi grinned and clapped his friend on the shoulder.

"You're just fine, Data," he said. "Now, go see the Captain. For all you know, the lid's stuck on his fish tank and he wants you to help him pry it off."

Data chuckled a little and returned his friend's smile.

"Thank you, Geordi," he said. "Your reassurances are very important to me."

"Get out of here before the Captain comes looking for you," the engineer said, and sank back into his chair.

Data gave him another little nod, then turned on his heel and marched back to the turbolift.

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Picard tapped a few flakes of fish food into the lionfish's tank and replaced the lid.

"Thank you, Mr. Data," he said and gestured for them both to return to their seats at his ready room desk. "I'm sure Livingston appreciates the thought. But I didn't ask you here about my fish."

Data tried to swallow a wince, but Picard caught it anyway.

"Is something wrong?"

"Wrong? No. No, sir. I am 'just fine.'"

"Good…" Picard said, regarding him a little more closely than the android liked. "Counselor Troi seems to think you could do with a rest. A change of scene, I believe is how she put it."

Data seemed stricken.

"Please, sir," he said, "I do not wish to leave the Enterprise…"
"Yes, she told me you might feel that way," Picard said, to the android's deepening horror. "But I think she's right about this. It's no good for you to stay here on this ship while the rest of the bridge crew is on leave. That's why…"

"Sir...?"

Picard shook his head at him.

"Data, don't look at me like this is the end of the world. I understand you'd probably prefer to stay on board to help Geordi with the upgrades to the warp core. I'm just trying to invite you to join me on an archaeological expedition to Nineveh IV. If you agree, Commander Riker and Counselor Troi will be joining us."

Data blinked.

"You want me to join you, Commander Riker, and Counselor Troi on an archaeological expedition?" he repeated.

"If you're willing," Picard said.

"Why?" Data blurted, only to wince. "Sorry, sir..."

"No, I know we all usually go our own ways when leave time comes around, but Counselor Troi made a very good point a short while ago. We've all been through a great deal of turmoil these last few years. It's past time the four of us did something together, something fun, outside the bonds of rank and Starfleet formality."

Data looked a little overwhelmed, his golden eyes shooting back and forth as if he'd been asked to process the entire mythological reference base of the Children of Tama.

"You're free to say no, Data," Picard said. "But, you should know that if you do-"

"No..." Data said, his oddly gray expression beginning to brighten. "No, I mean, yes!" he said. "Yes, thank you, Captain. I would be honored to join your expedition. I am just...surprised. Nineveh IV...they use horses for transport, do they not?"

"Yes," Picard said. "As I was telling Counselor Troi, ground vehicles are not allowed—"

"Near the ruins, yes, I know," Data said thoughtfully. "I have never ridden horseback before. Do you think a horse would respond favorably to an android rider?"

"I don't see that it would make much difference," Picard said. "I'm actually more surprised at Counselor Troi. She once told me Betazoids don't go in much for riding. They get too involved with the 'passions of the beast.'"

Data nodded, his brow furrowed. He had a growing suspicion about the Counselor's role in all this, but he knew it would be best to keep any accusations to himself until he had a chance to collect more information.

"It will be a rough journey, Captain," he said. "Nineveh IV is known for its sandstorms, and there has been a recent spate of mild tectonic activity in the region of the ruins. The archaeologists have logged no reports of damage, but there is the possibility we may experience a quake."

"All the more reason to go now, while the ruins are still standing," Picard said, and smiled. "So, Data, are you up for this adventure?"
Data opened his mouth, but his building enthusiasm seemed to puncture just before he could speak. 

"Captain…" he said awkwardly.

"What is it, Data?"

"Has Counselor Troi informed you—"

"About your reaction to that article in today's newsfeeds?" Picard shook his head. "Data, you mustn't let outside opinions erode your confidence. I know you've been going through some difficult transitions, that your emotion chip is affecting you in ways you probably never anticipated."

Data nodded a bit sullenly.

"But, for all the mistakes you may believe you've made since installing that chip, I know you've become a stronger person for it," Picard said, meeting his officer's eyes with firm sincerity. "I welcome this time to get more familiar with the man you have become. The man you are becoming. And I think it's time you get to know him too."

The overwhelmed look reappeared in Data's eyes and, for a moment, Picard was almost afraid the android would start crying. But he didn't. Instead, he stood.

"Thank you, Captain," he said again. "May I go make arrangements for my cat Spot to be cared for while I am away?"

"By all means, Mr. Data," Picard told him. "Just be sure to be in Shuttle Bay One at 0600 tomorrow morning."

"I will be there, Captain," Data said, and strode out of the room. Once in the turbolift, though, he leaned against the wall and sighed.

"The man I am becoming…" he repeated softly. "Fine words, Captain. But, I have never truly been a man. And I will never be like you. Any of you…"

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

References include: TNG: Darmok; Pen Pals; and the movie Generations.
Chapter 4

"Is the wind going to be like this the whole trip?" Riker asked, holding up an arm to shield his eyes from the coarse, swirling sand that seemed to get absolutely everywhere. In his hair, in his boots, in his ears, up his nose…

"Here, wear these," Picard said, handing him a pair of overlarge, almost goggle-like sun-shades off the display tower in the battered supply tent. "They'll protect your eyes from the wind, sand, sun, and from drying out."

"Very stylish…" Riker muttered wryly. "Deanna, Data?" he called out. "Last chance to grab extra gear and supplies. We won't see another supply tent until we get to the first site."

Deanna ducked into the tent, looking thoroughly harassed as she twisted her loose, shoulder-length hair into a tight, efficient bun and secured it with an elaborate clip she dug out from her rucksack.

"Is the wind going to be like this the whole trip?" she asked.

Riker grinned and handed her a pair of shades.

"These should help," he said. "Hey, Data, you want a pair?"

"Thank you, sir," the android accepted, his stiff posture and composed bearing thoroughly regulation. Riker sighed.

"Never mind the wind, are you going to be like this the whole trip?"

"Sir?"

"The way you've been acting all day! It's like you're a cadet on review. Loosen up a little! We're supposed to be having an adventure!"

"Is that an order, sir?"

"Does it have to be, Data?"

The android stared past Riker's shoulder for a beat, then smoothly slipped into an at-ease stance, his feet spread and his hands behind his back.

"Is this more acceptable, sir?"

Riker's expression grew grim, and he strode across the cluttered kiosk to Deanna.

"Do you know what this is all about?" he asked, gesturing to Data with his thumb.

"Data thinks I'm angry with him, and believes that he's only been invited on this trip as part of some ongoing psychological evaluation," Troi told him, though her eyes were on Data. "If we can't convince him that clamping down on his emotions is a surer way to a mandatory leave of absence than letting himself be himself, I'm afraid we're going to be stuck with The Perfect Starfleet Officer..."
"Urgh!" Riker gave a theatrical shudder. "Is there anything more annoying?"

His eyes slid over to Data, whose calm expression had soured into a scowl. Quite aware he was being watched, the android broke his perfect posture, shifting his hips and crossing his arms.

"I know you know that I can hear you," he stated.

"Then how about you come over here and join the conversation?" Riker said.

Data gave a world-weary sigh and stalked across the space as requested.

Riker struggled to hold back a smirk. Drawing on the psychic bond he shared with Deanna, he projected to her: See? What did I tell you? Is that teenage behavior or what?

Deanna shot him a 'look,' along with a sharp Betazoidian sensation he knew meant 'hush up,' then turned a welcoming smile on Data.

"There, you see?" she said. "We don't bite, and we're not here to judge you on protocol and decorum. This is an opportunity to share some time together without Starfleet rank and discipline getting in the way. Here, we'll just be four friends, out to see the sights."

"Forgive me if I question your motives, Counselor," Data said flatly. "But since when have you been interested in the ancient Exo-Akkadian civilizations of Nineveh IV? Or chosen to spend your leave time riding horseback through harsh sun and sandstorms?"

"Did it ever occur to you that we might be doing this for the captain?" she retorted.

"No," Data replied. "Since he told me himself that it was your idea for the three of us to accompany him on what was to have been a solo expedition. And that you proposed this idea only after my outburst in your office."

Riker looked amused.

"Looks like he's got you there, Counselor," he said.

Troi pursed her lips.

Data's expression hardened, but his golden eyes seemed vulnerable, even hurt, at her unspoken confirmation of his suspicions.

"Data," Riker said, "It's true. Maybe this planet, this expedition, isn't really to our taste – mine or Deanna's. But, maybe that's not the point."

"No. Perhaps the point is for three superior officers to observe how their emotionally volatile android subordinate responds to a radically different physical and social environment," Data snapped, drawing back from them. "I may be inexperienced when it comes to emotion and intuition, but I am not stupid. I intend to prove to you all, once and for all, that I am every bit as deserving of my post and position as I ever was, my emotion chip notwithstanding. If you will excuse me."

Data strode out of the tent in the direction of the stables.

Riker raised an eyebrow at Troi.

"Well, that told him," he said.
"Oh, shut up," she retorted, then sighed. "He really is very sensitive, isn't he? Perceptive, too. The captain was right – we're going to have to be completely upfront with him about our concerns. Any beating around the bush he'll take as a criticism, or a sign we no longer trust him."

Riker nodded a little.

"Funny thing is," he said, "he's always been that way hasn't he. Anxious…desperate to please, to fit in… And always so worried about his differences, his perceived shortcomings, holding him back like a tether that would only let him progress so far… You know, I don't think that emotion chip's really changed him at all. If anything, it's making him feel for himself what we already knew about him."

Troi averted her eyes, considering.

"Perhaps…" she allowed. "But, my concern is that, if he keeps stifling his feelings, as he's been doing—"

"Ah, Troi, Will, I picked up some extra emergency rations and water packs," Picard announced, hefting his overstuffed rucksack over his shoulders and clipping the straps together across his chest and hips. "Along with some rope and a few other bits of gear we might find useful. Time to pick out our mounts. I must say, I've been looking forward to this. Where's Data?"

"He's gone to the stables ahead of us," Riker told him.

"Then, what are we standing around here for?" Picard said cheerfully. "Let's go see those horses!"

*******

"Data, get back on your horse," Picard said for what felt like the fifteenth time since they'd set out. "All that sand down there can't be good for your systems."

"I do not mind the sand," Data replied, walking just ahead and to the left of the Buckskin gelding the stable manager had assigned to him. "And, I do not believe this horse likes me. Why could I not have taken the thoroughbred? She nuzzled my hand, and seemed most friendly."

"You know as well as I do, that horse was too young and too fine-boned to carry both you and your gear."

"I said I was willing to walk," Data protested. "As I am walking now."

"Data!" Picard sighed, and rested his hand on the neck of his sleek, white Arabian. "These horses are not pets. They are work animals. The Buckskin has the strength and endurance to be of practical use to this expedition. That skinny little filly was not for you. Now get back in that saddle and let the horse do its job."

"Commander Riker's Paint horse is quite sturdy. I could switch with him."

"Data, that's enough," Troi said, from the saddle of her slender Akhal-teke, a breed of horse originating from Turkmenistan. Its electric black coat seemed to shimmer blue and violet as it moved through the desert sun. "The stable manager knew what he was doing when he assigned us these horses. And I think your horse is reacting more to the attitude you have shown him than on any animosity he might feel toward you."

Data stopped walking and shot the Buckskin a suspicious look that was mostly masked by his sunglasses shades. The tall horse stared back at him, as if daring the android to climb on its back.
"How do you see me, Sagebrush?" he asked the horse, keeping his voice low so Troi and the others couldn't hear as they moved on ahead. "Am I a strange machine to you, or just another rider?"

Slowly, Data reached out a pale hand. The horse stepped closer. Data closed the distance between them, letting the horse smell his right hand as he gently stroked its mane and neck with his left.

"Perhaps it was me," he said, with some surprise. "You do not seem unfriendly after all. I apologize if my attitude offended you."

The horse snorted and nudged him, evoking a smile from the android.

"You wish to catch up with the others? Very well," he said, and climbed effortlessly up into the saddle.

He took a moment to look around, marveling a little at the vast, arid landscape that stretched for miles in every direction – a landscape that seemed static and lifeless but was, in fact, in constant flux. The swirling winds blew the sand into rippling waves and arching mounds and gullies, molded by the rocky hills and distant mountains, while tiny sand lizards, insects, and arachnids sought the shade and shelter offered by small, hostile clumps of native cacti.

The trail they were following was well marked, but as he and his horse hurried to close the gap between them and the rest of the group, the android noticed something strange out of the corner of his eye. Three parallel lines, barely visible, appeared to veer off from the path, as if some force, stronger than the constant wind, had blown the sand into that pattern. Data accessed his memory banks, comparing those lines with any sort of natural or unnatural force, creature, or vehicle that could have left such marks, then blinked at the result.

"Sand speeders?"

He frowned, and urged his horse to pass Troi and Riker and come up beside the captain.

"Captain," he said. "I saw something, back there." He gestured.

Picard turned his head, but saw only sand.

"What was it?" he asked.

"Three parallel marks in the sand, sir," the android reported. "They were quite shallow and all but eroded by the wind, but I believe they were left by three sand speeders, not more than thirty minutes ago."

"Sand speeders?" Picard repeated with a frown. "But all ground vehicles are banned on this planet. How could three sand speeders have slipped past the planetary security field?"

"I do not know," Data said. "But I thought it would be best to let you know what I saw. And to warn you that whoever is riding those speeders is likely to still be out there."

"Thank you, Data," Picard said. "You did the right thing. But, I don't think this is anything to get worried over. Those speeders could belong to anyone from wealthy thrill-seekers to local law enforcement."

Data nodded.

"Perhaps I did overreact…"
Picard regarded him.

"Did I say that, Data?"

Data blinked and considered.

"No."

"Then why do you automatically leap to the conclusion that you did something wrong?"

Data seemed to shrug.

"I do not know. Perhaps...I am projecting my own sense of...insecurity...to others? Anticipating a rejection before it can...hurt me. As I did with poor Sagebrush, here, who is not unfriendly at all. Just proud."

Picard smiled a little.

"You're a good man, Mr. Data," he said. "I'm waiting for you to start believing that again. Now, I want you to keep an eye out for those sand speeders," he said, speaking right over and past the android's puzzled look. "It'll be a few hours yet before we make camp. If we're to expect company, I don't want any surprises."

"Aye, sir," Data said, and fell back to the rear, where he could observe his companions and their surroundings without obstruction.

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

Comments and reviews are always welcome, and very helpful. Thank you for reading!

:)
Chapter Five

Riker winced, groaned, then gave a little, involuntary yelp of agony as he staggered bow-legged toward the campsite. Deanna wasn't in much better shape, but her unflappable dignity, ingrained in her psyche early on as befitted a member of the Fifth House and daughter of the heir to the Holy Rings of Betazed and the holder of the Sacred Chalice of Rixx, compelled her to walk upright – at least, as upright as she could manage after a long, hot day in the saddle.

Picard tried to hide a smirk, but it showed up in his eyes anyway. Riker scowled at him and held his breath as he gingerly straddled a worn rock many travelers before him had recruited to serve as a lounge chair. Troi chose to remain standing, shifting uncomfortably from foot to foot. It was great to be able to stretch her legs and back, but her thighs and backside felt like they were on fire.

"Sore?" the captain asked innocently, handing each of them a silvery ration pack.

Riker took the pack, but shot the older man a very dirty look.

"How come you're not suffering with the rest of us?" he asked grimly, kneading the pack between his hands to start it heating up.

Picard chuffed a slight laugh.

"I invited you many times to come riding with me in the holodeck, Will," he said. "If you'd accepted, you might have built up some tolerance by now."

"Tolerance?" Riker said incredulously. "My backside feels like it's been rubbed raw by a wood sander!"

Troi winced in heartfelt sympathy, her discomfort redoubled by the waves of agony she sensed emanating from Riker.

"Well, I can suggest two things," Picard said, leaning back against the shallow cave entrance and drawing a very old looking bottle from his rucksack. "First, that you each take a good, long swig of this. It's an old riders' remedy. To help with the pain."

"Ah! Tennessee whiskey," Riker observed, accepting the bottle and squinting at the worn label. "Just the thing for the ailing cowboy."

"And second?" Troi asked, taking the bottle after Riker and making a face as the whiskey went down. Quickly, she passed it back to a highly amused Picard.

"Well, I picked up a tube of liniment at the supply tent," the captain offered. "Stings like the dickens, but does the job, as they say."

Troi and Riker groaned.

"Or, if you prefer a more modern approach, you could make use of the dermal regenerator in the emergency med kit. You'll find it in Data's saddlebag – just there."
He pointed to the pile of stuff Data had unloaded from the horses before walking them down to the little mountain spring to drink, then set about clearing sand from the ancient-looking fire pit and cracking heat sticks, which he stacked neatly in the center before they grew hot enough to glow.

When, after several busy minutes of unrolling sleeping gear and setting out more ration and water packs, he showed no inclination of leaving the cave to fetch the dermal regenerator, Riker turned pleading blue eyes to Troi.

"Oh, fine," she muttered, and set down her slowly warming ration pack. "I'll get it."

"I knew I could count on you, Imzadi!" Riker called as she limped away.

Picard couldn't be sure, it happened so fast, but he thought he glimpsed the Counselor's hand flashing a surprisingly rude Betazoid gesture at the smirking First Officer. He smiled a very small smile and kept working, humming to himself all the while.

******

Data decided he liked horses. He liked them very much. The graceful way they held themselves, the elegance of their movements. The way they walked alongside him so trustingly as he led them to the bubbling little spring, not far from the campsite. Yes, he even liked the way they smelled.

The stable manager had provided the group with grooming tools as well as some treats for their mounts. Once the horses finished drinking at the spring, Data offered them each a treat, delighting as they delicately nibbled the goodies from his hand. Then, he led them up a sandy slope to the shallow little stable of a cave the planetary authorities who maintained the trail kept stocked with fresh hay and several bags of oats.

"In you go," Data said, and entered the cave with them, pulling the swinging gate closed behind him. He removed their saddles and bridles, hung them on the appropriate pegs, then began brushing the horses down, getting them ready for the night after their long desert trek. As he ran the brush through their manes, gently untangling the snarls the wind had caused, the android found himself drifting into a pleasant daydream.

He was back in his quarters, a paintbrush in his hand. The horses he was tending filled his mind with shades and shapes of light and color and he saw himself blending the right tones of brown, tan and ebony on his palate, tracing out their four dynamic forms on his flat, static canvas, dabbing in shadows and highlights to represent their movement through the desert sun...

Before long, he was seized by a strange, absurdly powerful idea. An idea he suddenly knew he had to make real. Leaving the horses to their dinner, Data raced back to the area near the spring. He scouted around in the dimming twilight for a while, examining the rocks and the layered, colored strata of the cliff side.

Slowly, he began to smile.

"Hematite, ochre, manganese oxide…"

He crouched down, collected a few stones, and crushed them to powder in his palm.

"Perfect."

******

"So, what is this stuff?" Riker said, peering into the dark, steamy depths of his piping hot ration pack.
"Smells like beef stew."

"It's beef bourguignon," Picard told him. "And there's dehydrated fruit salad for dessert."

"You mean those crunchy pink blocks with the yellow flecks?" Riker put on a wide, wry smile. "Sounds delicious."

"It's not so bad once it's been rehydrated," Picard noted. "Especially if you use whiskey in place of water."

Riker raised his eyebrows and shared a glance with Troi, both of them feeling much more chipper now the dermal regenerator had worked its essential repairs.

"Now that, I'm willing to try." He glanced over at the place they'd set for Data, the lonely ration pack and water sachet reflecting the orangey glow of the heat sticks. "How long does it take to water horses?" he asked.

"Not this long," Picard said, and frowned. "Data did mention he saw speeder tracks in the sand earlier today. You don't think he's run into any trouble, do you?"

"I don't sense that anything's wrong," Troi said. "But Data has been gone a long time. Do you think one of us should go looking for him, or should we give him a few more minutes?"

"I'll get him," Riker said. He set his ration pack down and climbed to his feet. "Don't either of you start eating without me."

*******

It wasn't hard to locate Data's position. All Riker had to do was follow the singing.

A lilting tenor wafted from a little cave that had long ago been turned into a makeshift stable. Riker paused at the gate and just listened. He knew Data had been working to master the violin, along with several other instruments, but he'd never heard him sing before. At least, not like this…

From this starship you now must be going  
I will miss your bright eyes and sweet smile  
We both know you are taking the starlight  
That has brightened our pathways a while…

The tune was soft and slow and bittersweet, and clearly not meant for any human audience. The horses seemed thoroughly charmed, standing still and calm, as if already asleep.

Riker could see Data was doing something as he sang, moving his pale hands against the smooth wind and sand-eroded stone, but in the dimness he couldn't make out any details.

Come and sit by my side if you love me  
Do not hasten to bid me adieu  
Know I always will treasure your memories  
And that my love will always be true.

The song ended like a mournful sigh, and Data stepped back from his work, his head slightly tilted. Riker opened the gate and stepped inside the cave, moving slowly until he stood beside him.

"Data—" he started, but the android jumped as if Riker had just jabbed him with a live wire. "Data, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to startle you!"
"Commander!" Data gasped, his golden eyes blinking rapidly. "No, it is I who should apologize. I did not hear you come in. I believe I was…preoccupied…"

"That's understandable," Riker said and stared at the cave wall. "Data…did you do this?"

A deceptively primitive wall mural stared back at him, done in the style of the Paleolithic art found in the Chauvet-Pont-d'Arc Cave in southern France. Four horses, clearly modeled on their four mounts, stood in profile, one in front of the other, from largest to smallest. They burst from a striking field of ghostly handprints, like the ones that gave Argentina's Cueva de las Manos its eerie name.

"I did," Data asserted, and showed the commander his reddish orange and black-smudged hands.

Riker nodded slowly, still taking it all in.

"It's…amazing, Data. Honestly. But…the authorities on this planet… I'm sure you're aware they have some very stiff rules regarding the…defacement…of their natural landmarks."

Data's expression seemed to freeze, the dreamy distance in his eyes momentarily replaced by something far more delicate. Before Riker could place it, that expression, too, had flattened out and vanished.

"This is not a natural landmark," the android stated. "It is a stable. A heavily used stable, at that. And what I did is not defacement. It is art."

"You say it's art and I agree – that is most definitely art," Riker said, his eyes still fixed on the powerful, haunting work. "But Data, the fact is, you didn't have permission to make that. If a Ninevehan Ranger should spot this mural, he might not see what you and I see. He might see graffiti."

Data stared straight at Riker, his golden eyes as hard as chips of amber.

"I will not remove it."

Riker closed his eyes and sighed.

"Data, do you really want me to bring the captain into this?"

"Do what you must," Data said. "I will do the same."

Riker frowned.

"Now, what does that mean?"

"It means, sir," Data said, "that I am quite aware of the laws governing Nineveh IV. I am certainly more familiar with them than you are. These caves are maintained by the Rangers, but fall under the public use clause applying to offworlders. To create this piece, I did not gouge or carve or in any other way alter the contours or affect the stability of this cave. All I did was apply a fine layer of naturally occurring pigments native to this location to the cave's interior surface – pigments that, given time, will naturally fade and erode along with the cave wall itself. Even if my work were to be deemed 'graffiti,' as you say, and it was decided I should be charged as an offender, the stiffest penalty I could anticipate would be a fine of no more than half a bar of gold pressed latium."

Riker's thoughtful frown deepened, but before he could say anything, Data turned on his heel and walked out, calling over his shoulder, "I am not a fool, Commander and, although I did create this work on impulse, I did not do it without considering the consequences. If you still want it removed,
you are welcome to do it yourself. Just do not expect me to watch.

"Data!" Riker called after him, but the android was already gone. The commander pursed his lips in frustration, and glared up at the mural. Despite the deliberately primitive style, in the deepening shadows those horses seemed almost alive. Riker shivered despite himself and strode out of the cave, making sure the gate was closed fast behind him.

******

Riker was greeted by a sullen golden glower when he returned to the warm, bright cave where he and the rest of the group would be spending the night. Troi and Picard looked both puzzled and concerned, but it appeared that the android hadn't spoken a word to either of them.

"Don't worry, Data," Riker said as he resumed his place on his comfortable rock. "I didn't touch your painting."

Data's expression didn't shift, but Troi and Picard seemed enlightened.

"So, that's what you've been doing," Troi said. "Well, we'll have to see this painting. Where is it?"

"Down in the stable," Riker said. "But don't bother going now. It's getting too dark to see and, trust me, a palmlight won't do this thing justice."

"In the morning, then," Troi said, and patted Data's knee. "I'll look forward to seeing your work."

Data scooted out of range of her touch.

"That is not necessary, Counselor," he said, his eyes fixed on the heat sticks. "The commander was right. It was a stupid, impulsive thing to do, defacing the cave wall like that. I will remove the offending pigments at the soonest opportunity."

Riker straightened.

"Don't you dare put those words in my mouth," he said, and glared. "I don't understand you lately, Data. How can you go from defending your work so passionately back in that cave to downtalking it like this?"

"Perhaps, I have had a chance to view it from an outside perspective," Data mumbled into his drawn up knees. "As a result, the emotional context of the work has...changed…"

"What are you talking about?" Riker demanded.

"Please, leave me alone," Data muttered, hunching into an even tighter ball.

"Come on, Data, don't be like this," Troi said. "Don't retreat into yourself. We're your friends. You can talk to us."

"Unless that is an order, I really would rather not," Data said, and buried his face in his arms. "Why did I do this to myself…? Why, why, why…?"

Picard took a meditative sip from his cup of rehydrated whiskey fruit punch, then tore open his ration packet.

"Ah, smell those herbs. There really is nothing like a good beef bourguignon. And this is certainly nothing like a good beef bourguignon." He grinned at his little quip. "All right, everyone, dig in."
Riker and Troi cast a last look on the despondent android and his untouched rations, then followed the captain's example. Before long, the three officers were laughing and chatting over their dinner, enjoying the warmth of the cave and the pleasure of each other's company.

Slowly, very slowly, Data raised his head and propped his chin on his arms, just watching. When no one seemed to notice, he slowly, slowly shifted into a cross-legged posture and inched, ever so slightly, closer to the group.

When, still, no one paid him any attention, he took in a deep breath and spoke over the banter: "It is fear."

The others stopped their conversation and stared straight at him, as if he were a rogue ball player pitching into the stands from two fields over.

"Do go on, Commander," Picard invited.

Data shrugged a little and started using his orange-and-black stained finger to draw abstract swirling designs in the sand beside him.

"I started to tell the Counselor, that day in her office, but I stopped myself...out of fear," he said. "This emotion chip has changed me more than any of you realize. More than I have allowed myself to show. The Counselor was right, I do not wish to disappoint you and I am greatly disturbed by the precedent set by my brother, Lore. Yet, I cannot deny that fundamental alterations have occurred... and there is no going back. These emotions are an integrated part of me now, whether I remove the chip or not."

"Is that what you find frightening, Data?" Troi asked gently. "That you can't go back to who you used to be?"

Data chuffed a dry laugh and shook his head.

"You really have no idea, do you," he said. "But, perhaps that is also my fault. I have been... hiding...for so long... How can I expect any of you to understand?"

"Perhaps if you explained?" Picard prompted.

Data glanced at him, as if debating. Then he sighed and went back to his absent doodles.

"You know," he said, "when we were on the D, I used to think...this is it. I am finally where I always wanted to be. My career had advanced further than I had ever dreamed possible, and I had friends, real friends: friends who encouraged me to learn and explore and try new things. For a while...a brief while...I truly believed I would make it, that one day humanity would greet me with the same unthinking acceptance it granted the naturally born members of its kind. And then, I installed this chip..." He swallowed hard and dashed his intricate doodles back to sandy smithereens. "And everything I thought I knew became so hollow..."

"Data, you mustn't think like that," Troi said. "You're going through a difficult transition right now. In a few months—"

"No, that is not it, that is not what I am saying!" Data cried. "You do not see it. You do not see it because it never, never happens to you! Those brief shudders, the second glances and embarrassed, awkward looks. The ones I get every day, whenever I pass behind a young ensign at the science stations, or reach over an engineer's console to make a correction. I scare people, Counselor. My proximity triggers a primal fear they cannot hide, and which I can no longer simply ignore."
He closed his eyes for a moment, his face contorting like a man struggling to hold back tears. When he spoke again, though, his voice was low and clear.

"Living on the D was like being in a bubble," he said. "A big, soft, cushiony bubble where I could believe I was making progress toward a goal I now know to be entirely unattainable. No, do not interrupt, just listen," he said to Troi. "Not one new transfer to the Enterprise-E has yet viewed me as just another humanoid officer…the way Geordi and Tasha and you, sir," he nodded to Picard, "did when we first met. And while the officers I have had to meet with and train since our incident with the Borg know of my reputation and my more 'inhuman' specifications, they have yet to accept me as a colleague, let alone a friend. They view me as a machine, a curiosity, something strange and unnatural, intimidating and a little bit creepy. And although this is nothing new, although I have been dealing with such attitudes all my life, striving to fit in and to behave as correctly as I knew how, I know now that it will not stop. No matter what I do, how far I progress, how much I achieve… These parochial human arrogances will never change, or go away. And, I must admit, surviving the Borg Queen's cruel abuses has only made me more intolerant of this type of behavior. Since our return home, I have found myself increasingly unwilling to allow these humans the time they need to become…acclimated…to my android nature. That damned article just brought the whole thing to a head. If you want to know the bare-bones, God's-honest truth: I am heartily sick of the whole ridiculous hassle and I do not want to take it anymore!"

He took in a deep, ragged breath, his nostrils flaring slightly as he struggled to reign in his anger.

"I am not human and I will never be human and I never truly wanted to be a flesh-and-blood human being," he stated with deep conviction. "I am an android, and I want to be an android. In fact, I even like being an android. But I do not like to be feared. And I do not like the frustrated, angry feelings that fume so deep inside me when I see that fear in others. That is what frightens me, Counselor," he said, staring straight at her. "That is the terror I try so hard to keep hidden. Lore's words have become clear to me. I do, finally, understand my 'evil' brother, and all he tried to teach me about human bigotry, prejudice, and betrayal. But I cannot forgive him, as he wished. For, he gave in to those frustrations, those angry, bitter thoughts. I will not. I will not."

Data clenched his fists and pressed them to his mouth, tears leaking from the corners of his eyes as he lowered his chin to his chest.

Riker, Troi, and Picard shared a long, deep look.

"It's true, Data," Picard said grimly. "Dealing with the Borg, the Cardassians, the Maquis, the rise of the Dominion… We have been forced to watch as the times changed around us, and not for the better. In many ways, humanity has become less open-minded as a result of the recent trials it has been forced to endure. It's unfortunate, and inherently unfair, that the suspicions and insular attitudes that lurk in the minds of many of our new crewmates have extended to include you. I could say the pendulum will one day begin its return swing and we'll once again see a future shaped by tolerance and curiosity, unhindered by fear of the different and the unknown. But that's a mere platitude, and you deserve better."

Data sniffled into his arms, his chest hitching with sobs.

"I am…so sorry," he choked. "I am a hateful being…I have been so…so very angry…"

"No, no, it's all right, Data," Troi soothed. "The Captain's right. You do deserve better. And we should have been more aware of what you've been going through. You were right to feel angry. If I'd known this was going on, I'd be angry too. And so would the captain and Commander Riker."

Data glanced up, his golden eyes oddly puffy from crying.
"Lore hated humans," he said. "He delighted in their fear, and in watching that fear turn to hatred. I do not want to be like that. I do not want to hate. But...but sometimes, I get so frustrated that I...I..."

"That you want to scream?" Riker offered. "Rant and rage and break things?"

Data blinked at him.

"Yes."

Riker smiled.

"Then, Data, I guess you really are human after all. I can't tell you how often I've felt like that. We all have." He gestured to Picard and Troi.

Data stared blankly for a moment, then shook his head.

"So strange..." he said. "I believed for so long that gaining emotional awareness would be the key to achieving humanity. Yet, I have never felt more like a machine than I have since the installation of my emotion chip. It is as if the more convincingly human I act, the more my internal differences seem to matter to the people I meet...and the more distant they behave toward me. This, of course, does not apply to you, or to any of the friends I made aboard the Enterprise-D. But - and I mean no offense - we will not be together forever. And...I dread the thought of a time when I will be left alone. I do not want to be human, Commander. I just... I want...."

He stopped and sighed, a look of anxious desperation creeping into his eyes.

"Who am I?" he asked plaintively, looking to each of them in turn. "I mean it. What the hell am I? What do you want me to be?"

Troi offered him a genuinely sympathetic smile.

"You are Lt. Commander Data," she said. "Starfleet hero and my personal friend. Any more than that, you're going to have to work out for yourself."

Data released a ferocious sigh and fell back until he was lying like a starfish on the cave's sandy floor.

"Thanks a lot," he muttered.

Riker laughed out loud and tossed him a silvery rations packet. Data lifted his left arm straight up to catch it, and squinted at the print near the top.

"Fruit salad?" he queried from the floor.

"Yeah," Riker said. "Something the captain thought up. Mix that packet in a cup with some Tennessee whiskey. It'll perk you right up."

Data let his arm flop back to the sand, still holding the packet.

"Commander, need I remind you that alcohol has no effect on me."

"I'm not talking physically, I'm talking mentally," Riker said. "Mix the stuff with water if you don't want any whiskey. Just sit up and have a drink with us."

Data frowned a little, but he sat up and moved closer to the group.
"That's the way," Riker praised, and handed him a little plastic cup. "So, what'll it be, water or whiskey?"

"Water, please," Data said. "And just water. I…do not like rehydrated fruit salad."

"Then, that's something we have in common, my friend," Riker said, and grinned. "I can't stand the stuff either."

Soon all four of their cups were full, and Picard raised his in a toast.

"To the adventure ahead," he said, and the four of them drank. "We should reach the first archaeological site late tomorrow afternoon. You're going to love it, I know. In archaeology, there are few sights more impressive than the Stairway of Sawrina the Great."

"I look forward to it!" Troi said, and raised her cup for another toast. "This one's for Data," she said, and smiled at the android. "For being brave enough to show us his true face."

Data raised his cup with the others, but he didn't return their grins. The fact was, he hadn't shown them his true face. Only one person had ever seen him as he truly was, had pierced straight through the trappings of his imitated, synthesized humanity…and that one person had been an abusive, manipulative, controlling Borg monster he himself had helped to kill.

It made him wonder…

What would happen? Could he do it? Should he do it?

Was he really brave enough to reveal his inner self?

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

References include: First Contact (movie); the novel Metamorphosis; Brothers; Hide and Q; The Ensigns of Command; In Theory; Silicon Avatar; The Offspring; Menage a Troi; Manhunt; Half A Life; Inheritance (in which Data tells his mother he is attempting to master all known styles of painting); The Red River Valley (song) composed circa 1870 (which I modified for this story); the Army food my Dad let me try when I was little (especially the weird, Styrofoam-like squares of dehydrated fruit salad!); the CD Ol' Yellow Eyes Is Back (1991); and the cave paintings that inspired Data's work in the story are real.
Chapter Six

Main Engineering sweltered at a steamy 39.1 degrees Celsius, the warp core pulsing mere meters behind his head like a warm, beating heart. Strapped to the converted lab table, helpless and alone, he closed his eyes and fought to keep his breathing steady as he had been taught: In through your nose, Data, out through your mouth…

The objective is close, he thought. So close… Stay calm, and you will make it. Do not show her that you are afraid…

A mechanical click, a whir, and the peculiar Borg incubator lifted from his arm. The air in Engineering was hot and damp, but one small, exposed patch of his arm felt oddly cool… He tried to access his diagnostics, but that patch remained blank to his internal sensors. The only information he received was that strange sense of coolness which was already fading after the searing warmth of the incubator…and a peculiar, alien pulsing…

He turned his head to look.

...What has she done…?

The Borg had removed a rectangular patch of his white-gold synthoskin from the underside of his forearm, and in its place…

Skin. Living, organic, human skin, warm and pink, fed by tubes and patched directly into his sensory mesh…

"Do you know what this is, Data?"

The Borg Queen's sultry voice pulled him out of his thoughts and he swallowed, his internal systems swamped with a terrible blend of horror and fascination.

"It would appear you are attempting to graft organic skin onto my endoskeletal structure…"

Data couldn't understand how she'd done it. This should not be possible…organic flesh was inherently incompatible with his android systems, the circuits in his sensory mesh should not be able to translate organic nerve impulses, let alone carry them to his brain. He felt shaken, violated.

And yet…

"What a cold description…for such a beautiful gift…"

The lithe Borg woman leaned over him, her black, machine eyes seductive as she pursed her lips and blew. The gentle touch of her breath made the hairs on his new skin stand on end, and he gasped at the sensation, startled by his body's response as he felt the goosebumps form.

For a moment, a brief 0.68 seconds, Data found himself awash in a powerful daydream, picturing what his days might be like enrobed in warm, sensitive, living skin. Feeling the breeze of another being passing him in the corridor or on the bridge; snuggling his cheek against Spot's soft, silky fur…
His traitor mind took him still further, to places he hadn't dared venture since installing his emotion chip. To dreams of a child…a wife… Sharing the love of a family unit; the longing to touch, to be touched, and to really 'feel' it…

The Borg Queen watched the shudder wrack through him, heard his breath hitch involuntarily, and her smooth, pale face grew smug with victory.

"Was that good for you…?"

*******

Deanna Troi sat up with a gasp and kicked her way out of her sleeping bag, her heart hammering in her chest.

"What…what was that…?" she whispered breathlessly, her hand pressed to her temple. She had sensed nightmares before, picked up on the more intense imagery from others' dreams, but…Data? How…?

She peered around the cave, squinting through the shadows cast by the fading heat sticks as her eyes picked out the sleeping forms of Will, the captain…

And the empty, crumpled heap of Data's sleeping bag.

With slow, careful movements, Deanna got up, found her boots, and tiptoed from the cave. The planet's twin moons shone dimly overhead, washing the desert in their eerie, orange light. It wasn't much, but it was enough to see fresh footprints in the sand, heading toward the stable.

She followed, but the footprints continued past the slumbering horses toward a rocky outcropping. Soon, she heard the gentle burble of flowing water, accompanied by the low murmur of a man humming very softly to himself.

"Data?" she said, sensing his familiar emotional presence even if she couldn't pick out his form in the dark.

The humming stopped, and a figure rose from the shadows. Deanna started to smile, until she realized she still couldn't see Data's pale face and hands. Instead, the moonlight revealed a slender, silvery shape; a humanoid form traced against the darkness in tiny pinpricks of blinking colored lights.

"Hello, Counselor," the android said. "What brings you out here at this hour?"

"I could ask you the same thing," she said, moving cautiously closer. "Data… What are you doing?"

"I have decided to act on your suggestion, Counselor," he said, his golden eyes seeming vulnerable but, also, slightly amused. "No more hiding or playacting for this trip. Tomorrow, I intend to show my true face."

"Your…? Oh no. Oh, Data, you must know… When I said that, I didn't mean…!"

She trailed off, staring openly at the exposed metal and plastic of his machine skull, amazed by the expressiveness of his intricate, even artistic, sculpture of a face. His nose and ears, his eyelids, his lips…they were all still there, still recognizable even, but seeing them like this… It felt strangely unreal, as if she was staring at a museum display. Not a friend she'd known and cared about for years…
"Are you upset with me?" he asked. "That I decided to take your words so...literally?"

Deanna frowned at him.

"Decided...? Then, you were thinking about doing this...even before...?"

He tilted his head, uncertain of her meaning.

"Before what?" he asked.

"Before your nightmare?" Deanna finished softly. "About the Borg Queen?"

Data's eyes widened and he stepped back, moving slightly deeper into the shadows.

"How did you know about that?"

Deanna shifted her feet uncomfortably, then sat down on a protruding rock, indicating he should join her. After a moment's hesitation, he did, staring in curiosity as she reached for his blinking, metallic hand and pressed it between hers.

"I'm afraid I picked up on it," she told him, "while I was asleep. Not the dream itself, but...brief images...the fear... It left a very...powerful...impression."

Data looked amusingly astonished.

"Really?"

She chuckled a little and patted his hand.

"Yes, Data," she said, but her expression soon grew somber. "You told me before that she'd tempted you. That she'd tried to seduce you. But I'm afraid I may not have fully understood what she did to you...or what it took for you to resist her...until now."

Data smiled, ever so slightly, and gave her fingers a light squeeze.

"If you sensed what I...felt...in that dream, then you know how...alluring...I found her offer," he admitted. "But her promise was an empty one. My course was already set."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

He released her hand and stared off into the desert, his golden eyes dim and distant.

"May I be very honest with you, Counselor?" he asked.

"Of course, Data," she said. "You know you can tell me anything."

He regarded her for a long, contemplative moment, the blinking diodes inset in his skull casting colored patterns and shadows on the smooth contours of his pensive, metallic face.

"Very well," he said, confirming his decision. "I will answer your question. Even if it means that, by the end, you may no longer wish to be my friend."

"Oh, Data..." She sighed and shook her head at him, but gestured for him to continue. The android closed his eyes and took in a few slow, calming breaths, then began to speak.

"When the Borg captured me and dragged me into Engineering, I was concerned, of course, but a
part of me was also relieved," he said. "By taking me into their lion's den, as it were, they had brought me closer to my objective – the objective of our attempted assault on the Borg hive. Although they did not know it, the Borg held me mere meters from the tanks containing the corrosive gasses I fully intended to use against them—if I could only find a way to get free. This objective remained at the forefront of my mind throughout my captivity, and affected every aspect of my communication with the Borg Queen."

"Sounds pretty logical to me," Deanna said.

Data snorted a little.

"Perhaps," he said quietly. "Perhaps the whole encounter might have remained a logical exercise—a matter of prolonged intellectual banter as I worked to find a way to shut down their attempted takeover from within. It might have—if the Borg had not found a way to remotely activate my emotion chip. Once it was active...the terror of my situation threatened to overtake my more rational intellect. I feared their Queen could hurt me, really hurt me…and I soon discovered that I could hurt her back..."

Data leaned his shoulders against the cliff side and crossed his legs in front of him. It was only then Deanna realized the android was wearing black Starfleet issue pajamas over his metallic frame—a strangely incongruous, and rather endearing, sight. But, this wasn't the time to comment. Data needed her to stay focused and to listen, and that's just what she would do.

"The Borg Queen could not access my thoughts," he told her. "She found my emotion chip, learned to turn it on and off, but she could not reach me, access my essential sense of self. That frustrated her no end. But, like all Borg, she was adaptive. She quickly found other ways to try to bend my will toward accepting hers, experimenting with different means of seduction. But, the Borg take, the Borg assimilate, the Borg control. It is not in their nature to inveigle and bargain...to love...or even to lie."

He sighed and shook his head.

"I fear that, in the end, was her weakness. Her clumsy inexperience with deceit…and her complete ignorance of the fundamental nature of social bonds. For all her experimentation, she never once hit upon the essential ingredient that means the difference between successful emotional manipulation, and mere physical temptation. Something I learned...long ago..."

Troi wrinkled her forehead.

"Lore?" she asked.

"Yes," he confirmed grimly. "But also...Ishara Yar."

"Tasha's sister?" Troi said. "I remember her. You two became quite close while she was aboard the Enterprise."

"That is true..."

His voice was a pained whisper, but she sensed it as an old wound, more of an ache than a cut.

"She deceived me from the start," he said. "Played on my memories of Tasha to gain my trust, my friendship, even my affection, manipulating me at every step until I had unwittingly secured for her what she had wanted all along: access to her rival gang's security grid. When I tried to intervene, she did not hesitate to fire at both Commander Riker and myself, her phaser set to kill."

Data snorted darkly through his nose, his expression wry.
"I had never been…betrayed…like that before," he said. "Never by someone I had come to trust, as I had trusted her. Her actions, and my responses to her… They puzzled me for the longest time. I believe my experience with her set my social development back quite a bit…particularly when it came to attempting romantic relationships. But now…now I understand. I understand because I have been in her place, and I have done as she once did."

He looked up at the moons, his expression etched with sadness.

"Deceit," he said. "Like love and friendship, deceit requires trust to be effective. I did not trust the Borg Queen. Not for one fraction of a second. But I convinced her to trust me. That is how I gained access to those tanks, and how I became the means of her destruction and the destruction of all the other Borg aboard the ship. Like my brother, like Ishara, I consciously exploited her candid, mechanical nature, feeding her trust until I could turn it against her. I have found myself struggling with that ethical quandary ever since."

He looked straight at her, his golden eyes deep and intense.

"I know…in my head and in my heart…that the actions I took were correct. I did my duty as a Starfleet Officer, put the good of the ship, and the timeline, before all other concerns, and rid the Federation of a mortal threat. I would do it again. But, I cannot ignore the fact that in the process I willfully, and premeditatively, caused the death of other beings – beings that, once separated from the Borg Queen's influence, may have rediscovered individuality, as Hugh did, or even recovered their former identities, as I once helped Captain Picard to do. And I cannot deny that I derived satisfaction, even a sense of vindication, from watching the Borg Queen die."

"Vindication?" Troi asked.

"The Borg Queen's attempts to physically seduce me were predicated on her assumption that I was an inferior lifeform, a callow innocent beguiled by the trappings of humanity," he said, his eyes averted once again. "An ignorant attitude, perhaps, but not entirely unfamiliar. The Romulans once harbored a similar impression of me...and many humans still do. But with her, it was all so much more personal."

He clenched his fists tight in his lap, then watched his fingers slowly relax.

"Recognizing her misapprehension of me as a weakness, I took her cue and played it up," he said. "I prattled to her as I used to do when I was young, staged an escape attempt to encourage her to drop her guard. And, when she kissed me and whispered to me of all the physical delights I could enjoy once she had completely replaced my synthetic covering with organic skin…I realized I nearly had her duped. A little patience, a few pointed acts of false loyalty, and she gave me the freedom I required, accepting me as her willing counterpart without a second thought. When I was finally able to watch her face as she realized her plans had failed, that I had tipped the scales against her...it was almost...enjoyable... Do you see now, Counselor?" he said, leaning toward her, his expression fierce with desperation. "Do you understand? Our roles had changed. She had become the trusting fool, I the deceitful manipulator. I had not anticipated that, or the rage she provoked in me. Nor had I expected the pain…"

"What do you mean...pain?"

Data closed his eyes, his shoulders seeming to stoop in the dimness.

"The Borg Queen's skin grafts made me feel as if I had been living my entire life under the numbing influence of Novocain," he whispered. "Suddenly, my senses were awake, alive…and it was like nothing I had ever experienced before. I was…injured…during my escape attempt. A Borg drone
sliced into the newly grafted flesh on my arm and I... I felt pain, real pain, I saw my own red blood seeping from the wound... It was the closest I have ever come to being human and it hurt, yes it hurt, but I did not want to lose those sensations even so. I still am not entirely certain what was worse: feeling the gasses melt the organic skin and eye the Borg Queen had given me... or the knowledge that losing them meant I would have to return to my previous numbed, synthetic existence. I wonder, perhaps, if it is not the latter."

"Data..."

"I fear, Counselor, that I am not the man I hoped I would become when I really was the callow innocent the Borg Queen mistook me for," he said grimly. "I have lied and I have killed and I have betrayed cybernetic lifeforms like myself while defending a human society that does not fully appreciate my sentience, and which fears my very being. My actions and thoughts concern me. My memories of the Borg Queen repulse me, and I do not mourn her death. Yet, I feel that, in defeating her, I have lost something too, something fundamental. If I am no longer the innocent, trusting Data I was when I first signed aboard the Enterprise, if I have become capable of deliberate acts of manipulation, deceit, and revenge... what does that make me? Are these the lessons I absorbed in my quest to become more human?"

Deanna gazed at him and shook her head, just marveling at this wondrous mechanical lifeform staring at her with such pleading golden eyes. For so many years, she'd been unsure what to make of him. Before the chip had given him direct access to his emotions, he had existed only at the periphery of her metaconscious mind, a peculiar blind spot in her empathic awareness. But now...

Now she felt the confusion raging in his being, the passions and desires and longings she knew had always been a part of him, but which neither of them had previously been able to adequately acknowledge or explore. She sensed his essential Data-ness beaming at her like a beacon, and she almost laughed at its awkward, self-conscious beauty.

"Oh, Data... If only you could see what I see," she said, and offered him a smile. "I want you to try something with me."

"What is it?" he asked.

"It's a thought exercise," she told him. "We'll do it together. Now, take my hands."

"Like this?" he asked, gently clasping her fingers in his own.

"That's right," she said. "I want you to close your eyes... good. Now, we're going for a ride in a time machine—no not literally, Data. Keep your eyes closed. We're going back, the two of us, to our first year aboard the Enterprise-D. Are you with me, Data?"

"I am trying, Counselor," he said, heartily confused but too curious to protest.

"We're in Ten-Forward. There are two people at the 3-D chess board," she went on. "One of them is a young Betazoid woman with a terrible hairstyle. A tight, swept-up bun. Can you see her, Data?"

"She is you, Counselor."

"Is she?" Troi asked. "She may be a part of who I am today, but would you say she and I are the same?"

"I suppose... she is less experienced. Perhaps less confident?" Data tried.

"What about the man with her?" she said. "Pale skin, yellow eyes... Remind you of anyone?"
Data sighed.

"What is the point of this?" he asked.

"Just bear with me," she said. "Who is he?"

"He is…"

"Is he you?"

"Yes… And no. At this point in his career he is…aspiring, uncertain. He does not yet know where he came from, or where he belongs."

"Look back at Troi," she said. "If she were to look up and see me standing here, as I am today, what do you think her impressions might be?"

"She would probably wonder why you were wearing insulated pajamas in Ten-Forward," Data teased.

"No, no, that's a fair point," she said. "What else might she notice?"

"You have changed your hairstyle."

"Anything beyond the physical?"

Data frowned, clearly struggling.

"You have become…more perceptive, more open-minded, more of a leader? You have learned to respect, rather than resent, your mother, which is something this young Counselor Troi may not yet appreciate or understand. You have—"

"Would it be fair to say I've grown up a bit since I was her?" she interrupted. "That I have learned from my experiences and worked to incorporate those lessons into my outlook and my approach to others?"

"Yes."

"And, what about you?"

Data opened his eyes and released her hands, pressing his back against the stony cliff.

"It is not the same," he said.

"Why not?" she asked. "We've both gotten older, both matured into wiser, more competent officers—"

"My emotion chip—"

"Is a part of you," Deanna said. "And, whatever else it may have done, it's allowed me to finally see you as you are. You are beautiful to me, Data."

"That cannot be," he muttered.

"Yet, it's true," she insisted. "Thanks to that chip, my Betazoid senses can perceive a kind, compassionate, honorable officer, so filled with love that he would never hesitate to put the lives of his friends before his own. Yes, you were instrumental in destroying the Borg who had invaded our
ship, but every action you took, every decision you made, was to save our lives, our future. Data," she said, closing the distance between them so she could catch his eyes with her own. "I know you've been hurting. You want so much to love, and to be loved, and it's terrible that your own caring nature has been tearing you apart. I can understand the guilt you've been carrying, and the frustration you experience when your natural overtures of friendship are not returned by the crew. But trust me, Data: if you really had become the monster you fear, we wouldn't be here, on this planet, talking by this spring. Because you wouldn't have cared enough to have had an emotional crisis in the first place. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

All through her little speech, Data had maintained eye contact, his expression sullen and a little resigned. Now, he sighed and lowered his head.

"Do you want me to replace my exterior covering before morning?" he asked.

"Not unless you want to," Deanna said. "No, don't be embarrassed. Would you like to know what I really think, seeing you like this?"

He shrugged.

"I think it's encouraging. It might be a good experience to go through the day wearing a face entirely unique to you. If you want to replace your skin later on, I'm sure there'll be time before we get to the first site this afternoon."

Data nodded slowly, and seemed to smile.

"Thank you…Deanna," he said, looking a little hesitant about using her first name until she smiled back. "And…perhaps I might test myself in other ways as well. Do you know I've never sprinted long distance outside of Starfleet endurance tests?"

Deanna blinked.

"Data…did you just say 'I've'?"

"Yeah," he said, and grinned for real. "I've been able to say 'I've' since installing my emotion chip. But, until now, I've only used contractions in private…mostly when talking to Spot."

"But Data, that's incredible! Why hide this ability?"

He shrugged.

"I told you. I didn't want to disappoint or frighten anyone. But, like I said, I'm done hiding on this trip. I'm also done letting that Borg bitch and that reporter bastard eat away at my insides until I can't stand the sight of me anymore. This is a vacation, and from now on I intend to make the most of it, and of the time the four of us spend together. I'm afraid I have...a lot to make up for..."

He chuffed a short, self-deprecating laugh.

Deanna shook her head and gave the android a friendly peck on his blinking, metal cheek.

"I'm proud of you, Data," she said, then stood up and stretched before catching a yawn with her hand. "But, I really should be getting back to sleep. We have another long ride ahead of us tomorrow. And I'm still looking forward to seeing that artwork of yours."

"It'll be there," he said.
"Are you coming back to the cave? I'm sure you have time for a better dream before sunrise."

"Maybe in a little while," he told her. "I rather like this spot. In addition…you've given me a great deal to think about."

"All right then," she said, and smiled. "Good night, Data."

"Good night, Deanna. And thank you."

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

References include: First Contact (movie); Best of Both Worlds I/II; Descent I/II; I, Borg; Legacy; In Theory; The Loss; Night Terrors; Dark Page; Redemption II; Data's Day; Conundrum; Home Soil; The Offspring.
Picard and Troi were pulled from their sleep by a startled, horrified yelp.

"Gah! What the hell did I just touch!" Riker cried.

Troi sat up at once and scanned the cave for Data, but saw only the android's sleeping bag, neatly rolled up by the entrance.

"Counselor? What's happening?" Picard asked irritably, blinking the sleep out of his brain.

"I think Will found Data's skin," Troi said, fighting to maintain a straight expression in the face of Picard's utter befuddlement. She climbed out of her sleeping bag and strode from the cave into the cool, morning light, the captain following not far behind.

Their eyes soon fell on a squareish patch of white-gold synthoskin, which had unrolled from an open pack to the sandy ground. Riker stood staring at it, anxiously rubbing his hand against his blue pajama top. Lying in the sand, like that, the normally convincingly flesh-like material looked alarmingly dry and artificial, almost…plastic…

"Will, what the devil is going on out here?" Picard demanded.

"Captain, Deanna!" Riker glanced up at them, still flustered from his shock. "I was just going through the saddlebags, looking for my razor and toothbrush, but when I put my hand in…in—"

"Will, it's all right," Deanna said, the look on his face as he frowned at the bag forcing her to swallow a rather inappropriate spate of giggles. "I just want to know… Is that what I think it is?" he asked warily.

"Rolled up sections of bioplast sheeting?" she asked innocently. "Looks like it."

"And it's packed in this saddlebag because…?"

"Because I've chosen to remove it for the day," Data said, joining them from the direction of the stable. There was a notable lightness to his step, and he seemed quite chipper. "Good morning, Captain. Will. Deanna."

"Good morning, Data," Troi said with a warm smile. "You're looking well. Did you find the time for another dream?"

"I did, thank you," Data told her, and smiled back, the colored lights that had limned his silvery skull the night before nearly unnoticeable in the daylight. He had changed from his pajamas to a lightweight desert hiking outfit in shades of olive, blue, and brown, secured at the neck, wrists, and over the tops of his boots to prevent any sand from getting in.

Picard frowned in some concern at the startling sight of his second officer, but Riker stared openly, half-wondering if he'd been transported to another reality during the night.
"Data…? Why…what—?"

"I've chosen to remove my…mask…as it were. To reveal my true face," the android said. "Today, I intend to be entirely myself."

Data spoke calmly, even confidently, and Picard's worried frown lightened somewhat. He seemed more curious now, even intrigued. But, Deanna sensed Data's inner turmoil. Beneath that strong, composite skull, the android was a conflicted mass of nerves, uncertainties, and doubts, not only about whether he could pull this off, but whether he should – and his anxious embarrassment was only heightened by Riker's ongoing stare.

"Well, I think that's admirable, Data," Deanna said, her eyes on Riker, "and I highly endorse your efforts."

If Data could have blushed right then, his entire face would have been burning.

"Yeah…" Riker tried, confused by Deanna's response and looking torn between following her lead and giving in to his initial inclination to chew them both out for this utterly unorthodox and bewildering behavior. Android or not, responsible, stable Starfleet command officers did not just up and remove their skin. And when had Data started addressing him and Deanna by their first names, and using verbal contractions…?

For all Riker knew, the captain was feeling just as upset by all this as he was, but the commander noted Picard had chosen to keep his silence, perhaps understanding that in an emotionally delicate situation, like this, an ill-timed criticism, no matter how well-meaning, could do more harm than good. With some effort, Riker took the hint and managed to reign in his reaction.

"I was just…looking for my razor…" he said.

"Allow me, Will," Data said helpfully, and efficiently set about repacking the sheeting that had fallen from his saddlebag and locating the small, black bag containing the commander's razor and other toiletries in another. "Here you are."

Riker took the bag, still too disconcerted to quite trust himself to speak.

"I think I need to sit down," he said.

"No, you just need some coffee, and a hot breakfast," Deanna said, clasping his arm and walking with him toward the cave. "Captain? Data? Will you be joining us?"

"In a moment, Counselor," Picard said, and motioned for Data to stay behind.

"Captain?" Data inquired.

Picard regarded the android for a long moment, his eyes compassionate but still concerned.

"I think I understand what this is about, Data," he said. "And I agree with Counselor Troi – it is admirable, even courageous, to step out in front and acknowledge yourself, your identity…your feelings, for what they are. But, you must know your…your skin is an essential part of you. Your face is your own."

Data lowered his eyes slightly.

"You are alluding to my outer resemblance to my brother, Lore...and to my father," he said. "You believe I have done this as a means of differentiating myself, and my feelings, from them."
"Haven't you, Data?"

"Perhaps…" Data knit his brow…an interesting achievement for a man with no skin, but the silvery covering that protected the delicate inner components of his face and skull was remarkably flexible and expressive. Picard reflected it was probably this smooth, muscle-like layer that had always controlled Data's facial expressions. It was an undeniably fascinating experience to see those synthetic muscles at work now as Data struggled to put his turbulent feelings into words.

"Yes. I think, on some level, you are right," Data said at last, his golden eyes deep and distant as he turned his thoughts inward. "But, I believe…there is more to it than that. I am an android. Right now, I look like what I am: a mechanical construct, designed and engineered by a human scientist to appear humanoid without being human. Yet, I have always wished to be more than just a machine. It has been my life's ambition to improve myself, to grow beyond the limitations of pre-written programming and algorithmic responses and reach a place of…of independence. These past few years have demonstrated that my emotion chip, and the responses it provokes, is just another program and, far from bringing me closer to my goal, installing it has only served to confuse matters. To confuse me. Last night, I began to realize… If I am ever to find my independence…to reach that place where my consciousness is not ruled by programmed impulses but is, instead, informed by them…where I no longer seek validation through imitated responses, but rely on my own innovation, judgment and intuition, as humans do… I must learn to better understand myself before I can make any truly meaningful advancement. And the first step must be to acknowledge…truly acknowledge…my android nature."

His eyes focused and he looked at Picard, his expression vulnerable and anxious as he awaited his captain's response.

But, the captain was looking back at him with a slight, fond little smile. All this may have been a revelation for Data, but much of it was advice Picard and his other friends had been trying to tell him for years. If Data had reached that understanding now, on his own...finally made the cognitive leap from theory to application...

"And there it is…" he said softly.

"Sir?" Data inquired.

"Emotional maturity… Somewhere, in these last few seconds…"

Data canted his head in confusion.

"Captain…I don't—"

"Are you sure you'll be all right to travel like that, Mr. Data?" Picard asked. "The wind and the sand won't trouble you?"

"I will be fine, sir," the android assured him, still looking puzzled. "Even if we encounter a sandstorm, I'm equipped with diagnostic shields that would effectively protect my more delicate components."

"Very good then," the captain said, and rubbed his hands in front of him. "Now, Will and Deanna were saying something about breakfast… I suggest we eat up and get moving before the sun climbs too high. Oh yes, and we were going to take a look at that painting of yours. Don't let me forget."

Data frowned slightly but, if he was planning to say something, he let it go. Instead, he fell into step beside the captain, the two of them entering the cave to the smell of rehydrated coffee and slowly
heating ration packs.

"Captain," Riker greeted, handing him a cup of steaming coffee. "Data, will you be eating with us this morning?"

"Yes, I believe I will," Data said, noting that Riker and Troi had taken advantage of their absence to change into riding clothes and finish packing up their sleeping gear. As he spoke, the captain set down his coffee and headed off to do the same.

"Although my power cells are self-charging, without my outer sheath and its accompanying fluids to help regulate the flow of energy and chemical nutrients to my systems, primary power resources must be rerouted to compensate. If I wish to continue running at peak efficiency, I will be obliged to ingest nutrients periodically throughout the day to make up the difference."

"Are you saying you'll need to eat?" Riker attempted to translate. "Regular meals, like we do?"

Data opened his mouth, ready to refute the comparison. But then, he paused.

True, there were notable differences between the way his body processed raw materials and the way a human body digested food. But, Riker wasn't asking about those differences. Quite the opposite: if he was interpreting the commander's words, non-verbal indications, and apparent intent correctly, his question seemed to invite a parallel association between android and human requirements and functions.

Didn't it?

Today was a day for trusting himself, no matter how uncertain he might feel, not backing safely behind walls of facts and figures. In that spirit, Data canted his head slightly, and took a chance.

"Yes," he asserted. "Yes, I will need to eat. And drink. Just like you do."

The android's eyes flicked tentatively from Riker to Troi, half-expecting the two biological humanoids to immediately call him on his technically inaccurate and rather grandiose claim. What he got was:

"Hmm. Well, that's great, Data. Maybe there's something to this experiment of yours after all."

Data blinked at Riker, and his whole demeanor brightened.

"Thank you, Will," he said through a happy smile. "What are the available breakfast options?"

"Well," Riker said, sorting through the warming packets he and Deanna had set out, "we've got scrambled eggs, scrambled eggs, scrambled eggs and...oh yes, scrambled eggs."

Data recognized this routine. He even knew the appropriate response.

"Hmm," he said, cupping his chin in mock thoughtfulness. "I believe I shall try...the scrambled eggs."

"Fine choice," Riker said, and tossed him a packet. "Coffee?"

"Please. With milk and sugar...if we have it."

"Can do," Riker told him, and shot him a rather appraising look. "You know, I think I'm starting to get used to you looking like this. You say it's just for today?"
"Well, at least until we approach the first site this afternoon," Data said.

Riker nodded thoughtfully, and handed the android his coffee. Data sipped it and winced a bit. The milk and sugar made the bitter drink palatable, but only just. Like the captain, Data found he much preferred tea to coffee.

"All right, Data," the commander said, grabbing a ration pack for himself and settling onto his comfortable rock. "I guess you know what you're doing."

"No," Data said with a very slight laugh. "I don't. But…somehow…I think that's the point."

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

References include - TNG: Thine Own Self; The Most Toys; The Naked Now; Deja Q; Code of Honor; Tin Man; The Defector; the novel 'Metamorphosis;' and the movies 'Generations' and 'Finding Neverland.'
Chapter Eight

"Mother, I'm telling you: I heard engines. I felt the rumble behind my ears!"

"It's probably just a tremor," Kurak said, pointedly fixing her attention on the datasets displayed on her console. "Get back to your studies, Kahlestra. School starts again in four weeks, and my daughter will not shame me by arriving unprepared!"

The young Klingon growled and stood, pushing the stacks of tablets and data padds from the table, where they scattered and skittered across the prefab lab's grated floor.

"I know what I heard! There's someone at the site, Mother. Someone who should not be."

"Apart from the research team, the only people out there are those four Starfleet tourists, and they will arrive on horseback," the scientist said irritably, still refusing to lift her eyes from her work.

"Fine!" Kahlestra sneered. "Stay here with your research. I'm going to investigate."

"Go, then, but make sure you don't pester the Federation archaeologists with your squalling," Kurak warned, tapping at the keypad. "I gave my word you would be on your best behavior. You will not make me a liar."

"Don't worry, Mother," Kahlestra sneered. "Unlike you and my teachers, Drs. Baker, Anders, Tu'Pari, and Kapoor have told me they welcome my thoughts and opinions!"

"It is not their duty to teach you Klingon discipline, but mine," Kurak retorted. "You will mind our values, daughter, and learn to keep your silence and your place."

Kahlestra growled in frustration, her ridged nostrils flaring.

"Like you, you mean?" she spat, knowing it was a cheap shot but firing it anyway.

Kurak's shoulders tensed sharply, but she didn't respond.

Kahlestra's dark eyes narrowed.

"You speak of values, always values," she muttered angrily, "but unless she's a member of a very prominent House, Klingon culture does not value a female's thoughts, her feelings, or her work. You've said this yourself, Mother...every time you tried for advancement and lost the post to a male competitor! Why should I value a culture that does not value me?"

"Kahlestra!" Kurak snapped, raising her eyes from her console at last.

But the fuming girl had turned her back and was already marching through the lab's sliding door into the windy desert heat.

The archaeologists' compound was nestled in the protected lee of a curving, stony ridge and divided into three sections: research facilities, eating and exercise huts, and basic housing. The structures were standard Federation flatpack domes, easy to assemble and disassemble while leaving only
minimal physical impact on the native environment.

Kahlestra strode to the sandy center of the compound, her long, braided hair tossed by the wind as she sniffed, and tasted, the air.

"Kahlestra!"

Dr. Melinda Baker waved cheerily and jogged through the wind to join her.

"I've just come from that new passage we found under the Stairway," the human said excitedly. "You and your mother really should see what…"

Baker trailed off, her freckled, sun-tanned brow furrowing as she ran a hand through her short, messy curls.

"Did you hear that?"

The young Klingon nodded.

"And I smell the ionized exhaust," she said. "I think it's speeder engines, but Mother refuses to listen to me. As usual."

"Well, your mother is under a lot of pressure, Kay," Baker said gently. "When it comes to pursuing research for research's sake, I don't think the Klingon Empire is exactly—"

"I don't care about the stupid Empire!" Kahlestra snarled. "Mother's always under pressure, and she always refuses to hear me! She may not think it is a child's place to speak out, but I'm eleven years old, I have my own mind! And I know a ground transport when I hear one!"

Dr. Baker frowned and tilted her head slightly in the direction of the faint, rumbling sound.

"There's more than one, if that's not an echo…" she said warily, and took Kahlestra's hand.

"Come on, Kay," she said, heading for the main building with its compact, but powerful, communications array. "It's probably just some off world punks, but I think we should report this…especially with those Starfleet tourists due to arrive this afternoon. Communications with the capital settlement have been sporadic because of the sandstorms, but we might be able to get a message through to the Federation Starbase on—"

A flash of green light seared Kahlestra's eyes, and the warm pressure of Dr. Baker's hand in hers vanished in a burning, stinging heat. She blinked the spots from her vision and looked down at her hand. It was scorched and raw and streaked with a peculiar black soot. Streaks the length and shape of human fingers…

"By Kahless…" the girl gasped, and glared, a deep, terrible rage roiling within her.

Whoever had fired was clearly a coward, choosing to remain concealed behind sand and rocks rather than step out in the open and claim the kill. With nothing to fight, Kahlestra clenched her blistered hand into a fist and raced for the main building. She moved, not in a straight line, but in an evasive zig-zag, as she'd been taught—until something small slammed painfully into her shoulder. The impact made her stagger slightly, but she kept running, reaching back to brush it away…

But, to the girl's horror, the world around her was already fading…dematerializing…and taking her consciousness with it…
Data could not recall a time he had felt so…liberated. It was as if the worries and inhibitions he had carried for so long had dropped away, somewhere along the trail, leaving the android free to act and speak and even sing as he pleased, without the awful, nagging fear that his colleagues would shrink away, chastise, or think any less of him for indulging his playful whims.

While Picard, Troi, and Riker kept to the path, Data and Sagebrush romped and cavorted in the sand. When Sagebrush indicated he wanted to rejoin the group, Data ran off on his own, testing his body's remarkable speed, agility, and reflexes just for the sheer joy of moving through the sunlight, dancing with the wind. Having spent the vast majority of his life within the close, controlled, orderly confines of Federation starships and Starfleet discipline, he found the planet's wild, empty spaces exhilarating, intoxicating, and he was still laughing when he rejoined the others at the sheltered rest area for their midday meal.

"Feeling better, Mr. Data?" Picard said.

"Yes, sir," Data assured him, breathing heavily as he flopped to the sandy ground, practically glowing with spent energy. Without his skin, his respiratory system had to take up the slack of regulating his body temperature, but that wasn't an easy task in the desert sun. Data felt drained and breathless and hot, but happy. "It was a…marvelous experience."

"It's easy to forget you never had a childhood…a chance to play," Deanna said softly, and smiled. "I enjoyed watching you today, Data. It was…joyful."

Data grinned.

"Yes, joyful, that's the word! Joyful…" The android closed his eyes and took in a deep breath through his nose, as if the sound were a flavor that could be savored. Then, slowly, he shook his head with a wry little smile.

"Since installing my emotion chip…losing the D…my life has seemed so…so grim, so dark…” he confessed. "I have been consumed by guilt and fear…so much so that even my dreams afforded little escape. Today, for the first time, I feel a change, a real change. Perhaps…" He shrugged a little sheepishly and risked a glance at Deanna. "Perhaps, I am not such a terrible person after all…?"

"Data…"

Riker and Deanna both gave him a playful shove, leaving the android chuckling through a slight, self-deprecating smile.

"Well, I don't know about the rest of you, but all that riding has left me ravenous, and very thirsty," Picard said. "How about some lunch?"

The captain's suggestion was met with cheers, and within minutes the group was talking and laughing over their shiny ration packets. With the first site so near, the topic stuck close to the archaeology and history of the planet, with Data happily sharing the information in his vast databanks with the curious group. Picard knew most of the facts, but it was all new to Troi and Riker, which made relating the material all the more fun.

"So this stairway we're about to see was never meant to go anywhere?" Riker asked. "Then, what's the point of building it?"

"As far as anyone has so far been able to tell, it is a purely ceremonial structure," Data said. "Its purpose and symbolism are steeped in mystery. I'm hoping the archaeologists we're about to meet
"As am I, Mr. Data," Picard said eagerly, and drained his cup. "If we're all finished here, I'd say it's time to continue on. We should be getting our first glimpse of the structure in another hour and a half or so."

"Indeed, Captain," Data said, and reached for the saddlebag containing his bioplast sheeting and the medikit. "If you'll excuse me, I only need a few minutes to-

A deep, rumbling tremor knocked the expedition to the ground. The horses whinnied and shied in alarm, straining hard against the restraints that kept them from running off. With the saddlebag slung over his shoulder, Data jumped to his feet and raced over, trying to calm them, but the tremors only got worse. The rockface that had provided shelter from the wind began to crack, sending sharp shards and chips skittering to the ground. Larger stones began to follow. Picard, Riker, and Troi only just managed to grab their packs and scramble out of the way before the space where they'd shared their lunch was filled with rough, red, sandy gravel.

It took nearly three minutes of frightened, breathless waiting, but the ground finally stopped its terrible shaking. Data hummed to the horses and stroked their manes and, slowly, they stopped their panicked screaming, calming enough to allow the android to look to his human companions. To his alarm, he found them half-buried in the hot sand.

"Is everyone all right?" Picard asked, coughing roughly as Data helped him climb to his feet, then rushed to help Riker and Troi.

"Yes, we're fine," Troi said, batting the burning, clinging sand from her hair and clothes with palpable distaste. "Thank you, Data."

"I suppose we're lucky," Riker said grimly. "All our supplies seem to be intact."

"Yes, but I believe we should head for the archaeological site at once," Data said, putting all thoughts of his appearance aside and already re-saddling the horses. "The tremors emanated from that direction and the effects there may have been worse. Communications on this planet are spotty at best, and if any of the scientists should be injured..."

"Quite right, Mr. Data," Picard said. "We'll have to lend whatever help we can."

*******

The Stairway of Sawrina the Great was much more than a straightforward flight of stairs. Though it led nowhere, it was a vast, elaborate structure, branching and interweaving with all the eye-twisting complexity of an Escher print brought to towering life. The four Starfleet officers couldn't help but marvel as it came into view, but their primary concern was to reach the archaeologists' compound as quickly as possible.

"Hello!" Picard called as they approached the prefabricated domes. "Is anyone there?"

His calls were met by an eerie, wind-whistling silence.

Data frowned, got down from his horse, and removed his protective, google-like sun shades, his golden eyes darting over the sand in front of the main building.

"This isn't right..." he said.

"What is it, Data?" Riker asked.
"I detect signs of a struggle," the android said. "But, despite the tremors, the erosion of the imprints I see here indicates they were made several hours ago. Two people were moving quickly, I would suspect a woman of medium build and a child. The woman's prints end in this patch of discolored sand, while the child's continue in an evasive pattern, only to stop abruptly..."

He crouched down near the blackened sand and rubbed a small sample between his fingers. Alarmed, he stood and faced the group.

"Captain, the woman was vaporized," he reported. "By a high energy weapon."

"And the child?" Deanna asked, dreading the answer.

"I have no way of knowing," Data said. "But as there are no other prints and no sign that the child fell, I would assume a transporter."

"You mean, someone came here, killed a woman, and abducted a child?" Riker repeated. "Why? What would be the purpose?"

"Let's spread out," Picard ordered. "There were five researchers working here. Perhaps one of them can shed light on this mystery."

The officers nodded and branched out, Data heading for the primary research laboratory while Picard took the main building and Troi and Riker moved toward the eating and residential huts.

The android walked through the sliding door into a scene of smouldering destruction. It seemed a hail of energy bolts had discolored walls, shorted out consoles, moving across the room as if tracking someone's movements.

Data heard a rustle, and scanned the vicinity for something he could use as an impromptu weapon. Grabbing a heavy piece of non-conductive rebar, he moved cautiously forward.

The rustle came again, then the lumbering tread of very heavy footfalls. Data raised his eyes-

And found himself staring into the wild haired, heavily ridged, bone-white features of a Nausicaan raider.

"Identify yourself," Data ordered, keeping the rebar low until it became necessary to use it.

"You first," the Nausicaan spat in a rough, fang-slurred voice, taking advantage of his heavily armored, muscular bulk to loom threateningly over the much smaller android. "You do not look like a hew-man."

"You are very observant," Data said dryly. "May I ask your purpose here?"

The Nausicaan snorted, then broke out laughing.

"A robot!" he exclaimed, as if listening to someone else. "Of course, a robot!"

Data frowned.

"Pardon me, but I am not a robot. And, as you are trespassing on Federation property, it is my duty to take you in to custody."

"Robot." The Nausicaan snuffled with laughter. "You may try, robot!"

The Nausicaan lunged at him, and Data dodged swiftly, a tap to the much larger being's back..."
sending him sprawling against a ruined console. Data moved to grab him, aiming for a vulnerable nerve cluster just under the Nausicaan's ear, but the Nausicaan shot something just as Data raised his arm: a gray dart gun small enough to conceal in one hand. Data felt a projectile impact hard against his side and reached for the communicator he'd tucked his pocket-

But the charred, smoky room was already dematerializing around him, and Data could feel his conscious awareness fading...

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

References include TNG: Suspicions; Tapestry; Birthright I; Peak Performance; Elementary, Dear Data; and the movie Star Trek: Insurrection.
Chapter Nine

The group's search of the compound turned up no signs of the archaeology team though, given the circumstances, each of them had taken a compact phaser from the archaeologists' emergency stores. Picard was heading back to round up the slowly wandering horses when, behind him, Troi let out a startled gasp.

"Deanna, what is it?" Riker asked.

"It's Data!" she exclaimed, sharing a worried look with Riker before fixing her dark eyes on the research lab. "Captain, something is very wrong!"

"Can you explain, Counselor?" the captain ordered.

Deanna frowned in concentration.

"It was brief. I felt an intense flash of…anger, alarm— And now, I'm not sensing anything from him. Nothing at all…"

"Whoever attacked this place could still be here," Riker said, gripping his phaser. "If Data ran into them…"

"Come on," the captain said, and they ran up to the lab's sliding door, weapons at the ready. Once there, Picard made a cautionary gesture, and indicated Riker should take the back entrance. The commander nodded and hurried off while Picard and Troi slipped through the door—

—just in time to see a huge, hulking figure vanish in a sparkle of transporter energy.

A horrified shudder clenched Picard's artificial heart, and he gasped: "Nausicaans…!"

A bevy of traumatic memories threatened to assault his mind, but Picard fought them back. They were from long ago, educing the fear and fury of a previous encounter with Nausicaan raiders that had left a newly minted Ensign Picard with a knife jutting through his ribs, a synthetic heart pumping in his chest... But the Borg had done far worse to him, and he had survived. He and Data, both...

Picard scanned his eyes across the room, anxiously searching the wreckage for his friend's metallic form, and for any shadow or movement that could indicate the raiders were still lurking—

"Errrghhhh…"

The groan came from somewhere under the scorched debris that littered the grated floor.

"That sounded like a woman's voice," he said.

"She's over here," Troi called, and the two of them picked their way toward the sound, raising their eyes as Riker stepped cautiously into the room, his phaser in his hand. At the captain's unspoken question the commander gave a brief, worried shake of his head.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said, "he's not back there, and he's not answering his communicator."
Troi turned her large eyes to the captain.

"Do you think... Could Data have been abducted too? If he's been deactivated, or transported out of communications range...?"

With Deanna's unfinished questions and all their distressing implications still hanging in the air, the woman groaned again and the three officers hurried to help, managing to shift enough wreckage to reveal a Klingon civilian only just flickering to consciousness. Dark magenta blood stained her long, tangled hair, trickled from her mouth and nose. Her leathery dress was charred, and her right shoulder and upper arm were all blackened and burned, probably grazed by the same energy weapon that had shot up the lab.

Deanna ran for the lab's emergency medical kit while Picard tried to keep the woman still.

"No, don't try to sit up," he said, wielding his commanding, cultured voice like the tool it was. "Can you tell us what's happened here? Why were you attacked?"

The Klingon was unaffected, and unmoved, by his concern.

"How the hell should I know?" she snapped viciously, pulling away from the human's helping hand and stubbornly pushing herself – with obvious pain – into a sitting position. "We are scientists, we have nothing here those brainless raiders could understand, let alone want!"

Picard pursed his lips, willing himself not to react to her anger.

"We're looking for another member of our party," he said. "An android. He would have come in here just a short time ago."

"If he came in before you dug me out, I did not see him," the woman snarled, wiping slick blood from her chin with the back of her hand as she surveyed the wreckage all around them. "Damn Nausicaan vandals...!"

Deanna returned with the emergency kit, pulled out a compact medical tricorder, and started scanning for the nature and extent of the woman's injuries.

The Klingon reached for the device. "I can do that," she snapped, but Troi moved out of range of her grasp.

"You're in no condition to move just yet," the counselor said firmly. "You have a concussion, and those burns are very serious. Is there a doctor or medic nearby-"

"I'm no invalid!" the woman shouted, forcing herself to her feet. She tried to take a step, but her legs gave out from under her and Riker was only just quick enough to save her from collapsing against a still-sparking console.

"Easy," he said, but the woman shook him off, baring her teeth in fury.

"I don't need your help, human," she snarled, supporting herself against the charred wall. "Captain Picard," she said, "Where is my daughter, and the Federation archaeologists? Are they still alive, or did the Nausicaans ambush them as they did me?"

Picard looked down at his hiking clothes, rather surprised to be recognized out of uniform. Their request to tour the site had included only names, not images.

"You know me?"
The woman snorted.

"Of course I know you," she said. "I have been aboard your ship. Or don't you remember the incident with that Ferengi scientist and his experiments with metaphasic shields?"

"Of course..." Picard realized, beginning to recognize her features beneath the blood and soot. "Then, you must be Kurak. Or...is it Dr. Kurak?"

"It would be, were I a Federation scientist," the woman growled darkly. "In the Klingon Empire, however, the use of academic titles is highly uncommon. I am, therefore, simply Kurak. And you have not answered my question, Captain. Where is my daughter, and the others?"

"I'm afraid you are the only one we have so far been able to locate," Picard told her. "But, I do have...somber news. Outside, we identified the...the remains of a woman, and evidence indicating that the child with her had been abducted."

Kurak closed her eyes, wrapping her arms tightly around her ribs. Troi winced at the burning spikes of agony the movement caused her, but the the woman seemed unaffected.

"Then, you think they have taken her," the Klingon said calmly. "That the Nausicaans have stolen my daughter. For what reason?"

"I don't know," Picard said. "But, if they have taken your daughter, it's likely she is not alone. Commander Data-"

"Yes, yes, you mentioned your android has gone missing as well," Kurak said brusquely, and opened her eyes. "You believe it possible they are being held together?"

"We don't yet have enough information to speculate," Picard said. "But, if Data and your daughter are together, you have little to worry about. Data is...an exceptionally resourceful man. And he has proven himself to have quite an affinity for children."

Kurak grunted low in her throat and squeezed her ribs even tighter.

"We have a small medical clinic near the exercise facility," she said, her words rough with pain and effort. She glared up at Riker. "Take me there."

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

References include TNG: Tapestry; Suspicions; Best of Both Worlds I/II; The Offspring; Pen Pals; Hero Worship; First Contact (movie).
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Ten

"My name is Howard."

"Yes, I am aware of that," Data said impatiently, pointedly staring through the rippling forcefield and not at the domestic service robot that shared the approximately nine-by-five-by-eight-foot gouge in the wall that currently served as his cell. Data had never been affected by claustrophobia before, but he had an anxious, off-putting sense that if he was forced to remain in these tight quarters much longer, he would either explode, short out, or start to scream incoherently. "You have told me your name seventeen times in the six minutes, forty-three seconds since I regained consciousness."

The energy field seemed to be powered through a very old-fashioned system of bundled optic fibers. The long, slender strands ran through plastic piping up the rough stone wall just outside the cell and across the stone ceiling into what appeared to be a system of tunnels...possibly an ancient sewer system.

Data sighed in frustration, angrier at himself than his situation. Under normal circumstances he could have counted on his body's substructure to interrupt this primitive forcefield's power flow long enough to slip through, but he couldn't risk a move like that without his skin. With so much of his circuitry exposed, the unshielded power surge would fry his positronic brain like bacon, as Geordi might say...not to mention melt most of his torso. If only he still had that piece of non-conductive rebar...

He knew he'd had it in his hand when the Nausicaan raider shot him with that transporter dart. Unfortunately, the dart's accompanying electric shock had been strong enough to overload his neural circuits and plunge him into dreamless unconsciousness.

According to his internal chronometer, Data had awakened approximately three hours, fifty-seven minutes later in this dim, dank, claustrophobic little hole in the ground, with a useless communicator, no sign of his captors, and no way of knowing where he was or how far he'd been taken from his weapon, his friends, his horse, or his skin. In fact, apart from the irritating buzz of the forcefield and the incessant drip, drip of water off a few spindly stalactites, the only sound he'd heard since regaining consciousness was—

"My name is Howard. I am here to serve. Would you like a beverage?"

Data closed his eyes, a surge of impatience swelling below his throat.

"Howard, you must know you cannot provide me, or anyone, with a beverage," he said flatly. "There is nothing here to drink."

"I am here to serve," Howard said again, the photoelectric cells that served him as eyes glowing blue in his vaguely humanoid, metallic green face. "How may I serve you?"

Data regarded him, several possibilities running through his mind. Disregarding the rather disconcerting emotional impulse to order the annoying robot to deactivate his vocal synthesizer or place himself in hibernation-mode, the android tilted his head and smiled, slowly.
"Howard, can you answer questions?"


"Yes," Data said. "You may serve me by answering some questions. Were you brought here by a Nausicaan?"

"I am a trade-in," Howard stated. "Not the best, but still a Great Buy."

Data suppressed a grimace. The robot sounded like those chipper ads he'd sometimes heard blaring in civilian-run starbase food courts.

"Where did you serve, Howard?" Data asked, trying a different tack.

"I have an excellent service record," Howard informed him. "Fifteen years of low maintenance efficiency. Only one previous owner: a high-powered businessman. My function was to maintain his private dwelling on Orion Prime."

Data blinked at that, a host of new possibilities and hypotheses slotting into place. If Orions had been behind the attack on the archaeologists, the Nausicaan he'd encountered could have been their hired muscle. Orion smugglers would certainly have greater interest in stealing ancient artifacts than Nausicaan raiders…not to mention kidnapping a serviceable 'robot'…

They would also pose a much more dire threat to his friends. Nausicaans were brutish, but very direct. Orions were crafty, devious, and highly opportunistic. And, although the Orion slave trade had long been wiped out, at least officially, Data was aware of numerous rumors…

Trepidation spiked through him, and the android worriedly pursed his lips.

"Thank you, Howard," he said. "This information makes my escape from this cell all the more urgent. Tell me, is your substructure made of conductive or nonconductive materials?"

"I am designed to be easily transportable, for your convenience," Howard said in his even, announcer-voice. "As such, I am constructed of lightweight materials: silicon, aluminum alloys and durable plastics, with a flexible, stain-proof silicone sheath tinted a fashionable metallic green."

"Intriguing, I'm sure…" Data said dryly. "May I ask a favor of you, Howard?"

"I am here to serve," Howard replied automatically.

"May I…examine your arm?"

"All of my limbs are detachable for ease of maintenance and replacement," Howard informed him, efficiently detaching his left arm with his right hand and offering the silvery-green appendage to Data. "For your convenience."

"Yes… Thank you," Data said…and frowned. He wasn't sure why, but watching Howard remove his arm, holding that arm in his hand, feeling its limp weight…

Something was happening, deep down inside him…an odd, acidic surging in his gut. His equilibrium seemed off, and he swayed slightly. If he hadn't known his body had already completely processed the rations and coffee he had consumed that day, he'd be worried they were about to make a reappearance on the floor.
The peculiar physical feelings didn't last long, but they were intense enough to leave him rattled. Could it be he'd been nauseated by the prospect of holding a robot's severed arm? He made a mental note to discuss the incident with Geordi when next they met. In the meantime, the most he could do was swallow hard a few times and take in several deep, steadying breaths.

"Well," he commented to the completely oblivious Howard. "That was new. Now, let's see if this mass-produced plastic construct of yours will do the trick…"

Howard observed blankly as Data cautiously raised the severed arm to interrupt the power flow from the forcefield generator…

Choking black smoke filled the tiny space, and Howard's severed arm grew red hot. Data's hand opened reflexively, and the melted mass of plastic fell to the ground.

The forcefield hadn't so much as flickered.

"Damn," Data swore, and glanced down at the ruined arm with a wince. "My sincere apologies, Howard."

"I am here to serve," Howard told him.

"Yes, I know," Data said, and sadly shook his head. "You are a veritable repository of preprogramed responses without a hint of ingenuity or independent thought. But, at least you are company enough to keep me focused on the task at hand, rather than the smallness of this cell."

He grit his teeth and sighed.

"Well. If we cannot disrupt the forcefield with what we have at hand - no pun intended - we will have to find a different means of escape. But for any of my four most promising back-up plans to work, I will need to catch the attention of our captors."

A curious idea struck him, and his golden eyes took on a wicked cast.

"Howard…how are you at singing?"

******

"Stop that screaming, you little brat!" the Orion guard roared, banging a heavy piece of rebar against the stone wall next to the children's cell.

"But that song is driving me insane!" the new addition shouted – the angry little Klingon. "Make it stop, or I swear by Kahless, I'll do something even worse than before!"

The Orion frowned, recalling the way the Klingon girl had lunged at his shift partner upon awakening. She'd bloodied his eye and nearly bitten the burly man's nose clean off before he and that idiot Nausicaan had managed to pull her away and shove her in the cell with the other Skins.

"Yeah, like I'm going to leave you unguarded. Besides, what can you do, stuck in that cell?" he taunted.

The young Klingon glared daggers, then opened her mouth wide and joined in with the faint, distant singing that had been driving her and her sensitive ears to distraction for at least the past eight minutes.

"'This is the song that doesn't end,'" she shrieked, "'It just goes on and on my friend! Some people
started singing it, not knowing what it was! And they'll continue singing it forever just because this is
the song that doesn't end—' Come on you simpering P'Tok," she snapped at the human boy beside
her, shoving him and several of the other huddled prisoners as she paced around the cell. "Join in!!"

"No, no, don't!" the Orion snarled. "All right, you win! I'll go find out what's causing that blasted
noise. But you'd better sit tight, right where you are, while I'm gone. If any of those Skins are injured
while I'm away—"

"Why should I want to injure these cringing sheep?" the Klingon retorted. "It's you I'd like to tear
apart."

The Orion snorted, and headed down the dank tunnel.

"Don't think I can do it?" the girl shouted after him. "Release this forcefield! Or are you too afraid to
face me without its protection, you green-skinned Orion coward!"

The Orion muttered dark mutterings to himself as he tromped through the maze of ancient passages,
following the singing to its source. To his surprise, the reverberating sounds led him to what he and
his fellow smugglers had termed the 'Junk Yard,' where they stored stolen, salvaged, and traded
machines for auction.

"...some people started singing it not knowing what it was, and they'll continue singing it forever
just because this is the song that doesn't end. It just goes on and on my friend..."

"All right, who's down here?" the Orion demanded. "Don't think I didn't hear you."

"I meant for you to hear me," a man's voice retorted. A second, much less nuanced voice continued
singing loudly, until the first one quieted him with, "Thank you, Howard. You can stop now."

"I am here to serve," the second voice replied.

The Orion frowned and headed for the section where they kept the more valuable machines,
including industrial, agricultural and domestic robots. Exiting the tunnel, he was met by a very angry,
golden-eyed glare staring out from a silvery skull that, despite its metallic sheen and blinking lights,
had an uncannily lifelike quality.

For a brief, unsettled, moment, the tall, muscular Orion's thoughts flew back to his childhood, to
stories his older brother had told him late at night: tales of restless souls possessing inanimate dolls
and puppets to wreak their revenge on the living.

But no, this thing was a machine, a robot. Whatever he thought he'd seen...it had to be a trick of the
light, a distortion of the forcefield...

"I hoped that song would arouse your curiosity," the yellow-eyed robot said, its undeniably wry
tone, expression, and cross-armed stance unsettling the Orion all over again. "Or, at least, provoke
enough irritation to compel you to investigate."

"What are you?" the Orion demanded, his own voice coming out rather paler than he'd intended.

"First of all, it is not 'what am I' but 'who.' I am a person," the robot...thing...corrected. "Beyond
that, I am a citizen of the Federation, kidnapped from a Federation world and held against my will in
a blatant violation of the Constitution of the United Federation of Planets."

"Constitution," the Orion snorted. "You're a robot. Robots are property. They're not citizens of
anything."
"As I informed your Nausicaan friend before he enacted my unlawful capture, I am not a robot," the thing proclaimed, the simmering anger in its voice becoming more pronounced. "Nor am I anyone's property. I am a free being with defined rights. My Federation citizenship is documented and fully acknowledged. My detainment here is unacceptable."

"Well, ain't that just too bad," the Orion said. "Look, buddy, in this place if you're not a robot, you're a Skin, and since you don't have any skin that I can see, you must be a robot. Simple as that."

"What do you mean: a 'Skin'?" the robot thing asked, its head tilting slightly.

"You really don't know anything, do you," the Orion scoffed. "We take in two kinds of livestock: Slaves and Skins. Slaves are the ones with marketable talents or other...attributes. Skins are what's left after the slave auction's over. They get sold for...different purposes...if you catch my meaning."

"I'm afraid I do not," the robot thing said. "Although I fear it is something most ominous. Tell me, where do you keep these...Skins?"

"None of your business," the Orion snapped. "Now you keep quiet. I've got to get back to my post."

"Wait!" the robot thing called. "If I am to be held prisoner here, I demand my basic rights."

The Orion paused.

"What rights?"

"Adequate space and sleeping accommodations. Clean, nourishing food and drink in suitable portions. Edifying entertainment. Appropriate clothing. Hygienic—"

"Ridiculous!" the Orion exclaimed. "Robots don't sleep or eat or—"

"I do," the robot thing said. "And, as I said before, I am not a robot."

"What's your name, then?" the Orion demanded. "Robots have nicknames based on their serial numbers. Only real people have names."

"Tell me your name," the robot thing shot back.

"Nizik," the Orion told him. "Your turn."

The robot thing smiled.

"My name is Soong," it said, seeming to enjoy the confused expression on the Orion guard's face. "Now, Nizik, will you accede to my very reasonable demands, or shall I use my friend Howard here to deflect the forcefield's energy toward the space you will be compelled to run to in just five...four...three..."

The robot thing reached for the domestic droid, clearly aiming to lift it into the air...

Nizik's midnight-blue eyes opened wide and he quickly deactivated the forcefield. As the energy wall dissipated, the robot thing breathed a sigh of relief so palpably genuine the Orion actually shivered in his boots.

"Thank you," it said. "The anxiety associated with such close confinement...well, it will suffice to say I will never look upon a closet the same way again." The Soong thing chuckled very slightly, its manner more unsettling than ever now it had more freedom of movement.
"Come with me," the guard said gruffly, remembering just in time to pull his phaser rifle from the holster on his back and aim it at his captive.

"What about Howard?" the Soong thing inquired.

"The droid stays," the Orion said, and pointedly reactivated the force field. Only when it was up and buzzing did it click in his mind that the lump of blackened plastic on the floor was what remained of Howard's left arm.

"Did you-?" the guard started.

The Soong thing smiled darkly and, suddenly, the phaser rifle was in its metallic hands, pointed straight at Nizik's heart.

"You were going to lead me to these…Skins…you mentioned?" the metal creature prompted, its golden eyes deep and frightening. "And please, do not attempt to deceive me. I would hate to have to use this weapon against you, at the setting you intended to use against me."

Nizik swallowed hard.

"This way..." he managed to grunt, and scampered through the tunnels the way he'd come, the Soong thing following close at his heels.

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes


Reviews are always welcome! :)
Chapter 11

Chapter Eleven

"How is she?" Riker asked as Troi joined him in the narrow foyer that linked the small medical clinic with the exercise facility's larger dome. He'd stationed himself there, near the tinted, transparent aluminum doors, to keep an eye on the captain as he wrangled the wandering horses, and to maintain a look out in case Data or any of the archaeologists should attempt to return to the compound, but he'd also set a tricorder to run a continuous, wide-range sweep for humanoid life forms. So far, only his, Troi's, Kurak's, and the captain's readings showed on the little screen.

"She's sedated," Troi reported grimly. "Kurak's internal injuries were much more extensive than they first appeared. I've done what I could for her, and she is stable, but she needs real medical attention, Will – more than what little this clinic can provide. We have to find a way to contact the Enterprise."

"I know," Riker grunted. "But, according to the readouts, the capital's currently being buffeted by a pretty intense sandstorm. The storm will start moving our way in a few hours, but until it clears the main city any hope of subspace communication is pretty much out. We just have to wait, and be ready with our message when a window opens."

Troi sighed and pursed her lips. Riker reached out to wrap an arm around her shoulders.

"So," he said, giving her a playful little squeeze, "are we having fun yet?"

Troi snorted despite herself, but ducked out of his embrace.

"Don't joke," she scolded. "Not with Data missing. And Kurak's poor little girl!"

She sighed and ran a hand over her dark hair.

"Data… I'm worried about him, Will, more than I've ever been. These past two days…it's strange, but I've been feeling like I've only just started to get to know him. Who he is, what he's really capable of – beyond the curiosity and imitative behaviors. For this to happen now, at such a critical juncture in his development—"

"I know, Deanna," Riker said. "I'm worried about him too. We just have to remember: despite that damned emotion chip, Data is a trained, experienced officer and he can handle himself. If he is functional, he will find his way back. You have to trust that. Trust him. And in the meantime, we'll do what we can on our end."

"I only wish it were that simple," Troi said. "Don't you see, Will? Before Data installed that chip, his responses were largely a function of his ethical program. He made rational decisions, drawing on intellect and experience – decisions he could always thoroughly explain and justify."

"And you're saying that's no longer the case," Riker said.

"Not exactly." She sighed again, struggling to put her emotional impressions into words. "Data will always be a rational being…it's one of the defining aspects of his personality, perhaps of being an android. My concern is this kidnapping…that it may have placed him in a position where his emotions could too easily overwhelm his rational nature."
Riker's brow furrowed as he trailed her line of thought.

"You're talking about post-traumatic stress," he realized. "Data is still recovering from his abduction by the Borg, and now he's been kidnapped by Nausicaans. If the parallel should trigger an emotional break—"

"Exactly," Deanna said. "Layer that with his previous abduction by his brother, Lore, and that awful collector Kivas Fajo… Can we honestly trust that Data will not react violently against his captors—this time driven, not by ethics and intellect, but by raw emotion? And if he were to lose control… Could he recover? Would he be able to rationalize it, move on from it, as a human might, or would it lead to an even deeper emotional crisis?"

Riker sighed through his nose and took her hands.

"I get where you're coming from, Deanna," he said. "But, this is all speculation. And, Data is not Lore. The anger he confessed to feeling last night isn't the same as hatred and, to my knowledge, Data's never acted out of sheer malice. Even when pitted against the Borg, when he fought, it was in defense of others. Whatever personal stresses he's going through, emotional or otherwise, he's just not a vicious person at heart. If anything, I think his attitude this morning is a better indicator of the kind of man he's growing into."

"If he gets the chance…" Troi scowled down at their linked hands. "Right now, we don't even know where he is, if he's alive or hurt or—"

"I hate this not knowing too," Riker said. "But—"

"Wait…" Troi said. The focus of her eyes shifted inward and she turned to the windows in alarm.

"Where's the captain?" she demanded.

Riker joined her and swore behind his teeth at the sight of the empty, sand-swirled compound. He glanced at the tricorder, but the captain's readings no longer blinked on the screen.

"He was just grabbing the horses…" he growled, and turned to Deanna, his phaser already in his hand. "Stay with Kurak," he ordered, and was through the doors before she could speak.

*******

Picard had found the compound's small stable with little trouble and settled the horses in, removing their loads and saddles and fitting them each with a nosebag of oats. The animals were still nervous and fidgety, but Picard gave them a quick rubdown with the brushes Data had packed for them and, slowly, they began to calm down.

Satisfied their mounts and supplies would be safe for the time being, he'd taken his tricorder and headed in the direction of the Stairway, scanning for any residual heat signatures or atmospheric disturbances that could indicate whether any of the missing archaeology team members had recently passed that way.

The captain had only gone a few dozen meters when he heard muffled voices. The tricorder showed no life form readings, and Picard was just about to head back to signal Riker to join him, but the sandy ground under his feet suddenly began to judder and tremble. He lost his footing and lay flat, resolved to wait out the tremor, until he heard the voices again. They seemed to be coming from directly under him…

"What's wrong?" one of them asked, the words so muffled it was impossible to tell if it was a man or
"It's stuck," another replied. "I don't know if it's wedged, or if the mechanism's just ridiculously old."

"Probably both," the first voice said. "Here, let me help…"

The juddering got worse. Picard rolled away from the shaking ground and almost missed an odd, oblong sort of trap door leap open behind him. Before the captain could think to take cover, two people began clambering awkwardly out of the hole in the ground, helping each other find hand and footholds in the loose sand. They wore broad-brimmed hats and loose khaki clothing with plenty of pockets, and both were laden down with so many scanning and recording devices Picard found it incredible they managed the climb at all.

"Almost got it…there you go!"

A tall woman with a very long, very blonde sunbleached braid pulled a slightly shorter, copper-skinned man to his feet, and the pair of them batted the sand and dust from their clothes.

"Thank you," the man said rather primly, his expression showing just a hint of amusement – until his dark eyes fell on the captain, who was also just climbing to his feet.

"Anders," he said, alerting the woman.

Her ice-blue eyes widened, and a broad smile stretched over her flushed face.

"Oh, you must be one of the Starfleet tourists!" she greeted, striding over to the captain with her hand outstretched. "Sorry if we startled you! I'm Dr. Freja Anders and this is my colleague, Dr. Prasannatman Kapoor."

"Nat," the man said, shaking Picard's hand in turn. "Would I be correct in assuming that you are Captain Jean-Luc Picard, of the Enterprise?"

"You would indeed," Picard told him. "And would I be correct in assuming you are two of the four missing archaeologists we've been hoping to find?"

"Missing?" Anders said, and laughed. "We weren't missing. We were down surveying the new tunnel complex we just uncovered. Didn't Melinda tell you when you arrived?"

"Melinda?" Picard couldn't hide a wince, realizing it must have been her ashes Data had found in the sand. "Would that be Dr. Melinda Baker?"

"Well, yes," Anders said. "She was supposed to meet your group at the compound. Are you saying she didn't greet you?"

Picard sighed.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but I'm afraid I have some very bad news. Were you the only ones exploring the site?"

"No," Nat said. "Tu'Pari is still down there, taking readings."

"He said he'd join us for dinner, in about an hour," Anders said worriedly. "Why? What is it, Captain? What's wrong?"

"It would probably be best to tell you all at once," Picard said. "I'd like you to join me back at the compound. Can you contact Tu'Pari?"
"Not down there," Anders said. "There's some kind of ancient dampening field we still haven't figured out. We'll have to go get him. You're welcome to come along, Captain. It's not far. Just back through these tunnels."

"Thank you," Picard said. "I must say, I've been dreaming of getting the chance to explore the Stairway for years. I only wish the circumstances were different."

"I don't like the way you're hedging around, Captain," Nat said grimly as Anders clambered down into the hole. "Tell me: is Melinda all right? And what about Kay, and Kurak?"

Picard sighed deeply and carefully followed Nat down into the cool, dim tunnel.

"I'm sorry," he said. "There's been an attack. Nausicaans raided your compound. Why, we don't know. My companions and I came upon them just as they transported away. They kidnapped one of my officers and, we assume, Kurak's little girl. Kurak was quite seriously injured, but my companions are caring for her."

"And Melinda?" Nat pressed.

"I fear she may have been killed," Picard admitted.

Nat closed his eyes tightly and looked away.

"You're right, then, Captain," he said. "We should find Tu'Pari and head back to the compound right away."

"Hey, you two, what's the hold up?" Anders called from further down the tunnel.

"We're coming," Nat called back, and nodded for the captain to follow through the musty dimness.

"Listen you idiots!" Kahlestra yelled at the huddled prisoners. "When a metal man with a phaser rifle breaks you out of an Orion prison, you get up off your butts and you run! Now get up! Get up!"

She kicked and pulled at the nearest girl, who just huddled into a tighter ball and began to rock, slowly.

Kahlestra roared in frustration.

"What is wrong with these creeps!" she shouted. "Don't you jerks get it? We're escaping! This Soong guy here is breaking us out! You come with us, and you'll be free!"

The Orion guard laughed.

"You're wasting your breath, little Klingon," he said through a darkly amused smirk. "They're Skins. Skins don't run. They know, even if they try it, they'll never be free. Not ever. Not in here." He tapped at his forehead.

Data frowned, his concerned eyes darting around the dimly lit space. This bewildering reaction was beyond his experience. He had opened all the cages, deactivated all the force fields. Yet, of the eighty-six beings being held prisoner, only three had so far dared to step up and join him: the young Klingon, Kahlestra; an even younger human boy; and an adolescent Orion girl...neither of whom had yet spoken a word, or even lifted their eyes from the sand-sprinkled floor.

"What has been done to these people?" he demanded of the guard.
"I just sell 'em, as is," the Orion said. "I don't ask how they got that way."

The expression that creased the android's silvery face actually made the smug Orion cringe. Data turned to the prisoners.

"Please," he said. "I will not harm you. Allow me to take you away from this place. If you come, I can help you find your homes. Your families. I promise."

"Go away," one of the older women said. "Leave us be."

Other voices soon joined hers, rallying against the android for causing trouble, for putting them all in danger.

"Do you not understand?" Data asked, his bitter confusion lending a trace of desperation to his voice. "I can take you to safety."

When the protests continued, the android stepped over to the Orion guard and clamped his hand over a nerve cluster in the man's thick, green neck. The burly Orion slumped in his chair, unconscious, and Data stepped forward.

"Listen, please, all of you," he said, loud enough to cut through the angry noise and frightened whimpers. "I told the guard my name is Soong, but I am Lt. Commander Data, of the Federation starship Enterprise. I can offer you protection and refuge from your captors, but you must follow me. Quickly, before this Orion's partner and the Nausicaan return from the city hospital."

"You can't protect us, robot, Starfleet or not. So you might as well go," a bedraggled human teenager said bitterly. The prisoners around her muttered their agreement, and Data just stared uncomprehendingly.

"But…" he tried, but Kahlestra interrupted him.

"He's telling the truth, you know," she snapped at the huddled figures all around them. "My mother has been on the Enterprise. She met Data, and I've seen his image in the newsfeeds plenty of times. I don't know what happened to his skin, but I know his face, and I'd recognize those yellow eyes of his anywhere. This guy really is who he says he is."

Data made a face.

"Thanks…I think," he said.

"Any time," the girl said, and strode to his side. "All right, you brainwashed morons, this is your last chance. Are you coming with us, or do you plan to just rot there – to prove to these Orion losers that you really are just a sack of skins with no living souls to worry about?"

The silence that met her words was stifling.

Data swallowed and blinked, his sense of incomprehension shifting to an angry sort of pity.

"I am sorry you will not trust me," he said. "But, you are free. The choice to leave or stay is yours to make. Just know that all that is holding you here is yourselves."

There were a few low mutters, but no one made a move. After a long pause, Data shook his head and turned away.

"Which way, Commander?" Kahlestra asked as she and the two others who'd joined them followed
Data into the labyrinthine tunnels.

"Down here," Data said as he walked. "We have one more individual to rescue. Do any of you know exactly where we are?"

"I'm pretty sure we're still on Nineveh IV," Kahlestra told him. "These tunnels look a lot like the ones under Sawrina the Great's Stairway." She sniffed the air and made a face. "Smell like them too…"

Data nodded, and led the way past heaps and piles of machines before turning into a narrower, darker tunnel.

"That is what I suspected," he said, and stopped in front of a small gouge in the wall, where a silver-green robot with one arm stood stock-still behind a shimmering force field.

"Hello, Howard," the android said. "I have returned for you."

"I am Howard," the robot told him. "I am here to serve."

"That is partially why I have come," Data said, already busy deactivating the buzzing energy field. "I may require your assistance."

"I am here to serve," Howard repeated, and stepped out of the gouge to join the little group as the force field dissipated.

"Incredible," Kahlestra muttered.

"Pardon?" Data asked as he led them back through the narrow tunnel, then turned toward a wider, brighter opening that sloped noticeably upward.

"Nothing," the young Klingon said. "It's just weird. I mean, no offence, but it seems like this robot has more sense than all those people we left back there." She shook her head. "Commander, do you think they'll make it out?"

"I don't know," Data said grimly. "I'm afraid I rather doubt it. But, what more can we do? They do not seem to want to be rescued."

"It's that crazy brainwashing!" Kahlestra said. "Not one of those people I talked to in there thinks they're worth spit. I mean it. They've all been—"

The tunnel shook violently around them. Data staggered, Howard toppled, and the three children found themselves tossed helplessly against the walls.

"It's a quake!" Kahlestra shouted.

"We must exit these tunnels immediately," Data said, sweeping the boy up onto his shoulders and pulling Howard and the young Orion to their feet. "Can you run?"

"Watch my dust," Kahlestra said, and raced ahead, the others close at her heels as the narrowing tunnel cracked all around them. Dust and sand spilled from the ceiling, and they could hear the rending of falling concrete filling the passageways behind them.

"Is that daylight?" the Orion girl asked, speaking for the first time.

"It would appear so," Data said in relief, lifting Howard and the girl along with the phaser rifle in his arms and putting on a final burst of speed. The escapees dashed out of the shaking tunnel just in time
to see the opening they'd passed through collapse in a shocking implosion of sinking sand.

"By Kahless…" Kahlestra gasped.

Data lowered his charges, covered his mouth and turned away, his insides tight with guilt and horror as he struggled not to dwell on the faces of all those people he had left down there, that Orion, Nizik, he had knocked out with a nerve pinch…

But, the quake wasn't over yet. If anything, the shaking was worse out in the open. There was nowhere to hide, no shelter to take.

The children screamed in terror, huddling close to Data and Howard. Data wrapped his arms around them, trying his best to shield them with his body as the hot, choking sand swirled and jumped, painfully pelting their exposed faces and hands.

After what seemed like forever (though Data's internal chronometer insisted only eight point three six minutes had passed) the trembling subsided, and the sobbing children looked up.

Data stood slowly, taking stock of their surroundings.

"What I wouldn't give for a tricorder," he commented. "Or a direct link with the Federation's subspace network. As it is, we will have to navigate by the sun. Do any of you—"

Data felt a tug on his sleeve, and looked down. The little human boy was staring up at him through big, brown eyes.

"Yes?" the android asked.

The boy pointed to the right, and the group followed his finger—

Only to see a dark wall of wind and sand moving rapidly toward them.

Data suddenly understood the old expression 'his heart sank.'

"It's a sandstorm," he said flatly.

"A big one," the Orion girl said.

"Great!" Kahlestra exclaimed. "We escape those stinking Orions and that awful quake just in time to get our skin flayed off in a blasted sandstorm! Going back to school's almost starting to look good right about now."

Data stared at the approaching storm for another two seconds, then started moving quickly across the hot sand.

"Follow me," he said.

"Where are we going?" Kahlestra asked, she and the others jogging to keep up with his long, fast strides. "There's no way to escape that storm!"

"I said I would get you to safety, and I will," Data stated, then shot her a broad smile over his shoulder.

"Don't worry," he said. "I have an idea."

To Be Continued…
Chapter End Notes

References include - TNG: The Most Toys; Descent; First Contact (movie).
Chapter Twelve

Data, Howard, and the children huddled together in the lee of a low, protruding chunk of ruined concrete, watching the projected energy field sparkle and fizz with every sand particle that slammed against it. Just beyond, the sandstorm raged, roaring and swirling and tearing across the hapless desert. The wind ripping around them made it hard to breathe, and the children's faces had grown flushed and sweaty, the terror in their eyes prompting Data to hold them close and whisper softly, over and over, that it was going to be all right, they were going to be all right.

Data's diagnostic shields were not very strong, nor were they meant to be. Their purpose was merely to ensure no dust or other foreign materials got into his systems while his circuitry was exposed during maintenance. But, with Howard helpfully serving as a supplementary power source, Data had managed to innovate a link-up allowing him to amplify and extend the extremely short range energy field he could project just enough to provide a protective "bubble" for the little group to wait out the sandstorm.

An energy-eating bubble that was draining his, and Howard's, power reserves more quickly than he had anticipated. But, he didn't have to tell that to the children. As Captain Picard had advised him long ago, there were times when excessive honesty could be detrimental.

"How much longer are we going to be stuck here like this?" Kahlestra asked, glaring at the raging storm.

"Only until the storm passes," Data said.

"How long will that be?"

Data reflexively opened his mouth, ready to provide her with a condensed, simplified report of statistical averages and projected meteorological activity, but something stopped him before he could speak. A…feeling…that, somehow, that was not what the girl was actually asking for…or what she and the others really needed just then.

No, what they needed was a distraction. Something to take their minds off of their frighteningly precarious situation.

He frowned slightly, wondering: Could this be intuition? Or just experience?

"It shouldn't be too much longer now," he said, hoping strongly that was true. If his energy reserves dropped too far, he was afraid his systems would go into automatic shutdown until his power cells had a chance to regenerate. If that should happen, it would look to the children as if he had fallen into a coma – a situation that would not only undermine their trust in him and his ability to help them, but also leave them vulnerable to…anything, everything…!

Data swallowed back his rising anxiety and shook his head. Perhaps he was the one who needed a distraction.

"Commander?"
"Yes, Kahlestra?" he said.

"You can call me Kay," the young Klingon said. "All my Federation friends do."

"Very well, Kay. You may call me Data."

She smiled, but only briefly. The Orion girl kept her eyes on the sand, and the human boy seemed to have fallen asleep curled up on Data's lap, his eyes closed and his breathing slow and steady.

"OK, Data," Kahlestra said. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Certainly," Data assured her. "What would you like to know?"

Kahlestra regarded him.

"What did happen to your skin?" she asked. "Did the Orions, like, peel it off or something?"

Data pursed his lips and looked away, a strong, discomfiting surge of reluctance causing him to shift his position slightly.

"No," he said quietly. "No, our captors did not do this to me."

"Then how-?"

"Please…" Data interrupted. "I understand your curiosity, but this is a…complicated matter. And highly personal. And I believe this time would be better used for introductions. After all, if we are going to be traveling the desert together, it would probably be helpful for all of us to know each other's names, would you not agree?"

Kahlestra grunted her dissatisfaction, but acknowledged his point. The Orion girl continued to stare at the sand. But, the little boy opened his eyes and looked up at him, his expression curious.

"Why is your name Data?" he asked.

Data blinked.

"I do not believe anyone has asked me that before," he said.

"It's a weird name," the boy said. "Data. Mine's Mikey. I'm almost nine."

"Hello, Mikey," Data said. "And, in answer to your question, my name is Data because my function is to learn, store, and recite all sorts of information. In fact, the word 'data' means 'information.'"

"Are you a soldier?" the boy asked.

"I am a Starfleet Officer," Data told him. "As such, it is my job to serve the interests of scientific discovery, and the peaceable exploration of our galaxy."

"I've seen lots of soldiers," the boy said wearily, watching the swirling sand beat violently against the force field. "They fought the Cardassians when their soldiers came to say our colony belongs to them now and not to the Federation anymore."

Data's eyes widened.

"You are from a disputed border colony…?"
"Hey, I heard about this in school," Kahlestra said. "About how the Federation accepted a treaty of half-measures to put an end to the war with Cardassia. My teacher brought it up as an example of how weak and sneaky the Federation can be when trying to back out of a violent dispute. But, if your colony was handed over to the Cardassians as part of the peace negotiations, why didn't your family just move?"

"My mom and dad and uncle said it was our home and we shouldn't have to give up what was ours because some far-away politicians said so," the boy recited glumly. "They said the treaty was bad and the war was still on and they kept fighting and fighting and fighting. All the time, they said the Federation would come, that they'd send Starfleet ships to help, but when no ships came the Cardassians dropped bad bombs that made everyone sick."

"…radiation…" Data realized, feeling rather unwell himself.

The boy looked up at him.

"You must have been hurt really bad to need so many metal parts."

"Metal parts?" Data asked curiously, not quite following his meaning.

The boy shrugged a little.

"I was really little when the bombs fell, but I remember things…like pictures in my head. I remember, my dad and uncle had some metal parts. They got them after a photon grenade blew up their real ones. My dad had a metal leg, and my uncle had a metal arm and a big metal plate in his skull that covered where his eye used to be and a big part of his face. It had blinking lights, sort of like yours. He used to keep a magnet on it that looked like an angry dog."

"What do you mean, 'used to'?" Kahlestra asked.

Mikey lowered his eyes.

"They're dead," he said flatly. "Everyone is. That's how I ended up with Father. Father collected me and lots of other kids from the Cardassian soldier who ran the orphanage. And when Father found out I was sick Father said I was a worthless Skin and now I'm here."

The Orion girl raised her head from Data's shoulder and scooted closer to Howard.

"What kind of sick?" she demanded.

"They say it's a kind of cancer," the boy said quietly. "I got it during the war, from breathing in the bad dust left by all the bombs."

"Whoa," Kahlestra said. "Are you going to die?"

The boy started to answer, but Data spoke first.

"No one is going to die, if I have anything to say about it," he said. "Federation medicine can treat nearly all forms of cancer. You children have probably never heard of Dr. Beverly Crusher, but she is one of the Federation's leading medical specialists, and a close friend of mine. Once this storm has passed and we make it back to the archaeologists' compound, I will contact her and—"

"Hang on," the Orion girl spoke. "What makes you think this big shot doctor friend of yours would even touch a sickly little Skin like him? Only time a doctor buys a Skin is for dissection…or worse things…"
Data stared, uncertain whether she was telling the truth.

Apparently, Kahlestra felt the same way because she looked just as appalled.

"Lying P'Tok," she muttered. "What could be worse than dissection?"

"You really want to know?" the Orion challenged. "You really want to know the kind of fate that can leave a Skin praying to be sold instead to some twisted scientist's dissection lab, or a Gorn's meat locker?"

Kahlestra bared her teeth and clenched her fists.

"If you are trying to frighten me, Orion, you will need a better imagination!"

"The realities I've seen are way worse than any horrors your pampered little mind could come up with, Klingon! And, you'd have found out first hand, if these robots hadn't come in with that phaser rifle! Haven't you heard the saying? 'There's no Skin so pliant as a Klingon without honor!'"

Kahlestra let out a savage roar, but Data clamped a staying hand on her shoulder.

"Please – there is not enough space for you girls to fight, and I require all my energy to project this shield," he warned. "Now listen. Whatever your circumstances were before, the five of us are free now. You are not Skins, you are people, with natural rights that must be respected. My friend, Dr. Crusher, is a healer. I can promise she will care for you – all of you – because, as Starfleet Officers, it is our duty to respect all life. We do not deny treatment to those who need our help, especially children!"

The young Orion snarled.

"Nice speech, Robot-Man," she said scornfully. "I'll believe it when I see it. Especially after learning how much respect and compassion your precious Starfleet showed this kid's colony!"

She poked Mikey's arm. He clung closer to Data, burying his face in the android's shoulder.

Kahlestra met the cynical girl's snarl with one of her own.

"I suppose you Orions would just let the human child die, then," she snapped. "After all, he's got no value to you filthy slavers. Even the Gorn wouldn't buy a sick kid!" She bared her sharp teeth. "Orions have less honor than Ferengi!"

The Orion lunged at the Klingon, but Data kept them apart, pushing them gently, but firmly, back into sitting positions.

"Stop this!" he snapped. "Have you forgotten the sandstorm?"

"What of it?" the Orion growled.

"Well, it can kill you, for one thing," Data said. "Right now, this shield Howard and I are projecting is the only thing keeping this storm from sandblasting your skin right off your faces."

The children shifted uncomfortably.

"Yes, that's right," the android said. "So, you can see it is in your best interest to remain as still and as calm as possible. Can you do that?"

"Yes… Yes, Data…" the children muttered in uneven chorus.
"Good," he said, and smiled. "Now, we have heard Mikey's story. Kay has told us of her capture, and I told you of mine. And we know why Howard is here."

"I am here to serve," Howard said.

"Yes…" Data said, and the children giggled a little. "But, what of you?" the android asked, turning his golden eyes to the young Orion.

The girl drew her knees to her chin and wrapped her arms around her shins.

"Doesn't matter," she muttered.

"What doesn't matter?" Kahlestra said. "Your name, your past, your identity, your family—"

"None of it," the Orion snapped. "I don't want any of it."

"Then, what are we supposed to call you?" the Klingon asked. "Hey You?"

"Kay…" Data chided gently, but the Orion's glare was hard and sharp.

"Ishta" she said. "Call me Ishta."

"Ishta! Seriously?" Kahlestra snorted. "Like the princess in that Rigellian fairy tale?"

"I like the name, OK!" the Orion shrieked. "You got a problem with that?"

"No. But, you don't strike me as the dreamy Cinderella type," the Klingon retorted. "With that skin, you're more like the Frog Princess!"

"Why, you pointy-headed little troll!"

The Orion clenched her fists, her blue eyes blazing, but once again, Data kept the two girls safely apart.

"Enough!" he exclaimed. "Why do you insist on denigrating each other by deriding each other's appearance? I would think that, after being treated as Skins, you would both know better than to judge an individual by their looks."

"Well, you look like a robot, and you don't even have any skin," Ishta muttered.

Data closed his eyes and took in a slow, steadying breath. "Let's get this straight right now," he said. "Howard is a robot. I am an android."

The Orion snorted.

"Same difference."

"Not at all," Data said. "Howard's humanoid appearance is purely aesthetic. Mine is not."

Ishta rolled her eyes.

"What does that even mean?" she said. "Are you saying you, like, used to be a human man but you got your body parts replaced by machinery, like Mikey's folks?"

"No," Data told her. "I am not a prostheticized human. Nor am I a cyborg."
"Then you are a robot!" Ishta insisted.

"I am not!" Data exclaimed, then winced, fighting to keep his frustration in check. He wouldn't be setting much of an example if he allowed his temper to rise as quickly as the children's. "My father, Dr. Soong, was human. I am his constructed son. He designed me to be as human as possible in looks and function. He spent his entire life working to engineer a mechanical brain and body and synthetic organs that would mimic human systems extremely closely. But I am not human. I am an artificial life form. An android. Not a robot. Do you understand now?"

Ishta shrugged.

"Whatever," she said. "It's not like it matters."

Data pursed his lips, irritated and a little concerned by her attitude, but Kahlestra looked up at him with a somewhat hesitant expression.

"Were you and your father…close?" she asked.

"No," Data said, a trace of sadness coloring his voice. "No, I barely knew my father. Although he provided me with a special chip containing selected memories of what could be called my 'childhood,' I only really met him once." He sighed. "It's complicated."

"Yeah," Kahlestra said. "I can get that. I'm not close with my father either."

"No?"

The young Klingon shrugged.

"My mother and father's marriage was arranged by their Families," she said. "My father's views on a wife's role were very…traditional. She tried to conform to her Family's expectations as long as she could, but after a few years she renounced her marriage oath, returned to school, and took me with her. It was her right, and there is no shame in her choice, but her parents have not spoken to either of us since…except to say they have no daughter. My father did not renounce me in the same way, but he has remarried, and I have never met his new family. Nor do I wish to."

Ishta snorted.

"So, Klingons are just as hypocritical in their beliefs and practices as humans. Good to know," she said.

Kahlestra bristled.

"You can talk, you Orion b—"

"Stop, right now," Data said. "You know we can't afford to start this again. But, I am curious about this fairy tale you mentioned. Perhaps, one of you might—"

Data broke off with a sudden, startled gasp, his hand flying reflexively to his chest. He swallowed hard, his breathing coming short and quick.

"No… Oh no, not yet…"

"Data?" Kahlestra asked, grabbing his arm. "Commander, are you OK?"

Data shook his head, feeling oddly cold despite the desert heat. His limbs felt heavy and weak, and the sheltered little space seemed to be spinning just slightly. His fingers tingled unpleasantly. Was
this what it meant to feel 'lightheaded'?

"I am sorry," he gasped, his diagnostics suddenly prodding him with alerts warning automatic hibernation was imminent. "I don't mean to frighten you. But I'm afraid my energy reserves are running alarmingly low. Do…do any of you have anything to eat, any food?"

"You eat?" Ishta said.

"He said he wasn't a robot," Kahlestra snapped at her, digging into her pockets. "Damn it! I usually have spiced meat sticks in my pocket, but that Nausicaan or those Orion jerks must have taken them!"

The wind blew a fresh wave of sand against the force field, but it didn't seem as fierce as before. Mikey crawled off Data's lap and peered through the shimmering field.

"I think the storm is starting to die down," he said. "I can almost see some blue through all the brown."

"And not a moment too soon," Ishta said. "Data, how long do you think you can keep this shield up?"

"I can maintain the shield for another two point one eight minutes, but even with Howard's assistance my systems have taken most of the stress. I am facing an automatic shutdown," Data said worriedly, far more frightened than he cared to admit. He'd never felt anything like this before, not even when his systems had been invaded, and corrupted, by an ancient Iconian program. His diagnostics had forced an automatic shutdown then, to purge the invasive code. But, this was different. This…he'd done to himself.

"If a shutdown does occur - if I should lose consciousness… Howard," he called. "Howard, I order you to keep these children safe. Do you understand me, Howard? I need you to serve me and these children by keeping them safe, no matter what."

"I am here to serve," Howard said.

"How comforting…" Ishta muttered. "But what about you? If you go into this shutdown thing, are you going to wake up again?"

"I will…once my power cells regenerate enough to allow me to regain consciousness," he said, his breathing becoming increasingly labored as he fought to stay awake. "I want…I want to tell you all…you have been very…very brave. You must…work together now… Help each other…"

He swallowed again, his saliva tasting oddly metallic.

"It's strange," he commented, and smiled slightly, struggling not to let his fear show on his face. "I felt so unsettled…even claustrophobic…when I was trapped in that Orion cell. Now, we are in even closer quarters, yet I do not feel the same pressing anxiety. You children must be good company…"

"Commander?" Kahlestra shouted. "Commander! Stay awake!"

Data tried. He strained to respond, to maintain his conscious awareness, but he couldn't fight the shutdown any longer. His eyes closed without his willing it, and his dizziness overwhelmed him, carrying all his thoughts and worries down to a gray, terrifying blankness…

To Be Continued…
Chapter End Notes

References include TNG: The Ensigns of Command; Journey's End; Brothers; Descent; Inheritance; Contagion.

There's more to come soon. Your comments and opinions help keep me going. Thanks for reading! :)


Chapter Thirteen

"Captain!" Riker shouted, raising his arm to shield his eyes from the coarse sand swirling all around him.

The wind had picked up with a vengeance, nearly blowing him off his feet as he left the sheltered area where the compound stood. His tricorder readings had indicated the approaching sandstorm was currently passing over the ruins of the ancient city some forty-five kilometers away – what was to have been the third and final stop of their little horseback riding adventure before returning to the current capital for beam-out. But, that storm was heading straight for them and, with an estimated wind speed between sixty and one hundred twenty kilometers per hour, Riker knew it was only a matter of minutes before it hit, and hit hard.

"Captain! If you can hear me, please respond!"

Wind and sand whipped at him, burning and stinging and scraping every speck of uncovered skin. Riker winced reflexively, but the sand got into his mouth, forcing him to spit and cough, the wind stealing his breath as he continued to shout: "Captain!"

He staggered forward, knowing he should turn back, that he should return to Deanna and Kurak before the storm hit. But, away from the ship, the captain's safety had to be his primary responsibility, and the way ahead was still relatively clear. He could risk going forward a few more meters—

"Whoa—whaaa—!"

The sandy ground gave way under Riker's feet and he felt himself fall, riding a cascade of sand into a loose, sandy hill that left him buried almost up to his neck. He struggled to kick his way out, but more sand poured over him from above. Riker coughed and spat and kicked and rolled and finally, finally tumbled into the cool dimness of what seemed to be a tunnel. A dank, musty, somewhat egg-shaped tunnel made of very ancient-looking, very faded pink concrete.

"Hello?" he called out hoarsely, still coughing as he climbed to his feet. "Captain? Is anyone down here?"

The sandy hill that had broken his fall was too loose to allow him to climb back out the opening without some kind of equipment. He’d had an opportunity to grab some climbing gear when he’d stopped at the archaeologists’ stable, but he’d been too intent on locating the captain to think of rifling through their supplies.

At least, down here, he was out of that suffocating wind and, if the storm did hit, he'd be safe from the scouring sand. More than that: now that his eyes were adjusting to the dimness, Riker noticed footprints—at least three separate sets of recent boot prints—heading into the tunnel.

Could the captain have run into the missing archaeologists? Or might these prints belong to the gang that had abducted Data and Kurak’s little girl?

There was only one way to find out.
The tunnel ahead was pitch dark and draped with what could easily have been centuries' worth of layered cobwebs. Riker suppressed a shiver and started walking, confident that Commander Troi could handle monitoring Kurak and dealing with the storm on her own.

He just hoped their bond would allow her to sense that he was still all right…

*******

"Is this what I think it is?" Picard whispered, staring in awe at the huge, opalescent wall plating that dominated what was, otherwise, a small, empty room hewn out of the sandy rock. Raised glyph-symbols dotted the shimmering metal, organized around and over a stylized monolith design etched into the polished surface.

"Opinions, Captain?" Tu'Pari prompted, one slanted Vulcan eyebrow slightly raised.

Picard stepped closer, hardly daring to breathe as he reached out to brush his fingers over the textured glyphs.

"These symbols…that obelisk design… They would seem to be reminiscent of…of artifacts thought to have been left by the Preservers…"

Anders grinned.

"We think so too," she said, her enthusiasm causing her to bob on her heels. "Wouldn't it be amazing, Captain? If this ancient Stairway is actually a Preserver construct, that could mean Nineveh IV originated as one of their seeded colonies!"

Nat crossed his arms.

"If it's true, it's likely any planted human civilization died out centuries before the modern settlement was established," he said. "But this Preserver theory could certainly help explain the startling evolutionary parallels between the flora and fauna found here and in Earth's more expansive deserts."

"Unfortunately, despite a cursory resemblance to suspected examples of Preserver writing forms, these particular glyphs and symbols do not correspond with any known finds," Tu'Pari noted calmly. "And evidence supporting the theory that there once existed an ancient species of so-called 'Preservers' remains inconclusive at best. The true purpose of the Stairway remains unknown."

"Yes, but that's why this find is so exciting!" Anders exclaimed, stepping forward with her arms outstretched, as if to encompass the entire shimmering wall. "Can you imagine it, Captain? Our find may be the hard evidence that finally pulls the Preserver legends out of myth and into reality! If we can crack these symbols, find out what's causing the odd energy-dampening effect in these tunnels – who knows! We might just unlock a whole new chapter of our galaxy's history!"

"Incredible," Picard said, still unable to take his eyes from the graceful forms and shapes and etchings before him. "I am aware of the Preserver legends, of course. Of the asteroid-deflecting obelisk Captain Kirk's Enterprise discovered protecting a mixed tribe of transplanted Native American Indians… And, there's also my own experience following the work of my old academy mentor, Professor Galen…tracking down the pieces of an ancient message coded into the DNA of species from across the Alpha and Beta quadrants… But this…"

He took in a long, appreciative breath and turned his shining eyes to the scientists.

"The potential here is astonishing! If Data could see this, I'm sure he would—"
He broke off, his features clouding with concern – for his friend, and for the scientists – as the difficult reality of their situation displaced his excitement.

"Tell me – who else have you told of your discovery?"

Nat frowned a little.

"Are you thinking this could be the reason our compound was targeted for attack?" he asked.

"No," Anders said, shaking her head. "No, I can't believe that. What interest could this find possibly have for Nausicaan raiders? It's not like it's transportable. They certainly couldn't sell it. From what we can tell so far, this metal's some type of copper alloy – hardly very valuable. No, they had to be after something else."

"Like what, though?" Nat asked. "We don't have anything of value. We're a research outpost, for goodness sake!"

"There is the energy dampening field - a field produced by an as yet unknown power source," Picard pointed out, watching as the researchers' expressions shifted from confusion, to realization, to fear. "If this discovery does turn out to be as ancient as it appears, that would imply this power source has been continually generating and/or supplying power for millennia. The strategic value of possessing such technology would hold enormous appeal to any number of the Nausicaans' more unsavory customers, ranging from petty terrorists to the Cardassians. Even the Romulans might—"

"Captain! Captain, is that you?"

"Riker?" Picard said, and the group turned toward the voice echoing from the dark tunnel. "In here, Commander!" he called.

Riker stepped out of the tunnel, blinking in the artificial light of the group's glowing lanterns and hand-held spotlights.

"Drs. Tu'Pari, Anders, and Kapoor, this is my first officer, Commander William Riker," Picard introduced. "Will, we were just about to head back—"

"Actually, Captain, that wouldn't be a good idea just now," Riker told the group. "I heard the sandstorm hit while I was making my way through that tunnel. It would probably be best to wait it out down here."

"How is Kurak?" Anders asked anxiously. "Your captain told us she was injured in a Naussican attack?"

"That's what it looks like," Riker said. "She's all right for now, though. Deanna managed to stabilize her, and she's resting in your medical clinic."

The researchers exchanged worried glances, and Nat squeezed Freja Anders's hand.

"Will," Picard said, waving him closer to the massive metal mural. "What do you make of this? Does the look and style of these images and symbols seem in any way familiar to you?"

Riker frowned and stared at the raised glyphs, the etched obelisk, and gave a little shrug.

"That monolith design strikes a chord, but I can't quite put my finger on why," he said. "It could be similar to an image I saw in a museum once...some kind of ancient asteroid deflector? If Data were here, I'm sure he could tell you more."
"I'm sure he could, but Will," Picard said, rather conspiratorially, "what would you say if I told you this might be the work of...the Preservers?"

Riker raised his eyebrows.

"You're serious?"

"Very." Picard told him. "And more than that: according to the archaeologists, there is a dampening field in effect in this room - a field that extends throughout this entire network of underground tunnels and even to the great Stairway itself."

"Then, you think whatever's powering this field could be the reason behind the attack? And, possibly the abductions?"

"Nothing is certain," Picard said. "Not yet. But, I'd like to know more about this field."

He turned to the huddled researchers.

"Is there any way to know what is behind this wall?" he asked, gesturing to the huge, metal mural.

"Why?" Nat asked.

"Because I think this mysterious energy source could be the key to solving our seemingly unrelated mysteries," Picard told them. "And I would rather we were the ones to find it - preferably before the Nausicaans, or their friends, return."

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

References include TNG: The Chase; Thine Own Self; The Royale; TOS: The Paradise Syndrome; and the novel Star Trek: Federation.

Next Time: Back to Data! Stay Tuned, and thank you so very, very much for your fantastic reviews! :)
Chapter Fourteen

"How long is he going to be like this?" Ishta groaned, kicking long gouges in the sand to express her exasperation.

"Duh! Until he wakes up," Kahlestra snapped back, brushing the kicked up sand from Data's clothes. "And will you stop doing that! I already have enough sand in my hair, thank you very much."

Ishta bared her teeth in a snarl, but stalked back to the group, crossing her arms and sinking down with her back against the protruding concrete.

Following the sandstorm, Howard had broken the link he shared with Data to preserve his own waning power reserves, and Data's diagnostic shields had immediately snapped back to default. The faint energy field remained operative even though he lay unconscious, protecting his exposed face and hands from the pervasive sand and wind, invisible unless the sand made direct contact.

Ishta growled.

"This sucks!" she cried. "I'm starving, it's getting dark, and Mr. I'm-Not-A-Robot over here is showing absolutely no signs of coming back online any time soon. I say we leave him here and start moving. If that Nausicaan and the other guard should come back from the city hospital and find us here and their hideout totally smashed—"

"What do you mean, leave him?" Kahlestra interrupted. "He saved our lives, you heartless qoH!"

"Yeah, and that's great," Ishta said. "I'm alive. Yay! But that doesn't make looking after this…thing…my responsibility! Especially if staying here means risking my life – a life, as you say, he tried to save! I mean seriously, what would be the point of that?"

"Orion Ha'DIbaH!" Kahlestra spat. "Have you no sense of community? Of honor?"

Ishta gave a derisive snort.

"You're such a phony," she said, "standing there judging me like you know who I am, what I've been through, what it means that I've managed to survive even this long when so many…so many others…"

She clenched her fists and bared her teeth, her blue eyes blazing.

"You can preach about community and honor, little Klingon, but as far as I'm concerned, you can take your broken family and your swaggering, macho culture and choke on it! No one's ever, ever given a flying damn about me, so if I—"

"Data does," Mikey said quietly from where he was lying, curled up in Howard's lap.

"Data is a machine, Cancer-Boy," Ishta snarled. "A computer with arms and legs! Don't fool yourself. All that stuff he said…it's programmed in. Gotta be. I mean, just look at him. Look at his
face, those stupid, ugly blinking lights! I'm not about to risk death or worse – recapture – for some weird…android…thing like that!"

Mikey frowned and slowly straightened up.

"I don't think you're very nice," he said.

"And I should care what you think?" she scoffed.

Ishta flicked her thick, dark hair over her shoulder and glared down at the boy.

"Show me a guy who can actually get me out of this mess, and I can be as nice as he wants," she said.

"Ha'DIbaH," Kahlestra muttered again, and shook her head in disgust. She walked to Data and sat pointedly by his side.

"Fine," she said. "Go. Leave us. We don't want you."

Ishta chuffed an incredulous laugh.

"No way."

"Yes way," Kahlestra said. "Seriously, if you don't want to stay here with us, get going. I'm sure you can make it through this desert just fine on your own. In the dark."

Ishta looked at her askance.

"So, you're truly going to stay there? All night? With…that."

She jutted her chin toward Data.

"If necessary," Kahlestra stated. "We all go, or we all stay. That's how it is."

"Oh, that's how it is," Ishta said, nodding. "Except for me, of course. Me, you don't want."

Kahlestra crossed her arms and glared.

"You know, I have had enough of you and your words," she growled. "Commander Data told us not to fight, but I swear by Kahless, if you don't—"

"What? Who's all words now, Klingon," Ishta spat threateningly, straightening to her full height and shifting her hips into a wider stance. "Come on, I'm right here. Why don't you show me what a tough little warrior you really are. Or, is that term reserved only for the males in your culture?" She snorted. "Did your father really want a son, Kahlestra? Is that why your parents really split up?"

Kahlestra roared in incoherent rage and she lunged at the Orion. Her moves were backed by skill and practice, but the young Orion was surprisingly quick and far stronger than her slender frame implied. Within moments, she had flipped the younger Klingon on her back, but Kahlestra kicked a weak point at the back of the Orion's knee, causing her to topple into the sand. Kahlestra surged after her, grabbing for her exposed, green neck, but something clamped onto the back of her tunic, lifting her off the Orion and into the air.

Kahlestra kicked and snarled and bit, infuriated by her inability to free herself, until an unexpected voice cut through her red haze of fury, causing her to blink and finally focus on her captor.
"I am here to serve."

"Howard?" she exclaimed. "Let me go!"

"What the hell do you think you're doing, you metal idiot!" came Ishta's voice, and Kahlestra realized the one-armed robot held the young Orion helplessly writhing under his foot. She almost started laughing at the sight.

"You children must not fight," the greenish robot asserted in his upbeat, announcer-voice. "Master Data ordered me to keep you safe. I am here to serve."

"Serve who?" Ishta snarled. "Us or him?"

"Master Data ordered me to keep you safe," Howard repeated. "To serve Master Data is to serve you. I am here to keep you safe."

"By crushing my ribcage?" Ishta exclaimed. "How about you serve me by getting the hell off and letting me breathe! It may be getting dark, but this sand down here is still damn hot!"

"My function is to serve. To serve, I must keep you safe," Howard persisted. "If I remove my foot, you and this other child will again attempt to injure one another. I cannot allow that. I am here to serve."

"By the deities!" Ishta cried. "Talk about a one-track mind!"

"Howard," Kahlestra said. "What if we both pledge to honor Commander Data's orders and agree we won't fight? Would you let us go then?"

"I am here to serve. To serve, I must keep you safe," Howard repeated.

"Is that a yes or a no?" Ishta said, squirming and pounding ineffectually at the robot's metal ankle with her fists.

"You promised Master Data you would not fight," Howard said. "Yet, you fought. It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that were I to let you go, you would fight again. I cannot allow that. I am here to serve."

"Gahh!" Ishta yelled, banging at Howard's ankle three more times before lying, spread-eagled, in the sand. "Hey, you, Cancer-Boy," she shouted to Mikey. "How about you grab that phaser rifle over there and put this idiot robot out of my misery!"

"How about I don't," Mikey said, sitting cross-legged beside Data. "I like Howard."

"Traitor," Ishta muttered. "I so hate you all…"

"What are you doing over there, Mikey?" Kahlestra asked, shooting the boy a suspicious frown from her awkward, dangling position.

"Data said he needed food before he passed out," Mikey told her, and scooted closer to Data's prone form. With an air of great gravitas, like a doctor examining his patient, he held open one silvery eyelid, then the other, then held his small hand gently over the android's mouth.

"His eyes move, and he's breathing," Mikey pronounced. "I think he's dreaming. Maybe, if we get him something to eat, he'll wake up faster."

"Right," Ishta said. "And how exactly are we supposed to do that with this hulking metal moron
"We could hunt...if Howard lets me down," Kahlestra suggested. "I know a lot about the animals on this planet. I've been stuck here all summer, and my mother sometimes grants me permission to hunt. With that phaser rifle, I could bag us a brace of ground cuckoos, or desert hare. Those come out of hiding at around this time to feed."

"Well, Howie?" Ishta said. "What do you say? Will you let us go so Lil' Miss Hunter over here can slaughter us a few helpless animals?"

"Orion qoH!" Kahlestra snarled, her dark eyes burning. "I am a Klingon! The hunt is in my blood and in my heritage, and I will not be mocked by the likes of you."

"What's that supposed to mean, 'the likes of me'?" Ishta demanded. "You still judging me, little Klingon, even from up there? I'll have you know—"

"Stop!"

The two children turned their heads and stared, surprised to see Data on his feet, the blinking lights dotting his skull casting a soft glow around him in the growing dimness.

"Commander!" Kahlestra cheered happily. "You're all right!"

"Hip-hooray, my heart skips with joy," Ishta said sardonically. "How about you order your robot lackey to get his filthy metal foot off of me already?"

"Howard, please release the children."

"I am here to serve," Howard said, removing his foot from Ishta's chest and gently lowering Kahlestra to the ground.

Ishta climbed to her feet and kicked the robot in the shin, only to wince and limp back to the protruding chunk of concrete that served as their temporary shelter, muttering all the way.

Data regarded her, then Kahlestra, his weariness still evident in his posture and voice.

"I take it you girls have been fighting again," he said, coming to sit beside them as he, Howard, and the three children formed a little huddle against the encroaching night.

"Only a little," Mikey said. "Howard stopped them before it got too bad."

"Thank you, Howard," Data said.

"I am here to serve," the robot told him.

"Suck up," Ishta muttered, but Howard had lapsed into still silence, oblivious to the dirty looks both Ishta and Kahlestra were shooting at him.

"He needs some time to recharge. These past hours have been exceptionally draining, for both of us," Data said, and sighed tiredly. "So, apart from the fight, is there anything to report?"

"Yeah," Ishta said. "We're not in Starfleet. You don't have to talk to us like we're your minions or something."

Data blinked, confused.
"I'm sorry?"

"She's just being a jerk, Commander," Kahlestra said. "I'd like to report on the supply situation."

"Namely, that we don't have any," Ishta muttered into her knees. Kahlestra glared.

"Can you shut up for, like, five minutes? Seriously, just five minutes!"

Ishta wrinkled her nose.

"Would that be five minutes all in a row or sort of broken up throughout the day? Because I can do that second one if—"

"Good grief – you see what she's like!" Kahlestra exclaimed. "She does this on purpose, I know she does. She wants to make me hit her!"

Data sighed again and lowered his head to his hands.

"Commander?" Kahlestra said, touching his arm. "Data, are you OK?"

"I…have never before operated at such low power levels," he admitted. "I am feeling oddly… unfocused. A most peculiar sensation. I'm not sure I like it."

"You're just tired," the Klingon assured him. "A good meal and some more sleep and you'll be just fine. Which brings me back to what I was trying to say before I was interrupted."

She glared at Ishta, who made a point of lying back and staring up at the darkening sky.

"You wish to hunt for game," Data said.

"Evening is the perfect time," Kahlestra said eagerly.

"I agree," Data said. "We will all require nutrition if we are to continue our journey to the compound. With no supplies readily at hand, hunting seems to be our best option. I will—"

He started to stand, then swayed dizzily and sank back down against the wall, a slightly shaky hand pressed to his forehead.

"Ooph… Oh my…" he gasped, and swallowed. "Oh…I…I don't feel well…"

"You should stay put, Commander," Kahlestra said, reaching for the phaser rifle and adjusting the settings with a highly experienced air. "Try to rest. I'll be back in half an hour. An hour, tops."

"Kay, wait," Data said. "While I have every trust in your abilities, I do not believe it is wise for you to go alone, especially as we will have no way to communicate should something go wrong."

"I'll go with her," Mikey volunteered. "I took my supplement dose when I gave you yours."

Data frowned confusedly at the boy.

"Explain," he said.

Mikey reached in the pocket of his tunic and held up an old-model hypospray.

"My body has a hard time fighting infections and stuff because I'm so sick," he explained, "so I have
to take these daily vitamin supplements. The hypo materializes them one dose at a time. I took mine, then I thought, if I gave you some too, you'd wake up faster, and it worked."

"So it did," Data said, and shook his head. "Intriguing."

"So, can I go?" Mikey asked. "My uncle showed me how to shoot, and I can help carry whatever we catch."

"I'll watch out for him," Kahlestra said.

Data seemed reluctant. He pursed his lips and turned his eyes first to Ishta, who gave him a dark 'don't even think about it' look, then to Howard.

"Howard?" he said. "Have you recovered sufficiently to accompany Kay and Mikey?"

Howard's photoelectric eyes went from dim to bright and he stood.

"I am here to serve," he said. "I will keep the children safe."

Data nodded and leaned back against the concrete, his golden eyes beginning to close.

"Thank you, Howard," he said wearily, and his head lolled heavily against his shoulder, the blinking lights in his skull beginning to slow.

Mikey touched the android's forehead, as if checking his temperature, then turned to the others.

"He's asleep again," he said. "I guess the shot wore off."

"OK, then," Kahlestra said. "Howard and Mikey will come with me on the hunt. You," she glared pointedly at Ishta, "stay here and guard Commander Data until we return with the meat. Then we'll all be 'safe.'"

"Guard him with what?" Ishta said. "You're taking the phaser rifle! And what if you don't return, huh? That Nausicaan jerk and his pal are still out there, remember?"

Kahlestra bared her teeth.

"I nearly took that Orion bastard's eye out," she said. "Trust me, it'll take more than a few measly hours to piece that mess back together, especially with the crap medical equipment they've got in what passes for a capital city on this backwater world. In fact, I hope they can't put his face back together. I want him to stay blind! His scars will teach him that no one touches me like that. No one. Ever!"

She shuddered hard at the memory of coming to consciousness with that hulking man so near, and almost lashed out at Ishta. The Orion girl grabbed her flailing arms and pushed her away, but something in her expression had changed...if just slightly.

"Go on, go hunt," she said, and stalked back to sit beside Data. "Take it out on some poor, stupid animal. I'll stay here with the android."

Kahlestra grunted and held the rifle close, her every sense on the alert.

"Come on," she said to Howard and Mikey. "Let's find some food before we all pass out from hunger."
Data stood alone on the desert trail, the blazing sun making his face feel uncomfortably hot. He adjusted his sun goggles and pulled down the brim of his hat, but it did little to soothe the burning feeling.

"Forget to wear your sun protector?"

Data turned to see his horse, Sagebrush, standing behind him, his long tail swishing.

"Ultraviolet rays can harm your skin, you know," the horse said, and wandered off, his graceful form vanishing into the hazy light.

"Wait!" Data called after him. "I was not aware you could talk! There are questions I would like to ask you!"

But, the horse had gone, and so had the sunlight. Stars now bloomed overhead, and the world around him had turned dark and quiet and cool.

A slow, rhythmic clanging sounded just ahead, and Data followed it, experiencing a peculiar sense of déjà vu. The clanging led him to a cave, and he ducked inside, where a blacksmith stood before a roaring fire, hard at work with his hammer and anvil.

Data came up beside him, his pulse quickening with anticipation as he waited for the man to turn, to notice he was there…

"Father…?"

"Oh, no, Data," the Borg Queen said, her smooth, gray features gleaming in the flickering firelight.

Data backed away in horror, only to collide with the cave wall, scraping his hand against the rough stone. He winced in pain and looked down, shocked to see bright, red blood seeping from the wound. He brought his scraped knuckle to his mouth, as he'd seen humans do, and the Borg Queen laughed: a cold, mocking sound.

"How does it feel, Data," she said, her slinky, seductive tone sending an unsettling chill up his spine as she moved toward him. She ran a bony finger along the contour of his jaw and it tickled, causing him to shudder, hard. "To finally have what you always wanted?"

"I…do not understand," Data said, struggling not to look at her face, her piercing dark eyes.

"Of course you do, Data," she whispered, her dry lips moving against his ear. "You know you can't hide from me."

"Actually, I believe I was quite effective in concealing myself from you," Data retorted, leaning as far away from her as he could.

"If that's true," she breathed, "how did I manage to get so deep under your skin…"

She ran her fingers through his hair, then brought them to a point just above his ears. Her bluish nails dug painfully into his flesh and she pulled hard, peeling it back to reveal a horrific, pulsing mass of muscle tissue and gore…

Data sat up with a gasp and brought his hands to his face, relieved beyond measure to feel metal and plastic and the faint, static tingle of his diagnostic shields. His internal chronometer told him he'd only been out for seventeen minutes, yet that awful nightmare had seemed so much longer…
"Bad dream?" Ishta asked.

"Oh, yeah," he admitted, lowering his hands with a sigh. "But it is over now."

"If you say so," she said.

"What do you mean by that?" he asked curiously.

She shrugged, her green coloring making her difficult to see in the dark, even with his enhanced vision.

"Nothing," she said. "I get nightmares all the time. It's no big deal."

"Actually, it is," Data said. "I have learned that nightmares indicate something is wrong, even if you cannot consciously perceive the problem. It is unwise to ignore or disregard such a warning."

"Fine, then. What's wrong with you?" she asked.

Data lowered his eyes.

"A great deal, I'm afraid," he said, then chuffed a slight laugh. "In fact, that sums it up pretty well. I'm afraid."

"So? Who isn't?" Ishta said.

Data regarded her.

"You are extremely cynical for one so young."

"You think?" she said. "Well, I'd tell you my life story, but then you might end up with the impression that you know me and you don't, so…"

She crawled through the sand like a slinky cat, then slid her hands slowly up his legs.

"Why don't we try something else instead," she said through a smile. "The others are still away on that hunt. As long as they're gone, I can do anything...be anything you want…"

Data caught her hands and looked her in the eye.

"I'd like you to be yourself," he said. "I wish for you to enjoy the experience of being the child that you are. It is an experience I never had, and will never know."

Ishta froze for a moment, her expression slack. Then, she sat back and smirked, pulling her hands away from his.

"Well. Guess you are a robot after all," she said bitingly. "A real man would know what to do with a willing Skin."

Data shook his head.

"If that is what you believe, then you have never met a 'real' man. And, for that, I am very sorry."

"Oh, don't you dare," Ishta said, a dangerous light sparking in her eyes. "Don't you dare pity me, android."

"It is not pity I feel for you, Ishta, but concern," Data said. "The abuses you must have suffered in
your brief life…I can't begin to imagine. Such…terrible experiences… It is clear they have caused you to develop this tough, emotional shell that, no doubt, has helped you survive to this point. But, while selfish, competitive behaviors and the manipulation of those you perceive to hold authority may be effective survival mechanisms, if you wish to work effectively within a group, you must learn when it is appropriate to set aside your anger and cynicism and put your trust in others. To form friendships. Even at the risk of being hurt, or even betrayed, by those you've come to care for."

He looked at her, his golden eyes tight with painful memories.

"I…knew a woman once," he told her. "She was…a very close, very dear friend of mine. She served as Security Chief aboard my ship…years ago…"

"And I should care, because…?" Ishta snarked.

"I don't know," Data said. "Maybe you shouldn't. It's just…in many ways, you remind me of her."

"That so," she said flatly.

"Yes," Data confirmed. "She was born to a world that had fallen into lawless anarchy. The violence she endured…the bargains and compromises she made just to stay alive…"

Ishta glanced at him, her brow creasing slightly when she saw the look on his face. It was a look, not of disdain or disappointment…but of esteem. He respected this woman, whoever she was. It made Ishta start to wonder…might this android man possibly respect her too? Did she want him to?

"What happened," she asked through a yawn, feigning disinterest.

"She did survive," he said, his voice bright with admiration. "She escaped that world but, unfortunately, not the damage. The emotional fallout followed her through the academy and far into her career. By the time we met…"

He shrugged a little, and offered Ishta a small smile.

"I suppose…in a way…you are rather like the girl I always imagined she had been…before she learned to believe in herself, and to accept that she was valued…even loved…by those around her. I think she must have been quite cruel and calloused, manipulative and pitilessly selfish. Filled with an anger so deep and harsh, it turned even hopeful dreams into haunting nightmares."

Ishta looked away, her jaw clamped tight. She only began to turn back when she felt him take her hand.

"Ishta," he said. "There is a vast difference between the act of love, and the emotion. Real love hinges on respect. And respect is something that cannot be bought or sold. It must be earned. By both parties."

Ishta shook her head, pulling her hand away and hugging her legs to her chest.

"I don't believe in love," she said. "Respect, maybe. But love…”

She rested her chin against her knees.

"I've never seen it," she mumbled.

"Nor had I," Data told her. "Until I made my first friend."

"How old were you?" she asked.
"Twenty-six," he said.

She snorted.

"Seriously? That's pretty sad, android."

"Depends on how you look at it," Data said. "It is entirely possible that I may not have been capable of sustaining a true friendship before I reached that stage of my cognitive development. If that is the case, you already have me beat."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

He smiled at her.

"You've already made a friend."

Ishta regarded him for a long moment, then chuffed a short, wry laugh.

"You are so full of it, you know that?"

"Perhaps," Data allowed. "But I am not lying, Ishta. You stayed here with me while I was unconscious despite the potential danger. You could have run off, even employed violence to ensure your escape, and you didn't. I admire that."

Ishta shivered a little, deeply discomfited by his appraisal. She buried her face deeper against her knees and began to rock, very slowly.

"My mother…" she muffled. "She was a very high-priced slave. She was extremely skilled at using her natural pheromones to, essentially, drug wealthy men, to get them to do her bidding. When she used up one man's fortune, she put herself back on the market to snare another. When I was…four years old… The man she was with began… Well, he began to pay more attention to me than to her. She…sold me…basically to get rid of the distraction. But, I fought, and I fought hard. I screamed whenever I was brought to auction. Eventually, the bids dropped so low…"

She shuddered and clutched her legs even tighter.

"That is when I first learned of the Skin peddlers," she said. "Once they owned me…"

She shook her head.

"Skins soon learn that Gorn prefer fighters. They sometimes like to hunt their meat before a feast. It's only later they discover a Gorn's meat locker is hardly the worst fate a Skin can endure. There are dark things…sick, malicious, twisted things…no being should ever have to face… I swore… I swore that would not be me, that would never be me…!"

Her rocking had intensified as she spoke until Data couldn't help but reach out to her. At first she shrank from his touch, but it wasn't long before the dam broke and she found herself clinging to him like a tiny child, trembling and shuddering as she sobbed into his shoulder.

Data held her close, brushing her hair from her face and feeling a slow, simmering outrage begin to build inside him.

This girl had been tortured and abused, and it had happened on a Federation world…under Starfleet's watch. They had all heard rumors of an active underworld, where slave trafficking and drug peddling fueled terrorist activities along the Federation's borders, yet, somehow, they had shrugged it off. Just
one of those things. Someone else's problem. Some other department's responsibility.

And Ishta and Mikey and hundreds, if not thousands, like them had lived all their lives huddled in that dark space between the cracks.

Counselor Troi had once told him that anger could be a positive emotion. Now, for the first time, Data began to understand what she'd meant. Here, before him, a fundamental injustice was at work; the blatant, and ongoing, betrayal of the Federation's highest ideals. What good was his positronic brain if he couldn't find a way to blaze real light on this crime...perhaps even stop it – to shut this operation down, once and for all?

Ishta's sobs began to slow and she gradually pulled away from the android's gentle embrace, shifting to sit beside him with her head resting against his shoulder.

"Don't think this means you know me," she said.

"Ishta," he said, "I barely know myself these days. But, I appreciate your company, just the same."

"Yeah," she said quietly, her eyes fixed on the sandy ground. "Me too."

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

References include TNG: Phantasms; Birthright I; Descent I; Where No One Has Gone Before; Datalore; The Next Phase; Legacy; First Contact (movie).
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Fifteen

The ghostly howls and shrieks of the buffeting sandstorm had dulled to a low, whistling moan. Deanna checked her patient's vitals again, and sank back into the seat she’d pulled up next to the biobed.

The little clinic had lost power shortly after the storm hit. Deanna had taken a refresher course on emergency procedures shortly following her promotion to full commander, but that course had focused more on starships, not planetside bases. It had taken her a long time to find the dome's main generator, then figure out how to switch the bio-monitor systems to battery back-up – so long, she'd been terrified Kurak's medications would begin to wear off, that she might have trouble breathing, or even go into respiratory arrest.

But Klingons were as hardy as their reputation held, chock full of redundant organs and nerve bundles that kicked into gear when the primary structures were injured. She knew this redundant anatomy made Klingons more susceptible to certain types of cancers and genetic disorders, but it did mean they could handle severe internal traumas that would certainly kill most other humanoid species. For now, Kurak was stable. Deanna just had to hope she’d stay that way until some real help had a chance to arrive.

Riker's tricorder bleeped. Deanna stood and strode across the small room to check its readout display.

The storm was passing. Intermittent radio signals were starting to get through the interference.

Deanna reset the tricorder to scan for humanoid life forms, turned up the signal volume, and placed it back by the window. She checked Kurak's readings one more time, gently patted the unconscious woman's hand, then walked quickly down the narrow corridor to the dome's small communications terminal.

The signals were still very patchy. It took her longer than she liked to establish a link with the compound's main transmitter, and she caught herself gnawing at her lip.

Data should be the one doing this. He was quick, efficient, observant. More than that, he was an operations specialist, an expert on all manner of Federation technologies and systems. Deanna's fingers felt clumsy on the unfamiliar controls, her eyes hesitating over symbols, codes, and graphs she had only a passing familiarity with. If Data were there, she knew he'd already have—

But, Data was gone. Data was missing, and she had no way of knowing if she'd ever—

And as for Riker, running out into the storm and leaving her alone with a severely injured patient and no means of contacting him, of knowing whether he or the captain had managed to—

Deanna closed her eyes, took in a long, slow breath, and released it as a sigh. Her hands were shaking, and she clenched her fists to make them stop.

It wouldn't help matters if she let fear and frustration get in her way. Will was all right. He had to be all right. She would know if he were injured…or worse…
She would know.

The link-up chirped, and Deanna focused her attention on the console. The Enterprise was probably still docked at starbase, undergoing its maintenance check, but it wouldn't hurt to try them, to contact Dr. Crusher and Geordi and let them know their situation. They could send a runabout or a shuttle or, if not, there had to be other Starfleet ships in the area that could lend assistance.

With careful pecks at the controls, Deanna sent out an emergency message, making sure she coded it to Starfleet frequencies only. The last thing she wanted was for those Nausicaan raiders or any of their friends intercepting her transmission…

******

"Chontay, chontay! Qapla'!" Kahlestra and Mikey chanted as they marched through the moon-lit desert with their quarry. "Our hunt has been a great success. There will be meat tonight!"

"Come on, Howard," Kahlestra urged. "Say it with us!"

"Chontay. Qapla'," Howard pronounced obligingly, speaking, as always, in his chipper announcer-voice.

Mikey giggled.

"He sounds like those language tapes we used to listen to at school," he said. "Can you say: Qapla'?" he mimicked, and giggled again.

"Yeah, well, he is a robot," Kahlestra said. "It's not his fault he sounds like a computer."

"Data doesn't sound like a computer," Mikey said.

"Data's different," Kahlestra told him, and shifted the phaser rifle's weight to her other shoulder.

"Why?" Mikey asked.

Kahlestra shrugged her eyebrows.

"I don't know," she said. "Why are you different from a targ?"

Mikey laughed.

"Because I'm a boy, that's why," he said.

"You and the targ are both animals, aren't you? You were both born to a mother and a father. You both have hair, eyes, a mouth and a nose. You are the same in so very many ways."

"But I'm not a targ," Mikey said. "Or a rabbit, or a ground cuckoo, or a chimpanzee!"

"Or even a Klingon," Kahlestra said, smiling at the boy in the dim light. "And neither of us are the same as all the other creatures out there."

"Right, I get it!" Mikey said. "Data's a machine, but he's not the same as all the other machines out there. Not even machines like Howard."

"I am Howard," Howard said. "Chontay. Qapla'."

The children laughed and took up the chant again. This time, Howard joined them.
"Chontay, chontay! Qapla’! Chontay, chontay! Qapla’!"

Mikey lifted his knees in a parade-style march, holding his laden arms out in front of him.

"Chontay, chontay! Qapla’! Chontay-"

He gasped and stumbled, dropping his hares and curling up in a tight, tight ball.

"Ow, crap, not now…"

"Mikey!" Kahlesta exclaimed, dropping the rifle and two birds to the sand and skidding to her knees beside him.

"What has happened to the human child?" Howard asked, his photoelectric cells glowing bright blue. "I am here to serve. How may I keep you safe?"

"I'm OK, I'm OK!" Mikey gasped through his teeth. "This happens sometimes. It's why…why Father…didn't want me…"

"What happens, Mikey?" Kahlestra demanded. "Just how sick are you?"

"It's my…agh…" Mikey moaned and curled up even tighter. "Oh, my bones feel like they're on fire…"

"Well…what can we do?" Kahlestra asked urgently.

"Just…" Mikey gasped again, his eyes tearing up and his breaths coming short and quick. "Ooww… My hypo, I need my hypo…"

Kahlestra dug through the boy’s pockets and pulled out the old-style instrument.

"OK, now what?" she asked.

"Setting...One…" the boy squeezed out, the pain making him tremble. "That's for…the painkiller…"

"It's too dark, I can't see a thing," Kahlestra grunted, squinting at the chunky old device. "Howard, can you tell which is Setting One?"

"I am here to serve," Howard announced helpfully.

Kahlestra held up the hypospray and the one-armed robot touched one of the tiny buttons with his finger. He tapped it several times, then took the device from the girl.

"Please hold still," he instructed as he crouched beside Mikey and pressed the hypospray to his arm. "This will not hurt a bit."

Mikey laughed despite his agony and rubbed at the injection spot. After a few moments, he slowly uncurled and sat up, his breathing settling back to normal.

"Feeling better?" Kahlestra asked worriedly.

"I'll be OK," the boy said, and shrugged, his eyes fixed on the sand. "Sorry about this."

"How can you be sorry for being sick?" Kahlestra exclaimed. "It's not your fault."

Mikey’s head lowered further.
"I don't want to be sick. I don't want people to see me when I'm this sick. Especially people I like…"

Kahlestra nodded.

"You want to appear strong," she said.

"Yeah, I guess…"

Kahlestra stood and held her hand out to him.

"No warrior can hope to defeat Death," she said, "but it takes real courage to look Death in the eye and dare to keep fighting. If you have been living with the pain I just saw, and you still carry hope in your heart…" She smiled. "I think you're very strong. For a human."

Mikey took her hand and let her help him to his feet.

"I am here to keep you safe," Howard said. "I can carry the boy."

Mikey looked ready to protest, but Kahlestra squeezed his shoulder.

"Go ahead," she said. "Howard can carry you, and you can carry the game. That way I can keep better watch with the phaser rifle."

"OK," Mikey said, hiding his weariness and his gratitude as Howard lifted him with his one strong arm. Kahlestra stacked the game in the boy's lap, then picked up the phaser rifle.

"Kay?" Mikey said.

"Yeah, Mikey?"

"Do…do we have to tell Data about what happened?"

Kahlestra looked hesitant, then shook her head.

"I won't, if you don't want me to," she said, and Mikey looked relieved. "But I think you should. I mean, Data already knows you're sick. If you tell him about your attacks, maybe he can help you. Make your hypo synthesize a better medicine, or something. That thing looks pretty old."

Mikey frowned, and slipped the device back into his pocket.

"Yeah… It's Cardassian surplus. From the war," he said. "I got it…back at the orphanage… But, even with the hypo, I'm slow and I'm sick and I'm a terrible bother to everyone I meet. Maybe I'm not worth helping."

Kahlestra bared her teeth.

"You show me the creep who told you that," she said. "And I will make it my business to cripple him."

Mikey raised an eyebrow at her.

"You don't believe me?" she challenged.

"Oh, I believe you," Mikey said, and smiled. "Chontay, chontay!" he said, tightening his grip on their game. "Qapla'! We've got a mission to complete!"
"Right," Kahlestra said, and hefted her phaser rifle. "Come on, Howard, let's get moving!"

"I am here to serve," Howard said, and resumed his rapid shuffle through the sand.

Like that, the three of them marched back to where they'd left Data with Ishta, their proud chant echoing across the arid landscape.

"Chontay, chontay! Qapla'! Chontay, chontay! Qapla'!"

*******

Data stared at the sleeping children, his head slightly tilted as he considered their situation.

Their meal had gone well. At the right setting, a phaser rifle was capable of cooking, rather than simply vaporizing, meat and, though it was a bit on the well-done side, even Ishta had been far too hungry to complain.

After their meal, Kahlestra had run some distance to bury the bones so they wouldn't attract predators during the night. Mikey and Ishta had searched for rocks and stones they could pile up and use the phaser rifle to heat for light and warmth. Data and Howard had been unable to find a suitable source of ground water, but they had collected a stack of thick, aloe-like leaves that could serve instead; at least, temporarily. Data made use of his android senses to test their chemical composition, ensuring they carried no toxins. He had also found a plant laden with sweet cactus-pear-like fruits growing safely in a dip behind a rocky outcropping: a welcome dessert the children had greeted with happy cheers.

Kahlestra wore an undershirt beneath her tunic, so she took off the outer layer and knotted the sleeves and neck to make a sack to carry their provisions in. They stuffed it with the remaining game, cactus-pears, and aloe leaves, tied it closed, and buried the whole thing in the sand, ready for the morning.

But, morning was still a long way off, and Data was all too aware of the passing time. They couldn't expect to stay where they were and remain safe, and he estimated they had a trek of just over forty miles ahead of them. That would be at least two days on foot, possibly three, and only if the weather held out. A quake, he could probably handle but, operating so far from peak efficiency, Data doubted he'd be able to withstand another sandstorm, even with Howard's help. And that worried him.

It worried him deeply.

The children's breathing was slow and steady, and Howard's glowing eyes were dim. Data stood slowly and crept silently away from their little camp, heading toward the site of the collapsed underground tunnels.

The sandstorm had significantly altered the landscape, but Data was able to spot the depression without much difficulty. He scanned the area, projecting where the 'Junk Yard' had been situated, and moved in that direction. If he could uncover some kind of transport, even if it was only a motor and some parts he could assemble before the children woke up…

"What are you doing?"

Data jumped.

"Ishta!" he gasped. "You should be sleeping!"
"So should you," she retorted, and stared at the large, crater-like dent in the sand. "You're not still moping about leaving those idiots behind, are you?"

"I regret what happened here very deeply, Ishta," he said somberly. "But no, I am not 'moping.' I was wondering if we might not be able to locate some means of transport in these ruins."

Ishta's eyebrows raised.

"So we wouldn't have to hike across this flaming desert?" she said. "That would be good. But, how could we hope to find anything under all this sand?"

"I was rather hoping the sandstorm might have revealed…"

He trailed off, moving rather cautiously toward a slight glint he saw gleaming in the moonlight.

"Data?" Ishta hurried after him. "What is it? What do you see?"

"Stay back," the android warned, holding a hand out behind him to stay her progress. "The ground over the ruins is quite unstable. I would not want you to fall through."

"Well, what about you?" Ishta shouted. "You're way heavier than I am!"

"I am an android," Data said, hopping nimbly from one relatively stable spot to another. "My visual acuity, balance, and reflexes are far sharper than those of any organic humanoid. And I am far less likely to suffer injury were I to fall some ten to twelve feet. Now please, stay where you are and allow me to concentrate."

Ishta muttered darkly to herself, but stayed put, frowning as she watched Data pause by a glint of shiny something, then crouch down and start digging around it with his hands.

"What is it?" she called out.

"It may be a power cell!" he called back. "Allow me a moment to find out!"

Ishta rolled her eyes and crossed her arms, but submitted to waiting without further protest.

Before long, Data had pulled three power cells and a detached antigrav unit from the sand. He returned briefly to pile them beside Ishta then, moving further on, he got down on his hands and knees and brushed the sand from something round and flat that looked rather like a manhole cover.

"Hey, what's going on?" Kahlestra asked, coming up beside Ishta.

"What the hell are you doing here?" the Orion demanded. "Where's the robot and that kid?"

"Howard and Mikey are still at the camp," Kahlestra said. "I wanted to see where you and Data had got to."

"Well, now you know," Ishta said. "Go back to sleep."

"No way," Kahlestra said. "I can help!"

"Whatever you do, stay back and keep quiet," Data called to them. "I have found a way inside. Please wait and do not attempt to follow me."

"Oh, come on!" Ishta protested. "You can't seriously expect—"
"I am quite serious," Data said. "Promise me you will stay where you are."

The girls shared a look.

"Yeah, OK," Ishta grumbled.

Kahlestra nodded.

"We promise."

Data nodded once, then lifted the manhole cover with some effort and climbed down the rungs into the darkness below.

The girls waited, first standing, then pacing along the edge of the prominent dint in the sand. After a long while, a strange rumbling thrumming started up and the ground began to vibrate just slightly.

"Don't tell me it's another quake," Ishta said.

"I don't think so," Kahlestra said, tilting her head, her senses on full alert. "It doesn't sound right."

She cupped her hands around her mouth and shouted: "Data? Data, are you OK down there?"

They waited, straining to hear any sort of response, but all they heard was that low, rumbling thrum: one after another after another.

"Come on, Data, this isn't funny!" Ishta shouted. "Get back out here, right now, or I'm coming in after you!"

"You can't do that," Kahlestra said, grabbing the girl's arm. "We gave our word."

"Like that's supposed to stop me?" Ishta said, shrugging her off and striding forward, straight toward the unstable ruins.

"Don't!"

Kahlestra grabbed her again, trying to pull her back, but Ishta gripped the younger girl's arm and flipped her, hard, into the sand. Kahlestra groaned, but rolled to her feet, wincing as she stretched the bruised muscles in her neck and shoulder.

Baring her teeth in a snarl, the young Klingon lunged at the Orion, tackling her around the middle and sending them both crashing into the sand. Ishta fought back, scissoring the younger girl with her legs and struggling to wrestle her way to the top. The two combatants rolled over and over, each focused on gaining the advantage – not where their battle was taking them. They tumbled into the crater-like dent, the damaged concrete below them cracking and splintering as they moved, until the sensation of falling startled the pair out of their fight.

They found themselves caught in a choking waterfall of sand and concrete chunks with barely time to cry out before they landed in a heap, coughing and spitting and pushing each other away.

"Oh, my God!" Data yelped and raced to help them. "Oh my God, are you all right? Are you injured?"

Kahlestra hacked and spat out more sand, but shook her head.

"No, I'm OK," she said hoarsely.
"Yeah, me too," Ishta rasped, and coughed.

Data's anxious expression turned absolutely livid, his yellow eyes seeming to flame in the moonlight that filtered down from above.

"What the hell do you two think you were doing!" he shouted. "You damn near scared the life out of me! Did I not expressly order you to stay out of this unstable area? Did you not promise me – to my face – that you would accede to the directive I set forth?"

"If you mean, did we break our promise, then yeah, we did," Ishta said, running her tongue over her teeth, then spitting out the grit. "But only because you weren't answering us!"

"I did not hear you call," Data said.

"Yeah, well, I did," Ishta insisted, crossing her arms and kicking at the piled sand. "But don't worry, android. Next time, I won't bother."

Kahlestra glared at the older girl.

"You are such a jerk!" she snapped, and turned to Data. "Yes, we shouted, but she was the one who walked into the unstable area. I tried to stop her, but she kept moving forward. That's why this happened. I never intended to break my word!"

Data closed his eyes and pursed his lips, turning his head away until he managed to get a grip on his temper.

"I believe you, Kay," he said at last. "And you, Ishta. And, I am extremely relieved that the two of you are unhurt. I understand that you are both quite young and still lack the capacity to fully control your impulses, but I did hope that I could trust you to remain on your own for a few minutes."

"You can trust me!" Kahlestra exclaimed. "This only happened because—"

"Please, stop," Data said. "You are both to blame for this incident. As am I, for not being more diligent about your supervision. We will all have to do better. But, since you are here now, come see what I have found."

The two girls followed but avoided each other's eyes, each muttering dark mutterings about the other under their breath.

"I can hear you whispering, you know," Data said from up ahead. "I do wish you girls could learn to get along. So much can be gained in friendship… I do not understand why you continue to expend so much energy on animosity. Ah—"

He stopped short, and the girls stopped too, staring blindly at the darkness. This far underground, Data provided the only light, his form an odd, blinking outline of a head with floating hands. He bent down, lifted something, and the girls squinted against the onslaught of a sudden, blinding light that slowly resolved into a hand-held lantern.

"Yow!" Ishta winced. "You could have given us some warning, you know."

"Apologies," Data said. "Has your vision adjusted to the light?"

"Yeah, it's OK," Kahlestra said. "What did you want us to… see…"

She trailed off, staring in amazement at four large sand speeders and two wheeled ATVs parked on a
"ramp near a collapsed exit.

"Oh, fantastic!" she cheered. "Do they work?"

"They do," Data confirmed. "I tested each of them to make sure."

Ishta and Kahlestra looked at each other, realizing that must have been source of the thrumming sounds they’d heard.

"And with the spare antigrav unit and power cells I already excavated," Data went on, "we should have no concerns about reaching our destination."

"I can think of one," Ishta said. "These things are huge! And this ramp is totally blocked. How the hell are we supposed to get them out of here?"

Data smiled.

"Ironically, you have already provided the solution to that particular conundrum," he said.

Ishta wrinkled up her face, then frowned, then stared.

"No way," she said. "You don't mean—"

"Up and out," Data said, and pointed down the tunnel toward the hole the girls had made when they fell.

"But this tunnel's totally unstable!" Ishta exclaimed. "If we burst through the ceiling, the whole thing will collapse!"

"We only need one vehicle," Data pointed out. "But even though the roof of this tunnel is already quite destabilized, executing this maneuver without damaging the vehicle we choose will be tricky. If you wish to exit now, I would advise you stand at least fifty meters away from—"

"Uh uh, no way," Kahlestra said. "If you're going to do this, we're riding with you. Right, Ishta?"

Ishta shuffled a few steps toward the ladder rungs that led to the manhole cover above.

"Well, actually, I might—"

Kahlestra smirked.

"So, you're a chicken after all."

Ishta bit the inside of her cheek and fixed the younger girl with a piercing glare. Striding past both her and Data, she ran her hand over the smooth side of the nearest sand speeder until she found the door latch, then opened it and slipped into the front passenger seat.

"Ooh," Kahlestra snarled. "That's just not fair. I should get front seat! You didn't even want to go!"

"Yeah, well, first come, first served," Ishta shot back. "Looks like you're in the back."

Kahlestra huffed angrily.

"Data, you can't let her—"

"You're right, I can't," Data interrupted firmly. "Federation traffic laws regarding civilian transport by
sand speeder dictate all children under the age of sixteen must sit in the back seat. Ishta, I am afraid you will be sitting beside Kahlestra."

Kahlestra looked triumphant.

Ishta looked suspicious.

"You just made that up," she accused.

"You are welcome to prove that," Data said. "But, until you can provide the relevant evidence, you will be required to ride in the back."

Ishta scowled, but clambered into the back seat. Kahlestra followed. Data took his place behind the controls, a rather smug look creasing his silvery face.

The look didn't last long.

"You suck, you know that," Ishta muttered to Kahlestra.

"Well you—" Kahlestra started, but Data snapped: "Girls! Please strap yourselves in. The action we are about to take is quite dangerous. I would strongly advise you never to attempt this on your own."

Kahlestra snorted helplessly into her hand.

"What?" Ishta said. "What's wrong with you?"

"Did he seriously just say that?" Kahlestra giggled. "I seriously think he just said that!"

Data glanced curiously at her over his shoulder.

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

"You!" she exclaimed. "You seriously just went: 'Don't try this at home, kids!'"

She broke up laughing again. Ishta shook her head with a shrug. Data raised his eyebrows, and turned back to the front.

"Well," he said, and started the engine. "If you liked that, you should love this: 'Fasten your seatbelts. It's going to be a bumpy night…'"

Kahlestra snickered, but Ishta still looked blank.

"Bette Davis, 'All About Eve', 1950," Data cited, and tapped at the controls, slowly easing the speeder off the ramp and into the narrow tunnel. "OK, here we go…"

Under the android's precise ministrations, the sleek craft rapidly gained speed, slipping through the jagged hole in the tunnel roof so smoothly, Kahlestra literally blinked and missed it.

"Whoa..." Ishta gasped, a hand pressed to her chest. "That was... Wow!"

"Yee-haw!"

Data let out a triumphant whoop, and the girls happily joined in, pausing only to load up the spare parts. They were still laughing and whooping when the android settled the speeder down beside their little camp barely a minute later.
Mikey stirred, and Howard stood, taking up a protective stance beside the boy until the speeder's doors opened and he saw Data and the girls clamber out.

"So awesome," Kahlestra enthused. "By Kahless himself, that was so awesome!"

"What happened?" Mikey asked anxiously, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "What's going on?"

"Data found us a speeder, that's what's going on," Ishta said, and set about digging up their provision pack. "We're finally getting out of this stinking sandtrap."

"Indeed," Data said happily. "And, despite the illegality of such transport on this world, this is an emergency and our journey has now been shortened from a three day hike to a ride of less than an hour. Please, hop in!"

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

References include TNG: Ethics; Transfigurations; Hero Worship; The Arsenal of Freedom; Encounter at Farpoint; that Nemesis movie; and Red Dwarf: Gunmen of the Apocalypse.

Thanks so much for reading and especially for your wonderful reviews! Your comments and opinions on this story are very deeply appreciated, especially when I'm stuck so deep in school essay-land...

Hope you liked this chapter! Until next time! :)
The underground club pulsed and vibrated with moving colored lights and low bass thrums, its patrons huddled in close groups among the shadows. Scantily clad servers of various genders and species edged between the dingy bar and the battered tables, small, blinking implants at the base of their necks indicating they were slaves: property of the club's owner.

Two hulking figures, an Orion and a Nausicaan, burst through the heavy camouflage curtain that covered the entrance, shook the sand from their clothes and hair, and stomped down the worn, rock-hewn stairs. The Orion moved hesitantly, running his hand along the wall as he felt for each step with his heel, but the Nausicaan strode straight to the bar and slammed his armored fist on the counter, adding another dent to the stained and scratched-up surface.

"We are here," he slurred through his fangs. "Where is the Boss-man?"

"You're late. Father ain't happy with you boys."

The slinky, reptilian bartender spoke in a low, throaty voice, her narrow teeth studded with salt crystals. She ran her tongue over them, making a sucking, slurping sound that made the approaching Orion cringe.

She shot him a teasing glance, her scaly tail swaying behind her as she slunk out from under her dull, red heat lamp to join the two men.

"OK, so sucking salt's a nasty habit," she said, reaching over the counter to flick open a box about a quarter full of salt sticks and loose crystals. "But, why not try it before you knock it? Not all salts are table salt, baby, and Father stocks only the best blends. Four credits a hit."

"Get that stuff away from me, you Gorn junkie," the Orion growled and snapped the box closed.

The bartender propped her elbows on the box's lid and squinted at the Orion through the flickering, colored lights. His nose, one eye, and half his face were covered in a flexible, translucent bandage that didn't entirely hide his raw skin and newly-knitted scars.

"Naughty Rizzy, who chewed up your face?" she said. "Such a mess. No wonder you've been shuffling round here like a blind man without a VISOR."

"My face is none of your business," Rizzul snarled, and gave the Nausicaan a shove. "We'll be in the office. Let's move, 'Poug."

"Boss man's there waiting," the bartender said in a languid sing-song, gesturing with a yellowed claw to the security board beside the credit reader. "Father's watching, always watching. 'S why Father knows everything."

The Orion seemed to pale, just slightly, and even the Nausicaan looked uncomfortable.

"Come on," the Orion grunted, and trailed the taller Nausicaan around the maze of tables and disorienting lights, past a scratched and smudged up wall mirror and through a thick, black curtain to
the private room beyond.

It was dark there, and reeked of stale alcohol, vomit, and various other bodily fluids. A rustle of frantic movement met their approach, customers terrified of a raid scrambling to hide, to distance themselves from their hired Skins. The lumbering pair ignored the creeps and strode straight through, down a narrow, purple-lit passage to a tapered, sliding door.

"You do it," Rizzul said.

The Nausicaan grunted and pounded the wall buzzer.

There was a long pause.

A very long pause.

Then, a crackle of static preluded a low, quiet voice: "Enter."

The door slid open and they walked through, into a vast, high-domed cavern lit from below. Rare Ninevehan wall hangings and other expensive artifacts adorned the space in elegant, concentric circles, drawing the eye toward the room's main focal point: three interlocking rings of red couches, cushions, and computer consoles where the Boss-man held court, surrounded by his most loyal, most ambitious, and most efficient slaves.

"Well, well," the Boss-man said, his voice so quiet it forced the pair to move closer. "If it isn't Rizzul and Izjiem Poug, back from their visit to the emergency ward. I trust your face isn't troubling you too much, Rizzul."

"Father, we—" Rizzul started, but the Boss-man held up a slender, white-gloved hand.

"Your shift-partner, Nizik, was here before you, you know," he whispered, his face completely shaded by a white, brimmed hat. "He told us how you two failed to capture me that archaeologist woman I wanted, of your carelessness with that Klingon Skin - and of how the pair of you left your assigned posts to tend your resulting injuries! This is very sloppy, Rizzul. Sloppy can be dangerous to an operation like ours."

Rizzul swallowed, feeling his job security wobble treacherously and wishing he could see the Boss-man's eyes.

Everything the Boss-man wore was a crisp, clean white, from his turtleneck tunic and scarf to his polished leather boots – an affectation that made it all the harder to make out his shadowed features. Nearly all the people who saw him left with no clear image of the man, uncertain even of his species, though rumor had it he was an Orion afflicted with a rare vitiligo-like condition that turned his green skin white.

"I…I apologize, Father," Rizzul said. "I would have stayed, but Poug—"

"Just tell me you truly aren't aware," the Boss-man said, even more quietly than before.

"Aware of what?" Rizzul asked nervously.

"Aware of what happened," he whispered menacingly.

The Nausicaan frowned, thoroughly confused by the entire exchange.

"What has happened?" he slurred. "Why is Boss-man so angry with Rizzul and Poug?"
The Boss-man gestured to his entourage.
"My dears…if you would…"

"There was a quake," one of the female slaves said coldly. Her smooth head resembled a golden turtle, and there were no whites to her deep, black eyes.

"Nizik transported himself away when the shaking began," another slave said, a male with a dinosaur-like skull, rather resembling a protoceratops. "But he failed to retrieve Father's freshly ordered Skins."

The turtle-looking slave closed her eyes.

"When the tunnels collapsed, all of Father's merchandise was lost to the sands," she said. "We had an important buyer lined up. The buyer must now be told."

Rizzul and 'Poug shared an unsettled glance.

"Well, with luck, all this may not end in total loss," the Boss-man said, reclining back and folding his hands across his chest. "I'll need a couple of strong volunteers to head back to the site and determine what of mine can be salvaged. Can you volunteer," he directed his words at Rizzul, "or are you too injured to handle this task?"

"I'm fine, Father, I can work," Rizzul said. "But, where is Nizik? Surely, with his help—"

The Boss-man and his gathered slaves turned their gaze to a spot to their left.

Rizzul and the Nausicaan followed their pointed stares, and their eyes widened in horror.

What they saw hanging there…that wasn't an artifact or a tapestry. That was…

"Deities..." Rizzul gasped, and felt his stomach lurch.

The Nausicaan was still confused.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Nizik's incompetence and cowardice lost me my Skins," the Boss-man said in his soft, quiet way. "I thought it only fair I take his in return. Fail me again, and I'll take yours to keep his company. Clear?"

"Yes, Father," the pair managed to choke.

"Then leave me," the Boss-man said, turning back to his other work. "Get out of my sight. And if any of my Skins did manage to escape, make sure you round them up and bring them to me here. If they can be retrained, all the better for you. If not, the two of you will pay the cost of their disposal."

"Yes, Father," the pair muttered again, and started to back out of the room.

"Oh-one more thing," the Boss-man whispered, holding up a single, staying finger.

The Orion and the Nausicaan froze in their tracks.

"Your friend Nizik mentioned a robot. Can either of you tell me anything more about it?"

Rizzul shook his head.
"We only had the one robot in stock - that domestic service droid, Howard."

"No, Nizik said you'd collected another," the Boss-man insisted.

Rizzul furrowed his brow.

"No, I never..."

"Robot?" 'Poug repeated thoughtfully. "Yes, I know robot! It is Federation's robot! Federation robot tried to fight 'Poug, but fell to the transporter gun!"

"Indeed..."

There was a long, uncomfortable silence while the Boss-man tapped at his console. Rizzul fidgeted, then managed: "Father? May we..."

"Go, yes, go," the Boss-man said. "And don't come back without my goods."

The pair nodded and fled, the chill in the Boss-man's voice clinging to their skin long after they'd burst back into the desert sun.

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

References include TNG: Unification I/II.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Seventeen

Nat lifted his lantern, straining to see over Picard's shoulder.

"The dampening field is interfering with this resonating drill," the captain said, handing the useless tool over to Riker and scooting closer to the opalescent wall, running his fingers over the lines and grooves in the metal.

Freja took the drill from the commander and turned it over in her hands, turning it on and off a few times as if to confirm Picard's diagnosis.

"So weird," she said, frowning. "All these tools have independent power cells, like the lamps, and the lamps are working just fine."

"Well, the drill is sonic," Nat said. "It could be that, apart from the electromagnetic aspect that messes with our communications and computer devices, the dampening field also emits some kind of sub- or ultra-sonic frequencies."

"Speculation," Tu'Pari said. "At least, until we get back to the compound. If the drill works there, out of range of this field, it could indicate that—"

Picard let out a slight, victorious snort.

"Find something?" Freja asked eagerly.

"It feels like…this could be an access port," the captain said distractedly. "If I can just…"

He traced his fingers over the outline of what seemed to be a rectangular panel in the opalescent metal plating that covered the wall, the reflections from the lantern light rendering it barely visible. Carefully, Picard slid his fingernails into the hairline slit, his face clenching with effort…

"Oh!" Freja gasped, covering her mouth with her fingers. "Oh, don't damage the etchings!"

"He's nowhere near the etchings," Nat said.

"We don't know that," Freja retorted. "It's only a guess that this rectangle shape is an access port. It may be a symbol, or part of a larger—"

Picard released a low grunt and a thin layer of metal came away from the wall, swinging out and to the left, like a cabinet door.

The group leaned in, eager to see what lay beyond…

"It looks like some kind of control board," Tu'Pari observed, a slightly raised eyebrow the only outward indication of his excitement. "But, the symbols are unfamiliar to me."

"To me as well," Picard said, reverently tracing the raised glyphs. "The panel appears to be constructed of the same material as the rest of this wall."
He pressed one of the symbols, and a low, resonating tone vibrated their ears.

"Interesting," Tu'Pari commented, leaning in to tap another. This time, the tone was higher, the resonance causing the dust in the air to dance in the lantern light.

"Well," Nat noted. "The dampening field didn't interfere with that."

Riker frowned.

"If I remember right," he said, "didn't the Preserver object Kirk's Enterprise encountered respond to a musical tone-based code?"

"So it did, Number One," Picard said, his eyes shining. "If all this was truly left here by the Preservers, it may be that to gain access to whatever may be behind this wall, we must first determine which tones to play—"

"And, in which order," Nat interjected. "According to the archive records I've seen, the object Kirk activated responded to the chirp of his communicator, followed by a brief, spoken phrase. What if this panel requires, not only mechanical tones, but specific vocal modulations as well?"

"A fascinating theory," Tu'Pari said, a slight frown creasing his lips. "I suggest we record holographic images of these new symbols and run them through the computer system back at the compound – well out of range of this dampening field."

"Logical," Freja said, smiling despite the disappointment in her eyes. "And, I believe, your second hint in as many minutes that it's past time we head back to the compound. Forget to eat lunch again?"

The Vulcan raised an eyebrow, but did not deny her allegation.

Freja's smile broadened briefly, then she sighed.

"Oh, well. Looks like there'll be no great breakthrough tonight after all. How's that sandstorm coming?"

"I believe it has passed," Tu'Pari said, cocking his head to listen for any lingering sign of heavy winds outside the tunnel.

"Then, we should be heading back," Picard agreed, though his expression rather mirrored Freja's reluctance to leave their discovery uncracked. "Do you need any help recording these images?"

"No, the holorecorders we have are pretty old tech – the dampening field hardly affects them at all," Nat said.

"Well, apart from those weird shadows we've seen on a few of the images," Freja noted. "But those only show up when one of us is in the shot."

"Shadows?" Picard asked curiously.

"I'll show you when we get back to the compound," Nat said, snapping a few holo images, then stepping back to allow Tu'Pari to take a few more with his own recording device. "It's no big deal, really, probably just an effect caused by the lights reflecting off this wall panel. All set, Tu'Pari?"

"I believe we have sufficient material to work with, for now," the Vulcan responded.

"Then, I'm heading out of this hole and straight to the nearest replicator," Nat said. "I don't know about the rest of you, but I've been craving a hot Reuben sandwich all day, and if I don't get one
soon my brain just may go on strike."

"It must be long past suppertime by now," Freja agreed. "We all need a good meal, and we really should see how poor Kurak is doing."

"Agreed," Picard said, and gently swung the access panel door back into place, while Nat took pictures of its shape and position. "Let's each take a lantern and get going."

"Very well," Tu'Pari said, slinging his holorecorder's strap over his shoulder. "I shall see to the horses and join you directly."

"Perhaps it would be better if we all went with you to the stables," Riker suggested. "With everything that's happened today, it might not be the best idea to separate."

"I am quite capable of attending to the animals myself," Tu'Pari stated rather flatly.

"Stable duty's always been Tu'Pari's job around here," Nat explained to Picard and Riker. "It might seem a little strange, Vulcans and horses, but they seem to have developed a kind of bond."

"I believe I understand," Picard said with a small smile. "But I agree with Commander Riker. Let's all go to the stables first, then back to the compound for our supper."

The scientists muttered a little, but ultimately shrugged and led the way out of the tunnels and into a surprisingly cold, starry night.

*******

A sleek, two-man speeder cut across the sandy desert on a direct tangent from the tents and concrete structures of the capital city to the ruined tunnels that, only hours before, had served as a key smuggling hub, the vehicle's headlights causing the sand ahead to shimmer like diamond dust.

"Hey, 'Poug." Rizzul said to the driver, rapping his knuckles against the front windshield. "Is my eye playing tricks, or does that dent in the sand up ahead look like a speeder track to you? A speeder track leading away from the tunnels?"

"Left by Nizik?" the Nausicaan supposed in his thick, heavy voice.

"Nah, that track's way too fresh," Rizzul said. "Besides, it's aimed at that giant Stairway, not the city. Maybe the big man was right about some of those Skins escaping before the tunnels collapsed."

"Then, we follow?" 'Poug inquired.

"We do if we don't want to end up like old Nizik," Rizzul said. "The Boss-man wants his property back. It's our job to collect it for him. You remember to load those phaser rifles?"

"In the back," the Nausicaan said, and thumped the back of his chair.

Rizzul reached into the dark, narrow space behind the seats and groped around until his hand grasped a cool rifle barrel. He pulled the phaser rifle up onto his lap and checked the charge, his damaged face creasing in satisfaction.

"We're set to go," he said. "Quick, 'Poug,' put on some speed! With any luck, we can bag some Skins and those Federation scientists the boss wanted before the moons begin to sink."

To Be Continued...
References include TOS: The Paradise Syndrome.

Next Time: Some Action! Stay Tuned! :)

HAPPY NEW YEAR, EVERYONE!

:D :D :D
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Eighteen

"Howard," Data said as he piloted the speeder, keeping his voice low so as not to disturb the children, sleeping in the back seat. "Do you find the monotony of this dark, desert landscape to have a strangely hypnotic effect?"

"I am Howard: an HDD-421 Series Robot," Howard stated from the seat beside him, his chirpy announcer-voice equally low. "I cannot be hypnotized, frustrated, or bored. I am here to serve."

"Right, of course," Data said, and shook his head. "It's just me, then. But, I am not bored. Quite the opposite. My mind is running along so many different tracks…not all of which I want to contemplate. I keep…worrying… What are we to find when we reach the compound? The attack was quite violent…can I assume it ended when they kidnapped me? Were my friends similarly captured, but sent elsewhere…to serve as Slaves rather than Skins? And, what of the archaeologists? Kahlestra's mother? Our poor, frightened horses… We still do not know just what the attackers were after."

Howard sat still as a statue, his glowing gaze fixed straight ahead.

"Howard?" Data prompted, anxious for some feedback. Perhaps…reassurance. At the very least, a bit of genuine conversation.

The robot turned his head to face him.

"My name is Howard," Howard said. "I am here to serve. How may I serve you?"

Data stared at the robot, rather stricken by his complete lack of…anything, really. Empathy, curiosity, concern… Even before the emotion chip, Data knew…at least, he sincerely hoped…he had not come across to others as so…blank… Yet, Howard—

Had the robot even been listening? Was his Orion-tech, duotronic brain capable of understanding the meaning, the nonverbal subtexts, that lurked behind spoken words?

From the start, Data had seen aspects of his own mechanical nature and mannerisms reflected in Howard. Enough to raise his hopes – to make him wonder if, perhaps, he wasn't quite so alone after all.

Now, however…

A sense of crushing disappointment washed over the android, and he felt his expression tighten. Talking with Howard…well, attempting to talk… It brought into painfully sharp relief just how unique he truly was…among machines as well as men.

He snorted slightly and shook his head. Spot was more perceptive, and responsive, than the cybernetic construct beside him. But then Spot, like Data and Data's other biological friends, was sentient.

Perhaps he would find his remaining time with Howard less frustrating if he stopped trying to
communicate with the robot and, instead, addressed him as he would the similarly non-sentient Enterprise computer.

"Never mind, Howard," he said.

"I am here to serve," Howard stated, and his gaze returned to the front.

Data sighed and stared out at the acres and acres of moonlit sand stretching before them, his anxious mind again propelling his thoughts in speculative circles as he drummed his metal fingers against the steering wheel: Tap tap tap tap. Tap tap tap tap.

Tap tap tap tap. Tap tap tap tap.

Tap tap tap tap. Tap tap tap tap.

Tap tap tap tap…

He caught his attention drifting and quickly straightened in his seat, muttering an irritable admonition under his breath. His mind had never been so misty before the damned chip… Or could this woolly-headed feeling be another symptom of his dangerously low power reserves?

"I would very much appreciate some music at this juncture," he said, still keeping his voice quiet. "But, the children need their sleep. I do not wish to disturb them. Yet, if I do not find some mental distraction, and soon, I fear I may lose focus entirely and slip into a daydream. Howard…"

"I am Howard," Howard responded. "How may I be of service?"

"Are you familiar with travel games?" Data asked.

"I am here to serve," Howard said, his blue photoelectric cells glowing brightly in the dimness. "Accessing…Games. My programming includes travel games popular on Orion Prime."

"I wish to play 'Imaginary Bubbles,'" Data said. "It is one of my favorites, a fast-paced game of mathematics centered on the minimal surface equation: a nonlinear equation involving powers and products of derivatives that, essentially, encodes the peculiar behavior of soap films. I start, by—"

Howard made a soft buzz-like sound, indicating a failure to process Data's input.

"I am Howard, your helpful domestic droid," he stated. "The phrase 'minimal surface equation'," for the quote, he played back a recording of Data's voice, "is not included in my programming. How may I be of service?"

Data grimaced, and briefly closed his eyes.

"Fine, yes, of course," he said, his shoulders falling once again into a grumpy hunch. "Howard, please provide a list of available travel games."

"My programming includes travel games popular on Orion Prime," Howard repeated. "These games are: Astronaut Challenge; Captain Korg; Capital Cities; FerengiCasino8; I Spy; Thermal—"

A rocking jolt jarred the vehicle, knocking it sharply off course. Data quickly compensated, but the lurching convulsion shook the children awake, and they cried out in alarm and pain as a second jolt slammed them against each other.

"Ow—hey! What the hell!" Ishta exclaimed, pushing a disoriented Kahlestra off her arm. "Stay on your side!"
"Did we hit something?" Mikey asked sleepily, rubbing his eyes.

"No," Data said, running his gaze over the diagnostic readout. "There appears to be a fault in the primary power converter. Most likely a result of deliberate tampering...either to discourage the theft or unauthorized use of this vehicle — or possibly done in hopes of selling the same vehicle over and over again, counting on the malfunction to ensure it would be returned."

"What does that mean?" Ishta demanded.

"It means..." he said, glancing at her over his shoulder. "...that we cannot continue to the compound until we repair the converter."

Data tightened his grip on the shaking steering wheel, struggling to hold in his frustration. The Orions who had been storing the speeder were smugglers, cons! Why hadn't he considered this contingency?

"Where are we?" Kahlestra asked blearily, covering a yawn with her hand.

"Approximately twelve kilometers from our destination," Data informed her.

"Good grief," the young Klingon said. "Another ten minutes or so and we'd be home free. How long will these repairs take?"

"Not long," Data said, wrangling the juddering vehicle toward the closest thing to cover he could spot - a small outcropping of weathered rocks and dry cacti. "There is an emergency kit in the back storage compartment. I estimate the necessary repairs shouldn't take more than half an hour."

"You 'estimate'?" Ishta said snarkily. "Isn't your brain supposed to be some kind of fancy-pants computer?"

Data's expression tensed, but he refused to give her the reaction she wanted.

"I don't understand why you insist on provoking confrontation," he said, "but now is not the time for goading taunts. I promised I would take you to safety, and I will. Until then, we must work together, as a team, no matter what challenges obstruct our path."

Ishta rolled her eyes in utter exasperation.

"Whatever," she said as the speeder slowed to a stop, then lowered rather jerkily to the sandy ground. "I need a bathroom break anyway."

Kahlestra wrinkled her nose at the older girl.

"Jerk," she grunted under her breath.

"We have no need for insults either," Data told her, and opened the doors. "Now, you children can stay in here or come out and stretch your legs for a time, but I advise you to stay within sight of each other, and the speeder."

"In other words," Kahlestra said, and smirked, "don't wander off."

"Precisely," Data said, smiling slightly. "Howard, I will need you to help hold the tools."

"I am here to serve," Howard announced, and the five of them piled out of the speeder.

*******
"Think he knows he's muttering to himself?" Ishta said, kicking at the sand.

"Who, Data?" Kahlestra said, and glanced at the android - a blinking metal construct with its head deep in the engine of another. "Probably not."

"I don't get it," Ishta said, making gouges with her toe, then kicking the excess sand toward the rocks. "Why would anyone build a thing like him?"

"He said why," Mikey spoke up. "His father wanted a son."

"That's stupid," Ishta said, and leaned against the rock-side with a huff. "Everyone would know he wasn't the guy's real son. That he couldn't be..."

Mikey regarded her.

"You like him," he said.

"You're an idiot," Ishta retorted.

"I am not. You really like him!" Mikey asserted, and started backing away from her aggressive glare, a smug, teasing smile stretching over his thin little face. "I bet that's why you and Kay keep fighting. You both like Data and you don't want to say!"

"Don't be stupid!" the girls objected, absolutely outraged.

"He's a machine!"

"He's...old!"

"Way old."

"Gotta be more than thirty."

"Way more."

"And besides," Ishta said. "I bet he doesn't even have a pe—"

"Ishta!" Kahlestra exclaimed, pressing a scandalized hand to her mouth. "You shouldn't talk like that. It's disrespectful."

"Why?" the Orion said. "Just think about it. You're a Klingon and you're acting like this. Do you seriously think a human would build a machine with a working—"

"Stop it!" Kahlestra shrieked. "Just... Yuck! Just stop!"

"I rest my case," Ishta said, and smugly crossed her arms. "Besides, I already tested him."

Kahlestra stared.

"You what?"

"Oh, don't worry," the Orion said. "He wasn't interested."

"Well, duh!" Kahlestra exclaimed. "You're fourteen! He may be a machine, but he's not a perv." She bared her teeth in disgust at the older girl. "You, I'm not so sure about," she said.

Ishta shrugged and flicked her hair over her shoulder.
"Think what you want," she said, heading for the speeder.

"Hey, where are you going?" Kahlestra called after her.

"To ask him," she called back.

"Kahless!" Kahlestra hissed. "She really is a freak!"

She glanced at Mikey, who seemed to be enjoying the whole scene way too much.

"Oh, shut up," she said, and hurried after Ishta. Mikey followed...once he managed to contain his snickers. He caught up just in time to hear Ishta ask her question.

"Data?" she said, leaning casually against the speeder and peering in at the engine the android was busily, and quite efficiently, repairing.

"Stop!" Kahlestra shouted, rather breathlessly. "Ignore, her, Data. She's a pig! A filthy-minded Orion pig!"

Data straightened and faced the three children, his brow furrowed in confusion as he struggled to interpret their wildly differing expressions: one smug, one horrified, and one teetering on the brink of giggles.

"I beg your pardon?" he said.

"It's no big deal," Ishta said, her blue eyes fixed on the darkly blushing Kahlestra. "I was just going to ask you if—"

"Ishta, don't!"

"If you've ever been in love," Ishta finished, speaking right over the Klingon's protest.

Kahlesta blinked, and stood down.

"Oh..." she said.

Ishta smirked, and winked at Mikey.

Data regarded them all, certain he had missed something but not quite willing to ask what.

"Do you want the truth?" he asked them.

"Yes," Ishta said quickly. Kahlestra just nodded.

"Then, no," he admitted. "I have never been in love. At least...not yet."

"Then you can fall in love," Ishta pressed. "That is, you can actually—"

"Good grief!" Kahlestra exclaimed, burying her face in her hands in embarrassment.

Data frowned at her, even more befuddled than before.

"I am fully functional, if that is your question," he said - causing Mikey to snort laughter through his nose.

"'Fully functional!'" he giggled.
"Does that mean you can pee?" Ishta asked, starting to catch the giggles too.

"Can you fart?" Mikey asked, nearly choking on his amusement.

"I have never attempted either of those functions," Data informed them, rather primly, "and I am beginning to suspect you children are making fun of me."

"No, no, we're not," Kahlestra said, still blushing furiously. "I promise we're not! I guess we just...want to know more about you. That's all."

"Hm..." Data grunted, not entirely convinced. He wiped his metal fingers on a cloth Howard held out to him, and closed the speeder's hood. "The repairs are complete and I have inserted a fresh power cell. If you children are ready, we can now complete our journey to the compound."

"I'm ready," Ishta said, and swung easily back into the speeder.

"Me too," Mikey said, and climbed in after her.

Kahlestra hesitated by the door.

"You're not mad...are you, Data?" she asked.

"Mad?" Data repeated. "As in 'angry'? 'Offended'?"

"Yeah," Kahlestra said.

Data smiled at her.

"No," he said. "Actually, upon consideration, I think I'm rather flattered."

Kahlestra wrinkled her nose.

"Flattered?"

"Yes," Data said. "Personal questions are asked of people. Have you asked many computer systems if they can pee?"

Kahlestra snickered.

"No, of course not."

Data's smile broadened, then slowly faded.

"Do not worry about me, Kay," he said. "While it is true that I have yet to experience romantic love...even familial love... I have known the love that comes with friendship. I know what it is to care for someone. I have come to care for each of you children quite deeply."

He climbed into the driver's seat but, before he could close the door, Kahlestra hopped up and kissed his metal cheek.

"Hey, Data," she said, "I love you too."

While Data blinked in surprise, Kahlestra hopped in the back, shooting Ishta a rather smug look as she fastened her seat belt for the ride home.

******
When I fall in love
It will be forever
Or I'll never fall in love...

In a restless world, like this is
Love is ended before it's begun
And too many moonlight kisses
Seem to cool in the warmth of the sun...

If I give my heart
It will be completely
Or I'll never give my heart...
And the moment
I can feel
That you feel that way too
Is when I'll fall in love with you...

"That song's really beautiful," Mikey sighed sleepily. "Where's it from?"

"Earth," Data told him, quite enjoying the cozy hush that had fallen over the speeder's cabin in the few minutes since they'd resumed their trip. The warm sense of...peace...belonging... It was a new experience for him, one he hoped would last. "It was Ishta's questions that made me think of it. The song is very old, dating from Earth's mid-twentieth century. Yet, somehow, I find that the sentiment it expresses...speaks to me."

Mikey nodded, and rested his head against the cool window.

"I remember...when I was really small," he said softly. "My dad used to sing like that to help me go to sleep. Do you think...you could sing it again, Data? I mean...you don't have to. I just..."

"I would be happy to sing to you, Mikey," Data assured him. "I'll sing it quietly so—"

A red flash lit the night and the speeder rocked violently, shattering the moment. Data turned at once to the controls, but the impact had shaken everyone out of their warm and muzzy thoughts.

"Data, what's happening!" Kahlestra exclaimed. "Is it the power converter again?"

"No," Data said, alarm making his voice seem clipped. "Someone is shooting at us! I am initiating evasive maneuvers. Please stay in your seats, and remain calm!"

"'Remain calm,' he says," Ishta scoffed, and undid her seatbelt, kneeling on the seat to peer out the rear window.

"Hey, sit down!" Kahlestra snapped. "Didn't you hear—"

"By the deities..." the Orion girl said, pointedly ignoring the younger Klingon. "Data's right! There's another speeder following us!"

"Is it them?" Mikey asked anxiously. "The other two guards? Do they know we escaped? Does... Could Father know?"

"Now is not the time for speculation," Data said, his hands flying over the control panel as he skilfully dodged blast after blinding blast. "Speculation without fact will only lead to worry."

"Speculation, hell," Ishta said. "I can say it's those guards for sure! That's 'Poug driving and Rizzul
shooting. I recognize that slaver bastard even with that nasty patch over his face."

She turned back around, digging between the seats in search of their own phaser rifle.

"Let's kill them, Data," she said as she searched. "Swing this crate around and let me blow out Rizzul's good eye!"

Kahlestra stared, unsure whether to feel impressed or disturbed by the older girl's vehemence...not that she didn't share the sentiment.

"What you propose is neither possible nor advisable," Data said. "Our phaser rifle is stowed in the back compartment, along with our provisions and extra power cells."

"Wait - are you saying we don't have any weapons!" Ishta exclaimed.

"I am saying we do not have direct access to a phaser," Data corrected, the children moaning despite their terror as he continued to swerve the speeder right and left, up and down, at increasingly frightening velocities. "In times of necessity, nearly anything can be used as a weapon."

"Like what?" Ishta demanded, leaning over his chair's back. "There's nothing in here, and there's certainly nothing out there! We might as well just crack a window and spit at them!"

"Ishta, sit down and fasten your seat belt! Now!" Data ordered, shooting her a rather wild-eyed glare. Surprised, Ishta actually did. "Believe it or not," he said, "I do have a plan - not to execute our pursuers, but capture them for questioning."

Ishta snorted.

"You're kidding, right? You can't expect to capture two of the Boss-man's best henchmen in a clunky speeder with no phasers, no——"

"Did I ask whether it was possible?" Data snapped. He shook his head slightly and tightened his grip on the wheel.

"Apologies, Ishta, this burst of temper I am experiencing is not directed at you," he said, his golden eyes fixed on a cluster of tall, undulating sand dunes just ahead. "It is just...that we should be attacked, so close to our destination—!" He shook his head. "This anger is fresh, but...I think... It is quite possible the frustration fueling it has been building for a long time. Perhaps years, perhaps my entire life... Still, I am feeling it now, truly feeling it, and I have no wish to stop until it all comes out!"

He put on a fresh burst of speed that pressed the children helplessly against the back of their seats, the towering dunes looming ever closer as he spoke.

"I have been pursued many times. Captured, 'collected,' manipulated, treated as an object, an appliance, a trophy, a possession, a thing! That Orion smuggler, Nizik, certainly viewed me as a commodity. At least, until he bothered to talk with me. That is when fear overtook 'familiarity.'"

He shook his head, and frowned.

"In fact, from the moment I first opened my eyes on Omicron Theta, I have been perceived by those around me as an unsettling contradiction; forced to straddle the walls humanoid societies tend to construct between concepts such as 'mechanical' and 'living,' 'life-like' and 'life form...' So, I sit alone, in a class by myself, and I hate it!"
His shoulders tensed and his expression hardened, the lights in his skull seeming to blink faster in the dimness.

"Do you know what Commander Riker said to me when we first met?" he said bitterly, speaking more to himself than his companions. "He presumed my Starfleet rank was honorary! Some token title I had been assigned. He had read through my file, but somehow it had slipped past his attention that an android might actually be an Academy graduate, same as him, that I had worked my way up the science track, earned a command position aboard the Federation's flagship!

"Of course, such presumptions were nothing new. Humans have been projecting their prejudices onto me for as long as I can remember, and each time I have wondered, what is wrong with me that they should treat me so? What am I missing, that I should be continually second-guessed, put down, taken for granted, patronized, infantilized, and otherwise blatantly diminished by a galaxy of ignorant, hypocritical, tech-phobic organisms I only ever sought to protect!"

He snarled and pulled back on the controls, lurching the speeder almost straight up. The children made small, frightened noises, turning their heads to watch the speeder behind them match their speed and angle, but they didn't dare interrupt Data's rant.

"They are all guilty of these behaviors, in one way or another," he went on. "Riker, Troi...Captain Picard! Maddox wishes to dismantle you for study, Data? - well, I have to consider Starfleet's interests! Your child is not a child, Data, it's an invention!"

He snorted through his nose, ignoring the sudden stinging in his eyes. Kahlestra blinked and shared a startled glance with Ishta, but they both kept silent.

"Even my brother is not classified in Starfleet's records as a madman, but as Soong's failed experiment!" he cried, hurt and anger tightening his voice as he continued their dangerously steep climb. "Yet, he may have had a point. Starfleet does see me more as a 'puppet' than a person. For all my achievements, my so-called rights, my fundamental situation is the same now as it was when I was first discovered. Sure, you can join up with us, the admirals say, but you can't sit at our table. Of course we accept you, they claim. Just keep to your station and don't look up! Geordi, Troi and Worf have all been promoted, Commander Riker has been offered ship after ship, but me? I subvert the Borg, bring scheming Romulans out into the light, but do I get offers of promotion? Glowing features in the newsfeeds? Oh no - my achievements make admirals nervous: an android can't be trusted to command on its own! So, they stick a commendation in my file, issue a token medal to add to my collection..."

"Well, guess what, Starfleet Command!" he shouted at the windscreen. "The fact that I am other than human does not inherently make me less than human! That I was constructed rather than born does not automatically imply I have no living soul! I will end this pursuit and take the perpetrators into custody, I will do it my way, and you children will see first-hand that my emotions have in no way hindered my ability to perform my duties as a Federation citizen, and a Starfleet Officer! Now stay still, and hold on tight! The maneuvers I am about to execute are extremely dangerous."

"Why did he have to say 'execute'," Mikey moaned, clutching his stomach as the speeder seemed to stop short, hovering just at the peak of the tallest sand dune as if waiting for the pursuing craft to catch up.

"What is he doing?" Ishta squeaked under her breath. "They'll be back in shooting range in a minute —"

"Calm down," Kahlestra whispered. "Listen to the engine! I think I know what he has in mind..."
"What are they doing?" Rizzul said, squinting through the dusty windshield as their speeder rocketed up the side of the sandy dune. "Why are they just hovering there?"

"Maybe they give up?" the Nausicaan suggested. "It is said how Skins fear freedom."

"I don't think that's it," Rizzul grunted, and checked the charge on his phaser rifle. "I've only got power for a few good shots. Line me up with their engine's plasma induction coils. Perched right above us like that, they're the perfect sitting target...!"

As 'Poug got them into position, Rizzul hopped up onto the seat and leaned his head and shoulders out the passenger side window, the tip of his tongue jutting through his lips as he took aim—

"Now!" Data exclaimed, and revved the engine, shifting the hovering speeder into its highest gear. He kept it paused there for 2.31 seconds - just long enough to send gusts and heaps of loose, displaced sand blowing straight into the pursuing speeder's engine, clogging its air intake tube and jamming the entire intake manifold - before shifting again and zipping down the dune, out of the dense sand cloud he'd created in time to avoid the same fate.

Meanwhile, inside the enemy speeder, 'Poug and Rizzul barely had time to realize what had happened before their engine stalled out, their residual velocity hurling them straight into what, on impact, instantly became a loose-sand avalanche. Sand poured in through the open window as the dune collapsed around them, the small speeder rocking and tumbling and sliding helplessly down the slope like a pebble down a mountainside, the two trapped men coughing and screaming and scrambling for dear life.

"We'll meet them at the bottom," Data said, bringing them around the dune to a safe viewing distance.

"Yeah, if they survive," Ishta commented, staring wide-eyed at the collapsing dune, and the little speeder skittering just ahead of the dusty wave. "I gotta say, though, I never would have thought sand could be a weapon!"

"What about that sandstorm?" Kahlestra pointed out.

"Not the same," Ishta said. "I mean, are you seeing this? Data just dumped a whole sand dune on those guys' heads, and he did it with a speeder!"

"Yeah, wind and sand," Kahlestra said. "Put them together and you get: sandstorm!"

"It was my intent to turn this hostile landscape to our advantage," Data acknowledged, watching closely as the shifting sands altered the enemy speeder's trajectory, sending it out of the avalanche's main path and up, then back down the slope of a neighboring dune, skidding to an awkward, spinning stop about a quarter of the way from the dune's base.

As Data drove to meet them, the children saw the enemy speeder's doors pop open and two very wobbly figures slide out in a rush of coarse sand.
"Excellent," Data commented, and straightened in his chair. "You know, I really am feeling much better now...as if some metaphysical weight has lifted from my chest. Perhaps it is better to 'vent' one's inner feelings rather than hold them in...even at the risk of enduring judgment...even fear...from others. I will have to discuss this episode with Deanna. In the meantime..."

Data pressed the external comm button, and smiled down at the disoriented criminals.

"Greetings," he said. "This is Lieutenant Commander Data, of the Federation Starship Enterprise. You have both violated Federation law. Prepare to be taken into custody."

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"Shit, we've been chasing the Feds," Rizzul groaned dizzily, his nearly drained phaser rifle still clutched close to his chest. "Damn Rangers must have called 'em in. Bloody traffic cop bastards... The Boss-man's gonna skin us for sure."

"If we are taken by Federation authorities, we will be labeled traitors, even if we should escape or be released," 'Poug recited. "Father tortures all traitors."

"And we already know what the Big Man's got in mind for us," Rizzul said, and looked straight into the Nausicaan's eyes. "But, if we're going down, those Feds up there are going with us. You get me, 'Poug?"

"Got it," the hulking being agreed, and rose shakily to his knees, lifting his bruised and bleeding arms in the air in the standard Federation gesture of surrender. Rizzul did the same thing, hiding the rifle under his legs as he watched the Fed speeder slowly descend...

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"Stay where you are," Data warned the children as he gently settled their speeder on the sloping, unstable sand. "I will go incapacitate our prisoners, and tie them in restraints."

"What about their phaser rifle?" Kahlestra said. "I don't think that's the stun setting they've been using."

"You are correct. But, the beams I observed were not full strength," Data assured her. "After all this exertion, their phaser rifle's power reserve must be nearly drained. But, even if they do manage to fire, I am more than capable of dodging."

Kahlestra regarded him, a small smile creasing her mouth.

"I believe you are," she said.

"Wait - where are you going to put them?" Ishta asked. "It's not like we have room."

"They can ride in the storage compartment," Data said, much to the children's satisfaction, and pressed the control to open the door.

*******

"They're coming out," Rizzul said, and grabbed his weapon. Firing his last energy bolts at his own speeder's plasma tank, he shouted: "Eat shrapnel, you Federation bastards!"

"Oh, shit!" Data gasped, and dashed back to his seat with inhuman speed, his fingers already flying over the controls. "Phaser fire, physical attack...certainly. But, this, I did not expect," he exclaimed,
piloting their speeder out of harm's way just as the brilliant gold and green explosion consumed Rizzul, 'Poug, and their damaged speeder. Flaming bits of the vehicle flew everywhere, but only a few impacted with the fleeing speeder, and those were mostly glancing blows. Data's bigger concern was riding out the violent turbulence.

"Whoa..." Mikey gasped, once the awful shaking finally began to ease.

Kahlestra stared at the burning wreck, her head shaking slowly back and forth in disbelief.

"By Kahless..."

"Holy shit!" Ishta shrieked. "Those idiots just blew themselves up! They actually blew themselves up rather than be taken away to some cushy Fed jail! I heard the Boss-man had his goons brainwashed, but to actually—"

"I believe it was their intent to blow us up as well," Data said, his golden eyes still wide with shock. "It could not be done with a nearly drained phaser, so they used their speeder as a bomb."

"There is an old Klingon saying: When backed against a ledge, always pull your enemy down with you," Kahlestra recited.

"Yeah, well those creeps weren't Klingons, and that sure wasn't any act of honor," Ishta said. "Come on, let's get out of this place."

"Agreed," Data said. "This latest adventure has taken us quite a distance from our established course, but if I maintain a speed of eighty kph, we should still be able to make it to the compound by sunrise. Does that sound acceptable to you?"

The children cheered and started up a happy chatter, their near-death experience already all but forgotten.

Data smiled, then looked over at Howard, who had ridden out the entire episode with all the flat detachment of a tricorder. His smile faded, and he sighed.

Howard may not have been the brightest bulb...more than likely, he was not even sentient. But he was diligent, and always ready to serve. Perhaps, at the compound, Data could replicate him a replacement arm.

He wondered if the robot would be pleased.

He wondered if there was still a compound to return to...

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

References include - TNG: Encounter at Farpoint; The Measure of a Man; Datalore; The Offspring; The Most Toys; Descent; Birthright I; Redemption II; Best of Both Worlds; Disaster; The Quality of Life; the movies Generations, First Contact, and Star Wars IV: A New Hope (with Rifftrax); and the 1952 song "When I Fall In Love" by Victor Young and Edward Heyman, featured on Brent Spiner's 1991 CD "Ol' Yellow Eyes Is Back."
Hope you liked this chapter! Next update will be for "Often Wrong." Stay tuned, and please review! :)}
Chapter Nineteen

A rosy glow was just brushing the horizon as the looming Stairway came into view. The dim light cast intricate shadows over the structure's twists and curves, making the intertwining steps almost seem to move as the speeder sped by.

"What is that thing?" Ishta asked, breaking the sleepy silence of the last few miles.

"You've never heard of the Stairway of Sawrina the Great?" Kahlestra said.

"I've heard of it, but I've never seen it," Ishta retorted. "It's not like those guards took us Skins out on history tours, you know."

Kahlestra blinked, and sat back. Seeing the familiar landscape, feeling she was so close to home...for a moment, the horrors they'd all been facing had seemed...unreal...

"Sorry," she said. "I didn't mean anything."

"Whatever," Ishta muttered. "Hey, Data, how much longer till we get where we're going?"

"We are here," Data informed them, and the girls sat straight, peering out the windows as the android pulled into a sheltered clearing and parked the speeder beside the archaeologists' stable.

"I gotta get home," Kahlestra said with sudden urgency, already unstrapping her seatbelt. "I gotta let my mother know I'm OK! And the archaeologists... I have to tell them about Dr. Baker and—"

"Kay, stop," Data said, turning in his seat so he could look her in the eye. "The attack on this compound was quite fierce. Until we know the site is clear, I want you children to remain in this speeder with Howard. I will take the phaser rifle and inspect the stable. If the horses are there, and well, we will all move on to the compound together. Understood?"

Kahlestra looked like she was about to protest, but a glance at Mikey, still fast asleep beside her, caused her to sigh and nod her head.

"OK," she allowed. "But if you take longer than five minutes in there, we're coming in after you."

Data gave her a little smile, then opened the door and climbed out.

"Stay," he warned again as the door closed. Keeping to the shadows, he strode to the back compartment, grabbed the phaser rifle, and crept silently into the pitch darkness beyond the stable gate.

"Don't know why he bothers sneaking around. With his head and hands blinking like that, he's a walking flash beacon," Ishta muttered.

"Heh," Kahlestra snorted. "That's true. Sometimes, I wonder if he forgets he lost his skin."

"How could a metal man with a computer brain forget a thing like that?" Ishta scoffed.
Kahlestra shrugged and looked down at her hand…the slowly healing burn scars left by Dr. Baker's fingers when the woman was vaporized right beside her…

"I don't know," she said quietly, pressing her thumb against the wound until the throbbing sting made her wince. "But, maybe 'forget' is the wrong word. Maybe he did it to remember…?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" Ishta demanded, thoroughly confused.

Kahlestra clenched her fist and shook her head.

"Nothing, never mind," she said. "Hey, look, he's coming back already!"

Data returned to the speeder at a jaunty pace; a saddlebag slung over one shoulder, the phaser rifle tucked under his arm, and a tricorder in his blinking hand. As the door opened, he met the girls' questions with the happiest, most open smile they'd yet seen him wear.

"It's all right!" he said. "You can come out. I have seen no lingering indications of violent raiding or occupation. The horses have recently been provided with fresh food and water. Even their manes and tails have been braided. And, my tricorder readings indicate seven humanoid life signs in that building." He pointed. "Four human, one Vulcan, one half-Betazoid and…" He smiled at Kahlestra. "One Klingon."

Kahlestra let out a relieved gasp, then jumped down from the speeder to clasp him in a hug so powerful, he actually had to stagger a little to keep his balance in the sand.

"Thank you, Commander," she said, squeezing the android with all her strength. "Thank you, for my mother and for myself."

For a moment, Data seemed quite abashed, even speechless. But then, his expression softened and he gently brushed the loose hair from the young Klingon's face.

"Thank you, Kay," he said, resting his free hand on her shoulder as she slowly let him go. "For trusting I would keep my promise. Your supportive input has been invaluable. This applies to you as well, Ishta," he said, fixing his golden gaze on the solemn girl. "You each aided in your own rescue, and mine. I am exceedingly proud of all of you."

Ishta frowned a little and lowered her eyes, but Data was already moving around the speeder, opening Howard's door, handing Kahlestra the phaser rifle, then slipping his tricorder in his pocket and gently lifting the sleeping Mikey from the back seat.

"Uncle Michael…" he muttered as his forehead brushed against Data's metal cheek.

Data pursed his lips and cradled the boy's head on his shoulder, soothing him back into his dreams.

"Poor kid…" Kahlestra said. "Where's he going to go after all this? His whole family is…well…gone."

"That may not be so," Data said, keeping his voice low. "His immediate family were colonists. He may have more distant relatives elsewhere in the Federation. Grandparents, perhaps. Or cousins."

"Like they'd want to take in a sick kid," Ishta mumbled, climbing slowly out of the speeder and watching the doors close.

Data regarded her.
"In my time aboard the Enterprise," he said, "I have known several children who lost their parents to various causes. Jeremy Aster. Jono Rossa. Timothy Harris..." He smiled a little. "When notified, their surviving relatives were more than eager to share their homes with them."

"And me?" Ishta challenged. "I don't have any of that. What am I supposed to do when Kay goes back to her mom and her school and you head back to your ship, huh? You gonna dump me in some Fed institution, Data? 'Cause if you send me home to Mother, she'll have me back on the market in two seconds, flat."

"I will not allow that to happen, Ishta," Data said.

"Yeah? How you gonna stop it, android?" Ishta shot back. "I wasn't born in your precious Federation. Human rights don't extend to Orion Skins!"

"You are not a Skin," Data insisted. "You are a fourteen-year-old child who has found asylum on a Federation world. You will not be returned to Orion or sent to live in an institution. Did I not promise I would keep you safe?"

Ishta kicked the sand.

"Like I'm supposed to know what that even means," she snarled.

"It means," Data said, fixing his eyes on her face until she met them with her own. "I will do whatever it takes to find you a home and an environment in which you, Ishta, can grow and thrive. I will not abandon you. Do you understand me?"

Ishta shrugged and kicked more sand.

"Yeah, sure," she said. "I get to hang around your neck like a big, green stone 'till you smoke me out some castle on a cloud."

Data tilted his head, his silvery brow deeply furrowed.

"I find the imagery you employ...confusing," he said. "But, if you mean to depict yourself as a burden to me, Ishta, let me assure you that you are not. None of you children are. Now, come," he said, adjusting Mikey's position on his left arm and offering a free hand to her. "We will discuss your situation with my friends. Counselor Deanna Troi has particular expertise in these matters. Together, we will sort this out."

Ishta grunted, but reached up from her slump-shouldered hunch to take his hand in hers.

Data smiled, just slightly, then said, "All right, let's go. Come along, Howard."

"I am here to serve," Howard replied, and stomped after the group, his metallic-green skin gleaming in the dawning light.

******

Riker woke to the regular bleep of a proximity alarm, only to find Deanna already sitting up on her cot.

"What is it? Who's there?" Nat mumbled blearily, reaching under his own cot for a phaser. "Have those damned raiders returned?"

"No," Deanna said, her dark eyes wide with concentration. "No..."
She jumped to her feet, reaching for her clip as she twisted her hair into a loose bun.

"Deanna?" Riker questioned, but she was already talking over him.

"It's Data, Will," she exclaimed. "Data's back – and he's not alone."

Riker wrinkled his forehead.

"What do you mean, 'not alone'?"

"I think—"

"Troi, Will!" Picard alerted, bounding in from the control room with Tu'Pari close behind. "The proximity alarm—"

"We know, Captain," Riker said, pulling on his boots, pocketing a phaser, and striding for the door to the foyer that connected the small control room and their sleeping space to the front exit they shared with the clinic. "Deanna says it's Data."

The foyer door slid open a moment before the commander reached it, revealing a very anxious Freja Anders, who had volunteered to watch over Kurak in the clinic.

"There's a proximity alarm going off—" she started, only to step back to avoid getting trampled by the rest of the group filing past. "Oh, I guess you know, then."

"Come on, Freja," Nat said, reaching for her hand. "They say the android's made it back with someone. Maybe he found Kay!"

"Oh, that would be wonderful!" Freja said, and allowed him to lead her out the door and into the cool, breezy morning.

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

References include TNG: The Bonding, Suddenly Human, The Neutral Zone, and Hero Worship. I don't think they ever mentioned Timothy's last name in "Hero Worship," so I named him after the actor who played him: Joshua Harris.

Your comments are always welcome! I hope you enjoyed this chapter! :)
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Another short chapter to keep things moving, but a longer one's in the works. Please stay tuned, and thanks so much for your reviews! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Twenty

The Boss-man stared at his viewscreen, where the garbled image being displayed was moving steadily backwards, one frame at a time.

"There!" the Boss-man murmured, and the image paused, the slave with the ceratopsian-like skull working frantically to clean up the picture.

"Damned atmospheric interference." A Suliban woman stepped forward, her arms crossed in annoyance over her flexible, armored jumpsuit. "I can barely tell what's speeder and what's sand in that shot!"

"Says the woman with skin like limestone," scoffed the slave with a head like a golden turtle.

The Suliban woman bared her teeth with a threatening hiss, her pebbled skin taking on the red color and smooth texture of the sofa she was gripping, but the Boss-man held out a white-gloved hand to her, drawing her around the edge of the curved sofa to sit by his side.

"I know your qualities," he whispered from under his wide-brimmed hat, watching her skin revert from smooth, leathery red back to speckled brown and tan. "And, I know your price. There is a team of scientists at work on this planet. They are the reason I called you here."

"Wait, you want me to track a bunch of scientists? On this sandball of a planet?" The Suliban snorted. "What the hell for? Unless they're into sandstorms or quakes, I don't see what—"

"I thought as you did, when I first learned of their dig," the Boss-man spoke over her in his quiet way. "Four Federation archaeologists poking about the ancient Ninevehan ruins... There have been so many digs already, what could possibly be the profit? But, this is no longer merely an 'academic' study. The Klingons have sent one of their own scientists to join in. And now, it seems, the Federation's flagship has become involved..."

He nodded to the ceratopsian slave, and the frozen image on the viewscreen came alive. The image was blurred and staticky, but it seemed to be from the point of view of a recently crashed sand speeder. Two rather wobbly figures staggered into the frame: a burly Nausicaan too tall for the shot, and a shorter, stockier Orion with a transparent patch over most of his face. As they watched, a second speeder came into view and a distant, slightly distorted voice announced through an external speaker: "Greetings. This is Lieutenant Commander Data, of the Federation starship Enterprise. You have both violated Federation law. Prepare to be taken into custody."

The Orion and Nausicaan looked at each other, apparently talking although the transmitter couldn't pick up their words. They knelt down in the sand, raising their hands in surrender as the other
speeder landed and its door began to open.

"Freeze now," the Boss-man said. "Zoom in on that door, and enhance the image."

"Yes, Father," the ceratopsian slave said, his thick, greenish-brown fingers stabbing at the controls.

"OK, I'm seeing standard Starfleet boots," the Suliban said as the image expanded. "Dark trousers… wait—is that...?" She leaned forward and squinted. "That metal-looking thing there…is that a hand or…?"

"Nizik's 'robot, I believe," the Boss-man said softly, and she could hear the dark smile in his voice. "Lieutenant Commander Data, Starfleet's one and only 'sentient' android, and the second officer of the famous flagship, Enterprise. Note: he was driving my speeder."

"What do you mean, 'your' speeder?" the Suliban asked. "If that speeder was one of yours, wouldn't it be all full of your spybug crap, like this busted one we're looking at here?"

"Like much of the merchandise I had stored in those tunnels outside the ancient city, that speeder was recently acquired at auction," the Boss-man whispered. "It was earmarked for sale to a Yridian trader, but was presumed destroyed before all of my preferred 'enhancements' could be made. Now I know it was stolen… Stolen by the Starfleet android. Restore aspect and continue playback," he ordered.

The ceratopsian slave tapped the controls, and they watched a blurry, staticky Rizzul grab his phaser rifle and shoot straight at the 'camera.' There was a roaring rush of greenish flame, and the viewscreen went blank.

"Right there, that android cost me two men, and two speeders," the Boss-man hissed under his hat. "And, for all I know, it was he, not a quake, that destroyed those tunnels…possibly in retaliation for 'Poug and Rizzul's idiotic bungling of the raid on the archaeologists' compound."

"You want him as smithereens, Boss, I can do that - if that explosion didn't do it first," the Suliban said. "I'll stick the pieces in a nice, white bag for you."

"No, no." The Boss-man shook his head in exasperation. "Don't you understand? Starfleet is here for a reason, Silarra. Those archaeologists have found something, and if that something is enough to warrant the involvement of both the Enterprise and the Klingons, it will certainly be of interest to others. More than enough to make up for the loss of my goods..."

He gently took her pebbled hands in his gloved ones and squeezed, gradually increasing the pressure as he talked until the tough Suliban woman began to squirm and wince.

"I want to know what that something is, Silarra," he said with quiet menace. "I want to know every single little detail those scientists know. Once I have this knowledge, I want you to take that something and bring it to me, making sure to…disable…any one or any thing that might come looking for it. For what I'm paying you, my dear little chameleon, I expect results. There must be no further slip ups."

"Yeah, yeah, all right!" the Suliban exclaimed, struggling in vain to pull away from his painful grip. "We've got a deal, OK! Just, let go already!"

The Boss-man squeezed harder – so hard, Silarra became genuinely afraid he'd snap her fingers. Only when he saw that fear in her eyes did he let go and sink languidly back against the red cushions.
Silarra jumped to her feet and glared at the white-clad man, rubbing the circulation back into her bruised hands.

"I'll take the job, and the payment," she said grimly. "But I'm warning you, right now, 'Boss-man.' I'm not one of your fawning, servile Slaves. I'm an employee, and I work freelance. If I find even a trace of your stalker spybug shit on me or in any of my stuff, I swear—"

"Please, Silarra, there's no need for profanities or oaths," the Boss-man said. "Just do the job I assigned you. Lead with your brain, not your gut. And, be sure to get this right." He gestured toward Nizik's hanging skin. "You know I don't believe in second chances."

The Suliban scowled and stalked out of the room, fighting not to shiver at the sound of the Boss-man chuckling low in his throat.

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

References include ENT: Broken Bow; Cold Front; Detained; Shockwave; Future Tense; The Expanse; and Storm Front, which feature the Suliban.
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Hi! I'm sorry this chapter took me so long to finish. I was kind of stuck for a while, but your nudges and wonderful comments helped me push through the sticky bits and connect a few of the hazier dots I'd left in the initial outline. :) Hope you like this next part!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Twenty-One

Freja handed the medical tricorder to Deanna and selected a small dermal regenerator from the tray beside the cot Riker and Nat had brought in from the other room, smiling gently as she turned back to Kahlestra. Deanna headed across the small room, where Mikey lay on the biobed beside the one monitoring Kahlestra's mother. The boy hadn't woken up since Data carried him into the clinic, and Deanna's expression grew pinched as she reviewed the tricorder readouts...

"Well, Kay," Freja said, "apart from that awful burn on your hand, you're fit as a fiddle and ready to play. I'll just use this to—"

"No!" Kahlestra said, pulling away from the dermal regenerator. "I don't want you to fix my hand."

"This isn't the time to be stubborn," Freja said. "Burn wounds can be pretty nasty if they're left untreated. Your hand could become infected. If there is nerve damage, you could lose some feeling and dexterity—"

"Just clean the wound," Kahlestra said. "Don't heal the skin. I can use my hand just fine."

"Kay," Data said, stepping away from the computer console where he'd been double-checking the results of his own self-diagnostic, and the diagnostic he'd run on Howard after replacing his arm. "If you do not allow Dr. Anders to heal your hand, the scars—"

"I want the scars," Kahlestra said, scowling down at the reddened wound. "I want to remember… Like you."

Data tilted his silvery head.

"I do not understand," he said.

"Those stinking slavers didn't take your skin," she said, narrowing her eyes at the startled android. "You did it to yourself, didn't you. You did it because someone hurt you. Someone hurt you so bad, you needed to remember – needed everyone to remember – just who and what you are, underneath. Well, I need to remember too."

"Remember what, honey?" Freja said.

The eleven-year-old slid off the cot and straightened to her full four feet, six inches, teeth bared and
"That I am a Klingon," she said. "Dr. Baker was my friend, and she was killed – vaporized! – while trying to protect me. Shot in the back by flesh-peddling cowards! I will not erase the marks her murder seared into my skin!"

Data blinked thoughtfully and flexed his own metallic hand, his golden eyes moving back and forth as he processed the girl's words.

Freja looked uncertainly from one to the other.

"I don't know how your mother would feel about this…" she said, glancing at Kurak's prone form. The Klingon woman had stabilized, but she still needed a trained specialist to examine her internal injuries. Melinda Baker had worked as a nurse for three years before going back to school to follow her dreams of becoming an archaeologist, working in the field. If she'd been there now...

"Just let her keep the stupid scars," Ishta muttered, curled up in the corner with her arms crossed over her knees, her chin on her arms, and her back against the wall. "It's her hand, after all. If her mom makes a fuss, heal it then."

Kahlestra snarled at the older girl, who wrinkled her nose right back.

Freja sighed and set the dermal regenerator back on the tray.

"All right, Kay," she said. "Come with me, and we'll get that wound all cleaned out for you."

Looking down at Ishta, she added, "I'll expect to see you on that cot when we get back, young lady."

"Fat chance," Ishta mumbled, sinking deeper into herself until only her blue eyes were visible over her arms.

"You do not wish a physical exam?" Data asked.

"Hell no," Ishta grunted. "I'm not letting a bunch of Feds poke and prod me with those machines."

"You saw for yourself that the exam is entirely non-invasive," Data said. "There is no poking or prodding involved."

"Whatever! I just don't want one, OK? And I'm keeping my clothes," she added fiercely, digging her fingers into her tattered, sand-and-travel-battered rags. "Tell that Freja lady I will not wear some stupid, ugly replicated jumpsuit!"

Data regarded her, noting her tense, protective posture, and was again reminded of his friend, Tasha Yar. He recalled all she had told him of her life before Starfleet, a life of abuse and insecurity, where those who trusted too easily were marked as targets, victims…and he nodded.

"As you wish," he said.

She glanced up at him, her brow furrowed in suspicion.

"Did I not promise I would look out for you?" he said. "If you are uncomfortable with the mediscan, I won't force you. As for your clothes, if you are amenable, perhaps later I can show you how the replicator can be used to design an outfit to your own specifications. Would you find that acceptable?"

She grunted and shrugged, but most of the angry tension had drained from her shoulders.
Data smiled, and gave her dark, tangled hair a supportive pat.

"In the meantime, the sonic shower is free," he said. "Why don't you clean up, then get some sleep. The replicator can supply you with a pillow, dental cleansers, and a hairbrush if you like."

She grunted again and slouched to her feet, shuffling toward the replicator while Data headed over to check on Mikey.

"How is he, Counselor?" he asked quietly.

"Not good, Data," she said, indicating the troubling readouts. "According to this, the boy is suffering from end-stage leukemia. I'm amazed he was able to find the strength to make it this far."

Data frowned and moved closer, gently brushing a stray hair from the boy's warm forehead.

"What is Dr. Crusher's ETA?" he asked.

"Her shuttle won't arrive for another few hours yet," Deanna said, and looked into her friend's worried face.

"I never thought I'd say this," she said, "but you look exhausted, Data. We have things under control here. Why don't you take this time to activate your dream program? We'll wake you if the situation changes."

"But, Deanna," he said, "would it not be better if I stayed here, with him? If he should wake, in a strange place—"

Deanna squeezed the android's shoulder.

"You need to take care of yourself too," she said. "I noticed you brought your bioplast sheeting in from the stable."

Data hunched his shoulders and looked away, his discomfort palpable even to a non-Betazoid.

"I have considered replacing my…skin…" he said. "And, I know it would be best to do so sooner rather than later. Since removing it, my systems have endured unprecedented stress and, as you observed, I have not yet fully recovered from the ordeal. Yet…"

His shoulders hunched even further and he clasped his hands, his blinking thumbs twiddling over his laced fingers.

"Is this difficult for you, Data?" Deanna prodded.

He tilted his head.

"Difficult?"

Deanna's lips quirked slightly and she gestured for him to follow her to the cot. In the next room, they could hear Ishta and Kahlestra arguing over whose turn it was to use the sink. A spike of concern shot through Data, but Deanna held him back, indicating he should sit beside her on the flat, foam mattress.

"They're all right," she assured him. "I want to talk about you. You've been through a lot these past couple of days. From what you, Howard, and the children have told us, it sounds like it's been one adventure after another since you escaped those kidnappers."
Data narrowed his eyes.

"I am not quite certain what you are asking me," he said. "If you wish to know whether my emotion chip has—"

"No, no, Data – I'm trying to say I'm proud of you," Deanna said. "You've progressed so far so fast, and all on your own…it's only natural you might find your return here, to us, to be a bit… confining…"

Data shook his head very slightly.

"Deanna, I still do not—"

"Data," she said, resting her hand on his arm. "Let me just say this, straight out. You know that, as organic beings mature, as they go through the mental stages of development from infant to adult, their physical features also change. But, while you may have an aging program, your appearance stays pretty much the same from year to year, decade to decade. The experiences that change you on the inside are not necessarily reflected in your face…as they would be if you were human."

"That is true…" Data said quietly. "And, it has been a concern of mine as I have watched others around me age."

He sighed, and pulled his arm away from her hand.

"You are quite correct, Counselor," he said. "I have changed, and I do wish my outward appearance to reflect those changes. The prospect of…replacing…my former skin… A skin that…that I purposefully shed…"

He winced a little, and shook his head.

"Bioplast sheeting may be durable, but it was old tech when my father procured it for my construction, over thirty years ago. There is a much broader range of materials available now, materials that are infinitely more advanced. Materials capable of matching, not just the look of human skin…but the sensations as well…"

He swallowed, and glanced at her.

"I have never admitted these thoughts out loud before, not even to Geordi," he said, his voice growing increasingly strained as awkward emotions churned within him. "But…I have been considering this…operation…since I first realized that my mother, Juliana, was an android. The advancements evidenced in her construction…the capacity for real, physical sensation… And yet, until the Borg Queen…I didn't… I never…"

"It's all right, Data, I understand," Deanna said, placing a supportive hand on his shoulder. "And no, I don't think you're vain to feel this way."

He straightened slightly.

"How did you—?"

"It's pretty obvious, isn't it?" she said, and smiled. "Data, I know you worry about disappointing or upsetting us, but it really isn't necessary. As the captain has said, we want you to be the man you are, the man we've all watched you become. And, Data, part of that is knowing that you feel comfortable and confident in your own skin. If you truly feel this upgrade is right for you, that you've 'outgrown' your old skin, as it were, then go ahead and embrace the change. And, when you do, do it for
"But, my Starfleet records…" he protested weakly.

"The rest of us aging mortals have to update our image IDs every five years," she said. "I'm willing to bet you haven't changed yours since you made Lieutenant Commander."

"I'm afraid you would lose that bet, Counselor," he said, and smiled. "I update my image file every time they come out with a new uniform. But, I suppose it is about time for a change. When time permits, I will discuss the matter with Geordi and Dr. Crusher."

"And, until then?" Deanna asked, glancing at the saddlebag he'd brought in from the stable.

"I don't know," he said, and slid off the cot. "Ask me after my power levels have returned to optimum parameters."

"Does that mean you're going to sleep?"

"It does," he said. "Please wake me should Mikey's condition change."

"I promise, Data," she assured him, her expression turning thoughtful as she watched the android stride through the clinic's sliding doors.

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

Next Time: A bit more talk and character stuff before the plot heats up again, but this time, someone may be watching... Stay Tuned as the second tier of this three-level story continues! :)
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Twenty-Two

Silarra adjusted her transporter armband and rechecked her small, Romulan tricorder for any sign of humanoid or equestrian life forms in the caves ahead.

The readings showed residual heat traces of two horses and two humanoids, and fresh tracks in the sand indicated some sort of horse-drawn vehicle. Probably a couple of local Rangers re-stocking the camp-stops along the official trail that circled through the planet's ancient ruins.

Silarra smirked, and tucked her tricorder back into its pocket on her narrow utility belt. As tourist expeditions went, this burning sand-pit of a trek wasn't exactly popular, but it was the only real attraction Nineveh IV had going for it, and she knew the city officials made a point of maintaining the paths and keeping the stables clean and stocked. The Rangers who had just been here were probably only a few miles ahead of her, off to identify and report any trail or site damage caused by the latest bout of earthquakes and sandstorms. For now, though, it seemed the caves were…

"All clear…" she murmured to herself.

Shifting her skin tone and texture from reddish-rock to coarse, sun-lit sand, Silarra crept out of the shaded, rocky crevice like a lanky spider and skittered across the sand, using a strange-looking, yet surprisingly efficient, hop-shuffle that effectively erased her tracks behind her.

It was only a short distance, but the burning rays of the rising sun were enough to make her feel uncomfortably overheated. She tugged irritably at the collar of her tight, translucent bodysuit, and grunted.

"Damn suit…"

The highly advanced suit refracted light, aiding her chameleonic talents by providing a shade of near-invisibility, but while the inlaid metals, glass fibers, and woven plastics were effective protection against stun rays and projectiles, the outfit was designed for use in deep space – to retain body heat rather than cool a person down. As such, it wasn't exactly the most efficient desert gear.

She headed for the sleeping cave first, tricorder in hand, but either the Federation travelers were conscientiously tidy or the Rangers had cleaned up the campsite because they hadn't left so much as an empty ration packet or used heat stick behind. Even more disappointing, the walls of the cave were extremely rough. Loose sand crumbled away at the slightest touch.

Silarra grumbled through her teeth.

The Boss-man had provided her with several stolen passwords to get her started on this assignment, but smooth surfaces and casually discarded trash could have given her the biodata she needed to access private personal information on these Starfleet people she'd been sent to shadow. Fingerprints, trace DNA… Without it, she'd have to learn from official personnel records and observation alone and, while she prided herself on being an exceptionally skilled mimic, it always helped to be familiar with the inner hopes and secrets of her prey.

The stable didn't promise to be much better, but Silarra went in just the same. She kept her attention
on her tricorder, waiting for her eyes to adjust to the dimness…

Movement - there, in the shadows…!

Silarra gasped and crept back, but despite the alarm bells chilling her spine, she couldn't quite bring herself to run. Instead, she moved in deeper, slinking closer to the shadowy back wall…then closer…

"What in all the galaxy…?"

Four powerful figures faded into view – and she realized what her eyes had mistaken for movement was really a startling image of four sleek horses bursting out from a field of golden handprints.

"It's…it's a painting…" she said, slowing leaning forward, her long fingers outstretched. "An artwork…"

She sniffed the air, then patted the vibrant pigments with her glove. It came away clean, but she was certain, "This is no ancient relic. This paint is fresh…"

Quickly, she fumbled for her tricorder and scanned the work. The stone here was different from the other cave, smoother, less sandy, but she could still find no trace DNA. Even the background of yellow hands provided only partial prints, smeared and badly muddied by the thick paint. But—

"What's this…?"

Silarra bent closer to the craggy wall, where she found a very neatly printed dedication written, not in Federation Standard, but in an odd sort of code that combined letters and numbers. Her tricorder gave her at least eight possible translations, but only two made any sense:

TO MY DEARLY LOVED FOR LAL

******

Riker shuffled into the main cafeteria, yawning and stretching, and almost stumbled over a pair of legs sticking out from under the cafeteria's replicator. A silvery tool box and empty saddlebag rested against the wall nearby.

"Whoa - what—?"

"Oh! My apologies!" Data said, backing swiftly out of the open wall panel and rising to his feet. "Good morning, Commander. I'm sorry for… That is, I was merely making some…um… adjustments…"

He held up his tool box as if in demonstration, his entire manner oddly awkward and sheepish.

Riker regarded the fidgeting android, his pre-caffeinated brain hovering somewhere between amused and suspicious.

"What kind of adjustments?" he asked. "Is something wrong?"

"No," Data assured him. "This unit operates as specified. Perhaps it would have been more appropriate to say 'enhancements' rather than 'adjustments,' as the items I wish to replicate require a great deal more power, processing capabilities, and memory capacity than a standard, portable emergency replicator is designed to handle."
"Yeah?" Riker said, a tiny smile playing around his lips. "What do you have in mind?"

Data looked away and Riker could swear, if an android without skin could blush, Data was certainly doing his best to prove it.

"I do not understand why speaking about…personal matters…has lately become so…so hideously awkward," the android mumbled. "Such discussions never bothered me like this before…"

"It's perfectly normal Data," Riker assured him. "You're going through a very personal transition right now. We all understand that. It's something all humans – or humanoids, if you prefer – go through as they mature."

Data regarded him, and Riker smiled.

"Well, in one way or another," he qualified.

Data returned his smile, just slightly, and set his tools back down on the floor.

"Yes, sir," he said, and glanced at the console controls. "The replicator is functional. Did you wish to order breakfast?"

"Scrambled eggs, crispy bacon, sourdough pancakes topped with lingonberry jam and birch syrup, a glass of cranberry juice, and a black coffee," Riker rattled off. "Hot. And, put it on a tray."

The replicator chirped and whirred, and an appropriately loaded breakfast tray materialized on the inset shelf.

"Ah, perfect!"

Riker grinned and carried his food tray to a fold-out table nearby.

Data just watched.

"If you're planning something complicated, Data, you might want to get it finished now," Riker suggested. "We're admittedly getting a late start this morning, but it won't be long before the rest of the group swarms in clamoring for their breakfast."

Data nodded.

"I should, yes."

He glanced at Riker, already eagerly digging into his scrambled eggs.

"Do you intend to…remain there…?"

"Hey, if you want me to leave, I'll leave," Riker said. "And don't worry, Data – I get it. You're feeling shy, and that's OK. I suppose if I were planning to replicate myself a whole new skin, I wouldn't want an audience either."

Data's eyes widened, and he twiddled his folded fingers.

"It's that obvious?"

Riker's smile gentled, and he picked up his tray

"Look, Data, I can go eat in the other dome. It's no problem. I just came in because this replicator's
better than the one in the clinic. You do what you have to do and, when you're ready, you're welcome to come join the rest of us. Just don't forget to order some breakfast for yourself, OK?"

Data nodded, very slightly.

"Thank you, Will. I do appreciate your understanding in this matter. And…Will?"

Riker stopped half-way to the cafeteria's sliding door.

"Yeah, Data?"

"Those sourdough pancakes… Are they…" He smiled a little. "Do they 'taste as good as they smell'?"

Riker grinned all over his bearded face.

"Better," he said, and left the room.

Data jutted his lower lip with a slight, "Hm!" and went back to his work. By the time Nat and Tu'Pari came in some fifteen minutes later, the android, his tool box, and his replicated materials were already gone.

******

Data stood in the dimness, his overstuffed saddlebag slung over one shoulder and a dermal regenerator in his metallic hand. He started to move toward Kahlestra's cot, then paused and backed away, briefly closing his yellow eyes as he listened to the soft, slow sounds of sleep...

Despite their exhaustion, it had taken a lot to get the children to bed. Kahlestra had wanted to stay beside her mother, and Ishta had flatly refused a cot. All Deanna and Freja's attempts to persuade her had only fortified her stubborn anger until the young Orion had seemed on the verge of screams. Finally, Data had pried his exhausted frame up from his own cot and wordlessly handed the furious green girl a blanket. She'd taken it with a huff and marched to the far corner, where she had a clear view of both doors. Crouching down with her back to the wall, she'd wrapped the blanket around herself like a cloak, hugged her knees to her chest, and glowered until Deanna and Freja had left the room.

"You know they're only trying to help," Data had said wearily, sinking heavily back onto his cot. "They are concerned about your wellbeing, as I am."

"I don't care," Ishta had grumbled into her knees. "I won't sleep there. I won't sit there. I can't."

"Then, you do not have to," he'd said.

Data could have questioned her. She might even have answered…at least, in part.

But he didn't. For some reason, at that moment, allowing the tightly-strung girl her privacy and some time to relax had seemed more important than assuaging his own concern and curiosity. So, he'd pulled his own blanket up to his chin, closed his golden eyes, and listened closely until both girls had fallen fast asleep. Only then had he activated his dream program…

Data squeezed the dermal regenerator and sighed through his nose.

He'd hoped the girls would be awake…that he could talk with them a bit before…
But, no. After everything they'd been through…he couldn't wake them up now. Better to let them come to consciousness on their own, when their systems were ready.

Unfortunately, his systems couldn't wait that long. The warning messages from his diagnostic programs had faded in intensity from red to yellow, but it was clear now that, no matter how long he rested or what he consumed, he would never be able to sustain optimal performance levels as long as he continued to operate without his skin. He was tired of feeling tired and, while he was aware he should probably wait until Dr. Crusher was available to assist, this awkward new 'shyness' was pressuring him to complete the operation now, on his own, before the doctor arrived.

Was it an aspect of his modesty program – insisting it was inappropriate to appear 'naked' before a colleague? Particularly a female colleague? Had his studies of humanity fostered this powerful sense of embarrassment?

Or was it, as both Riker and Troi had said, that he was undergoing something quite personal? A transition as physical as it was mental?

Whatever the cause, Data knew if he was to complete his 'upgrade' before the captain, the doctor, or the children required his presence, he would have to do so now, and quickly. Besides, if he needed assistance, he could always call on Howard. He'd assigned the robot to monitor Mikey and Kurak while the rest of them slept, but he was sure Riker would be amenable to keeping watch should Data have to call the robot away for a few minutes.

Adjusting the saddlebag on his shoulder, Data left the children to sleep and headed out of the clinic, through a plastic tunnel, and into the empty exercise dome...

*******

Fifty-six minutes later, a light-skinned young man with neatly brushed dark hair entered the crowded cafeteria. His face seemed a little flushed, his gait a bit stiff, but his boots were polished to a mirror-like shine, his khaki hiking outfit looked crisp and freshly-pressed, and his Starfleet combadge gleamed above his front pocket.

The man made a brief stop at the replicator, then headed for the long, fold-out table, struggling to keep his expression blankly neutral as he watched startled, yet pleased, recognition dawn first on Troi's face, then Riker's and, finally, Picard's and Kahlestra's.

Setting down his tray of pancakes, juice, and hot breakfast tea, he offered a polite "Good morning!" and a friendly handshake to Kahlestra and Ishta, to the very puzzled archeologists, and to Picard, Troi, and Riker, who was struggling not to laugh into his second cup of coffee.

"Always knew you'd make it, Pinocchio," Riker teased, once he'd managed to swallow. "Seriously, though, I don't know what you were so worried about. You look great, my friend."

"Indeed," Picard said approvingly. "I would hardly have known you."

"You really do look wonderful," Troi told him sincerely, her gaze lingering appreciatively on the warm gold and copper hues in his striking amber eyes.

Kahlestra echoed her sentiment with a wide-eyed, "Wow! You look way better than in those pictures I saw. Way better! Don't you think he looks great?" She nudged Ishta.

Ishta grunted, her unruly hair mostly concealing her grumpy, sleepy scowl.

"What are you talking about?" she mumbled. "Who the hell is this guy?"
From the glances they shared, the archaeologists seemed to share her confusion.

No longer able to hold its carefully neutral expression, the man's face broke into a big, beaming grin and he laughed out loud.

"I am Lt. Commander Data," he told the rather stunned girl, grabbing his tray and squeezing into the space between the young Orion and Klingon. "And, right now, my energy-starved systems are crying out for nutrients. Mind if I join you?"

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading, and for your wonderful comments! I hope you liked this chapter, and the picture of Data with his new skin and amber eyes! (manipulated the image myself) :D Coming Soon: More about the mystery beneath the Stairway... Stay tuned! :)
Chapter Twenty-Three

Mikey laughed weakly and reached for Data's hand. Data moved his folding chair closer to the medicot so he could give the boy's fingers a friendly squeeze.

"You have arm hair," the boy observed, pushing Data's sleeve back, then pulling at his collar. "And chest hair. And bristles on your chin."

Kahlestra snickered wickedly and leaned against the foot of the cot.

"Are you going to grow a beard now, like Commander Riker?" she asked.

"I was not planning on it," Data said, giggling despite himself as he pulled his arm away from Mikey's teasing pinches. "Ow! That's enough now."

"All the male Klingon warriors have beards," Kahlestra said, teasingly pressing the paintbrush end of her braid against her chin in demonstration and speaking in a fake, deep voice. "It's tradition."

"Then, I am fortunate that I am not a Klingon warrior," Data teased right back, playfully plucking the braid from her hand, then flipping it over her face, "because I do not intend to grow a beard!"

Their silly laughter masked the low hiss of air escaping from between Ishta's teeth as she rolled her eyes under her blanket, but Data's ears caught it just the same. He glanced over to the girl, hunched against the far wall, and gestured for her to move closer.

"Come join us, Ishta," he said.

The girl just glowered at him, her blue eyes like cinders in the shadow under the blanket.

"Then, at least say something," he invited. "If you are upset, I—"

"Just stay where you are android," the Orion spat, and Data's expression fell.

"Ignore her, Data," Kahlestra huffed. "She's being a brat."

Ishta's growl grew louder.

"Well, you are!" the Klingon snapped. "You knew from the start that Data was supposed to have skin! What the hell is your problem!"

Ishta turned her head away and hunched deeper into her blankets.

Mikey snickered.
"She likes him, that's the problem," he taunted. "She thinks Data looks hot!"

"Shut up!" Ishta shrieked. "I swear, Cancer Boy, if you weren't already dying I would kill you!"

Data blinked at the real anger in her voice.

"You don't mean that," he said.

"She does," Kahlestra said, and she and Mikey giggled.

"Data?"

"Yes, Mikey?" Data said, his concerned eyes still on the sulking Ishta.

"Is it just your skin that's skin now, or did you change your insides too?"

Data turned back to him and smiled.

"I only replaced my outer covering," he said, directing his voice toward Ishta. "My insides are just the same as before. Would you like to see?"

"Yeah, yeah!" Mikey and Kahlestra cheered.

Data shot them each a sly, secretive look, then pressed a pressure point on his inner arm. An access panel slid open, revealing the sophisticated mechanisms and blinking diagnostic lights underneath.

"That is so freakin' cool," Kahlestra said.

Ishta looked up, and grunted.

Mikey sighed and leaned back against his pillow.

"You're so lucky, Data," he said. "I wish I could be an android."

"Yeah, me too," Kahlestra said. "Then, I could stay here in the Federation and I wouldn't have to go back to that stupid Klingon school!" She shot a little glare at her unconscious mother, but couldn't hide a tinge of genuine concern.

"If I were an android, I wouldn't have to be sick all the time," Mikey said.

Data smiled, but his amber eyes had grown distant, and a little sad.

"Even androids can get sick, Mikey," he said quietly. "Only, when it happens to us, it's usually called a 'malfunction.'"

"Malfunctions can be repaired," Mikey grumped.

"Sometimes…"

Data swallowed away the sudden roughness in his voice, then reached out to stroke Mikey's hair.

"But, so can humans. That is why you have doctors."

He smiled, and playfully tapped the boy's nose, but it was difficult to push away the fierce frustration fisting in his chest.

Only minutes before, they had received word that Dr. Crusher's arrival had been delayed another
three hours. The Ninevehan government had already granted her runabout permission to land, but Nineveh IV's ridiculously counterintuitive regulations regarding the importation of medical supplies, coupled with the post-permission red tape involved in actually landing a spacecraft in the desert, was creating the kind of knotty hold up that could drive even the most bureaucratic-minded Zakdorn to tears.

It would, of course, have been much easier just to use the transporter from orbit. And, while that may have been fine for Kurak, Dr. Crusher was wary of subjecting a child in Mikey's condition to the energies of a transporter beam. She insisted it was a far better, and safer, bet to bring the runabout, its sickbay, and its far superior resources, to him and, as long as he remained stable, no amount of persnickety bureaucratic procedures was going to stop her.

Until it arrived, though, Data intended to make it his mission to keep the children's spirits up.

"Kay told me how brave you were back in the desert, when I was feeling unwell," Data said. "How you helped Howard keep the girls from fighting."

"And how you carried all that meat back from our hunt, remember?" Kahlestra said.

Mikey nodded.

"Chontay! Qapla'!" he said.

Kahlestra beamed.

"That's it!" she cheered.

Data chuckled fondly, and squeezed his hand. To his surprise, Mikey squeezed back, sitting up a little and putting real effort into it before he lay back down with a gasp.

"My goodness!"

Data carefully flexed his fingers, making a show of pretending to check for damage, and Mikey smiled.

"That is quite an impressive grip," Data told him. "You are stronger than you think, Mikey. I am very proud of you."

"Yeah…" Mikey said, and yawned deeply, his heavy lids struggling to stay open. "Data?"

"Yes, Mikey?"

"Will you stay with me?" the boy asked. "When the doctor gets here?"

"If that is your wish," Data told him.

"It is," Mikey sighed. "Data?"

"Yes, Mikey?"

But, the boy had fallen asleep, the biomonitors bleeping in time with his slowing heartbeat.

Data shared a glance with Kahlestra, then pulled the silvery blanket up to Mikey's chin and leaned in to press a soft, fatherly kiss to the boy's forehead.

"Sweet dreams, my child," he whispered.
Ishta pursed her lips and lowered her eyes, resting her chin on her knees.

"He's going to die," she said. "You know it."

"I don't believe that," Data said.

"Then you really are dumber than you look," the Orion grunted.

"Hey!" Kahlestra snapped.

"What?" Ishta retorted. "He's an android, right? He's got a fancy metal brain! He knows, if he had to replace his stupid skin, he could have picked any face in the universe! And he picks that?" She snorted, and curled her lip. "He looks like some big-nosed, pasty-faced computer tech geek! And, his hair is stupid too!"

"I'm flattered," Data said dryly.

"Why do you have to look human, anyway?" Ishta snarled. "Humans are idiots. Ugly, hairy, ape-faced idiots! If you're an android, why not keep looking like one? No one would mistake Howard over there for an Orion!"

"I am Howard," Howard announced chirpily from his monitoring station by Kurak's biobed. "How may I be of assistance?"

"You can shut up!" Ishta snarked.

"That is enough," Data snapped. "My apologies, Howard," he told the robot. "Please, return to your work."

"Right away, sir," Howard acknowledged, completely unfazed.

Data turned his amber glare on Ishta, who glared right back.

"I was constructed and programmed by human parents," he said quietly. "A father and a mother that I barely knew. They provided me with a very pale synthetic skin that was extremely durable. But, although it was far stronger than human skin, it did not allow me to feel sensations the way you children can. I could distinguish textures and materials. I could hold an ice cube and measure its temperature, weight, volume, melting rate – any aspect at all – with computer accuracy. But, holding it did not make my hand feel 'cold.' It did not make me shiver. The melting drops did not tickle as they dripped through my fingers or down my arm."

"Can you feel those things now?" Kahlestra asked.

"Yes, Kay," he said. "And, it is entirely due to this upgrade. Since my construction, major advances in the science of synthetic skin grafting have produced an entire range of artificial skins that are now capable of mimicking every component, layer, and function of organic skin. I saw no reason not to take advantage of this improved technology."

"Then...your new skin is still fake. I mean – it's 'android,' like you," Ishta said.

Data snorted a slight laugh, and nodded.

"In a manner of speaking," he said. "This is not organic skin. And the fluids that flow through the complex mesh of synthetic tubing beneath it are the same nutritive fluids that have supplied my systems with energy all my life. Only, they are now tinted dark red rather than yellow, to help give
this new skin its 'realistic' hue. I can still control the rate at which my hair and nails grow, and since I can now adjust the concentration of melanin in my skin, I have the ability to make my skin and eyes appear darker or lighter at will."

"Again, you picked that look?" Ishta said snidely but, this time, it was more teasing than angry.

Data smiled.

"If you must know," he said, "this 'look,' as you put it, is a carefully chosen composite. I had the computer run a simulation to determine what my parents' biological offspring may have looked like, had they chosen to have any. From literally thousands of options, I chose one that, I felt, looked most like me. This face you now see."

"Looks just like your old face to me," Kahlestra said, peering at him closely. "Except your skin's not all whitish and your eyes aren't yellow."

"Yes, they are," Ishta said, leaving her corner in order to make her point. "There's loads of yellow in there. See?"

"But, there's also some brown and green," Kahlestra said, leaning in even closer. "Even a little blue. See? They're like two little golden nebulas."

Data laughed, and leaned back in his chair.

"You children are wonderful," he said. "'Little golden nebulas…' I like that."

"Yeah…" Ishta stuck out a finger to touch his cheek, then his nose and forehead. "Euuch… Skin grease, nose hairs, little wrinkles…"

She shrugged.

"Eh. You still look like some stupid, old-man, big-nosed human, but I guess I can get used to it."

"Thanks," Data said, and rubbed the places she'd poked.

"Jerk," Kahlestra said. "He doesn't either. He just looks like Data."

Data blinked at her, his head cocked just slightly.

"Is that what you really think?" he asked.

"Of course!" she said, and he suddenly had to look away, startled to feel his face and eyes burning.

"I waited so long to perform this upgrade," he confessed, once he could talk. "Years, in fact. I waited…because I was afraid. I did not want anyone to judge me, or to misinterpret what I had done. In addition…" He sighed a little. "I wanted to be sure I was doing this for the right reasons."

"What do you mean?" Kahlestra asked.

"I told the counselor... I did not do this because I wanted to mimic humans, or attempt to convince anyone that I was a biological human being," he said, gesturing to his skin. "I did this because I honestly feel it is a more accurate reflection of who I am…what I was designed to be. I am an android, but I am also the child of my father's mind…my mother's creative core… I am a construct, but not an automaton. I can feel, and I can dream. I am a man born of human imagination, but I am a man, just the same. And now…now that I have chosen to stop hiding…to stop denying…"
He shook his head, and smiled a little.

"Well, perhaps it is too much to hope that others will see that too. At least, right away. Society will insist we keep proving ourselves…"

"Proving ourselves…” Mikey sighed sleepily, and curled up under the blankets.

Kahlestra giggled, and Howard quickly returned his glowing photoelectric cells to his monitor screens, his expression as smooth and blank as ever.

"Data?"

"Yes, Ishta," the android said.

"I think you're the weirdest guy I ever met," she said, and briefly rested her forehead against his shoulder. "And, I seriously do not think you're hot," she mumbled, lifting her head to glare at Kahlestra. "No matter what those little twerps say…"

"I believe your sentiment is most appropriate," Data said, a slight teasing tone entering his voice, "especially given the fact that you are all far too young to—"

"Picard to Data," his combadge chirped, and they all gave a little jump.

"Data here, sir," he acknowledged, giving Ishta's shoulder an apologetic little pat as he rose from his chair.

"Data, meet us in the primary control room," Picard said. "I'd like to make one more trip to the site before Dr. Crusher arrives, and we could certainly use your input."

Data glanced at the children, his gaze resting on Mikey's sleeping form.

"Go ahead," Kahlestra said. "We'll be fine. We've got Howard."

She beamed.

Ishta rolled her eyes, and headed back to her corner.

"Whatever," she said.

Data pursed his lips in irritation, but nodded slightly and said, "I will be there momentarily, Captain. Data out."

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

Until next time! Your reviews are always welcome, and very much appreciated! Thanks for reading! :)

References Include - TNG: The Naked Now; The Offspring; Family; The Quality of Life; Unification; Peak Performance; Brothers; Birthright; Timescape; Inheritance; and the movie First Contact.
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

Update! Thanks so much for your reviews and for your nudges to keep me moving on this story. :) Hope you like this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The late-morning sun was already blisteringly hot as the group climbed down into the relative coolness of the tunnel system beneath the Stairway. As he reached the bottom, Data winced a little and frowned at his palms, rubbed red by the rope ladder anchored in the sand above.

"You OK, android?" Nat asked, hopping to the sandy ground beside him.

"Fine, thank you," Data said stiffly, and wiped his overheated face and forehead with his sleeve, rather startled to see the khaki fabric come away damp.

"I didn't know androids could sweat," Nat said, wiping his own face with a cloth before reaching out a hand to help Freja jump the last few feet from the ladder. "Kind of a strange thing to program, if you ask me."

"It is not strange at all," Data said distantly, seemingly unable to look away from his sleeve. "In fact, the secretion of perspiration is one of the skin's most important functions. Just as with humans, the endothermic process of evaporation helps my systems maintain a relatively constant internal temperature..."

He reached up to touch his face and neck, to brush back the damp hair sticking to his forehead, then experimentally tapped the tip of his finger to his tongue. He tilted his head slightly, analyzing the concentrations of water, acids, sodium, potassium, calcium, and magnesium in the sample, and started to smile.

"Intriguing..." he said. "But, I don't quite understand. I was not sweating like this when we crossed the compound, and the temperature up there was much higher."

"That's dry heat up there," Nat told him, smirking a little at Data's expression. "That damn desert sun wicks away any moisture it hits. Down here, the air is closer, cooler. Moisture has a chance to condense, and collect as humidity. As if the heat wasn't miserable enough in these tunnels..." he muttered.

"Of course..." Data said, touching his upper lip then rubbing the moisture between his fingers.

"Hey, Data – you sure you're gonna be all right down here?" Riker asked, hopping down from the ladder and testing his emergency beacon. "You're certain this dampening field won't affect you?"

"Not to the extent that it should have any significant impact on my performance," Data told him. "As I said back in the control room, as long as the field continues to operate at its current strength, my systems should have no trouble compensating for the drain."
He offered the commander a little smile.

"I appreciate your concern, Will, but I'm sure I'll be fine. After all, I will only be exposed to this energy dampening field for, perhaps, an hour before we must head back to meet Dr. Crusher's runabout."

"Well, if you feel any discomfort, don't hesitate to report it," Riker said.

"Yessir," Data said, and Riker returned his smile with a brotherly clap on the shoulder.

Picard made the jump to the ground, then reached out to help Tu'Pari, who – despite Data's offer – had insisted on carrying the team's heavy equipment pack strapped to his back.

"Well," the captain said, an eager smile creasing his sun-flushed face. "If we're all here, let's get started. Dr. Tu'Pari, as you'll be recording this expedition, would you take the lead?"

The Vulcan nodded and pulled a holorecorder headset from his pack, slipping it over his severely straight, short black hair and turning on the lamp as he strode ahead of the captain through the narrow, egg-shaped tunnel. Riker, Freja, and Nat followed closely in a tight group, already talking about the strange musical codes and what they hoped to find…

…which left Data suddenly behind, to bring up the rear…a somewhat irritating development, given the fact that it had not been his first choice to accompany them – as he had informed the captain following his summons away from the children…

*******

"With all due respect, sir," he'd said, consciously working to keep his voice level and calm, "I believe I could more effectively use this time before Dr. Crusher's arrival were I to remain here with Counselor Troi. Deanna has promised to assist my search for Mikey's living relatives, and to help me find Ishta a suitable—"

"Data—" Picard had started, then sighed and clasped the android's arm. "My friend," he'd said. "I do appreciate your feelings in this matter. And, while extending our aid to the children you rescued is, of course, important, we have a different priority here."

"Captain, I must disagree," Data had said. "The fact of Kahlestra's and my abduction, captivity, and subsequent escape evidences a most alarming, and on-going, oversight on the part of Starfleet – to say nothing of the Federation's top investigative, intelligence, and law-enforcement agencies! These black market flesh peddlers have been operating with near impunity on Federation worlds and along Federation borders for I do not yet know how many years, kidnapping and selling children for purposes I can only describe as—"

"Mr. Data…" Picard had raised a calming hand. "You're right. You are absolutely right. The fact that such despicable criminality could continue to operate within the Federation in this day and age is an inexcusable violation of the values and tenets that define our society, and you have my promise that I will support any official report you wish to submit. But, this find is more significant than you know. If I'm right…"

He took a breath to compose himself, then leaned in with a conspiratorial smile, his eyes gleaming with the enthusiasm of a sleuth on a hot trail.

"This could be a truly momentous discovery, Data," he'd said. "An ancient artifact of unknown power that, once tapped, could irrevocably shift the balance of power in this part of the galaxy. That's why that Nausicaan came here. That's why those raiders killed Dr. Baker and destroyed
Kurak's lab. Someone has been following the archaeologists' work on this planet, someone who does not want to take the chance that this ancient power source will fall into Federation – or even Klingon – hands."

Data frowned.

"The Romulans?"

Picard looked grim.

"Or, the Cardassians," he'd said. "Perhaps even the Dominion. Do you see now, Data, why this investigation must take priority, at least for now?"

Data closed his eyes and nodded, sighing deeply through his nose.

"You say the key may be a musical code?" he'd said, and smiled slightly, admittedly intrigued by the mystery despite his deeply conflicted feelings.

Picard's stern features broke into a grin.

"There's the Data I know," he'd said, proudly clapping his friend on the shoulder. "I knew we could count on that inquisitive mind of yours! The rest of the team is waiting in the control room. We have a computer analysis in the works, but I want you to go over their findings, then return with us to the main site. We only have a few hours, so let's get moving!"

******

Data flexed his hands. His palms were still a little raw from the rope, but they didn't exactly hurt. Beyond that, his sweaty skin was beginning to make his entire body feel unpleasantly tacky and unclean. His lightweight hiking shirt stuck uncomfortably to his chest and back as he moved, and he could feel the dust that hung in the muggy air clinging to his face and neck as he continued through the tunnel. A quick swig of water from his canteen quieted his system diagnostic warnings that all this perspiring was causing a slight unbalance in his body's water, salt, and mineral levels but, shortly after swallowing, the back of his nose and throat again seemed 'dry.' The more he tried to ignore it, the more 'present' the odd feeling became until he reached back for his canteen, giving in to the peculiarly pressing need to take a few more, longer, sips.

He had to wonder: could this strangely physical sensation be 'thirst'? Had losing so much moisture through his skin truly left him 'thirsty'?

Data knew he couldn't be the only one experiencing these awkward physical discomforts. But, as none of the others were voicing complaints, he decided to keep his questions to himself for now and just continue walking. Without breaking his stride, he tucked his canteen back into place, sank his stinging hands into his pockets, and followed the rest of the group into a surprisingly small, cramped cavern, his mind burning with the bitter suspicion that this long-anticipated, 'indistinguishably realistic' new skin of his would ultimately turn out to be as much a mixed bag as his goddamned emotion chip.

Nat's lantern flickered in the darkness ahead, and the bright lamp at the side of Tu'Pari's headset went out.

"Tu'Pari, I thought you said you'd fixed our equipment to work despite the dampening field," Nat complained, shaking the lantern as if that would recharge the dimming light.

"I did," the Vulcan said, calmly reaching for his tricorder. "Allow me a moment to scan…"
An odd wave of lightheadedness washed over Data and he shook his head, raising a hand to his temple.

"Oooph!" he winced. "Oh…I—"

"Data?" Riker said, turning to face him in the dimness. "What's going on? Are you all right?"

Data rubbed his sinuses, as if experiencing the start of a headache.

"I am…unsure… I think I—"

He started to move forward, only to feel a terrible, static-like prickle surge through his systems. He gasped and staggered, the dark cavern seeming to spin around him as he lurched desperately toward the stability of the rough, stone wall.

"…help…! …Captain…!"

The archaeologists stood back as Picard and Riker rushed to keep their android friend from collapsing to the sandy floor.

"Data, what is it?" Picard said, taking him by the shoulder. "Is it the dampening field?"

"I… I am uncertain, Captain…" the frightened android managed, fighting to swallow back a powerful swell of nausea. "Suddenly, I…I feel…incredibly dizzy…"

"The field's strength has increased by twenty-eight percent in the last thirty seconds," Tu'Pari reported coolly, "but appears to no longer be rising. I estimate that, at this level, even with my modifications, our equipment will be drained of energy within the next thirty-to-forty minutes."

Data groaned, and rested his head against the wall.

"Why would the field strength increase now?" Picard asked.

"Actually, Captain, the strength of the energy dampening field has been increasing in irregular increments ever since we first discovered the wall panel at the far end of this cavern," Tu'Pari said.

"Why didn't you say anything?" Riker demanded.

Tu'Pari raised an eyebrow, unaffected by the commander's tone.

"I had previously presumed these energy spikes to be random," the Vulcan said.

"And now?" Nat asked curiously.

"Now, I am almost certain that there is a direct correlation between the field's energy increases and the amount of electronic gear we have brought in near proximity to that wall panel."

Freja frowned.

"Then, this energy source, whatever it is," she said. "It can somehow 'sense' electronic devices and adjust its own energy levels to inhibit their function the nearer they get to this wall?"

"That would be my theory, yes," Tu'Pari said.

Data snorted; a strange, darkly amused sound.
"Ah..." he said, leaning weakly against the cavern wall. "So, you are saying...this is my fault."

Tu'Pari fixed him with a blank stare.

"I would hardly categorize a machine of your sophistication as a mere electronic device," he said, earning a dirty glare from Riker. "But, yes. It is likely that your proximity is, in part, responsible for this latest increase."

"Incredible," Data said drolly, and sniffed, still unsteady and a little breathless as he struggled to straighten up. "Abduction...earthquakes...sandstorms...a nearly deadly speeder chase...and now this." He smirked. "You know...I'm starting to...to get the impression...that this planet doesn't like me."

Riker chuckled, but Picard's eyes were crinkled with worry as he helped his android officer find his footing on the uneven ground. Even in the dim light, Data's face looked alarmingly pale beneath its mask of dust and sweat.

"Take your time, Mr. Data," Picard said, holding him by the arm. "There is no rush."

Data nodded, and attempted a reassuring smile.

"I will be fine...in a moment, Captain," he promised. "Systems...are already compensating..."

Freja bit her lip, glancing anxiously from Data to the noticeably dimmer lantern.

"Maybe we should start back," she said, twisting her hands. "We can readjust the equipment and return later."

"She may be right, Captain," Riker said. "If the dampening field is going to have this effect, it might be better for Data to observe remotely, from the control room."

"No—no, sir," Data said quickly, the color starting to return to his cheeks as his labored breathing began to even out. "Please, we've come this far. I am curious to see for myself just what this mysterious field has been protecting."

"I admire your spirit, Mr. Data," Picard said approvingly and reached for the lantern, leading the way to the silvery, shimmering etchings and glyphs, and the rectangular panel they had located the day before. "Now, let's see what we can make of this."

******

A glimmer of movement passed through the shadows at the edge of the narrow corridor - there and gone so quickly it could be easily shrugged off as a trick of the eye.

Silarra kept just shy of the motion detectors that operated the clinic's sliding doors, rising to her tiptoes to peer in through the transparent aluminum window. What she saw there made her reach at once for her com-unit—

Until a sudden thought gave her pause...

The Boss-man had sent her out to find his stolen property and bring him all she could on that mysterious energy source the scientists here had been buzzing about. Including the energy source itself.

Well, she could see most of his stolen property right here. The Orion, the Klingon, that robot...even
the sickly little human child. But, why jump the gun and report to the Boss that she'd found his stolen Skins when she could hold out for a while? Offer him a better package deal for a significantly higher price?

According to her research, that dark-haired woman in there with the children was the half-Betazoid counselor of Captain Picard, and a fellow crewmate of that Starfleet android she'd been tracking since the caves: Lt. Commander Data. Her value on the black market could be incalculable to a clever operator like the Boss - not just for her looks and empathic talents, but for the information she held as a high-ranking Starfleet officer.

And, odds were, she wasn't alone...

Starfleet trained its people to work and fight in packs. Spot one uniform, and at least two others were sure to be close by.

Silarra could work with that.

Of course, this group was sure to be more clever than most. The android's skillful handling of Rizzul's pursuit was warning enough that an outright attack would never work here.

But, Silarra was a skillful manipulator herself, and an even better hunter. Like the Earth spider with its web and the patient owl in its tree, all she had to do was wait and watch and, soon enough, her prey would come to her.

Bringing the Boss-man's ancient energy source right along with them.

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

References include - TNG: Inheritance; All Good Things...; Final Mission.

Until next time, thanks for reading! Your comments, thoughts, opinions, and reviews are always welcome! :)


Chapter Twenty-Five

Counselor Deanna Troi, Personal Log, Nineveh IV.

It has been about four days now since we left the Enterprise yet, with all that has happened, it feels like it's been four months. As I had initially hoped, removing Data from the ship has prompted him to begin to open up – to try to understand himself as the deeply compassionate, sensitive being he has become. Yet, while he has made some impressive advances in this very short time, I remain concerned with regards to his long-term emotional health and stability. The scientists here are wary of him – of all of us, really, and understandably so. They have spent the last several years of their lives on this project, after all; they were targeted by raiders and lost a colleague pursuing this work, and it is only natural they would be protective of their findings now that they are so near to a real breakthrough. But, more worrying than the archaeologists' attitude, I think, is the fact that Data has become extremely attached to the three children he rescued. That he was able to inspire these wounded, temperamental young people to band together and work as a team under such difficult circumstances is entirely to his credit and, to me, provides satisfactory evidence that the leadership skills he has been honing throughout his career have only been enhanced by his recent emotional growth. But, Data yearns for acceptance, for the warmth and love of family, and the Enterprise-E is, unfortunately, not a family ship. The promises he made to Mikey, and to the young Orion who calls herself 'Ishta', could present a significant conflict with his Starfleet duties if—

"Who's there?" Troi called out suddenly, standing up and moving a few steps away from the computer console.

"We're here," Kahlestra said, peering at her over the stack of summer homework she'd piled on the little fold-out table beside her mother's biobed. "Why, did you hear something?"

"No," Troi said, her voice a little distant. "It's something I sensed…"

She strode through the sliding doors to peer out into the corridor. She scanned the area with her eyes, reached out with her mind…

Then frowned and walked back into the clinic.

"Well, whatever it was, it's gone now," she said – only to set her jaw when she spotted Ishta standing

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
in front of the console.

"That log is confidential," she said, hurrying over to blank out the screen.

Ishta snorted.

"Whatever," she said. "It's not like any of that stuff's a secret anyway."

"What do you mean?" Kahlestra asked curiously. "What was she writing about?"

"Nothing that concerns you," Deanna tried, but Ishta barked a harsh laugh.

"Yeah right," she said scornfully, and faced Kahlestra. "The Counselor, here, thinks Data's too 'attached' to us," she said. "She thinks if he tries to help me and Mikey, like he promised, it'll hurt his career."

Kahlestra regarded the counselor.

"I thought you were supposed to help too," she said.

"I am, Kay," Troi told her. "I was just getting some other work done while I was waiting for the computer to reconnect with the Federation's subspace network."

"Don't believe it," Ishta said. "She's a Betazoid, and a shrink. I'll bet it was her idea to make Data leave! That's the plan, isn't it? Keep us apart, keep him busy, then send us away while he's not looking?"

"No, Ishta," Deanna said firmly. "That is not true."

"And, we're just supposed to believe you?" Ishta challenged.

"They shouldn't have made him go," Kahlestra said, scowling down at her homework padds.

"You mean Data?" Troi said.

Kahlestra nodded, looking up to meet the counselor's eyes.

"He should have stayed here, with us," she said. "They don't want him down there."

Troi regarded her curiously.

"Why do you say that, Kahlestra?"

"Call me Kay," the girl said.

"All right. Kay," Troi corrected.

"Why do you even bother asking?" Ishta muttered bitterly. "Betazoids read minds, don't they?"

"I'm only half-Betazoid," Troi informed her. "My father was human."

"So, what? You can only read half my mind?" Ishta glared. "You must really think I'm stupid."

"Not at all," Troi said.

"Then, why the hell are you here?" the Orion demanded.
"I'm here because I promised Data that I would keep an eye on you," she said. "And, I thought we could get a head start on working out your situation."

She sat back at the computer station and opened a new LCARS search window.

"And there – see? Our network connection is back. Now, let's see how far we can get before it cuts out again. Perhaps we could begin with your name. 'Ishta' is very pretty, of course, but I understand you—"

"Ishta is my name now," Ishta snapped. "And we don't need you to watch us. We don't need that stupid robot either."

"I am here to serve," Howard said. "I must monitor the woman and the boy. I am here to keep you safe."

"Gah!" Ishta exclaimed, and slammed her fists against the prefab wall. "I hate this place!"

"You're holding on to a great deal of anger," Troi observed. "If you would like to talk—"

Ishta spun on her, her blue eyes as hard and cold as sapphires.

"Don't even try it, Doctor!" she spat, glaring at the counselor through her tangled, black hair.

"I told you before, Ishta," Troi said, keeping her voice carefully controlled. "I am not a doctor. I am a counselor. A therapist."

"Even worse," Ishta snarled. "'Therapists' scramble your brains! When doctors slice you up, it's usually just the parts they're after. Lungs, kidneys, corneas, bone marrow…"

Troi swallowed her revulsion.

"That sort of practice ended hundreds of years ago," she protested. "Today, we have cloning, replication, synthetics—"

"Think what you want," Ishta growled, and leaned back against the wall. "You stupid Feds really don't know anything."

Troi sighed, and rubbed her temples. The distrust and bitter anger that had been radiating from that girl since she arrived buffeted Troi's senses in waves so strong, the effort of shielding her mind against them was making her neck and shoulders ache. Ishta's obstinate, aggressive attitude was exasperating, and Deanna had had just about enough.

"Ishta," she said. "I won't ask you to trust me, and I understand that you don't want me to tell you that I am your friend. But, I think you know that I have no wish to harm you. None of us do. You don't act out like this with Data, do you?"

"She does," Kahlestra said.

Troi shot her a look.

"I'll put it this way," she said. "You recognize that Data cares about you, right?"

Ishta glowered, her arms crossed tightly over her baggy rags.

"Data isn't you."
"That's true," Troi said. "But, I am Data's friend. He and I have worked together for a long time, and we've learned to trust each other. Data trusts me to look after you while he's away. Now, knowing how important you are to him, and how concerned he feels about your safety, do you really think he would have left you with me if he didn't believe I wanted to help you?"

Ishta snorted, and brushed her hair back from her face.

"Data's an idiot," she said. "I don't need your help!"

"He is not!" Kahlestra shouted defensively.

"He is, because he thinks he can change what's real!" Ishta shouted back, her green face growing flushed as her fury rose. "You don't know – you have no idea! If you did, if your poor, sick mother over there knew what Nizik and Rizzul had in mind for you, she'd make sure you felt the real meaning of dishonor!"

Kahlestra snarled dangerously and started to rise, but Troi waved her down.

"Don't let her words bait you, Kay," she said, and turned her dark gaze to Ishta. "We both know she's not really talking about you."

"Who's she talking about, then?" Kahlestra asked angrily.

"Herself," the counselor said gently.

"What?" Kahlestra wrinkled her nose.

"You're a liar!" Ishta shouted. "Keep your damn half-Betazoid mind probe out of my head!"

Troi's expression tightened, but she didn't break her compassionate gaze.

"Is that how you feel, Ishta?" she asked softly. "Is that how you think we see you?"

"I don't feel anything, and I don't care what you think!" Ishta shrieked. "Once a Skin, always a Skin, that's what Father says! That's what Father knows. He knows the real truth: that Mikey and me, we're tainted goods – infected by the stink of the Skin trade. Even if that doctor-lady can help the little cancer-boy live, even if Data does talk some nice, clean Federation family into taking us in, that stink can never wash away. We'd just be a couple of charity cases to be trotted out and pitied until the authorities decide we're old enough to fend for ourselves!"

"You paint a pretty cynical picture," Troi said.

"You saying it's not true?" Ishta challenged.

Troi regarded the fuming girl, her sensitive heart aching for the bitter young Orion even as her clinically-trained mind worked to parse out the layers of her resentment and pain.

"There is some truth to what you're saying," she allowed. "But there are other truths, larger truths, you don't seem to be taking into account."

Ishta snorted darkly and shook her head.

"Stupid Feds are all the same," she scoffed. "You like to talk and talk about some pie-in-the-sky dream of 'acceptance' and 'love,' but even you know it's just stories! The way you people talk, it's like you want to fool yourselves."
"Data knows what people are like," she said darkly. "He knows the way they promise and use and cut you down, over and over…! He even knows that putting on some stupid human-looking skin won't convince his precious Starfleet admirals to let an android-man captain their fancy starships! But, he did it anyway. He trusts you 'Fleet bastards anyway! And that's why he's an idiot!" she shouted in Kahlestra's face.

The Klingon bared her teeth in a warning snarl, but Troi nodded slowly, thoughtfully resting her chin on her hand.

"You're an observant girl, Ishta," she said. "And quite insightful. But, you've missed something very important."

"Yeah? What?" Ishta challenged, jutting out her chin.

"Data is not alone," Troi said. "He has friends: a community of people who care about him, and who are willing to give of themselves to support his dreams, no matter the adversities he may face while working to achieve them. And, Ishta…" She fixed the girl with her dark eyes. "So do you."

Ishta clenched her fists, and her nostrils flared.

"You don't know anything," she muttered angrily.

"I know you've been hurt," Troi said. "More deeply and more often than any child should be forced to endure. I know you're afraid, and that fear makes you angry. And, I know you're strong. Strong enough to take a chance on hope, even though, until now, hope has only ever led you to more disappointment, and pain."

"Get out of my head, you half-Betazoid freak!" Ishta shrieked, her expression fierce with fury. "You don't know the first thing about me, or what I've been through, so shut the hell up!"

"Sounded pretty good to me," Mikey said, propping his head up on the pillow.

"You were listening!" Ishta cried. "You infectious little creep! If you weren't stuck in that bed—"

"Leave him alone," Kahlestra snapped, rising defensively from the table.

"You gonna make me, little Klingon?" Ishta hissed, baring her own teeth.

Troi stood, alarmed by the fierce hostility she felt sparkling and prickling between the two girls, but before she could react, Howard stomped out from behind his monitor station to clamp a staying hand on each of their shoulders.

"Master Data said I was not to let you fight," the robot stated. "I am here to keep you safe."

"Get off me, you metal moron!" Ishta said, struggling to wriggle out of his strong, silver-green grip.

"We weren't going to fight!" Kahlestra protested, glaring daggers at Ishta. "I was just gonna crack her stupid skull a little!"

"Stop this, all of you!" Troi exclaimed. "I don't understand what's come over you girls!"

"They do this, now and then," Mikey said, obviously amused despite his exhaustion. "Data knows how to stop it."
He looked around, and Troi caught his sharp spike of anxiety as he asked: "Hey, where is Data?"

"Captain Picard ordered him into the tunnels under the Stairway," Kahlestra said, still struggling against Howard's grip.

"Will he be back soon?" Mikey asked, clutching the shiny blanket between his fingers.

"He should be back in time to meet Dr. Crusher's runabout," Troi assured him. "There's no need to worry."

"I'm not worried," Mikey lied, and frowned at her. "Why are you here?"

"She's here because Data got too close to us," Ishta snarled, hammering ineffectively at Howard's metallic fingers. "He's made us all sorts of fancy promises, you see. So, they ordered him to leave and stuck this Betazoid head-shrink here instead so it'll be easier for them to send us away!"

"That's not what happened, Mikey," Kahlestra said angrily. "The archaeologists found something down in the tunnels, something important. But, it's blocked by some code. Captain Picard said they need Data's android brain to help them crack the puzzle, but that's not what Dr. Tu'Pari and the others want. They never wanted any Starfleet visitors at all!"

"What do you mean?" Troi started, then shook her head at the awkward scene before her. "Oh, this is ridiculous." Walking up to Howard she said, "Excuse me…erm… What's his name again?" she asked.

"Howard," Mikey said, and smiled.

"Howard," Troi said.

"I am Howard," the robot said in his chipper way, entirely oblivious to the struggles of the two girls he was holding apart. "How may I be of service?"

"Howard, I would like to talk with Kay and Ishta," she said. "Would you please let them go?"

"Mistress Troi. Master Data said I was to listen to you as if you were him. I am here to serve," Howard said, and obligingly released the girls.

"All right," Troi said, pulling a chair over to Kahlestra's cluttered folding table. "Thank you. Now, how about we all sit down? Howard, would you care to join us?"

"Master Data ordered me to monitor the woman and the boy," Howard said, striding stiffly back to his station. "I am here to keep them safe."

"Stupid machine," Ishta growled, scowling at her ripped sleeve.

"We could replicate you some new clothes," Troi offered.

"Buzz off," Ishta snapped.

Troi sighed and looked to Kahlestra.

"Kay," she said, "what were you saying about the archaeologists? Why wouldn't they want us to visit?"

"Not all of them," Kahlestra said. "Dr. Baker and Dr. Anders were happy to have some new people to talk to and show around for a while. But, my mother and Dr. Kapoor were kind of angry about it."

""
Not because they're mean, or anything, but they've spent ages working on these ruins, and now that they're finally close to a breakthrough, they said they didn't want some high-ranking amateur like Captain Picard to swoop in and claim all the credit."

"I suspected as much," Troi said, hoping that really was the underlying reason. "And, I assume they felt the same way about Data."

"Dr. Tu'Pari doesn't like him," Kahlestra said. "He's a Vulcan, so he won't admit it, but I know. Before you guys came here, he read some article that claimed Data's emotion chip made him dangerous, and I heard him say he couldn't respect the intelligence of any being who purposefully chose confusion and chaos over logic and order. And Dr. Kapoor agreed."

"That's why you said the scientists didn't want Data to join them down in those tunnels," Troi said.

"Yeah," Kahlestra said. "They were hoping the dampening field would be enough to keep him on the surface, but mostly they didn't want a couple of Starfleet officers taking over their project before they had a chance to publish their results."

Troi smirked a little, and shook her head.

"You think this is funny?" Ishta said.

"No, of course not," Troi said. "But, I can assure you, Kay, your friends have no reason to worry. I think you know by now that neither Data nor Captain Picard are in this for the credit."

She clapped her hands together, and smiled.

"Now, I don't know about you, but I'm starting to get hungry. How about we take a little break. Then, if you're ready, we can get back to work – starting with Mikey this time."

Her smile warmed a little as she said, "You know, Mikey, I just realized, I don't know your full name."


"And, your parents' names?" Troi asked, quickly moving over to the console and typing in the information.

"Katy and Graham," he said.

"Thank you," Troi said. "At least, that's something to start with. We can start going through the initial results after lunch. Now, are you all OK with sandwiches, or would you prefer to order for yourselves?"

Ishta and Kahlestra raced for the clinic's small replicator, but Troi held back, that same odd feeling that had pulled her away from her log entry tingling in her brain.

The sensation that they weren't alone…

She spun slowly, searching the room with her eyes, but there was nothing to be seen. No sign of movement, no out of place shadows, nothing that might indicate an intruder.

And yet…

Electronic warning shrills and bleeps burst from Kurak's monitors, and the Klingon woman began to
gasp and convulse.

"Something is wrong," Howard reported, his metallic fingers tapping at the control station. "I cannot interface. I cannot stabilize the woman's biorhythms."

"What's happening!" Kahlestra exclaimed, rushing over to her mother. "You have to help her!"

Knowing there was nothing she could do on her own, Troi slapped her combadge, keeping her voice calm and steady as she said: "Troi to Dr. Crusher. Medical emergency in the clinic. We need you down here, immediately!"

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

References include - TNG: The Offspring; Hero Worship; Inheritance.

Next Time: Back to the mysterious glyphs. Is the Stairway a Preserver construct? What might the energy field be protecting?

Reviews are always welcome! Please let me know what you think! :)
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! I hope you had a great Thanksgiving! My head's still a little fragile and I'm trying my best to avoid doing or eating anything that might trigger another migraine attack, but I've got my 'computer glasses' on, and I am feeling a lot better now. Thanks very much for your reviews and comments - they really are much more effective than pills! :) "Alternative Data" is next in line for an update.
Hope you like this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty-Six

Nat Kapoor waited in the shadows near the tunnel, watching Data's movements until the android Starfleet officer stood alone with his back to him, facing the gleaming wall panel. The moment he did, Nat slipped a holorecorder headset over his hair and began recording.

"What are you doing?" Freja asked him.

"Shh!" Nat hushed, and hit 'pause'. "No - wait, do me a favor. Go stand over there, next to the android."

"Why?" she asked, eyeing Data a little awkwardly. "I mean, what would I say?"

"Say anything, it doesn't matter. I just want to check something out."

"Those odd shadows still showing up on the recordings?"

Nat nodded.

"And, I'm starting to think it's more than just a trick of the light, if you catch my meaning," he said, giving her a significant look.

Freja's eyes widened.

"Then, you really think—"

"Not yet," he cut her off. "I still need to consult with Kurak - check all this against her findings. But, seriously, will you please go over there before he walks away? And, stay casual. I don't want these Starfleet tourists catching on. At least, not until we're on more solid ground with this."

Freja nodded and squeezed Nat's arm.

"I've got this," she said, and made her approach as Nat backed deeper into the shadows and continued his recording.

******

Data placed his palm against the opalescent panel that dominated the cavern wall, feeling the
qualitative aspects of the metal’s warmth, its polished, textured smoothness, even as his familiar, android sensors measured every quantitative dip and imperfection his fingers touched.

He watched his hand slide over the raised glyphs and symbols and his lips twitched slightly, his computer-perfect memory bringing him back to another artifact, another time…

Bozeman, Montana…April 4, 2063…

A temporal anomaly triggered by a Borg attack had drawn the Enterprise-E some three hundred and ten years into Earth's past, allowing Data, and his captain, to make physical contact with what was, perhaps, the most significant invention of the modern age: humankind's first successfully tested warp-capable vessel.

Dr. Zefram Cochrane and his team had - with a very self-aware sense of irony - constructed the poetically named Phoenix in a missile silo, having adapted a Titan II missile to launch it through Earth's atmosphere, into space. Data remembered Picard's expression as he stood before the towering ship on the eve of its historic flight…the reverent wonder that had lit his eyes… Then, on impulse, Picard had reached out a hand, pressed it to the Phoenix's rough, metal surface, and Data had not been able to understand why. Why was touching Cochrane's warp ship so important to him? The ship was so clearly, materially present – Data had felt no need to touch it to verify its reality.

But now…

Data drew in a slow breath and closed his eyes, leaning forward until his cheek rested against the wall panel. He felt the energy field as a buzzing tingle against his skin, humming between his teeth… energy generated from a source that had likely been put in place several thousand years before. In that moment, Data perceived himself outside of time, standing where the mysterious beings who had built these ruins once stood, touching what they had touched… and briefly, just briefly, he felt a connection…

He backed away, blinking in astonishment.

Was this powerful sensation a product of intuition? Imagination?

Did it matter?

"Having fun?"

Freja Anders's wry, lightly accented voice drew Data out of his thoughts, and he turned to face her.

"I just wanted to…touch…a piece of history," he said.

Freja regarded him, and he frowned at her look of incredulity.

"Do you think it strange for an android to seek to connect with the past? To wish to feel a part of the history and culture that fostered his own creation and development?"

Freja's pale forehead creased, and her stare grew more intense.

"Is that what you feel, standing here?" she asked.

Data inclined his head, just slightly, then clasped his hands behind his back, returning his gaze to the panel.

Freja moved a little closer.
"I'm curious," she said. "Do you believe that this panel...that, perhaps the Stairway itself...was placed here by the Preservers?"

"I would support your team's argument that similarities in form, format, organization, and style to artifacts previously attributed to the Preservers firmly suggest this panel can be fairly placed in that category," he said in a flat, matter-of-fact tone. "I am not yet as certain about the Stairway itself, or any nearby ruins."

"Then, you would support the theory that the Preservers are more than a myth?" Freja pressed.

Data slid his amber eyes to the side, then said, "I believe enough objective evidence has been found to indicate there was a group – or, perhaps, several groups – of beings who, at various points, have interjected a willful influence on developing civilizations in our galaxy. You are, perhaps, aware that I assisted Captain Picard in his mission to complete Professor Galen's research on that subject."

"Yes, we read the reports with great interest," Freja said. "Well, at least, what little information Starfleet saw fit to release. I understand you found an ancient message encoded in certain specific strands of DNA. DNA Professor Galen had been collecting from planets across the Alpha and Beta quadrants."

"That is correct," Data confirmed. "I, unfortunately, did not have the privilege of witnessing that message myself. But, I have viewed Dr. Crusher's recording of the event. I had not yet installed my emotion chip at that time, but I must admit, even then, I found it quite...moving."

Freja narrowed her eyes.

"But, you are an android," she said. "A machine. Why would a constructed being like you be moved to learn the peoples of our galaxy may share a common genetic inheritance?"

Data smiled very slightly.

"I may stand outside the gene pool, Dr. Anders," he said. "But, I understand kinship...and the desire to ensure one's continuity. That instinct, if you will, is not, necessarily, unique to 'biological' life forms. If you would excuse me...?"

Data edged past her to join the others by the open console, leaving the deeply unsettled Freja Anders staring after him.

"That looked like a pretty intense conversation," Nat said, walking up beside her, his headset dangling from his hand. "What did he say to you?"

Freja shook her head a little, then turned to face him.

"Did you get the images you wanted?"

"I won't really know what I have until we get this equipment back to the compound, and the computers there," he said, and touched her shoulder. "Are you OK?"

"I think," she said softly, clutching his hand, "I think that man is the spookiest thing I have ever faced in my life."

"What did he do?" Nat demanded.

"It's not anything he does... It's the way he is," she said. "That machine is alive, Nat, I have no doubt of it. A breathing, thinking, living...thing! Standing there, he spoke to me of...of kinship and instinct
and… And I could sense this loneliness in him. A…a sadness, so profound…”

She leaned in close and whispered against his arm.

"Oh, Nat… I think it's absolutely terrifying…”

******

Riker stood up from his uncomfortable crouch and stretched his arms above his head. Picard and Tu'Pari were deep into the puzzle of the musical glyphs, and Riker was getting tired of holding the lantern, and craning his neck to peer over their shoulders.

"Hey, Data," he greeted as the android approached. "Did the break help? Are you feeling any better?"

"My power levels have, again, stabilized," he said truthfully, deciding the first officer did not need to know that he still felt uncomfortably weak and irritable, and that the low, pulsing buzz from the omnipresent dampening field was vibrating incessantly in his newly sensitive ears and sinuses, provoking the onset of what he could only describe as a mild headache. "Thank you, for your concern."

"Come on, Data, you don't have to talk like that with me," Riker said.

"Sir?" Data queried.

"We play poker, remember?" Riker said. "And, we both know you haven't quite remastered that stony face you used to pull. Now, what's wrong, really?"

"I am fine," Data insisted. "It's just..."

He sighed, and gave Riker's arm a slight tug, leading him to a fairly sheltered part of the cavern where they could talk in relative privacy.

"I don't think the archaeologists feel...comfortable...around me," he admitted, glancing at Freja Anders. "Which makes me feel terribly awkward around them, especially in these close quarters. But, more than that, I get the impression that they do not want my input. Dr. Tu'Pari in particular has made a point of downplaying my every suggestion so far, and Dr. Kapoor has been making covert recordings when he believes my back is turned..."

He shook his head and looked straight at the commander.

"Why?" he entreated, his amber eyes tight. "If they have an issue with my presence here, why do they not speak to me directly? Why these odd, passive-aggressive behaviors?"

"I don't think it's personal, Data," Riker said. "They've been a team for a long time. From their perspective, we're just a bunch of drop-in strangers."

"Perhaps..."

Data rubbed his gritty forehead, and leaned back against the cavern's rough rock wall.

"Will..." he said. "Do you think I made a terrible mistake, installing my emotion chip?"

"Why are you asking me now, when you know I don't think that at all?"

"I don't know," the android said. "I just...I feel so...so torn. I know this work is of vital importance, I
understand why the captain wants me here to help, yet I feel utterly superfluous. Whereas, back at the compound, I know that I am needed. That my input...my presence...is valued, even welcomed—"

He cut himself off, and straightened, glancing over to where Picard and Tu'Pari still had their heads bent over the silvery console.

"My apologies," he said stiffly. "I am being selfish, allowing my personal frustrations to overshadow my purpose here. I am currently running a cypher decryption program, but many of the symbols on that control panel are unknowns, and the musical codes themselves are enormously complex. I—"

"Data..."

"Yes, sir?"

Riker shook his head, and looked the android in his anxious amber eyes.

"Data, my friend, when are you going to learn that it's OK for you to feel what you're feeling? I know you're tired, and I can tell you're frustrated, and it's nothing to apologize for. You know how I know? Because I feel the same way."

Data lowered his gaze, unconvinced.

"Sir, I—"

"Do you think I feel useful here, Data," he asked, "moving equipment around and holding up lanterns? At least you've got that positronic brain. I couldn't crack this code with a mallet."

"A mallet?" Data tilted his head. "But surely..."

His dark eyebrows raised, and his mouth opened in realization.

"Ah! A joke, of course," he said, and smiled, a hint of humor relaxing the tightness around his eyes. "I'm sorry, Will. I think that damn dampener is draining my patience along with my energy. I must admit, that awful buzzing is getting on my last nerve. It makes me feel so oddly...frantic...? Or, would 'frazzled' be a better term?"

"I can't really hear it," Riker said, rubbing at his bearded jaw, "but I know what you mean. There is this constant, subtle sort of vibration, isn't there... I can feel it, way down deep in my ears..."

"It is absolutely maddening," Data said. "I experienced a similar sensation when those Orion kidnappers had me locked in that tiny closet of a cell with Howard, the helpful home domestic." His smile broadened. "Though, perhaps I shouldn't complain. The incessant humming of that forcefield is what gave me the idea that led to our escape."

"Really?" Riker said. "I've been meaning to ask you about that. We didn't have time for much more than a quick debriefing after you got back, and I know it's been your priority to find some help for those kids."

"That is true," Data said. "And, I would be pleased to tell you the whole story. But, with our time here so short, should I not return to——"

"Yes, of course," Riker said. "I didn't mean you should tell me everything right now. But, you mentioned that you drew the Orion guard's attention with a song, and I have to ask——"

"It was The Song That Never Ends," Data told him. "A rather whimsical, and effective, expression of
the concept of endless infinity. Are you familiar with it?"

Riker shook his head a little, trying to cast his memory back...way back, to his earliest childhood...

"God, Data, you know... I think, maybe in preschool, we used to sing a song like that. But now... I can't even remember how it goes."

Data glanced surreptitiously around the little cavern, then cautiously brought a hand to the side of his mouth, looking for all the world like a shy little boy preparing to impart a secret. Softly, very softly, he sang: "This is the song that doesn't end. Yes, it goes on and on, my friend. Some people started singing it not knowing what it was. And, they'll continue singing it forever just because this is the song that doesn't end."

"That's right!" Riker said, his eyes widening with wicked amusement. "I remember! It just goes on and on, my friend..."

Data joined him, just as amused, and delighted to find the commander playing along. Soon, the two had begun to harmonize.

"Some people started singing it not knowing what it was. And they'll continue singing it forever just because this is the song that doesn't end. Yes, it goes on and on, my friend! Some people started singing it—"

Data's combadge chirped, and Deanna's spotty voice crinkled through. The two men stopped singing at once, and Data tried to respond to the badly distorted message.

"Counselor?" he said urgently. "Counselor Troi, you are not coming through. Please repeat—"

A terrible rumbling shook the cavern. Data caught Riker before he could topple to the ground, then rushed over to help the others.

"What did you do?" Tu'Pari demanded as the rumbling worsened, his dark eyes burning in his stiffly expressionless face. "What was that song you were singing?"

"Merely a circular rhyme for children," Data said.

"Well, whatever it was, that song did something, Data," Picard said, his own expression wide with wonder. "Look - look there!"

He indicated the etching of the monolith, where a long, dark slit had appeared. It deepened slowly, the opalescent wall panel splitting before their astonished eyes into two massively heavy doors that continued to swing inward as showers of dust and rock poured down from above.

The officers and archaeologists coughed and huddled close while Data did his best to deflect the largest and sharpest of the falling rocks. After what felt like an anxious eternity, the rumbling slowed, then stopped, leaving the little group shaken, cut, bruised, and filthy...and far too awed to care.

"By Surak, and all his teachings..." Tu'Pari intoned, dust and dirt streaming from his hair and shoulders as he rose shakily to his feet.

The wall had opened to reveal a dazzling, ethereal display. Insubstantial images, waves and ripples of light, coalesced to form intricate braids, twisting lattices of stairs and ladders with no apparent beginning or end.

The group only caught a glimpse, a brief impression of power and delicacy, of color and darkness
twined together in infinite complexities before the doors slammed shut, the slit disappeared, and the opalescent wall mural stood whole and impenetrable once more.

"No..." Freja gasped, holding out her hand...

"Sing it again," Tu'Pari demanded, his cold black eyes boring into Data's.

"It would do no good," Data said quietly, still deeply shaken by what they'd all just seen.

"Sing it, android," Nat said, moving to the Vulcan's side. "Sing that song exactly as you did before."

"Dr. Tu'Pari, Dr. Kapoor," Data said, struggling to keep his own voice steady and calm. "I do not think that my song alone prompted that wall to open. If you recall, when Captain Kirk encountered a Preserver artifact, it was a combination of vocal intonations and the sound of a communicator that signaled its trap door to open."

"What are you telling us, Data?" Picard asked, standing slowly, then helping Freja to her feet.

"My communicator signaled while Commander Riker and I were singing," Data told him. "But the message was garbled by atmospheric interference. This confluence of sounds, both vocal and mechanical, may be what triggered that wall to open. But, sir, I must report that the tone of Counselor Troi's message was quite urgent. Although I was unable to catch many of her words, I believe she wants us to return to the compound, Captain. Immediately."

"No, not yet," Nat said, his own dirt-streaked features taking on a rather wild look. "We have to try to open those doors again!"

He dashed to the center of the gleaming wall panel, searching desperately with his fingers for any trace of a crack.

"Come on, we did it once!" he cried. "We've seen the Preservers' power source! We can't just walk away now!"

"I'm afraid that is exactly what we must do."

Nat turned his fierce, incredulous glare on Tu'Pari.

"You have to be kidding me," he said. "You, of all people—"

But, the Vulcan simply shook his head, standing tall and stoic amidst the fresh piles of rocks and floating dust.

"We know now that it is possible," he said. "However accidentally, the code has been broken. Our task now is to study what has occurred. Only then, when we have gained a greater understanding of this event, will we be properly prepared to try again. And, perhaps, to begin to comprehend the significance of what we all saw here today."

Nat turned away, his fists clenched tightly by his sides.

"Damn you, Tu'Pari," he growled. "There are times when I truly hate your Vulcan logic!"

"But, he's right, Nat," Freja said gently, her bright yellow hair left dim and dark by the falling dust and fading lantern light. "You know it as well as we do."

Nat swore again and kicked the panel, then turned and nodded.
"All right," he said. "All right, let's pack up our gear and head back home. Somebody find that equipment bag..."

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

References Include - TNG: The Chase; The Offspring; Brothers; the movie First Contact; TOS: The Savage Curtain; "The Song That Never Ends," by Norman Martin (1988).

Please review! :)
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Dr. Beverly Crusher beamed down from the relative quiet and pacing frustration of the orbiting runabout into the rumbling, juddering chaos of a ground quake. Emergency lights flashed inside the little, domed clinic, children were yelling, but the doctor kept her calm and headed straight for the biobed where a Klingon woman convulsed and thrashed, her monitors bleeping wildly. On the bed beside her, a small human boy lay unconscious, protected from falling, or from any debris, by a force field powered by its own emergency generator.

Dr. Crusher pursed her lips at the sight of him, then turned to face the Klingon, her mask of professionalism firmly in place.

"What have we got?" she asked Troi, both officers recognizing there was no time for friendly greetings.

"Her convulsions started suddenly, before the quake, and they've only gotten worse," Troi reported. "She was shot by an energy weapon and suffered severe internal injuries. We managed to stabilize her, but—"

"It's all right, I've read your reports," Crusher said, her professional eye skimming over the battery-dim computer read-outs. She checked the electronic chart at the foot of the bed, then grabbed a hypospray from her bag, programming in her prescription then pressing the hypo against Kurak's neck.

The Klingon's tense muscles relaxed. She released a very strange sound, like a half-choked sigh, and her head lolled to the side…a line of dark magenta blood trickling from her mouth.

"What's that?" Kahlestra cried, rushing to her mother's side as the ground beneath them continued to shake. "Why is she bleeding?"

"This is Kay, Kurak's daughter," Troi introduced the girl. "Kay, this is Dr. Crusher, the friend Data and I were telling you about."

"Yeah, great," the girl said distractedly. "Why is my mother bleeding? Is it her guts? Her lungs? What's happening!"

"Kay," Troi said, her voice kind, but firm, "you need to get down and go back under your shelter with Ishta. It's too dangerous for you to be standing while—"

"That shelter's just a stupid fold-out table you pushed against the inner wall," Kahlestra snapped. "If you can stand, so can I. What can I do to help?"

"To tell you the truth, Kay, the best thing you can do right now is keep yourself from getting hurt, so I can concentrate on helping your mother," Dr. Crusher said, meeting the girl's eyes.

"But the blood—!"

"It seems your mother bit her tongue during the convulsions," Crusher told her as she continued her
examination. "It looks a lot worse than it is. Now please, do as Counselor Troi said. My job is to help your mother. Yours is to keep yourself safe and under cover until this shaking stops. Can you do that for me, Kay? For your mother?"

Kahlestra bared her teeth in a snarl.

"Fine!" she growled. "But, I'm not stupid, and I won't be lied to! Not by you or any grown-up!"

"Then we understand each other," Crusher said, offering her a little smile.

Kahlestra snorted, but crawled back under the table and placed a hand on its vibrating leg, in case the shaking caused the table to shift or slide away. Ishta had buried herself in her hair, her green hands folded tightly over the back of her head and neck.

"Some vacation spot you picked," Crusher quipped to Troi as the pair of them worked together to change the unconscious Kurak into a surgical gown, then position a surgical hood over the biobed.

"I just hope Howard can keep those battery back-ups working," Troi said anxiously. "We had some trouble during the last sandstorm."

"Howard?" Crusher raised a curious eyebrow.

"He's Master Data's handy, helpful robot," Troi said, indicating the busy, metallic-green robot with her head. At the look Crusher shot her, the counselor almost smiled.

"Don't worry," she said. "I'll explain later."

"I'll hold you to that," the doctor promised, already preoccupied with her preparatory scans.

*******

The desert heat and blinding sun felt planets away from the humid, musty, dusty dark inside the tunnels.

Data slipped on his shades, stretched out his arms and breathed in the dry air, enjoying the feel of the sun on his skin. Away from that awful, buzzing dampening field, he felt as though a literal weight had been lifted from his head and shoulders, and the physical relief made a significant improvement to his mood.

"You should wear a hat, Data," Riker suggested, donning his own hat and sun-protector shades. "Then again – does this new skin of yours burn? You know…the blistering, the peeling…"

"It is vulnerable to sun damage," Data said. "But, for my new skin to experience severe sunburn, in the way you mean, I would have to come within approximately thirty-six million miles of the star in question without the protection afforded by a planetary atmosphere or space craft."

"Thirty-six million…" Freja wrinkled her brow. "That's Mercury's distance from the sun."

"Just about," Data said, and smiled. Then, his smile vanished and he stepped closer to her.

"So," he said. "When do you and Dr. Kapoor intend to let me in on your secret?"

Freja's eyes widened and she turned to Nat, but he was already speaking.

"What the hell are you talking about?"
"I'm talking about those covert recordings you were making back in the cavern," Data said. "You must remember. After all, it was your idea to send Dr. Anders over to distract me with conversation while you were recording, was it not?"

Nat snorted and rolled his eyes behind his own protective shades.

"I don't have to listen to—"

"You wanted to see if the holovid would show the same peculiar wave pattern with me as it does when you point the recorder at a biological humanoid," Data spoke over him, his amber eyes fixed and steady. "I understand there is no such effect when you aim your recorder at rocks and electronic equipment. So, naturally, I am curious. Does your recording show this odd wave distortion when you record me behind my back, or does the distortion only occur when you do so to my human colleagues?"

"Mr. Data," Picard started to reprimand, but Nat sucked in his cheeks and turned his head away.

"Fine," he snapped. "You caught me, android. Yes, I was recording you and, yes, I did ask Freja to help. As for those strange wave distortions… I honestly won't know until we play back the recording on the computers back in the control room."

"Have you come up with a theory to explain these distortions?" Picard asked curiously.

"Quantum probability waves," Tu'Pari said, standing rather stiffly under his own hat and shades.

Nat shot him a very dirty look, but the Vulcan didn't flinch.

Freja reached for his arm.

"Nat…" she prompted. "Given what's happened, maybe we should explain what—"

"All right, all right!" the human scientist said, and held up his hands. "Look, we didn't mean to lie or anything. It's just…this is our work, you know? Our job, not some recreation or hobby or…"

He closed his eyes and tried again.

"Sorry," he said, looking at Picard. "I didn't mean it like that. It's just, we didn't know you, and—"

"I think I can understand how you've been feeling," Picard said. "When we requested to spend these two weeks touring these ruins, we had no way of knowing how close you were to a breakthrough – especially a finding of this magnitude! Mon dieu—! What we just saw—"

"What we saw, Captain," Tu'Pari said flatly, "was a brief glimpse of what Kurak, Dr. Baker, and I have long suspected to be the true function and purpose of the Stairway. If you Starfleet officers are willing to work with us in a volunteer capacity as, judging from your actions back there, I now believe you are, we will tell you our theory – and why this find presents a far greater threat to the current balance of power in this galaxy than you could possibly envision at this point."

Riker raised his eyebrows over his shades.

"And they say Vulcans don't exaggerate."

"I assure you, Commander, this is no exaggeration," Tu'Pari stated. "Whatever value you imagined outside agents may have placed on this energy source, its true function is worth exponentially more."

"Well," Data said. "I'm intrigued. I am also relieved. I was starting to take your reticent attitudes
"It's not that we didn't trust you, Commander," Freja told him, her dirt-streaked face cracking into a slight, awkward smile. "It's just that we didn't trust you."

Data narrowed his eyes, then his eyebrows lifted and he broke out with a laugh. Freja moved closer to Nat.

"Ah – I get it!" Data said. "And I, too, understand. But, I believe I speak for each of my friends when I say you have nothing to fear from us. We did not come to take over your research here, only to learn, and to help. If you will let us."

"Besides," Picard said. "If this find is as potentially threatening as you say, you may find you need our support, and the protection afforded by Starfleet."

"I'm afraid the way this trip's been going so far, that'll be sooner rather than later," Riker added.

Freja shared an uncomfortable look with Nat. Tu'Pari straightened his posture.

Picard observed their discomfort, and pursed his lips.

"I know feelings are running high," he said, "particularly after what we just experienced. I suggest we all head back to the compound, get cleaned up, then meet again after lunch in the control room to discuss our results with clearer, cooler heads. In the meantime, Dr. Crusher's runabout should be due quite soon and I, for one, don't particularly wish to greet her looking like this."

The little group glanced around at their torn clothes, scraped-up hands, elbows and knees, and filthy dust-and-dirt-streaked faces, and all but Picard and Tu'Pari started to snicker, the heavy mood lightening to something almost resembling camaraderie as they headed back through the wind and sand toward the sheltered compound.

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

References Include - TNG: Ethics and the movies Generations and First Contact.

Coming Up: Social complications only increase for Data once Kurak wakes up. Will he be able to navigate these tricky social waters without capsizing, or being forced to cast his young friends adrift?

Please review! :)

 personally."
Chapter 28

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Data rubbed the two brushes together until the gel was well distributed between them, glanced at his reflection in the mirror, then proceeded to precisely and meticulously brush his unruly, freshly showered hair back into its accustomed style.

"And the doctor actually had to cut her open!" Kahlestra prattled beside him as he brushed. "The whole clinic was shaking, the lights were going on and off, but it was like she didn't even notice. She focused her mind, did her duty, and that was that – just like Kahless would have done!"

Kahlestra flopped down on her cot, laced her fingers under her head, and stared up at the metallic, domed ceiling.

"Maybe that's what I'll be when I grow up," she said.

"Kahless?" Data teased.

"No," Kahlestra retorted. "A surgeon! Maybe even a Starfleet surgeon. I mean – cutting into people, not to kill them, but so they can keep living! It's got to be one of the coolest things I ever saw!"

"I am delighted by your enthusiasm, Kay," Data said, setting down his brushes and giving his appearance a final, critical inspection before turning to face her. "I am certain Dr. Crusher would feel quite gratified to know she has made such a positive impression on you. I take it your mother is now recovering?"

"She's still asleep, but yeah," Kahlestra said. "I know it's awful to say this, but I almost wish she'll stay that way. Unconscious, I mean, not injured. No way she'll let us talk like this when she wakes up."

Data tilted his head.

"Why not?"

Kahlestra sighed, and crossed one leg over her raised knee.

"It's complicated…" she muttered.

"If you explain the situation, perhaps I can help," Data offered, pulling his newly replicated brown vest over his cream-colored shirt, then sitting on the cot opposite hers.

Kahlestra turned her head away.

"It has to do with the divorce," she mumbled, and sat up, her face still turned to the wall. "I was practically a baby when she left my father's House, and of course no one ever tells me anything, but I do know my father only lets me live with her because she made a vow before the court to raise me in strict accordance with his Family's 'traditional Klingon values.' I hate it, and I know she hates it too. But, she won't fight back!"

Kahlestra growled low in her throat, then pounded her fist against the wall.
"I despise her for that!" she cried.

"What is so disagreeable about these 'traditional Klingon values'?” Data asked.

Kahlestra shuddered angrily and shook her head.

"I don't want to talk about it," she grumbled, and sat up. "Not now, OK? Because, if I start talking about it I'll get angry, and if I get angry I might scream and, if I scream, she might hear me and wake up and I'm not ready for her to lock me in a room with my stupid homework just yet."

Data raised his eyebrows.

"Surely, your mother would not lock you in a room," he said.

Kahlestra snorted.

"You don't know her," she said, and slid off the cot.

"Data?" she asked.

"Yes, Kay?"

Kahlestra regarded him closely, as if considering a rather weighty decision.

"I…" She hesitated, then tried again. "I was just thinking. Because, my mother doesn't know I know this… But, I asked at school once, and there is a way to get around the—"

The sliding doors opened, and Ishta stormed through.

"You clean now?" she asked Data.

"Yes," he said. "But, Ishta, when you interrupt—"

"All dressed and decent?"

"You can see that I am." Data frowned at her in confusion. "Ishta, what?—"

"I want a new outfit," Ishta told him. "And a hairbrush. Like you promised me last night."

Data regarded her, rather nonplussed by her demanding tone.

"You showed very little interest when I made that offer."

"Well, I'm interested now!" Ishta snapped. "Will you help or what?"

Data's lips tightened.

"Right," he said, and stood up. "Let's start this again. Hello, Ishta. Kay and I were just having a conversation. If you would care to wait, I can be with you in—"

"Actually," Kay interrupted, "it's OK. It was a dumb thought, anyway."

"Kay, if something is upsetting you—"

"No, I'm fine, really," she said. "Thanks anyway, Data."

"If you say so…" Data said, his expression deeply puzzled as he watched the girl walk out of the
"Well?" Ishta demanded impatiently.

Data returned his eyes to the scowling young Orion.

"Can you describe specific criteria for the apparel you wish to replicate?" he asked her.

"I'll tell you what I want when we get to the replicator," she said, and led the way out of the room. "The good one you fixed up in the cafeteria. Come on!"

Data shook his head, then took a last glance at himself in the mirror, fastening his vest and neatly smoothing a few errant strands of hair back into place as he walked out after her.

*******

"She called me a 'poor thing'!" Ishta protested angrily as she picked the tangles from her long, black hair with the hairbrush Data had replicated for her. "Said I reminded her of some old rag doll she had when she was a child."

"Who said this?" Data asked, taking the newly replicated boots from the replicator's shelf and carrying them over to her.

"Your prissy, pinch-faced doctor friend!" Ishta snapped, flipping her hair back behind her shoulders and taking the boots. "She said it to that half-Betazoid shrink-woman you stuck us with when you went down into those stupid tunnels. But, I heard her, and I knew what she meant."

She scowled and jammed her socked feet into the boots.

"I won't be pitied. Not ever. Especially not by some fancy Fed doctor like her!"

"I am certain she meant no offense," Data told her. "Dr. Crusher is one of the kindest, most—"

"I don't care!" Ishta cried. "I'm not some pathetic, beat up little doll! I am Ishta! That is what I want that doctor-woman to see!"

Data nodded slowly, his expression contemplative.

"Is the fit acceptable?" he asked regarding the boots as she stalked up and down the cafeteria.

"Yeah, they'll do," she said, and spun sharply in place, her hair and skirt twirling around, then back as she said, "How do I look?"

Ishta had exchanged her torn, stained and battered rags for sturdy black leggings and boots, a blue turtleneck, and a knee-length cranberry jumper dress with gold trim that managed to simultaneously conceal and compliment her willowy figure.

Data cupped his chin.

"You wish me to offer an honest opinion?"

Ishta buried her face behind her hands.

"Deities, is it that bad?"

Data chuckled fondly.
"Not at all," he said. "I believe this new skin suits you quite well."

Ishta snorted.

"Oh, ha ha," she snarked, but her blue eyes were vulnerable when she glanced up at him.

"You really mean that?"

"I do," Data assured her. "You look like Ishta."

The young Orion's guarded expression opened wide, her sharp features softening as she blushed happily. On impulse, she rushed Data with a hug, but pulled away before he could hug her back.

"Will you help me braid my hair?" she asked, sniffing a little, then clearing her throat.

"Of course," he said, and picked up her hairbrush and a black elastic. Within a minute, the braid was complete, and Ishta pulled it over her shoulder for inspection.

"My mother used to braid my hair, when I was small," she said. "Your braid's better."

"Thank you," he said, and smiled. "Shall we join the others in the main building now? They should still be eating lunch."

"Yeah, I guess," she said. "Data… Can I ask you a question?"

"You may ask me anything, Ishta," he told her.

Ishta swung her foot back and forth, then asked: "Do Federation people… dance?"

Data grinned.

"Indeed, we do," he said.

"Seriously?"

"Absolutely," he said. "In fact, back on my old ship, I once devised a comprehensive dance course for the holodeck, incorporating music from across the Alpha and Beta quadrants and featuring some very interesting partners."

"So… you dance?"

"I do," Data said.

"You're telling me that you," she gestured to his rather stiff, upright posture, "can dance."

"Quite proficiently."

Ishta quirked an eyebrow.

"Prove it," she said.

"You first," he shot back, his grin turning a little wicked. "After all, since you introduced this subject, I must assume you find it to be of some personal interest."

Ishta averted her eyes.

"Maybe I used to," she admitted. "A long time ago. It was just stupid kid stuff."
"Somehow," he observed gently, "I don't think you fully believe that."

"What do you know?" she snapped, and stalked toward the cafeteria table.

"Did you used to dance, Ishta?" he asked quietly.

"I wanted to," she said, her back still turned to him. "When I was six… Dancing… It was a way out! It seemed like…like this magical life. Good food, beautiful costumes…"

She sighed, and sat on the bench.

"Orions take dance very seriously," she said. "Top stars can write their own ticket at the high-end slave markets. That's how my mother got started."

"Are the dancers slaves, then?" Data asked uncomfortably.

"Most of them," Ishta said. "The producers and directors hand pick the best of the best for their productions. The dancers are trained from age six to work hard and follow their masters' instructions. If a top performer gets famous enough, they can use popular demand as a bargaining chip. Many of them bargain for a cut of the ticket money, then use that money to buy their freedom. Some continue performing after that, or try different careers, but most put themselves on the market to hook wealthy buyers. Like my mother did."

"Is that why you did not become a dancer?"

Ishta fiercely shook her head.

"Too independent-minded," she growled. "That's what they said. Like it's some awful crime to even have a mind, let alone opinions of your own!"

She shivered a little, then turned to face him.

"I was a good dancer," she said. "Better than the brat kids they did pick – and they knew it! But, they threw me away – back to the slave market, and then to the Skins…" She snarled, her nose wrinkling in disgust. "They rejected me. And, now I'm way too old for training…"

"Ridiculous," Data said. "You are only fourteen."

Ishta grunted in exasperation, and buried her face in her hands.

"Why do I even say anything to you Feds," she muttered.

"Ishta," Data said, "I can see this means a great deal to you. It is understandable if you are frightened. But, if you do not try—"

"And, there it is!" Ishta exclaimed. "That stupid Fed optimism! 'Anything's possible if you just believe hard enough.' Well, it's not, OK? Because, it's not just you who has to believe. It's all those gatekeepers out there whose entire job in life is to keep you out!"

Data blinked, her words striking a surprisingly deep chord within him. But, rather than analyze the unsettling sensation, Data kept his mind on the topic at hand.

"You can dance for fun, you know," he said. "And for the exercise. It does not have to be your career."

"Ishta—"

"No!" she snapped. "I don't want to talk anymore."

"Then don't talk," he said. "Dancers express their feelings through movement."

"I told you, I'm not a dancer—"

"Neither am I," Data said. "But, I can do this."

He broke into a quick series of tap steps, ending with a neat spin.

Ishta raised a wry eyebrow, but couldn't hide her impressed surprise.

"Your turn," he challenged. "Show me what you've got."

The girl gave a dark, world-weary sigh, but lifted her arms into a graceful pose. Slowly, she arched her back, then whipped her body around, her toes sliding into a ballet-like position before she set off leaping and spinning, her frustrations and angry fears translating into quick, athletic kicks, dives, and jumps. She leaped high, performing a startling split in mid-air, then turned her landing into an elegant spin that grew lower and lower until she ended on her back with one leg in the air. She stopped short, then rolled backwards, finishing with her knees on the ground and her arms crossed over her chest.

She held out a hand, and Data moved to take it, helping her rise to her feet.

"I know," she said, before he could speak. "I suck. But, you're not going to say that."

"No," Data said. "You are unpracticed. But your timing and instincts are good, and you have a natural grace any observer would find quite striking. I think you should show Dr. Crusher what you can do."

"That fancy-pants doctor!" Ishta scorned. "What the hell for?"

"Dr. Crusher is the one who taught me to dance," Data said. "She is quite proficient. If you are interested, she may even be able to advise you regarding dance schools and performance troupes. She is certainly better informed on these matters than I am."

Ishta scowled at him.

"You really are an idiot, aren't you," she said.

"Because I believe that you should follow your interests?" he asked.

"Because you think it matters."

"You matter, Ishta," he said, staring right into her eyes. "You matter to me."

"And I should hate you for that," Ishta said, turning her eyes away.

Data sighed, and pulled her into a warm, half-embrace, which she slowly returned, resting her forehead against his shoulder.

"Yep," she mumbled into his arm. "I totally hate you."
"I know," he said, and gave her a fond little squeeze. "But, we should go. Lunch will be nearly over by now."

"Data?" she asked, looking up at his face.

"Yes, Ishta?"

"When this is over, and you go back to your ship…will you think of me?"

"I will," Data said. "And, I would hope that we would stay in contact."

"Data?"

"Yes, Ishta?"

She caught a sniffle with her sleeve and swallowed hard, clinging to him as she pressed her head even deeper into his shoulder.

"I can't stand how much I'm going to miss you."

Data pursed his lips, then he smoothed back her hair, a peculiar inner ache tightening his chest.

"I will miss you too," he said, surprised by the slight roughness in his voice. "But, the Enterprise-E is not a family ship. Even if she were…"

He stopped, the memories of his daughter Lal and Starfleet's cold response to the android's earnest attempt at fatherhood threatening to overwhelm him. Yet, somehow, Ishta seemed to understand.

"Fed authorities probably wouldn't let a metal man adopt a meat kid, huh," she said. "Let alone two, or three."

"It would be...difficult," Data admitted, realizing that was an understatement.

"Well," Ishta said dryly. "Isn't the universe just full of bigots, jerks, and bastards."

"Not entirely," Data said, and Ishta punched his arm.

"Idiot," she said.

"Cynic," he retorted, and she smiled.

"You sure I look OK in this?" she asked, giving her skirt a little twirl.

"You look like what you are," Data told her. "A sharp, sweet, talented girl I am proud to call my friend."

Ishta's eyes widened.

"Dieties," she said. "You actually mean that."

"I do," he said, and offered her his arm. "Would you now do me the honor of allowing me to escort you to lunch?"

"Only if you don't expect me to return those compliments."

"I would expect no such thing."
"Then, I'll accept," she said, and squeezed his hand in hers.

"Hey...Data?" she said as they stepped through the sliding doors.

"Yes?"

She lowered her eyes.

"Thank you for the new outfit. I...I've never had new clothes before, and these..." She swallowed, embarrassed, and shrugged a little. "Well, thank you."

Data's expression warmed, and he nodded.

"You are most welcome, Ishta," he said and squeezed her hand back, allowing himself to imagine - just for a fraction of a moment - what his life might be like if adoption was a viable option for an android officer, and he really did have the chance to be a father again...

0.68 seconds...0.69...

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"Then, it's possible the quake we experienced here was actually caused by that wall opening underneath the Stairway?" Crusher said as she finished the last bite of her sandwich.

"I wouldn't be surprised if that's exactly what the readings show," Nat said around his own mouthful. Picard nodded thoughtfully, and glanced at Tu'Pari.

"I'd be curious as to whether this new finding has any bearing on the increased frequency of the quakes this region has been experiencing lately," he said.

"Yes," Troi said, setting her drink down on the control room's little conference table, "But, what troubles me is that Kurak's bio-monitors cut out before the tremors started."

She creased her forehead, her gaze seeming to turn inward.

"No, it's more than that," she said. "Just before the quake, I had the strangest feeling… It was as though we were being watched. But, there was no one there – at least, no one I could see."

"Well, you are empathic, isn't that right?" Freja said. "Maybe it was a premonition…a sense that the quake was coming?"

Troi shook her head, just slightly.

"I don't know…"

The doors slid open and Ishta walked in, with Data just behind. Riker smiled a greeting from the table and said, "Hey, we saved you two some sandwiches. Come grab a seat."

"Thank you, Will," Data said, heading for the nearly empty sandwich platter. "Hello, everyone."

"Hello, Data," Troi greeted. "That vest looks quite flattering on you."

Data smiled and straightened his posture.

"Ishta and I decided to update our wardrobe," he said. "I am pleased you approve of my selection."
Crusher narrowed her eyes curiously, looking like she was about to ask a question, but Freja's gasp diverted everyone's attention.

"Oh my…" she said, bringing her hands to her mouth. "Is that really Ishta? Oh, what an adorable dress!"

Ishta scowled and picked at her skirt.

"Whatever," she muttered, grabbing a sandwich, some apple slices, and a bottle of milk and flopping onto the seat next to Kahlestra, who pretended to sniff the air.

"Well, you certainly smell better now," she teased. "What happened to that torn up old sack you were wearing?"

The Orion growled and bared her teeth at the Klingon.

Kahlestra rolled her eyes.

"Sheesh, I was only teasing. Seriously, though, you look a lot better with your hair back. First time I've actually seen your whole face."

Ishta scowled and scrubbed her fingers through her neatly brushed-back hair until her long bangs came loose from the braid and fell over her eyes and forehead.

"OK…" the Klingon drawled. "I guess that works too."

Ishta grunted and took a bite of her sandwich.

Crusher raised a bemused eyebrow and shared a glance with Troi, who had to cover a smile with her hand. She looked up and gestured to Data, who was just setting his folding chair down beside the two girls.

"Data, why don't you sit here," she invited, scooting her chair over to make more room. "Beverly's been wanting to talk with you."

"Very well, Counselor," he said and politely excused himself, carrying his chair and plate to the other end of the table. "Hello, Doctor. Welcome to Nineveh IV. I understand your arrival was quite eventful."

"I admit, it's not every day I'm expected to perform surgery during a ground quake," Crusher said wryly. "Fortunately, the patient pulled through just fine."

"Have you yet had a chance to examine Mikey?" Data asked anxiously.

"Only a cursory check," Crusher said, rather grimly. "Once the runabout lands, I'd appreciate it if you could help me transfer the boy to the ship's sickbay."

"It was my intent to do so," Data said, and Crusher smiled.

"Correct me if I'm wrong," she said, "but there's something different about you, Data. It could be the vest – I've so rarely seen you without your uniform."

Data regarded her, his head slightly tilted.

"Are you teasing me, Doctor?" he asked.
"Never!" she said playfully. "I'll admit, when Deanna first told me about your upgrade I wasn't quite sure what to expect. But, now that I've seen you, I think it works. In fact, I might go so far as to say you look more yourself now than before you left the ship. The eyes in particular seem more… well…you."

Data's forehead creased.

"More…me?"

The women laughed, and Troi patted the android's arm.

"Consider it an observation on how well you've managed to keep that promise you made to yourself at the start of this trip," she said. "To let yourself be yourself. No hiding."

Data's pale face flushed and he glanced down at his twiddling thumbs.

Dr. Crusher's eyebrows raised at the new sight, but she managed to keep her expression suitably sympathetic.

"Don't be shy, Data," she said. "That's a good goal to set. In fact, it's probably something we should all give a little more thought to."

She offered him a little smile, which he gradually returned.

"But I want to hear more about these adventures you've been having," she said. "Deanna tells me you were kidnapped by Orions?"

"That is correct, Doctor," Data said, "but it is a long story. Do you think we have time before the runabout arrives?"

"If we're interrupted, you can always tell me the rest later," she told him, and he shrugged his acknowledgement.

"Very well," he said. "But the story is not just mine to tell. Kay and Ishta each played an instrumental role in our escape, as did Mikey and Howard. In fact, I—"

"USS Blackstone to Dr. Crusher," came the runabout pilot's voice. "Landing permission has been confirmed and finalized. I am beginning my descent."

"Acknowledged, Lieutenant," Crusher said and stood. "Well, Data, it looks like that story will have to wait after all. Let's get your little friend ready to move."

"Right away, Doctor. Please, excuse us," Data said to the group, taking his sandwich and following her out the door.

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

References Include - TNG: Hero Worship; Data's Day; The Game; The Offspring; and the movie First Contact
Next Time: Kurak regains consciousness and Data and Mikey share a moment before heading for the runabout. Will Dr. Crusher be able to help him? Stay Tuned!

NOTE: In DS9, runabouts were named after Earth rivers. I named this one after the Blackstone River that runs through Pawtucket, RI and provided power for Slater Mill, the first successful cotton-spinning mill in the US and the birthplace of the American Industrial Revolution (and one of the first school field trips I ever went on. I remember the waterfall best!) :)

Until next time! Thanks so much for reading! Your comments are always welcome and very much appreciated! :D
The soft sounds of biomonitors bleeped and hummed in the dimly lit little clinic. Kurak lay sleeping; her long, wavy hair spread over the pillow and a silver-blue blanket tucked over her shoulders. But, Mikey was wide awake.

"Data!" he cheered happily, sitting up on his biobed as the android strode to his side. "You're back! Howard was just telling me how there was a quake while you were gone. Then, Kay's mom started thrashing around and the doctor had to come and do surgery on her and—" He shook his head. "I can't believe I slept through all that! Those must be some tranquilizers that Freja lady gave me!"

"Indeed?"

"Oh yeah," Mikey said. "She gave me some pretty good painkillers too. Way better than that Cardassian stuff."

"Hm…" Data knit his eyebrows. "Well, in any event, I am pleased you were able to get some rest."

He looked over to Howard, who was efficiently attending the control panels.

"Howard," he said, "Counselor Troi tells me that you have been very helpful here."

"I am Howard: Your Helpful Home Domestic Droid," Howard told him in his chipper way. "I am here to serve."

"And you are doing quite well," Data said. "Thank you, Howard."

"My orders are to monitor the woman and the boy," Howard said. "I am here to keep them safe."

"Yes," Data said, rather bemused by the robot's unflaggingly one-note attitude. "Well, the boy will be coming with me. But, I will need you to keep monitoring Kurak."

"I am here to serve," Howard acknowledged, and fixed his glowing photoelectric cells on the monitor panel.

Data shook his head, and turned his slight smile to Mikey.

"The runabout has landed," he said. "Dr. Crusher is getting the sickbay ready for you."

"What?" Mikey straightened. "Oh…I mean, it's here already? That was quick."

Data offered the boy his hand.

"Shall we go?"
"Yeah. Of course."

Mikey's eyes flicked to his hands, which were wringing and twisting the bed's silvery blanket like a wet rag.

"Mikey?" Data inquired with some concern. "Are you all right? Your body language indicates that you are feeling…hesitance? Trepidation?"

"No," Mikey said. "I'm not scared. It's just…"

"What is it, Mikey?" Data asked, sitting down beside him on the biobed. "You can tell me."

Mikey roughly shook his head, then leaned into Data's shoulder, clinging to him with all his strength.

"I'm sorry," Mikey sobbed. "I'm sorry."

"What have you to be sorry about?" Data asked him.

"I shouldn't have come here," the boy mumbled, his grip starting to loosen. "I shouldn't have followed you and Kay when you broke out of that Skin dump. Now, everyone's going through all this trouble and it's all my stupid fault!"

"Mikey…?" Data placed a hand on his shoulder, trying to see his face. "I do not quite understand what you are—"

"I wish I was an android!" Mikey snapped, keeping his head down as he roughly wiped his eyes. "Or, a robot, like Howard. Then you could be the one to fix me, and I wouldn't ever even need a sickbay, or any cancer doctor!"

"I appreciate your faith in me," Data said, rather sadly. "But, you must know that you are in better hands with Dr. Crusher."

"I've been so much trouble to everyone," Mikey cried, burying his face in Data's shoulder. "Ishta's right. You got a smart, Starfleet doctor to bring a ship all the way to this dustbowl planet just because she's your friend, when everyone knows I'm just going to die anyway. And then…"

Mikey pulled away and turned his head, hiding his reddened face from view.

"I keep thinking how…how I should have died back in those caves. How that would have been better. How, if I hadn't followed you…"

He wiped his sniffles on his sleeve and mumbled miserably into his medical gown.

"I mean…I've known I'm dying for a long time. My family is dead. I was going to die too. OK. No big deal. Because, you see, no one cared before. No one was bothered. One less mouth to feed, one less Skin to lug to market. And then… Then, I met Kay, and you, and…you care. And, now…when I die…"

He closed his eyes against his tears and sniffled, hard.

"I don't want you to be sad, Data, or Kay," he said. "I don't want anyone to miss me. I know what that's like, to miss people, and…" He shook his head. "That's why I'm scared now…and I wasn't scared before…"

"You know, Mikey," Data said. "It may anger Ishta to learn this, but she does not know everything. Dr. Crusher believes there is a very good chance that you will—"
"Dr. Crusher doesn't know what I feel," Mikey said, and leaned back against his pillow, his expression turned inward.

"What do you feel?" Data asked quietly.

Mikey regarded him, then swallowed and turned his eyes away.

"It's like, I'm in two pieces," he said. "There's the me part, you know? The part that thinks and hums and remembers… And, then there's the sick part. The sick part is everything else. Used to be, most of the time, the me part could control the sick part; keep it quiet, under wraps. But…"

He sighed and looked back at Data.

"I can't do it anymore," he admitted. "The sick part just keeps getting stronger. Before you came, I thought it would take me over. Then Kay attacked those Orion guards, and you asked us to trust you, to follow you out of that awful place and… It was like, the me part woke up again. And, I knew it was wrong, that I didn't have a chance, but I had to go with you. I had to try…"

"Come here, Mikey," Data said, opening his arms and gently pulling the boy into a hug. "Come here."

He looked down into Mikey's tearful eyes, and affectionately brushed the hair from his warm forehead.

"What you did was not wrong at all," he said. "Your actions have proven to me that you are very brave, Mikey. Brave enough to hold on to your hope – something too many of the others in that cavern prison had lost. Now, you fear that I will regret taking the time to know you and care about you because you think your life is near its end. Let me assure you, I will not. Knowing you has been my privilege, Mikey. I could never be sad about that."

"You say that now," Mikey mumbled. "But, I've seen what happens. I've seen it over and over… People you love die or get killed and you get so angry and it hurts so much… So, what's the point? What's the point of having hope and being brave and caring about people if we're all just going to die anyway?"

Data's arms tightened around the boy and he closed his eyes, his mind brushing cautiously against a memory he had consciously avoided accessing even before he'd installed his emotion chip.

A memory he only hesitantly opened now.

...Lal...

...Lal... l—

Data took in a sharp, hitching breath and blinked rapidly, trying to head off the lump in his throat, the tears burning in his eyes…

He'd known it would be like this: that the record in his mind would play out with an emotional overlay he had been incapable of fully processing at the time. Since activating the chip, most of his earlier memories had proven to be emotionally affecting on at least some level.

But, this…

*He stood in the cybernetics lab, back on the Enterprise-D, his daughter gently propped within the diagnostic elevator, too weak to balance adequately on her own. He knew she was dying, and that*
she knew it too. But, he spoke the words just the same…

...Lal. I am unable to correct the malfunction… ...We must say goodbye now…

"Data?" Mikey said worriedly, touching the tear tracks on the android's pale face.

Data quickly dried his eyes on his sleeve and gave Mikey's hand a little squeeze.

"You ask, why do we care?" he said a little hoarsely. "This is a question I have often asked myself. Why do I nurture a deep attachment to a cat I know will die in only a handful of years? Why do I endeavor to cultivate close friendships with humans, when I know death will inevitably separate us?"

"Do you know?" Mikey asked him.

Data swallowed, hearing his daughter's voice replaying in his head; seeing her looking up at him, her dark eyes so intense…so alive…

...Father… ...I feel…

He sighed, and brushed Mikey's tousled hair back behind his ears.

"I know my daughter tried to teach me," he said. "A long time ago…"

Mikey smirked a little and leaned back in Data's arms.

"I knew you had to have a kid," he said. "Is she an android, like you?"

"She was," Data said. "Her name was Lal. I constructed her, using myself as a model. We had approximately two weeks together, before catastrophic, pan-systematic cascade failure caused a permanent and irreversible shutdown of her positronic brain."

Mikey sat up, staring into Data's pale face.

"She's dead."

Data nodded and lowered his eyes, his voice growing heavier with each word he spoke.

"It came on suddenly, with very little warning. I tried everything I could…did everything possible to stay ahead of the system failures. But, I could not keep up. The damage was too extensive. In the end, I…"

He swallowed hard, and blinked his reddened eyes.

"I had to tell her that I could not save her. There was nothing I or anyone else could do. But Lal… She knew."

"Was she angry?" Mikey asked.

"No…"

Data frowned a little, his expression distant as he finally allowed the memory to replay in its entirety, recalling the frustration and pain of her loss…the guilt of his inability to protect her…

...I am unable to correct the malfunction...

...I know, Father…
...We must say goodbye...

And then, he accessed her file...the memories he had recovered and downloaded into his own brain before they were lost or corrupted in the system collapse...

...I feel...

...What do you feel, Lal?...

He heard his voice through her ears, saw his face through her eyes, his white-gold features drawn and blank. And, he felt...

...I love you, Father...

He felt all that she had felt...

...I wish I could feel it with you...

...I will feel it for both of us...

Data's throat grew tight and his eyes stung, but when he could speak again his voice was bright with wonder.

"No, she wasn't angry," he realized. "She thanked me for her life...for the time we spent together, and all the opportunities she had to learn... She told me..."

...I love you, Father...

"She told me that she loved me," he said. "She said she felt enough love for both of us..."

He looked down at Mikey, his amber eyes shining with much more than tears.

"That is why we care, Mikey," he said. "That is why we hold on to hope, and risk heartbreak again and again. Because the love we share connects us, no matter how long or seemingly final our separation may be. When I think of my dear Lal, I feel the pain of her loss but – more than that – I remember her curiosity, her energy...the feel of her hand holding mine... I had a daughter, Mikey. My daughter loved me, and she loved her life. I could never resent or regret having known her, or treasuring the special connection that developed between us in those short weeks we had together. And, I will never regret knowing you, no matter what happens."

Mikey held on to Data, resting his head against his chest.

"Data?" he said.

"Yes, Mikey?"

"Can I tell you something true?"

Data's lips twitched into a fond little smile.

"Of course you can," he said.

"I used to want to die," Mikey told him. "I used to wait for it...especially at night, when I remembered... What things were like before? When my Dad would sing me to sleep, and my Mom used to let me be the one to plant her little seedlings outside in the vegetable garden... And...after missing them for so long, it got to be like the memories I had were more real than anything real that
was going on, you know? Like, the Cardassians and Father and the Orions were just this awful
dream I was having, and my family was waiting for me...back in the real world. But..."

"Yes?" Data prompted gently.

Mikey sighed, and burrowed deeper into his arms.

"But, when we started on that trip through the desert?" he said. "It was like, I started to dream ahead,
not behind, you know? I started to wonder what tomorrow might be like...what I might be like if I
wasn't so sick... And I tried to be like that. And, now..."

He sat up and looked at Data.

"Hope can really suck sometimes," he said. "When you don't have it, nothing matters. But when you
do... You have everything to lose, you know?"

Data stared thoughtfully at the boy, nodding slowly.

"I think I do," he said. "Mikey, I believe that—"

"Crusher to Data," his combadge interrupted. "Is everything all right? I have sickbay all ready, if you
—"

"Everything is fine, Doctor," Data assured her, giving Mikey a questioning look, which he answered
with a determined nod. "Mikey and I are on our way."

"Acknowledged, Data," Crusher said.

Data stood up and opened his arms to the boy, but Mikey shook his head.

"I'm OK," he said. "I want to walk."

"As you wish," Data said, and held out his hand.

Mikey smiled and took it, giving Data's fingers a little squeeze.

"Data?" he said.

"Yes, Mikey?"

"Will you sing to me again...before they make me sleep?"

"Certainly," he said.

"Data?"

"Yes, Mikey?"

"Will you stay with me while the doctor works?"

"I promise, I will be right by your side."

"Data?"

"Yes, Mikey?"

"Are you scared?"
Data's expression softened, and he crouched down to the boy's eye level.

"I am," he said. "It's all right to feel afraid, Mikey. As you pointed out, there is a great deal at stake here. There is much that could be lost, but far more to gain if Dr. Crusher is successful."

Mikey nodded, and gave the android's hand a stronger squeeze.

"OK," he said. "I'm ready."

*******

Kurak watched as the android and the human boy walked through the sliding doors, hand in hand. She still felt infuriatingly weak and woozy and far too nauseous to stand…yet, she knew the medications that had been pumped into her system weren't the only thing making her head swim.

"Hey you!" she croaked, and coughed. "Robot!"

"My name is Howard," Howard said cheerily. "How may I serve you?"

"Water," she demanded. "With ice! Who was that man who just left?"

"That man who just left' is my current de facto owner."

"What's his name, idiot?"

"My master's name is Lieutenant Commander Data," Howard told her as he headed across the room to fill her order at the replicator.

"Impossible," Kurak grunted. "Commander Data is a machine. I saw him when I was on the Enterprise."

"You are correct," Howard said, handing her a covered cup of ice water and a flexible straw. "Lt. Commander Data is a Soong-type android. Current assignment: Second Officer, USS Enterprise-E."

Kurak sipped the water and cleared her throat.

"Didn't look like that when I saw him," she grunted suspiciously. "Talk like that either. What's his story?"

"Lt. Commander Data is a Soong-type android," Howard repeated in his helpful way. "Current assignment: Second Officer, USS Enterprise-E."

"By Kahless," she growled, and threw her cup back at him. "I'd be better off talking to a computer! Where is everyone, anyway? I want to know how long before I can get out of this damned bed!"

"Would you like to summon an emergency contact?" Howard inquired, efficiently retrieving the cup and placing it back on the replicator shelf for dematerialization.

"Call Melinda, Tu'Pari, Nat, Freja, anyone," she snapped. "And, find my daughter! I won't have her ranking in school slip because of this."

"I am here to serve," Howard acknowledged and returned to the console to carry out her demands.

As Kurak fell back against her pillow with a fierce sigh, Silarra watched from her crouched position among the domed ceiling's metal support braces and smiled.
"I think I've gathered enough to get started..." she said to herself, and closed her little holorecording device. "Time to begin setting this plan into motion."

A firm tap on her wrist, and her camouflaged form silently dissolved into silver sparkles, subtle enough for the woozy Klingon below to dismiss as a trick of the light.

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

References Include - TNG: The Offspring (some direct quotes); Suspicions; Touched By An Angel: Psalm 151 (references primarily derived from a memory of watching this episode with my Grandma. I looked up its title on IMDb).

Next Time: What's Silarra up to? Will Dr. Crusher be able to help Mikey? Stay Tuned! Thanks so much for your reviews! :D

I hope you enjoyed this chapter! Please let me know what you think! :D

******

P.S.: I just got this 'inspirational e-mail' from a children's publishing magazine, and I thought it would be nice to pass on the message here in fanfic land 'cause it's the New Year and a good time to reevaluate, reaffirm, and reassert our inspiration, and also because it's something I happen to believe [enough for it to be the central theme of a story I wrote a few years ago: "The Day No One Died"]. :) So, here it is:

"As writers, we can often feel frustrated, and even overwhelmed, by our perceived smallness...We wonder whether our efforts truly matter, and whether the world really needs our contributions.
"If we can give you one gift to begin 2017, it would be to erase that sort of thinking from your mind...Because it only takes one reader to be changed and moved by your words for you to set in motion a massive impact on this planet.
"We like to think that big changes in the world happen only by big people doing big things. But that's not true at all. The history of the planet is really the history of the "butterfly effect". Of people with vision inspiring others, who then inspire others. "You are a critical part of this cycle, and you absolutely cannot give up and break this chain. Your butterfly wings can create a hurricane of humanity, decency and hope. But only if you are willing to fly."

I think this message is particularly relevant to fanfiction writers and fanfiction readers - to all the stories we create and enjoy together. Happy 2017, and thanks so much for reading my stories! :D
Hi! I got kicked in the throat by this awful paraflu virus thing and I've only just today started to be able to sit up and read again. I've been going nuts listening to old stuff on ancient eight hour tapes taped back when there were tapes 'cause I couldn't get up to change disks. For not being an 'actual' flu this thing's been worse than most of the 'real' flus I've had and that's pretty awful. Still can't talk right, can only stand up for a short time without getting ridiculously dizzy, but I had to write something or scream (which I can't do due to laryngitis), so here's what I could do after working literally all day. :([1][2] It was supposed to be the start of Chapter Thirty but will have to settle for being Chapter Thirty until I can finish the rest, which is all patchy and scattered right now because I'm so tired everything blobs out like this blobby blob. Bleb. So, here it is, a short something to prove to myself that I'm still alive and that this awful energy-draining virus hasn't turned my aching brain to total mush. I hope. More on Data, Dr. Crusher, and Mikey's fate coming soon - 'specially if I finally get to get some actual sleep without coughing every three minutes! ...ow... Then, I'll get back to work on "Croaked" and see if I can finally finish "A Different Kind of Ace!" Only a couple more chapters to go on that one. What's left? A huge cake, angry genetic mutants, a space battle, angry genetic mutants, a huge cake... Stay Tuned, and thanks so much for your reviews! They've really helped me feel better! :)
"What the hell is that nonsense?" a voice called out from the front of the ship. "Silarra! Silarra, I want to talk with you!"

The Suliban hissed angrily, made a quick gesture with her fingers, and the holo-guise dropped away, exposing her own stony features.

"What are you doing, calling me here," she demanded irritably, glaring at her caller's face on the main viewscreen. "I told you, Boss-man, you'll get my next report when I give it."

The white-clad figure on the screen was uncomfortably back-lit, making it impossible to clearly distinguish his features or much of anything about his hat and clothes apart from their (lack of) color. Silarra scowled and squinted against the light, knowing full well he did that on purpose – a tactic to disorient both 'friend' and 'foe.'

"Given the amount I'm paying for this job, I don't think these updates are an unreasonable demand," the Boss-man hissed, "especially when I find you in a ship, in orbit, practicing tongue twisters in some ridiculous accent!"

"I know it's hard, Boss, but if you can dredge up a little patience I'll give you an explanation for that," Silarra said. "Shut up and watch this."

With subtle, deftly coordinated movements of her eyes, eyelids, tongue, and hands, the expert chameleon ran through her newly programmed gallery of guises: the Starfleet officers, the archaeologists, the newly arrived Starfleet doctor, her pilot and nurse, and even the three children.

Before she'd made it half-way through her demonstration, the Boss-man was laughing and clapping like a child at a puppet show.

"Wonderful, wonderful!" he cheered. "Next, you'll be passing yourself off as one of their horses." His overlit shadow leaned closer to the screen, and his voice grew cold. "Oh, you do take your time Silarra. But this trick of yours had better pay off. I want the information I sent you for."

Angry frustration twisted inside her, and she snapped, "What the hell do you think I'm doing with these guises? Playing dress-up? I've gone to a lot of trouble to get these recordings! The equipment I use ain't exactly cheap, Boss, and it's hardly basic user interface. It's an art, doing what I do. An art, and a skill. Especially considering they've got that damn android."

"Don't vent your troubles to me," the Boss-man snarled. "Just get me what I want. The sooner the better. The market doesn't run on patience, my dear – and you are hardly my only asset in this matter."

"That a threat, Boss-man?"

"Just a fact," the Boss-man said coyly. "One of those hard, cold facets of life. I will have what's mine with or without you. It's only to your benefit to deliver...on my terms."

Silarra bared her teeth, her pebbly skin turning a vivid, angry green.

"Until our next communication, my dear chameleon," the Boss-man said, his oily voice dripping with menace. "Don't disappoint me."

The screen darkened, and Silarra slammed her fists against the arms of her chair.
"…washed out, back-lit bastard..." she snarled with bitter anger. "I tell him: contact me only through my personal comm unit. So he hacks my ship, like some stupid, schoolyard power play! Computer!" she snapped. "Run another spybug scan, as deep and thorough as possible. Search for bug programs and physical tracers, old and new, starting with the comm system. Encrypt the results under Code Sil1355 - you know the rest. I'll deal with the findings when I get back."

"Acknowledged," the computer chirped, and Silarra stalked to the transporter touch pad at the back of her little craft. She rechecked her emergency failsafes and procedures, then tapped in the planetary coordinates for the Starfleet runabout just outside the archaeologists' compound.

"One last detail…" she said, enduring the static tickle of a guise shift, "and energize!"

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

References include - TNG: Devil's Due; Red Dwarf: Legion (from which I pinched hard light holograms that can exist outside a hologrid); and a couple of vocal warm up exercises I remember from a public speaking class.

Until next time, thanks so much for your nudges and for your reviews! It means a lot to know you're enjoying my stories. Thanks! :D
Chapter Thirty-One

The runabout's sickbay was even smaller and more compact than the clinic, but the scanning equipment was light-years ahead of the basic, collapsible emergency kit that came standard with the archaeologists' temporary, prefab structure.

Dr. Crusher stood before the wall display, her expression somber as she studied images of Mikey's chromosomal DNA and several screens of cancer cell samples she and her head nurse, Lt. Alyssa Ogawa, had collected from the boy. Beside that, a full-body scan highlighted the masses of tumors spread throughout the boy's little body in shades of red, orange, and yellow.

"I haven't seen anything like this since I took that course on Earth's Post-Atomic Horror at the academy," Ogawa said, her forehead wrinkled with compassion. "I remember my reaction when I first saw the images of the mutations and tumors caused by exposure to that much harmful radiation – especially the infants and small children whose bones and organs were still growing, still developing…" She shook her head, as if to clear it. "It's hard to believe such things still go on in this supposedly 'enlightened' age."

"I won't argue," Dr. Crusher said, her anger clear in her voice and posture. "From what I can tell, this boy's been surviving on sheer spit and guile. I've never seen a case so advanced. And, there is no reason for it to have gotten this bad. If this child had been brought to a hospital – any hospital – when he was first diagnosed, a single injection could have cured him! Now…"

"Mikey's condition was left untreated by his captors because he was viewed, not as a being, but as a damaged commodity," Data spoke from Mikey's bedside. "My question to you, Doctor, is can you repair the damage?"

Crusher turned to face him, and her hard expression softened. Even unconscious, Mikey held on to the android's hand – a connection Data seemed unwilling to break even to cross the small distance to
The display panel.

The scene reminded the doctor of another boy Data had rescued, years ago. Timothy Harris. Data had pulled the boy from the ruins of the SS Vico after his parents and the rest of the crew were killed in a terrible accident, and the two had quickly formed a strong connection. Impressed by the android's strength and abilities, Timothy had claimed he was an android too, imitating Data's mannerisms, the way he talked, and even his swept-back hairstyle.

Watching them together, Crusher had been amused, but also touched by how naturally Data had carried out his role as the boy's mentor. She remembered how Data had come to her for parenting advice when he created Lal; how concerned he had been that his perceived 'lack' of emotion would impede him from providing his daughter with the love and support he so wished to give.

Now, she was seeing those very emotions in full force on Data's newly 'upgraded' features… anxieties that, as a parent, she knew all too well…

And, it made her heart sink in her chest.

"I wish I could help him, Data," she said. "I truly do. But, the truth is…" She glanced back at the scan. "It doesn't look good. Enlarged liver and spleen, a rapidly failing immune system…tumors on the kidneys, the lungs…another here, near the heart…"

She shook her head, her expression sharpening with frustration.

"I'm afraid the cancer has metastasized too far. Even if I did attempt treatment, at this stage I don't think his system is strong enough to handle the trauma."

"What is the treatment?" Data asked.

"Well, genetic therapy for starters," Crusher said. "That would correct for the genetic mutation that triggered his condition, but it wouldn't be enough to handle all the existing tumors. Unfortunately, when a cancer is this advanced, excising the tumor can too often harm the affected organ more than the tumor itself…"

She raked a hand through her coppery hair and sighed sharply through her nose.

"At this point, I'd say his only hope would be cloned transplants," she said grimly. "And that hope is pretty slim, Data."

Data knit his dark eyebrows and glanced around the compact sickbay, his amber eyes seeming to catalog and analyze everything they saw.

"This facility is equipped for such a procedure," he said. "There is a small adjoining lab, where the required organs and tissues can easily be grown from Mikey's existing stem cells, and the operating theater, though quite compact, does feature the latest—"

"That requires time, Data," Crusher told him. "Time this boy doesn't have. Even if he did survive the transplant procedure, the strain would be too much for his body to handle. The recovery could kill him. I'm afraid I can't recommend it."

"That is unacceptable," Data stated, tightening his hold on Mikey's hand.

"That may be," she said, her brows quirked in angry challenge. "But, given the situation, it's all I've got. You're welcome to come up with something better."
Data's eyes grew fixed and focused, then began to move rapidly back and forth, as if reading text only he could see.

"Doctor," he said, his head snapping up. "You say that Mikey needs time. Time for you to prepare the required materials, and time for his body to recover and adapt to the necessary transplants. What if there was a way to provide him that time?"

"What are you suggesting, Data?" Crusher asked warily.

"I am suggesting we place Mikey in temporary stasis, Doctor," Data said.

"Stasis?" Ogawa repeated. "But, we don't have a stasis chamber. And, even if we did, how could we operate through it? Isn't the point of a stasis chamber to place a patient in suspended animation?"

"Yes. But," Data said, his enthusiasm building as the project coalesced in his mind, "I am proposing, not to construct a stasis chamber, but a stasis field – rather along the lines of a standard, adjustable energy field that can be penetrated by surgical lasers set to a specific frequency. The idea would not be to freeze Mikey's systems in time, merely to slow them enough to mitigate the trauma of the surgery as much as possible."

"You can do that?" Ogawa said, her eyes wide.

"I am certain that I could," Data said, and stared straight at Crusher. "With your permission, Doctor."

Crusher regarded him, her own mind beginning to churn over the possibilities until, slowly, she began to nod.

"I see," she said musingly. "What you're suggesting is not dissimilar to a procedure used during the twentieth century to keep stroke or heart attack victims from suffering brain damage due to a lack of oxygen. They would pack the patient in ice to induce hypothermia, lowering the patient's body temperature in an attempt to slow the metabolism as much as possible."

"Only, instead of ice, we'll be using this stasis field," Ogawa said.

"Exactly," Data said. "In theory, we should be able to use the field to control Mikey's metabolism rate during the surgery, monitor his healing process, and adjust as needed to ease the stress to his system while he recovers."

"How long would you need to create this field, Data?" Crusher asked.

"No more than six hours, Doctor," Data told her confidently. "Most of what I require is readily available, but I will have to replicate some tools and supplementary materials."

"All right, Data," Crusher said. "We'll give your idea a try. Alyssa, prepare the lab. If we start now, we should have the transplants ready to use by tomorrow."

"Yes, Doctor," Ogawa said, and strode off to carry out her orders.

Crusher looked to Data.

"That should give you more than enough time to construct and test your stasis field."

"Indeed, it will," Data said, his face breaking into a broad smile as he released Mikey's hand to take hers.

Crusher blinked, surprised both by the gesture, and by how warm – how human – his new skin felt.
The detail was incredible…faint blue veins, small freckles, dark hairs at his wrists and knuckles…

She turned her gaze to his warm, amber eyes, the faint shadow of beard bordering his smile…and was struck by a very peculiar twinge. It was unsettlingly similar to the odd feeling she'd had the first time she'd walked in on her son, Wesley, shaving in front of the bathroom mirror: the sudden jolt of understanding that he wasn't her little boy anymore, but a real, separate, grown-up person...

"Thank you, Beverly," Data was saying when she tuned back in. "I understand that this is a long shot, but I want you to know how much I appreciate your efforts, and the positive example you have set for the children just by coming here."

"Why, thank you Data," she said, caught rather off balance by such sincerely spoken compliments…as well as his use of her first name. As far as she could remember, he had only ever called her 'Doctor.' "I just hope you'll feel the same way after tomorrow's operation."

"I have full confidence in your abilities, Doctor," he said, and she knew it wasn't a platitude. "If you will excuse me, I should like to make use of the cafeteria replicator before supper."

Crusher watched as he cast a glance at Mikey, then headed through the sickbay's sliding doors, deeply rattled by what she'd just experienced and resolving to discuss Data's sudden 'upgrade' with Troi, Picard, and Riker as soon as she had the chance. If the changes she'd observed in their android friend had left her reeling, she had to wonder how the others were taking this 'new' Data…and whether his surprising decision to alter his appearance was as impulsive as it seemed.

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

References include - TNG: Hero Worship; The Offspring; The Game; Journey's End; Encounter At Farpoint.

Thanks again for reading! Please stay tuned and remember, reviews on this or any story tend to cure sickness and kill pain way more effectively than migraine pills. Thank you! :)

:(
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

Update! And, a long one too. Thank you so much for your reviews and well-wishes while I was sick! I feel like I've been playing crazy catch-up for weeks. I hope you enjoy this new chapter. Sorry about the wait! Please Review! :) See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Thirty-Two

"I still don't see what you need me for, Data," Geordi said though a yawn. Unlike Data, Geordi had his video feed turned on and Data could see his rumpled bedsheets in a corner of the computer screen, along with a scattered stack of work padds - an indication his friend had fallen asleep reading. Which made sense. Ship's time was five hours ahead of ground time in Nineveh IV's archaeological region, and it was not Geordi's habit to go to bed so early unless he'd intended to work late from his quarters. "You're the one with the positronic brain. If the numbers play out and the computer sim was positive, go ahead and run with it."

"I know, and I would," Data said, ignoring the blinking red prompt to activate his own video feed. "I expressed as much to Dr. Crusher. Yet, with a child's life at stake, I... I simply did not feel 'right' about implementing an original, untested design without first receiving your feedback."

"My feedback..." Geordi repeated, and pursed his lips as he again pulled up the screen with Data's schematics for his proposed medical stasis field. "Well, I do appreciate that, Data. But, you know you have a solid design here. What the hell – it's brilliant, OK? Especially the redundancies you've built into the power amplification system so if there's a power failure or fluctuation, your stasis field can automatically draw from a series of alternate sources without negatively affecting the performance of the runabout's key systems."

"That was necessary," Data said. "Conditions here are worryingly changeable. Already, we have endured multiple earthquakes and sandstorms, and the turbulent atmosphere makes network linkups spotty at best. If this field is to be effective, it must be able to hold for an extended period without threat of even the slightest falter."

Geordi nodded, his optic implants focusing in on the details of Data's blueprints.

"Well, of course, there's always a jump from theory to application. Nothing's ever truly perfect," he said. "But, in all honesty, I think you have a good idea. If it helps your confidence, you've got the green light from me. Is that what you wanted to hear?"

"It is... I suppose..."

Geordi sighed at the android's tone.

"Data, come on. We both know you don't need my opinion to validate your plans. What's this really about?"

He waited a long beat, but the only response he heard was the warped, windy static of atmospheric
and subspace interference.

Geordi scooted his rolling chair closer to the screen.

"Look, I know you can see me," he said. "Why don't you turn on the visual from your end and we can have a real conversation, OK?"

Data lowered his eyes to the computer terminal's touchpad, but made no move to activate the image feed.

"I apologize for my insecurity, Geordi," he said quietly. "It is just…these children have come to mean a great deal to me. If I should implement this design – my design – and something should go wrong—"

"Then, at least you'll have tried," Geordi cut in. "Which is way more than anyone else seems to have done for these kids. You have no reason to feel guilty here. None, got that? No matter how things turn out."

"Perhaps not," Data allowed. "But…am I doing enough?"

Geordi wrinkled his nose.

"What does that mean?" he asked warily.

Data leaned back, one foot swiveling his chair slightly from side to side.

"Why am I here, Geordi?" he said, rather flatly. "Why did the captain, first officer, and counselor of my ship 'invite' me to spend two weeks of my leave-time in their company, in such a radically different environment?"

Geordi smoothed a hand over his short hair, already aware where this was going.

"They do trust you, Data," he said. "We all do. It's just, you've been through so much in so short a time… It's only right that they should worry a little."

"Worry, yes…" Data said, and frowned. "As a parent might worry over a child."

"Data…" Geordi sighed. "You know that's not—"

"I have post-traumatic stress, Geordi," Data stated, rather bitterly. "My nightmares and flashbacks are vivid and terrible, and I cannot seem to stop this cycling anxiety…these awful doubts I feel about myself, my competence as an officer, and as a person… Seeing the concern in the captain's eyes…in Riker's and Troi's… Their worry only makes my doubts grow, until I feel I must escape or explode – either of which would only make me appear more 'unstable' to Starfleet Command."

"What the Borg did to you was terrible," Geordi said. "No one expects you to recover overnight. God, Data, it took the captain years to come to grips with what the Borg did to him, and Starfleet is still wary of—"

"Captain Picard is human, Geordi. I am a machine. The way Starfleet defines 'damage' and 'recovery' is quite different when your brain is not an organ but, rather, a manmade computer. But, that is not the point I wish to make."

"OK," Geordi said. "What is the point?"

Data paused for a long time, long enough for Geordi to wonder if the android had left. Then, quietly,
"I am not who I was," he said. "I will never again feel or act the way I did before the chip. I will not adapt to my emotions the way I might have had we not lost the D…had I not been held captive by the Borg…"

"Serving aboard the Enterprise-E, I have felt that my inability to conform to previous expectations others held for me, for my behavior, has been a terrible shortcoming. The fact that I could not manage to resume my former calm, rational persona, both on duty and in private, without swallowing back a large part of myself…it felt like a personal failure on my part. Each time I felt myself growing upset or frustrated, any time I felt like crying…I experienced this stab of…of guilt…of self-blame, as though I had let someone down. The captain, my friends, myself… And that article…that damn hatchet job… It just…it seemed to confirm all the terrible things I had already piled upon my conscience…everything I hated myself for doing, or failing to do…"

"But here, with these children…none of that... It hasn't..." Data swallowed hard, his eyes beginning to sting. "With them, I have shown myself to be vulnerable, angry, frightened…imperfect… Yet, when they look at me, I feel…I see…"

He sniffed sharply, his voice growing noticeably rougher.

"I see myself as they see me and, Geordi… For the first time since this emotional shitstorm knocked my life off course, I feel like…like the man they see is someone worthwhile. This man is strong, confident and caring. He…he actually stands for something. I don't want to mess that up, Geordi," he said and choked, hot tears streaming down his cheeks despite his best attempts to stop them. "Oh… oh, God, I'm sorry…"

"Data?" Geordi leaned forward, frustrated that he couldn't see his friend on the screen. "Hey, come on. Come on, pal, it's OK. Really."

"I don't want to cry," the android sniffled. "I want this to stop."

"Hey, sometimes it's not about what we want. It's about what our body needs," Geordi said. "If your brain needs to cry for a while, then go ahead and let it cry. Better to let the pressure out then hold it in and wait for the explosion, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes…" Data said, and sniffled a few more times. "That image is helpful. I will remember that."

"Don't sweat it, Data," Geordi said, and Data snorted a slight laugh, realizing his friend didn't yet know the android could sweat. "There, you see? You're already feeling better."

"I am," Data admitted, still chuckling softly. "Thank you, Geordi."

"Yeah," the engineer said. "I think I know where you're coming from, Data. That damn Borg Queen hit you right in the self-image, didn't she."

"Knocked it all to tiny splinters…" Data muttered, another quiet giggle escaping despite his anger.

Geordi nodded.

"That's a pretty tough blow to recover from."

"There may not be enough adhesive in the galaxy…"

"Yet, here you are, cracking jokes," Geordi pointed out.
"Yes, here I am," the android said, and sighed deeply. "Geordi?"

"Yeah, Data?"

"I miss my daughter, Geordi," he said. "I miss the children aboard the Enterprise-D. This new ship of ours seems so dark and bleak without them."

"It's a battleship, Data," Geordi said grimly. "Maybe next time, once things have settled down and people aren't so afraid, they'll make the Enterprise a family ship again."

"That may be a long time, Geordi," Data pointed out. "And…I am not certain that I want to wait."

Geordi frowned.

"Now, what are you saying?"

"I know that the captain, Riker and Troi are evaluating my performance here," Data said. "I know the counselor is considering whether to recommend I take an extended leave from my duties. While such a recommendation would not necessarily sully the reputation of a human officer, I have no doubt it would be a death-knell for my career. Any aspirations I may hold for promotion – for command – would be snuffed out. So, why should I wait for the ax to fall, as it were, when I could request a transfer now? Perhaps, to a deep space research vessel that allows children and families as well as pets."

"You'd really do that?" Geordi asked. "You'd really want to leave the Enterprise? Your friends?"

Data went silent again, and Geordi shook his head.

"You've only been away from the ship four days, Data," he said. "I've heard it's been something of a roller coaster down there so far, but if you want my advice, I say keep this thought of yours quiet for now. Let the rest of the trip play out. If, after the full two weeks leave are up, you're still considering a transfer, let's talk it over then. You and me – before you talk to the others. OK?"

"OK," Data echoed.

Geordi pursed his lips, still wishing he could see his friend's face.

"You know what I think?" he said after a thoughtful moment.

"What do you think, Geordi?" Data asked.

"I think this impulse to leave us is a sign you're getting better."

"Better?"

"Yeah," Geordi said. "Let me put it like this… It's like, you have this sailboat, right? And it used to be you always kept your sailboat docked at this little harbor marina. Even during a storm, when the other boats were out tossing and swaying on the swells, yours was always in the calm, balanced and stable."

"Geordi, I—"

"Then suddenly," Geordi said, "after this one weirdly awkward day, a realization struck. The marina just wasn't cutting it for you anymore. You decided you were past due for a change of scene."

"I believe I can see where this is going, Geordi," Data started, but his friend didn't pause.
"You convinced your best friend to help you raise anchor and pull away from the dock," he said. "And now that you're finally out on the ocean, learning to navigate the wind and the waves with all the other sailboats, you pace around the swaying deck and fret. 'My boat never used to rock this much,' you say. 'I must be doing something wrong.'"

"I do not—"

"Now, let's bring these kids into the story," Geordi said. "When you first met them, your boat was already tossing around on the sea. But, to a frightened castaway, getting pulled up onto a rocking boat is as good as finding dry land. Add to that, these kids never saw your boat tied up to that marina dock. As far as they know, you've always been riding these waves, keeping your head, and theirs, above water. Is it any wonder they've come to see you as a bit of a hero? Is it any wonder you want to be that hero for them…now that you've found your sea legs?"

"An intriguing, and imaginative, metaphor, my friend," Data said, a trace of amusement in his voice. "But, you cannot really believe that I have found my 'sea legs,' as you put it."

"Sure I do," Geordi said. "I know it, because I know you've already been trying them out down there and, talking to you now, I can hear the difference in your voice. Helping those kids has brought some of your confidence back – enough to suggest the outline of a new self-image to step into. Who knows," Geordi smirked. "You might find you've already grown a new skin… A self-induced upgrade, if you will, to cover over the scars those Borg left on your 'inner being'."

Data blinked and straightened in his chair.

"You know!"

Geordi laughed and nodded.

"Dr. Crusher filled me in," he said. "We had a chat while she was waiting for permission to land. I think it was Riker who told her about the upgrade, and the informal speech you've started using down there. But, I'm sure he didn't mean to betray any confidence. The way Dr. Crusher tells it, he's really proud of you, Data. Really proud."

"That's good to know," Data said quietly. "Although, I must admit, I would have preferred to have revealed the news to you myself. In my own time…"

"You mean stress and angst about my imagined reaction until you got back to the ship and I saw the 'new you' for myself?"

Data felt his face grow warm, but he chuckled just the same.

"Perhaps…" he allowed.

"Hey, pal," Geordi said. "You have to know we're all rooting for you. And, if this new skin will help you feel more secure with your self – with who you are now – then, I'm all for it. Don't forget that I'm your friend, Data. No matter how alone you might feel at times, you've gotta know you can always count on me to have your back. No matter what."

"I do know, and I appreciate that, Geordi," Data said, swallowing hard as his eyes teared up again. "More than I can adequately express. Oh…" He sniffled, and wiped his eyes on his sleeve. "Now, I feel terrible about contemplating a transfer. I should never have doubted any of you."

"Just stop doubting yourself, Data," Geordi said. "That'll be enough for me. And, I'm sure, for Troi and the captain."
"You're right," Data said, and a slight, self-deprecating smile stretched his lips. "You are absolutely right, and I will try. Geordi, I want to thank you for—"

The door to the main building slid open, and Data turned just in time to catch Kahlestra as she threw herself into his arms for a hug.

"Data! So, this is where you've been hiding!" Kahlestra exclaimed, and glanced at the screen. "Who's that you're talking to?"

"Greetings, Kay. This is my friend Geordi La Forge, from the Enterprise," Data told her, returning the hug, then gently pushing the young Klingon back to her feet. "He serves as chief engineer."

"Who's there, Data?" Geordi asked.

"This is one of the three children I—"

"Hey, your vid-feed is off," Kahlestra observed, and pressed the blinking icon.

"Kay, wait—" Data started, then flushed violently as he realized it was already too late. Geordi could see them both.

The android winced.

"Well?" he asked.

"Well what?" Geordi teased, and tapped a finger to his temple. "You look just like an android to me. Electromagnetic halo and all."

"And, if you access only the visual spectrum?" Data prompted.

Geordi blinked, and the blue-tinted mechanisms in his optic implants whirled as he made the adjustment.

"You changed the shape of your eyes, and your hairline, just there…" he said. "And your ears are a little different too. A composite? Soong and Juliana?"

"Precisely," Data said happily. "I believe you are the first to notice, unprompted, that I decided to include aspects of both my mother and my father in my new appearance."

"Well, it works, Data," Geordi said honestly, and quickly readjusted his implants to process the full electromagnetic spectrum, as his VISOR had done. "You've finally got a face that's truly, uniquely yours. How do you feel?"

"It was strange at first," Data admitted. "I think I was a little worried that, by altering my appearance in this way, I was somehow…disappointing my father… Tampering with his legacy, if that makes sense…? But it has been nearly a full day now and, I have to admit, I… I'm starting to like the way I feel when I see this face in the mirror. It is as if – as if my brother's shadow has finally faded from my reflection, leaving only my face. My eyes. My smile."

He grinned broadly in demonstration.

"See?" he said. "And, the compliments I have so far received from Deanna and Beverly don't hurt either," he added, attempting a wink.

Geordi laughed.
"Well, that's great, Data," he said. "I'm glad to know you've been taking advantage of this trip to explore who you are on your own terms. Not Starfleet's – and certainly not ours. Promise me you'll keep it up."

"I will try, Geordi," Data said.

"That's a good start," Geordi said, and turned his eyes to the young Klingon standing by Data's side. "Hello there," he said, his smile broadening. "You must be Kurak's daughter. Kahlestra, am I right?"

"Yeah," Kahlestra said, "but my Federation friends call me Kay."

"All right, Kay," Geordi said. "You know, I remember your mother from her visit to the Enterprise."

"What's to remember?" Kahlestra grunted. "She got to go to the Federation's flagship, got all mad and grumpy, and didn't even bring me back a souvenir."

"What would you have wanted?" Data asked curiously.

"I don't know," she said. "Just something, you know? I mean, she knew I wanted to come. Would it have been so hard to bring back some, like, special Federation candy or something?"

Geordi chuckled.

"She's cute," he said. "Kind of reminds me of Alexander."

"That's Commander Worf's son, right?" Kahlestra said. "I've heard of him. Commander Worf is pretty famous in the Klingon Empire for how he's aided Chancellor Gowron, and how he helped seat the Clone of Kahless as Emperor, and stuff like that."

"Yeah," Geordi snorted. "Not like the rest of us helped at all."

"Hey, yeah – of course you would have been there!" Kahlestra said, turning her bright eyes from Geordi to Data. "Then…no way. No way – Data! Data, don't tell me you actually met the Clone of Kahless!"

Geordi's grin nearly split the screen.

"Data, I've got to go," he said. "Unlike some people, I'm on duty in the morning. Dilithium chambers don't upgrade themselves, you know."

"OK, you can go," Kahlestra said, hugging Data's arm. "But, you better remember what your friend looks like because I plan to keep him."

Data looked troubled, but Geordi laughed and slapped the table.

"Get this," he chuckled. "One day in that new skin, and already a girl magnet!"

"Hardly," Data said rather primly, and Geordi laughed harder.

"Hey, thanks for calling, Data. Let me know how things go with that stasis field, OK?"

"OK, Geordi," Data said. "And, thank you."

His friend nodded, and cut the transmission. Once the screen had cleared to black, Data turned to Kahlestra.
"Kay," he said gently. "You must be aware that I cannot stay here. My leave is only temporary."

"Yeah, I know," Kahlestra said dismissively, and smiled up at him. "So, what were you two talking about before I came in?"

"We were discussing me, if you must know," Data said. "As well as my plans to construct a stasis field to help mitigate the physical stresses of Mikey's surgery and subsequent recovery."

Kahlestra's eyes widened.

"Whoa… Then, you really do think you can cure him?" she asked.

"If my stasis field operates successfully, the odds of a full recovery would rise significantly," Data told her, and the young Klingon beamed with pride.

"Buy' ngop!" she praised happily. "But, you know, Ishta still doesn't believe you can help him," she said. "She's convinced Mikey's going to die even with the doctor's help."

"She may yet be right," Data admitted. "There are no guarantees with an operation like this, Kay. But, Dr. Crusher and Lt. Ogawa have already begun growing the materials for transplant. And, once we have finished our conversation here, I intend to spend the remaining hour and a half before supper in sickbay, beginning to implement my designs."

"Can I watch?" Kahlestra asked. "Mother's been after me about my stupid summer homework, but I'm sure I'd learn much more from watching you and Dr. Crusher!"

"That must be up to your mother," Data said. "If she agrees, I would be happy to have you as my assistant. Ishta as well, if she is willing."

"Ishta's too busy playing mind games with Counselor Troi," Kahlestra said. "She says the grown-ups are all conspiring to keep us away from you because they think we're too close, and that's why we've barely seen you all day."

Data wrinkled his forehead.

"I do not believe that to be the case," he said. "But, I assure you, I would much rather have spent the day here with you children than down in those awful tunnels. The energy field in operation down there does not agree with my systems."

He shivered a little at the memory of his sweaty, headachy discomfort, and Kahlestra laughed.

"Still, there was a positive outcome," he said. "Had I not been present, the doors may not have opened, and we would not have glimpsed the energy source beneath the Stairway."

"Wait," Kahlestra said. "You saw the energy source?"

"Quite possibly," Data said. "Though it will require a great deal more research before we can be certain. On this world, that is not my responsibility, but that of your mother, Dr. Kapoor, Dr. Anders, and Dr. Tu'Pari. Which leaves me free to lend my assistance to our dear friend Mikey in any way I can. At least, for now."

He stood, and held out his hand.

"Shall we go?"

"Let's," Kahlestra said, taking his hand and giving it a squeeze as they walked out the door—
—and straight into a very irate-looking Kurak.

"What is this," the Klingon hissed, her burning glare shifting from Data to her daughter. "Another lie, Kahlestra?"

"I do not lie!" Kahlestra screeched, and Data flinched in surprise.

"You told me you would stay in our dome," her mother snapped. "Does this look like our dome?"

Kahlestra bared her teeth.

"I said I'd stay until I finished my stupid worksheet. I finished it. You can check if you want!"

"And you, android," Kurak snarled, ignoring her daughter's protest to glare up at Data. "What is your excuse for luring my daughter away from her studies?"

"I did no such thing," Data retorted, his startled expression growing angrily defensive. "Your daughter came to me, to ask if she could assist—"

"She has no business asking favors of you, or anyone else here," Kurak snapped, and grabbed her daughter's hand. "Come, Kahlestra," she growled. "Do not shame yourself further by making a scene."

"I didn't shame anyone," Kahlestra howled, her voice rising to a piercing shriek. "I want to help Data!"

"Perhaps, after supper?" Data suggested to Kurak, wincing slightly as he rubbed his sensitive ears. "If you are amenable, of course. I assure you, a child as bright as your daughter could only be of help to both myself and Dr. Crusher, and you are certainly welcome to accompany—"

"My daughter knows better than to draw outsiders into what is a private, family matter," Kurak growled dangerously, and viciously yanked Kahlestra after her down the narrow corridor. Kahlestra dug her heels into the floor, but Kurak only pulled harder.

"Pick up your feet and follow," she commanded. "I swear by Kahless, you will learn your place, daughter – or, would you rather your father taught it to you?"

"...and Starfleet had the gall to question my competence as a parent..." Data muttered angrily, watching through eyes like yellow diamonds as the pair disappeared around a curve.

Walking away was one of the hardest things he'd ever done.

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

References Include - TNG: The Offspring; Peak Performance; Best of Both Worlds I/II; I, Borg; Datalore; Brothers; Inheritance; New Ground; Heart of Glory; Cost of Living; Firstborn; Rightful Heir; Redemption I/II; Hero Worship; Suspicions; and the movies Generations and First Contact.

Please Review! :)
Update! :D Things have been crazy busy going to New York and back and anyway after several weeks of rain and chaos I vowed that I was going to write something out today no matter what. Of course, I made the same vow yesterday and the day before, and the day before... But tonight I actually managed it and it was so wonderful to finally get to write out something new! I just hope you enjoy this next chapter. Please let me know what you think! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Your mom's a real nut, you know that?" Ishta said, crouched in her usual way against the wall facing the sliding doors. "Where does she come off locking you in your room like this? And, why the hell are you just sitting there letting her do it?"

"She is not, she didn't 'lock' me in my room, and I'm not 'letting' her do anything," Kahllestra grunted, shooting a glare over the stack of work padds cluttering her small, metallic desk. "I need to fix this essay. And you can sit on a chair, you know."

"She is, you are, and I like it where I am," Ishta retorted. "Besides, I thought you said you were done with this school work crap."

"Mother said my last essay was rushed and sloppy, and she's right," Kahllestra said irritably. "I can't risk letting my grades slip. So, shut up for a minute and let me finish this. I want to be done before dinner so we can go help Data after!"

Ishta snorted, propping her chin on her knees and squinting her eyes.

"And if you're not?" she said. "What's mommy-dearest gonna do? Yell at you? Slap you around? Jab you with some Klingon pain stick?"

"This isn't about her, OK," Kahllestra snapped. "So, drop it!"

"What's the big deal?" Ishta pressed. "School's out, isn't it? Isn't that why you're here, on this dustball planet? 'Cause your big-shot scientist mommy didn't have anywhere else to stick you for the summer?" She smirked. "What's a matter: Daddy too busy with his new family to find time for you?"

"It's not like that!"

Kahllestra fiercely whacked a stack of padds, sending them flying toward the young Orion so hard and so fast, Ishta had to cover her head with her arms.

"What the hell?" she shrieked.

"You don't know anything about my mother or my Family," Kahllestra snarled. "So why don't you just shut up!"

Ishta stood, her blue eyes burning behind her long bangs.
"I know a lot," she retorted. "Way more than you and your sheltered little school-box brain will ever know. In fact, I'm still alive because I learn fast, and I listen."

Kahlestra grunted.

"Whatever."

"I know your mom was supposed to be best friends with that Dr. Baker lady who got killed," Ishta said, advancing slowly until she was leaning over the small desk. "I know Dr. Baker was the one who got her a job here after government funding for her solar-shields project dried up. And, I know that this afternoon when those other scientists told your mom how Dr. Baker got killed protecting you, she just stood there and nodded like they just gave her some dumb data analysis report. She didn't so much as shed one tear!"

"Duh," Kahlestra snarked, grimly fisting her scarred hand. "Of course she didn't. She's a Klingon."

"What, are you saying Klingons are too tough to cry?" Ishta taunted.

"Pahtak!" Kahlestra pushed back the table, forcing the Orion to step away. "I'm staying we can't. Klingons don't have tear ducts, Miss 'I Know A Lot'!"

"Then, how do your eyes stay wet?" Ishta snapped back.

"Read for yourself," Kahlestra said, ramming a data chip into one of her school padds and tossing it at her. "There, everything you never wanted to know about Klingon anatomy. Have fun!"

Ishta caught the padd, but didn't look at the screen. Just holding it seemed to make her uncomfortable.

"You can't expect me to read a Klingon book."

Kahlestra rolled her eyes.

"It's in Standard. Just look at the title."

"I don't care," Ishta said, holding the padd out to her like a dead mouse. "I'm not reading this."

"Come on, it's basic fifth-grade biology. We went through the whole thing last year, and it's really —"

"Hey!" Ishta snapped, her sudden flare of outrage genuinely startling the young Klingon. "Just because I never went to some fancy school doesn't mean I haven't learned things. Real things about real life. So, maybe mother-dearest can force you to sit here all day filling your head with this bookworm shit, but I don't need it, OK! I don't need any of you!"

She slammed the padd against the edge of the desk so hard the protective plastic cover splintered, then tossed it to the floor and stormed out of Kahlestra's family dome.

"Fine!" Kahlestra shouted after her, angrily picking up and re-stacking her scattered padds. "I never asked you to come in here anyway!"

*******

The desert sun was beginning to sink below the hills, but the wind and sand still burned as Ishta ran across the compound, stopping near the mid-point to scream at the top of her lungs.
She stood there and screamed again and again, until she sank to her knees and sobbed – harsh, broken, angry gasps that only deepened her despair.

"...stupid..." she sobbed against the sand. "What the hell is the point of getting out when you're too dumb for any other life..."

******

"But, why would she wish to isolate her daughter to such an extent?" Data inquired, snapping the access panel back into place on Mikey's biobed and moving to the wall terminal to test his new link-ups. "Would it not be more beneficial to her education to gain hands-on experience?"

"I don't know, Data," Dr. Crusher said as she ran similar function tests on the incubation tray across the room. The tray housed an array of clear canisters Nurse Ogawa had filled with a softly glowing pink growth solution. The cloned organs they had started in the lab would be ready for transfer into those canisters within the next four to six hours, and Crusher wanted to see for herself that the runabout's equipment was working as it should, rather than rely on a single, remote diagnostic cycle. "But, from what I've learned dealing with Worf and Alexander, Klingons can be pretty intense when it comes to education. To them, education isn't about allowing children to explore their own interests as they learn. It's about passing down traditions. Codes of conduct, philosophies, ways of doing and thinking and telling stories that go back centuries. Many Klingons view their traditions as a long, unbroken branch connecting past and future, and some more conservative groups worry that exposure to foreign ideas and outside influences breeds doubt and questions that can too easily snap that branch, shattering their cultural continuity and, by extension, their children's link with their past, forever."

"Hm," Data grunted musingly. "But, Doctor, if that is the case, why would Kurak allow her daughter to travel to a Federation world in the first place?"

"Maybe she didn't have a choice, Data," Crusher said. "It can be very difficult being a single parent, especially when your work requires you to travel. I remember how hard it was when I left Wesley to take that position at Starfleet Medical, and that was only for a year. Of course, he was older, and he had Jean-Luc and all of you as his mentors... But, in that year, he changed so much, and I knew I could never get back that time with him. Working here, so far from the Klingon Empire... I can barely imagine how hard it must be for a Klingon struggling to raise a young daughter from such a distance."

Data furrowed his brow.

"Perhaps..." he said. "But, I am still of the opinion that Kahlestra's interests would be better served if —"

"Data," Crusher said, walking to his side and placing a hand on his arm. "Let me give you some advice. No matter how good your intentions may be, getting between a parent and her child is never wise."

"But, Doctor, you didn't see—"

"Listen," she said. "Kurak may be high-strung, but she's really not as close-minded as she seems. Give her a few days to relax, to get used to us being here. If you respect her decisions now, I think she'll come to acknowledge that your friendship with Kay isn't a threat to her authority. In fact, she might just realize it's been beneficial to both of you."

Data sighed through his nose, but nodded.
"I understand," he said. "If our roles were reversed, I would likely hesitate to trust a stranger with my daughter."

Crusher smiled, just slightly, and gave the android's arm an affectionate pat.

"So," she said, "how's the stasis field coming?"

"The computer simulations I ran through with Geordi were quite promising," he reported, his expression brightening as he spoke. "And my initial tests of these new link-ups indicate the redundancies I have built into the runabout's power system to supply the field will hold as planned. Once I have finished constructing and programming this new control pad, I will be ready to test the field's performance."

"I'd like a chance to practice manipulating the field as well," Crusher said, watching his pale hands precisely arrange minute data chips and circuit boards at a speed that would seem surreal if she wasn't so used seeing him deal cards at the weekly poker games the senior staff still held aboard the Enterprise. "I need to know how it feels using my instruments while the stasis field is in operation. If there's any interference or refraction when I activate the laser scalpel—"

"I assure you, I am taking all such matters into consideration," Data said. "If the field works as planned, the operation itself should take place in real time. Only the effects on Mikey's body will be slowed, allowing his systems more time to adapt to and recover from the trauma, and more time for you to identify and remove any cancerous cells that may recur following the transplants."

"Well, I'll believe it when I see it," she said, casting a long glance at Mikey's peacefully sleeping face. "But, I'll warn you again, Data, not to get your hopes too high. When a cancer is this advanced, the chances of survival—"

"I am quite aware of the statistics, Doctor," Data interrupted her. "Just as I am aware that an adjustable stasis field like the one I have designed has never yet been employed to aid such an operation. If this field performs as anticipated, the likelihood of Mikey's survival jumps from practically nil to nearly forty percent. Factor in your skill and experience, as well as that of Lt. Ogawa and myself, and the likelihood jumps still higher. Beyond that…"

His busy hands stilled, and he turned to face her.

"Mikey wants to live, Doctor," he said, the passion in his voice mirrored in his amber eyes. "Surely, that must count for something."

Crusher pursed her lips, and covered his warm hand with hers.

"It does, Data," she said, still marveling at the way he could look and act so different, yet seem so much the same. "It counts for a great deal. But, let me tell you something most doctors have to learn the hard way."

She led him to a folding metal chair and pulled over a wheeled stool so she could sit beside him.

"You can't hinge your hopes, or your self-confidence, on the outcome of an operation. The cold facts are, you can plan for every contingency, you can do everything exactly right, yet still lose the patient in the end."

Data sighed through his nose and shook his head, his expression wry.

"Doctor, I realize you are attempting to prepare me, emotionally, for a potentially negative outcome and I appreciate the effort, but there really is no need," he said. "Mikey and I have already spoken
extensively on this very topic. In addition…” He averted his eyes, just slightly. "I have been through a similar situation before."

Crusher winced as a tangible sadness washed over the android's expression, making his fresh, youthful skin seem washed out and careworn.

"I'm sorry, Data," she said, memories of Lal's loss causing her own heart to ache. "I should have realized—"

"No, Doctor, you have no reason to apologize," he said. "I too am a scientist. I understand that even the most painstakingly conducted experiments can fail."

"But, as scientists," Crusher said, "we mustn't forget that such experiments still have value. Even if the outcome doesn't go as planned, the results can lead to other breakthroughs. That's why it's important for us to think globally in a situation like this, and consider the broader potential of your innovations. Data, I'd like to ask you something."

"Please do," he said, and she smiled.

"With your permission, I'd like to write an article about this invention of yours. Perhaps we could collaborate – I'll outline the medical procedure, you fill in the technical side. What do you say? Are you interested?"

Data blinked, his eyebrows raised halfway to his hairline.

"Is this proposal not a bit premature?" he said.

"I don't think so," she told him. "This adjustable stasis field you've cooked up could have a considerable number of applications, and not just in the medical field. I'd say an article is warranted, no matter the outcome."

Data seemed rather overwhelmed.

"I must admit, while I have been a subject of numerous scientific and medical texts, I have never yet submitted my own work to a medical journal. I suppose I feared such a submission by an android might seem…presumptuous…"

He blinked a few more times, then raised his head, a broad smile stretched across his face.

"Yes, Doctor," he said. "I would be honored and delighted to co-author a paper with you."

"Excellent," she said, and gave his shoulder a friendly clasp. "I'd like to get Alyssa in on this as well. This operation will be something entirely new. I want to be sure to record every aspect."

"As you wish, Doctor," Data said. "I believe Mikey will be quite pleased to learn our efforts to save his life may well have a positive impact on the lives of others."

"I think you're right. And you should be the one to tell him, as soon as he wakes up," Crusher said, and she and Data rose to their feet, ready to head back to their work.

"Beverly," Data said, and she turned in surprise.

"Yes, Data?"

"I… I am not quite certain if I am phrasing this correctly," he said. "But, I believe I have a 'good feeling' about this upcoming operation. The sensation is not logical or rational yet, somehow, I know
this procedure will work. Do...do you have a similar...feeling?"

Crusher considered his question seriously before answering, "Actually, Data, I think I do."

The android beamed, a new sort of confidence adding speed and surety to his inhumanly nimble fingers as, over the next few minutes, he finished constructing the control pad and hooked it into place.

"Doctor," he announced, "we can begin testing the field's functionality as soon as you are ready to __"

A harsh, windy sound crackled over the runabout's comm system, followed closely by Freja's voice.

"Attention all personnel: a group meeting will be held in the main cafeteria in fifteen minutes. Dinner will be directly after the meeting, followed by a special memorial service for our dear friend, Dr. Melinda Baker. Once again, that's the main cafeteria in fifteen minutes. Don't be late!"

"It's fourteen and a half minutes now," Data couldn't keep himself from commenting as he strode toward the adjoining lab where Howard had been dutifully assisting Nurse Ogawa.

"Excuse me," he said politely, waiting for the silvery-green robot to face him before he went on. "Howard, I need you to watch over things here for a couple of hours. Please contact me at once if Mikey wakes up, or if his status should change in any way. Do you understand, Howard?"

"I understand," Howard acknowledged cheerily, and Ogawa smiled behind her hand. "I am here to serve."

"Thank you, Howard," Data said. "Lieutenant, are there any orders you would wish to add?"

"Actually, if it's all right, sir, I'd like to stay here with Howard and continue what I'm doing. That meeting isn't for me. My time would be better spent monitoring these samples."

"Doctor?" Data inquired.

"It's all right with me, Alyssa," Crusher said from the other room.

"Then, I agree as well," Data said, offering her a smile which she gratefully returned.

Data turned to leave, only to find Howard shadowing his footsteps.

"Howard?" he inquired. "Is there a reason you are following me?"

"I am Howard," Howard said. "I am here to serve. If Lt. Ogawa is to remain, are my services here no longer required?"

Data quirked an eyebrow, regarding the robot curiously.

"How intriguing," he said. "You've never questioned an order before."

"I am here to serve," Howard announced. "My purpose is to best serve you."

"Indeed?" Data kindly clasped the robot's arm. "Then listen closely. Mikey's status is extremely important to me. Therefore, you can best serve me by staying here and following my orders. Understood?"

"Understood," Howard said, and moved obligingly toward Mikey's biobed. "I am here to serve. I
will monitor the boy's condition and contact you at once if there is any change."

"That's right..." Data said, his forehead deeply furrowed.

"Anything wrong, Data?" Crusher asked, returning from the sickbay's small washroom to hang up
her long, blue lab coat on her way toward the door.

"I do not believe so, Doctor," Data told her, though his sharp eyes were still fixed on the robot. "But,
as soon as Mikey's operation is over, I intend to conduct a comprehensive pathway analysis of
Howard's duotronic brain."

He blinked away his intense expression, then offered her a friendly smile as he gestured politely
toward the sliding doors.

"After you, Doctor."

Chapter End Notes

To Be Continued…

Stay Tuned for More, and Please Review! :D
Hi everyone! Apologies for the very long delay between updates. The crochet doll figures I make brought me to NYC for a while, I got to be an extra in an independent short, and I got involved in a cool project to turn the Batman/Joker story I've been working on into a free audio book - with real actors (and me) providing the voices! So excited! If you're interested, let me know. I'll be posting information about how to access the free audio book in my profile once we've finished it. :D First, though, it's up to me to write that story's conclusion and finish the script which - along with a few other original projects - is why it's been so long between updates over here. But, I think about this story all the time and I'm always really excited when I get to share a new chapter with you. This is just a short segment, but more is coming soon! I hope you like this next part! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Troi's footsteps clanged in the tubelike metal corridor as she hurried to head off Data and Dr. Crusher before they made it to the cafeteria's sliding doors.

"Counselor?" Data said.

"Data, Beverly, I'm glad I caught you," she said. "I have some good news about Mikey. My contact at the Federation Embassy has tracked down his living relatives. They're on Earth, and willing to take custody as soon as he's well enough to travel."

"Well, that is good news," Crusher said, smiling.

"Indeed, Doctor," Data agreed. "And Ishta?"

Troi's expression fell.

"That's a little more complicated," she said. "Mikey was born in the Federation and, despite his world's disputed status, he remains a Federation citizen. Ishta isn't. And, she's a minor. The way the Federation sees it, as long as her mother—"

"Her mother put her on the market!" Data protested before Troi could finish.

Crusher placed a calming hand on his arm.

"Surely, you're not saying the Federation would consider sending that child back to Orion," she said to Troi. "Not after all she's been through."

"Such a decision would be most unwise," Data said angrily. "There must be another option. Don't forget, Counselor, Ishta was rescued from a Skin trafficking ring. That entitles her to Federation asylum, and special protection under Federation law. An emergency VISA should be issued by—"

"It's not that straightforward, Data," Troi said tiredly. "Not anymore…"

"I don't understand," Data said. "Federation policy is clear."
"Policy is influenced by politics, Data," Troi told him. "And the political climate on Earth has changed considerably since the Dominion War began. People are frightened - frightened to the point of xenophobia. Fringe groups like the Keep Earth Human League, while still a minority, have become a growing voice in government. You're probably aware that, in the last election, nearly every candidate the K.E.H.L. supported won their seat, and they've been fighting to pass policies based on their closed border platform ever since. And it's not just Earth, Data. Betazed has been going through its own bout with anti-alien sentiment. There's been talk of building a protective energy web, rather like a force field, into the planet's weather modification network to better monitor and even restrict the comings and goings of offworlders."

"Given the Federation's superior tracking and sensor technologies, such a measure would seem redundant," the android grunted. "But why should this trend toward paranoia affect Ishta's ability to remain in Federation territory?"

"Because, officially, the Orion slave trade is a thing of the past. The Orion Consulate has instructed if 'rogue' cells should be found operating within the Federation's borders, any Orion citizens we recover from such cells should be classified as 'kidnapped'...as you and Kay were...rather than as victims of the slave trade, and returned to Orion territory without delay. If they resist, they are to be deported to Orion by force."

"You can't be serious..." Crusher muttered.

Troi went on, rather helplessly.

"That means, according to the Federation Embassy and the Orion Consulate, if Ishta stays here, with us, she can be classified as an Orion citizen illegally residing in Federation space, with no claim on the Federation's emergency right to asylum. My contact told me if she wants to remain here, she must first return to Orion Prime, where her legal guardian must fill out an official petition on her behalf, then—"

"She has no legal guardian on Orion Prime!" Data exclaimed, raising his arms. "Her mother relinquished any right to guardianship when she sold her child to the highest bidder! As for the Orions we escaped - they made no distinction between those of us they had kidnapped and those they had purchased. They classified us all as merchandise for sale! I rescued her from that. I brought her here. That makes me her de facto guardian. Tell your contact I will fill out any required forms in that capacity, on her behalf."

Troi winced.

"I'm afraid that won't work, Data," she said. "Even if the Embassy agrees with you... Your...um... well..."

She gestured awkwardly and, for that moment, Data felt more nakedly mechanical than he had without his skin.

"Good God!" he cried. "Forget adoption - are you telling me I do not have the standing to serve as temporary signatory for—"

"Data, I'm not—" she tried to break in.

"Decades of loyal Starfleet service," he said, his amber eyes wide, "a legal battle to establish my right to choose, and still I remain as Kivas Fajo described. Just an android. A positronic thing dressed up in Starfleet colors! I have the right to serve or to quietly leave service, but should I ever seek to become someone's legal guardian, to build a family...to branch beyond my day-to-day duties... Up
pops that uncomfortable, unanswerable question. Is this Data machine alive or not? More poetically, does it possess a soul? Is this engineered construct competent to take on a role demanding independent thought and leadership? Or, does it lack the social acumen...the emotional capacity, or emotional control..."

"Data..." Troi tried again, but he waved her off, his frustration sending him pacing up and down the narrow, curving corridor.

The vibration of his quick, heavy steps shook several strands of his new, human-looking hair free of its severely swept-back style; strands that tickled his high forehead. His fierce attempts to push them back only dislodged more.

He stopped pacing and grunted in disgust.

"What the hell kind of place have we become?" he snapped. "Is this not supposed to be the United Federation of Planets? Are we not supposed to welcome those who need our aid - celebrate our strength in cooperation and honest debate and not deny the realities around us?

"Listen," he said, turning back to Troi. "Under Federation law as previously interpreted by the high courts of Earth, Vulcan, and the entire UFP, Ishta's situation merits Federation asylum as an emancipated minor. This is a fact separate from any reactionary political paranoia or bureaucratic red tape. If your contact at the Embassy feels he cannot achieve this, I will contact Captain Phillipa Louvois at JAG Headquarters with a request to put together an emergency legal team of our own. And, if she should decline, android or not, I shall go to Earth, engage the media, and argue Ishta's case myself. Tell him that," he said. "Make sure he understands."

"It won't come to that, Data," Troi assured him, her tired eyes fixed firmly on his. "I still have a few more strings I can pull. And, if they don't come through, there's always my mother..."

Data stilled, then nodded, then offered her a small, rather sheepish smile.

"Your efforts to help in this matter are deeply appreciated," he said. "Deanna. I apologize for snapping at you as I did."

Troi's expression softened, and she clasped his arm.

"I'll get back on the comm," she said. "They don't need me at that meeting anyway. Tell Will and the captain I'll be in for supper, and the memorial service."

"I'll save a plate for you," Crusher said, and Troi smiled.

"Thank you, Deanna," Data said. "If you should wish a full report—"

"I'll let you know, Data," she said, sharing an amused glance with the doctor as she started back down the corridor.

"After you, Doctor," Data said politely, and followed Crusher into the cafeteria dome...their long shadows obscured by a third in the moments before the sliding doors closed...

To Be Continued...
References Include - TNG: The Measure of a Man; The Offspring; The Most Toys; and the TOS novel Sarek.

Please review! :D
Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The meeting was just getting underway when Data and Dr. Crusher walked into the cafeteria dome. The lights over the long, fold-out table had been dimmed and the far wall, across from the replicator, had been set up with a holoprojector to provide visual aids as the archaeologists took turns making brief presentations. Now that they’d come to accept the Starfleet officers, not merely as tourists, but as volunteers - albeit reluctantly - the team had agreed to bring their visitors up to speed on their theories so they could all make the most of their remaining week and a half together.

Nat Kapoor stood at the podium, a detailed, full color diagram of the cavern and tunnel system under the Stairway projected beside him. He paused as the two latecomers moved toward the table where Picard, Riker, Tu'Pari, Freja, Kurak and Kahlestra were already seated.

"Ah! Doctor, Data, excellent," Picard greeted cheerily. "Come, sit here. Dr. Kapoor was about to share his recordings of the peculiar wave patterns he's seen cropping up near the Stairway."

"Thank you, Captain," Crusher said, and offered the group a friendly smile as everyone shifted over slightly on the bench to allow them room.

"Deanna isn't with you?" Riker asked.

"The counselor intends to join us for supper," Data told him. "She has chosen to take advantage of the current lack of atmospheric interference to contact Federation authorities regarding Ishta's status."

He raised his chin, the light from the projector making his amber-gold eyes look oddly wolflike as he cast them over the darkened room.

"Where is Ishta?"

"Who knows," Kahlestra said, rather irritably. "She'll probably turn up when she gets hungry."

Data furrowed his brow.

"Perhaps she did not realize she was included in Dr. Anders's summons." He started to rise. "I'll go look for her."

"Stay here, Mr. Data," Picard said, more than a hint of impatience in his voice. "You can search for your young friend later."

"But sir—"

"Data, I know these children have kept you preoccupied, and I do understand. But, this meeting is being held for our benefit. After what we saw this afternoon, and with all that we know to be at stake, I would think this information should warrant your full attention."

Data leaned back and blinked, his features tensing in a way that made Riker brace for protest. But, the android just nodded and said, "Yes, Captain. I will go after the meeting."

Picard nodded his satisfaction, and gestured for Nat to continue. As he did, Riker leaned in close to Data's ear.
"Don't worry," he said, "Deanna's been on the alert ever since you got back. She'd contact us if she sensed anything out of the ordinary."

"Of course you're right, Commander," Data acknowledged. "Our recent experience with those Orion kidnappers has put me 'on edge.' I'm sure Ishta is—"

"Psst," Crusher whispered to the two men, giving them both a teasing poke in the arm. "Pay attention."

Silarra crouched like a spider atop a thin, duranium support strut, peering down at the meeting from the domed ceiling.

She had considered taking the form of the Starfleet empath, or the Boss-man's Orion Skin, intending to get in some one-on-one interaction…maybe ask a few questions. But, after spending most of the afternoon in the runabout sickbay pretending to be a helpful, upbeat robot, she was too tired attempt an evening performance.

Besides, the intense stare the android had given her before he and the doctor headed out for the meeting had left her with a genuine chill. If he hadn't been on his way out the door, she was convinced he would have forced the fawningly obedient 'Howard' into some scan that would have exposed her little trial act right then and there.

Most humanoids tended to see what they expected to see and accept the familiar with very little question, dismissing anything unusual or out of place as a trick of the eye, or simply their imagination. It was an attitude magicians had played on for centuries, and it was what Silarra relied on for her success. It had, quite literally, been a snap to temporarily deactivate the silver-green robot and take his place in the runabout's sickbay, and even easier to slip away again by feeding the busy Starfleet nurse some vague line about needing to 'recharge'.

The android didn't work like that. He saw everything with computer clarity and perfect recall. And, like most Starfleet officers she'd observed, once his curiosity had been roused, he wouldn't back down until it had been appeased.

Silarra snarled. If her infiltration scheme was going to pan out, she'd have to find some way to keep that Starfleet android distracted - or, better yet, out of commission all together - long enough for her to learn how to access and steal the ancient energy source everyone seemed so interested in. And she had to do it without provoking the curiosity and suspicion of the other Starfleet officers. The stasis field the android was constructing for the sickly human Skin had possibilities, but effective sabotage would require some pretty advanced technical know-how and Silarra had always considered herself more of a performance artist than any sort of tech expert. She knew how to work technology, not how technology worked.

Unlike the Boss-man, though, Silarra was in no particular hurry to make her move. Until she came up with a suitable scheme to remove the threat the android posed, she could observe quite well from the shadows, relying on her chameleonic abilities to keep her and her miniature data recorder hidden as the scientists below unwittingly outlined the closely guarded research information the Boss-man had sent her to collect…

"Scientists and fantasists alike have been speculating about the Stairway's purpose and function ever since its initial discovery," Nat was saying when his unseen eavesdropper tuned back in to his talk.
"And, it is pretty unusual to come across a massive flight of stairs, however complex, standing on its own without at least the remains of some building or bridge or natural landmark those stairs were meant to scale. But, there is absolutely no sign that any such construct has ever existed, or even been planned. The nearest structure even half as tall as Sawrina's great Stairway is located in the ruins of the ancient city, several kilometers from here.

"So," he said, using the podium's keypad to shift the holo-image beside him to a side-view of the towering, interweaving, eye-twisting stairs. "What could be the point of building something so enormous and so elaborate way out in the middle of the desert?

"Lacking any written records or reliable oral accounts, most researchers have pretty much settled on the conclusion that it's a ceremonial structure, built here by the ancient Exo-Akkadian peoples of Nineveh IV to honor their First Dynasty Sarru-Kan, or True Ruler, Sawrina the Great. Like the triumphal arches of ancient Earth built to honor the conquests of the Roman emperors and, later, Napoleon, its purpose would have been more decorative than functional: an intricate tribute sculpture dedicated to their gods and designed to celebrate the achievements of their civilization.

"But," he said, holding up a hand. "there are a few problems with this theory. Dr. Anders, would you care to elaborate?"

Freja stood and moved toward the podium as Dr. Kapoor took her place at the table.

"This is one of the better images of Sawrina the Great," she said in her faintly accented voice, changing the floating holo-image to a detailed portrait of a cloaked woman with green eyes, sun-blonzoned skin and dozens of golden-brown braids twisted into an elaborate bun at the top of her head. "It is taken from a work of fiction because, the truth is, we have no real evidence that such a ruler ever existed here on Nineveh IV. Let me explain," she said in response to Picard's startled look as she shifted to an image of the ruined city.

"Nineveh IV has been home to three successive civilizations that we know of, the first two being long extinct. The current settlement is quite modern, founded by a Federation trading company nearly eight decades ago. They were the ones who discovered the Stairway, all but buried in the sand of what had, until then, seemed to be an unpopulated world. When they stumbled upon the ruined city shortly after that, the company called in the first group of archaeologists. Most of what is popularly known about Nineveh IV today derives from that early, rather cursory study - including the theory that the Stairway was constructed in tribute to an early ruler of a race of people once native to this planet, and that the ruler's name was Sawrina.

"As far as we can tell, this name, and the archaeologists' supposition, derives from a rather hamfisted attempt to translate the cuneiform-like symbols that appear over the main door frame of one of the largest ruins in the ancient city. Unfortunately, their translation does not pan out. The symbols may seem vaguely familiar in shape, but the language and grammar behind them is unknown and, unless we somehow find a Rosetta Stone of our own that includes a known language along with these symbols, they will likely remain so. Still, this has not stopped the legend of Sawrina the Great and her mysterious Stairway from becoming entrenched in Federation fiction and popular culture.

"Another, perhaps greater, problem with this myth of Sawrina the Great lies in the fossil record which shows that, even if a ruler named Sawrina did exist at some point, she could not have been native to this world.

"As you probably know, our team is the first to make a truly long-term, in-depth study of the Stairway and the nearby ruins. Yet, it may surprise you to learn that in the years we have been working here, we have uncovered no fossil record indicating the development of intelligent, humanoid life forms native to this planet. Rather, it seems the first humanoids settled here a little less
than five thousand years ago - about the same time Sawrina's Stairway and the caverns beneath it were constructed. It's a similar tale for the vast majority of plants, animals, and insects that populate this treacherous desert landscape. Improbable as it may seem, genetic scans show they are all but identical to species found on Earth, and studies indicate they also made their initial appearance on this world, as if by magic, about five thousand years ago.

"But, how could this be? Archaeological evidence indicates the earliest peoples here used tools and weapons remarkably similar to early Bronze Age artifacts developed by Earth's ancient Mesopotamian cultures. Namely, the Sumerians, the Akkadians, and the Babylonians. Surely, these peoples did not have the technological capacity for deep space travel. So, how did they come to be living here, so many light years from Earth?"

She changed the image again, this time to show the opalescent wall beneath the Stairway, the images, raised glyphs and symbols seeming almost to float against its gleaming surface.

"Enter the Preservers," she said. "Ancient beings that we theorize have, as your Lt. Commander Data put it, at various points interjected a willful influence on developing civilizations in our galaxy. It is our theory that, in an effort to 'preserve' the ancient Mesopotamian cultures of Earth before wars and other forces could cause their early civilizations to be superseded by those of Egypt, then eventually Greece, then Rome and so on, the Preservers took 'samples' of the peoples, plants and wildlife there with the intent of transplanting them to a new habitat where their unique cultures could continue to develop unimpeded by outside influences.

"Unfortunately, we now know that, unlike the displaced Native American settlement discovered by Captain Kirk's Enterprise, events did not turn out so well here. Archaeological evidence indicates the first settlers were nearly wiped out by this planet's terrible sandstorms. Survivors lived in caves, forced to revert to a paleolithic, hunter-gatherer type existence. There is evidence the Preservers may have noticed their struggle, however, because a second wave of settlers seems to have appeared here some two hundred years after the first. It was this later group, with their more advanced tools, that constructed the ancient city. They also developed that cuneiform-like writing system we have been struggling to translate. Dr. Baker had been working on that but…"

She closed her eyes and took in a long, rather shaky breath.

"In any case," she said, flicking through a series of illustrative images as she went on, "this second civilization seemed to get by well enough for the next thousand years or so, branching out to construct a second city as well as several smaller towns and villages. But it seems, as the population grew, the struggle for resources provoked a series of devastating wars. We have found weapon hordes and catacomb-like tombs in the ruined city filled with skeletons displaying injuries consistent with those inflicted by Bronze Age-style weaponry. Eventually, whether as a result of war, hunger, storms, or a terrible combination of the three, all humanoid life on this world was wiped out. The desert swallowed up the tombs, the ruined buildings, and most of the Stairway. And, this time, the Preservers did not interfere."

She looked up, casting her pale eyes over the group.

"If the Preservers were responsible for relocating two successive groups of early Bronze Age humans from Earth to this world as part of their 'seeding' endeavors, it would certainly explain why we have found no fossil record of their evolution here. The Preservers' involvement could also explain the appearance and function of the Stairway, the existence of the dampening field and the strange energy source it seems designed to protect, and the sound-based code required to unlock this beautiful, mysterious wall. To explain further, I would like to invite Dr. Tu'Pari to carry on from here. Tu'Pari?"
The Vulcan took his place as Freja settled in next to Nat.

"Before I begin," he said in a rather flat monotone, "may I presume that, as graduates of Starfleet Academy, you all have at least a passing familiarity with quantum physics?"

Riker and Crusher shared a look, but Data, oblivious to any derogatory undertone, quickly volunteered: "Probability mechanics was one of my specialties as a cadet."

Tu'Pari raised a nonplussed eyebrow.

"I'll try to keep this as simple as I can," he said, and Data's eyes crinkled.

"Ignore him, Data," Riker whispered. "Vulcans may bite back their emotions, but that doesn't mean they don't know how to be snide."

Data still seemed befuddled, but he knew better than to press the issue while Tu'Pari was beginning his talk.

"The questionable legend of Sawrina the Great notwithstanding, the Stairway may be more aptly named than most people realize," the Vulcan said. "Both in a literal and metaphorical sense."

He pulled up an image of a long, brick wall, then added an animated humanoid figure repeatedly tossing a small ball at the wall, then catching it when it bounced off the bricks.

"Allow me to introduce you to the concept of quantum tunneling," he intoned.

Riker quickly clasped Data's arm to keep him from commenting or correcting the scientist.

"In the macro world of classical physics," Tu'Pari said, "where every action is said to have an equal and opposite reaction, it is to be expected that when you throw a ball at a solid barrier, that ball will not pass through the barrier. Rather, if thrown with sufficient force, it will bounce off the barrier and return to you.

"The same cannot be said of the quantum world. Quantum particles typically do not have a defined position until they're observed. Instead, they are described by a wave function. Probability. If there exists a probability, however small, that your particle will appear on the far side of your barrier, then it will. This, very basically, is quantum tunneling. It occurs when a particle passes through a section of space - in this case, your barrier - typically forbidden to it in classical physics.

"Now, how does this relate to the Stairway and the energy source it contains? It is our supposition that this ancient structure is actually a means of transportation, constructed by the Preservers to transfer their chosen samples from one world to another uninhibited by the vast barriers of time and space. Those samples, typically, seem to have been life forms - plants and animals - which is why Dr. Kapoor's recorded wave patterns are so significant. Until today, those patterns had only been seen to form around living forms. Plants and animals composed of living cells, as opposed to sand, rocks, rucksacks, electronic equipment, and the like. The curious fact that this afternoon's recordings showed them appearing around your Mr. Data, a mostly inorganic mechanical construct, suggests an aspect of agency may also have a part to play in that selection.

Data's shoulders tightened beneath his vest, but he didn't say a word.

"You may ask, how might all this be possible?" the Vulcan continued. "We hypothesize that, with the Stairway, the Preservers have, somehow, managed to develop an energy field in which complex, massive, macro objects can operate like quantum particles."
"In the quantum universe, energy is quantized. It is not continuous, projecting a full spectrum of electromagnetic radiation. Rather, energy emitted by particles has a certain length that can be observed with a spectroscope as a discrete band. Different types of atoms emit different wavelengths: unique patterns and bands of energy that serve to identify them, rather like a fingerprint.

"You can picture it like this," Tu'Pari said, shifting the holographic illustrations as he spoke. "Here, we see a smoothly sloping ramp. This ramp represents continuous energy, or a full spectrum of electromagnetic radiation. As you climb the ramp, you can stop at any position along its length and, thereby, stand at any elevation you choose.

"Here, we see a flight of stairs. These stairs represent quantized energy: discrete bands, or wavelengths, as opposed to the full spectrum. In this diagram, you can stop at each step, but you cannot stand in between the steps. Unlike the ramp, you cannot stand at any elevation you wish. Only at the elevations allowed by each step.

"To put it more scientifically, as the frequency of the electromagnetic radiation increases, its energy also increases in increments defined by, what you humans call, Planck's constant. These increments can be illustrated to look rather like a stairway.

"Now, if our hypothesis is correct, and the Preservers did design and construct the Stairway, its very shape would seem to indicate its intended function: namely, a means for complex, macro beings like ourselves to traverse space, time and reality via quantum tunneling, freed from the confines of classical physical laws. In this system, each macro individual, regardless of mass, would take on the unique properties of a quantum particle, or photon. Like a quantum particle, these individuals would become subject to quantum decoherence and gain the improbable ability to pass through spaces normally forbidden to objects of our size and mass.

"This implies, if we were to release the energies contained within the Stairway and allow the Preservers' program to fully activate, we could use their quantum tunneling system to travel anywhere. And, quite possibly, any-when. That is, of course, if the calculations I made based on the data we collected this afternoon are, indeed, correct."

"Then, according to your theory," Picard spoke up, "the energy source behind that wall was designed to power a quantum tunnel on a macro scale. A gateway that could potentially take us to any location, and possibly any time period, in our universe?"

"Not merely our universe, Captain," Tu'Pari said. "There is a fifth-dimensional aspect to these new equations that seems to support the 'many worlds' view of alternate realities, or parallel universes. If this is the case, it may explain what happened to the Preservers, and why they seem to have disappeared so completely. It is entirely possible they left our universe for another plane, perhaps using a device not dissimilar to this."

"Incredible," Crusher breathed.

"Now, you understand our great concern," Tu'Pari said. "If some unscrupulous enemy should gain access to the Stairway and its energy source, and somehow managed to release the dampeners—"

"They would obtain the key to instantaneous travel, not only in space, but also through time," Picard said. "Reality itself would become subject to their whim."

"Then, maybe the best thing would be to shut it down," Crusher said. "Dr. Kapoor showed us the recordings made down in that cave. Every one of you shimmered with those quantum probability waves and, if your experience down there today is any indication, the effect is only going to get worse. If the dampening field should weaken, or grow more unstable—"
"I understand where you're going, Doctor, but I'm afraid it's no good," Freja said. "There seems to be no way to shut down the energy source from the outside. Even if we did, we have no idea what the reaction of the system might be. There is a possibility the Stairway may implode...taking out both this planet and whatever unfortunate planet was at the far end of its last established quantum tunnel."

"Earth..." Riker grunted.

"This is why it's so damn important we gain access to that energy source, study how it works, what it's hooked into...if anything..." Nat said. "It's the only way figure out if there's any way to safely deactivate the thing. If we can't work out how to control it before this fluctuating dampening field fails all together..."

"It will not come to that."

All eyes turned to Kurak, who smirked and shook her head.

"You saw it yourselves," she said. "The android cracked the code. We have his recording of the precise procession of sounds required to access the chamber that houses the energy source. However accidental and unintentional it may have been, that wall did open and, for a moment at least, you did have access."

"It's playing with fire, Kurak," Nat said. "Sure, the doors opened, but they closed again a few seconds later - nearly bringing the roof and the entire Stairway down on our heads in the process."

"Then, we need to experiment. Study the sounds. Break them down, compare them to that tone-based control panel in the cavern wall."

"The kind of in-depth study you're proposing would take a lot longer than a week and a half," Nat said. "Especially with Melinda gone, and more than half our equipment out of commission. I mean, I hate to bring this up, but have you seen the condition of your lab?"

"If I might make a proposal," Picard said. "I suggest Kurak work with Mr. Data on this. With his android speed and positronic brain—"

"Captain, I'm sorry to interrupt, but I must protest," Data said, his pale face growing rather flushed. "Mikey's surgery is scheduled to take place tomorrow afternoon, and I promised him that I would be present."

"Will you be taking any active part in the surgical procedure?"

Data shared a long look with Dr. Crusher. Reluctantly, he admitted, "No, sir."

"Then, you can consider yourself assigned to work with Kurak," Picard said. "You can visit your young friend when he regains consciousness."

Data worked his jaw, turning his unhappy glare from the captain to Kurak, who seemed almost equally as displeased with her new partner.

"I prefer to work on my own," she growled.

"No kidding," Nat joked. "But, in all honesty, you probably should go with the captain's suggestion. This compound's already been attacked once. If there's to be a next time, I want to be sure we've learned as much about that energy source as we possibly can."

He gave her a significant look, which she reluctantly acknowledged.
"Very well," she rumbled. "I will work with the machine. Tell him to meet me outside my dome at 0700, sharp."

"Mother," Kahlestra admonished. "He's not 'the machine.' He's Data, he's my friend, and he's standing right there."

"Thank you, Kay," Data said.

Kurak bared her teeth in a snarl.

"0700 is pretty early," Crusher said, her expression concerned. "Will that be enough time for you to finish work on your stasis field?"

"I can work through the night," Data told her. "But, you will require sleep. When would you be available to go through that test run?"

"0600 would work for me, if it's not too much of a strain on you. My internal clock is still on ship's time, some five hours ahead."

"0600 would be acceptable," Data assured her. "I would ask, however, that you please contact me when you are ready to begin the surgical procedure. I would like to be present for Mikey before he is anesthetized."

"Would that be all right?" Crusher asked the captain.

"Yes, very well," Picard said, and she and Data shared a smile.

"All right," Nat said, slapping his hands down on the table. "If this meeting is over, I say it's time to eat. After a day like today, I could down a whole vat of Ma's famous coconut chicken and still have room for dessert."

"If that is the case, I will go find Ishta," Data informed them, making a rapid bee-line for the sliding doors as if worried he might be stopped. "I don't wish her to miss out on sharing our evening meal."

"Kurak," Freja asked as the doors closed behind him. "Are you still planning to lead the memorial after supper?"

"Of course," the Klingon said. "Melinda Baker was my closest friend. I would not be here if not for her. It is my duty to honor her memory."

"Do you think you'll stay on…I mean, now that she… And, what happened with that Nausicaan attack…?"

"I have no desire to return to the Empire at this time," Kurak said. "I will stay for the duration."

Freja smiled.

"I'm glad," she said. "So, Kay, are you looking forward to your mother's performance tonight?"

"Whatever," Kahlestra grunted, squeezing her scarred hand into a tight fist as she stomped her way toward the replicator.

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes
References Include - TNG: Suspicions; The Chase; Parallels; Yesterday's Enterprise; TOS: The Paradise Syndrome; Mirror, Mirror; a few stacks of Brian Greene, John Gribbin and Michio Kaku books; a few books on Sargon of Akkad and Ancient Assyria; The Epic of Gilgamesh.

Reviews are always welcome! Please let me know what you think. :D
Data raced through the compound, his worry increasing with every clanking, clattering step he took through the tunnel-like corridors.

He hadn't found Ishta in the makeshift quarters the archaeologists had set up for them the night before. She wasn't in the clinic or the exercise dome. Counselor Troi, still busy with her subspace calls, had assured him Ishta hadn't come into the communications center. She wasn't in the runabout, she hadn't gone to visit Mikey and Howard in the sickbay…

Data stopped moving, closed his eyes, and took in a slow, steadying breath through his nose.

He had to think, not panic. To panic would be inefficient and only waste more time.

If only they were aboard the Enterprise instead of this barren, desert planet, he could run an internal scan—

Data's eyes snapped open.

"Of course!" he cried, already sprinting for his tricorder.

With android dexterity, he pulled the device from the saddle bag by his cot and set it to scan for all humanoid life forms within a two kilometer radius. As he did, he muttered to himself, "Perhaps I have grown more irrational. I should have thought of this at once… Ah!"

The tricorder's small display screen showed a basic map of the complex, with the people inside showing up as red dots. There were three in the runabout: Lt. Ogawa, Mikey, and the pilot, Lt. Exupery. Howard was there too, he knew, but as a robot, he read as a mechanical device and did not show up as a dot on the screen. That was an oversight Data would have to remedy, as he had when he'd programmed all Enterprise scanning equipment to differentiate his own unique energy signature…but later. He saw eight dots in the cafeteria - nine dots? No, there were eight, and one more was approaching through the corridor. The control room read as empty, so it had to be Counselor Troi, joining the rest of the group for supper.

Data zoomed out to include the residential domes, the exercise dome, the labs, then out further to the stables—

"There she is! With the horses," he said in deep relief, pocketing the tricorder as he strode from the room, through the foyer, and out into the cold, dark, windy night.

He shivered, the unexpected sensation of goosebumps rising on his sensitive flesh momentarily sending him back to the Borg Queen…his split-second of temptation as her warm breath brushed his skin…

...Was that good for you...

"Stop it!" Data snapped at the darkness, shaking away the computer-perfect memories like Spot shaking water from her fur. "The Borg Queen is dead. She is dead!"

...If that's true, Data, why do I still haunt your thoughts...
Data shook his head harder and increased his pace, making it across the stinging, swirling sand to the stables in only a handful of seconds.

"Ishta?" he called, holding his tricorder out like a palm beacon as he passed through the swinging gate and started peering into the stalls beyond. "Ishta, it is Data. Please respond."

He walked past the sleepy horses, giving Sagebrush's long nose a friendly pat as he moved toward the back of the cave, where saddles, equipment, fresh oats and hay were stored. Ishta's willowy form was nowhere to be seen…until he turned the tricorder toward the speeder he and the children had taken across the desert. The compact vehicle was snugly parked there, out of sight, but taking up an inordinate amount of the already cramped space.

Data pursed his lips and pocketed his tricorder. Adjusting his own eyes to read infrared light, the android opened the speeder's door wide enough to squeeze through without scratching it against the uneven rock wall.

Ishta's warm form glowed inside, her back pressed against the seat and her legs pulled tightly against her chest.

"Hello," Data greeted. "It is rather chilly in here, don't you think?"

She didn't answer. Just scooted closer to the door.

Data squeezed between the driver and passenger seats to join her in the back.

"I came out to find you when you did not come to dinner. You had me quite worried for a while."

The young Orion didn't respond. She just hunched into a tighter ball.

"Ishta, what is wrong?" Data asked. "Has something happened to upset you?"

Ishta released a frustrated roar and slammed her back against the seat.

"Stop it, OK!" she snapped. "Just, stop! I don't want to talk to you, so just leave me alone!"

Data sighed and lowered his eyes.

"I thought we had passed this stage," he said. "I thought we were becoming friends."

"Oh, please," Ishta scoffed. "There's no such thing as 'friends'. Not really. We exist only to use or be used, and I'm no good either way. That's why I was made a Skin and not a Slave. That's why I won't be able to hack it in your precious Federation even if your red tape officials do let me stay. So, get out and leave me alone!" she shrieked.

Data blinked in the darkness, quite disheartened by this shift in her attitude. Back before lunch, it had seemed she had started to relax her shields a bit. She had opened up to him about her past, her dreams of becoming a dancer...

Now, it seemed her fragile confidence had imploded completely.

Data leaned toward the dashboard to activate the speeder's battery and turn on the inside lights. He readjusted his eyes to read the normal, visual spectrum and sat down to face Ishta again.

The lights revealed that the girl had been crying, and for a long time. Her bright blue eyes were puffy and rimmed with red, her green cheeks were flushed and streaked with tear tracks.
Data swallowed sadly.

"I am sorry," he said, reaching out a hand to brush tear-dampened hair back from her face. She flinched, but didn't pull completely away, watching his expression with her hard, wary eyes.

"I have not been very fair to you, have I," he realized. "I have asked for your trust and promised you mine, but at the same time I have withheld any assurance of stability or sustainability. It is not right of me to foster a caring bond between us if we are to be separated in less than a week, and I should not expect you to feel any comfort knowing the best I can offer you right now is a surrogate shelter and holiday visits. I have been terribly selfish, Ishta."

Ishta stared at him. Then, she tilted her head back and screamed a scream so harsh and so loud the horses shrank back in their stalls.

"Ow…" Data winced, reflexively covering his ears with his hands. "Why—"

"Damn you!" she cried, her long braid lashing as she slammed her fist against the door window again and again and again. "You metal android bastard! I never cared about anything before I met you. I never wanted to stay around anyone the way I want to stay with you. And now, you're dumping me too!"

"Ishta, no, I—"

"I hate you!" she shrieked. "I hate you for making me think a robot might actually be different! For making me imagine…"

She sniffed and swallowed hard, turning her tortured face toward the speeder's hard top roof.

"I want you to tell that shrink woman to stop trying to find me some place to stay in the Federation," she croaked. "I want you to tell her to send me back to Orion Prime. I can't learn all the sciencey mathy shit they'll want me to learn here. The kind of crap Kay has to cram in her head every day. If I can't stay with you, I don't want to."

"It probably does not help to know this, Ishta," Data said, "But, I have been imagining too. For the past few days, I have found myself daydreaming—"

"I know where you're going, and I don't want to hear any more," Ishta cried. "I don't want you to say you'd adopt me if you could! If you can't close the deal, shut up and move on. Don't keep asking me to care, because I can't, OK! I just can't…"

Data closed his eyes and sighed through his nose.

"Ishta, please know the ridiculous legal situation regarding your status has nothing to do with the person you are. You are—"

"I know what I am, android," Ishta snapped. "I'm a piece of merchandise. Something you picked up, but found out you can't keep. I get it, OK?"

"No, Ishta, you do not," Data said firmly, locking his eyes on hers. "There are layers here. Decades of deeply ingrained injustices, both within the Federation and without. That is what we are facing, Ishta. That is what I intend to fight."

"Yeah, well, good luck with that," she snorted. "Nobody cares, idiot."

"I care, Ishta."
"You don't count!" she said. "No one counts except Users like Father. If your computer brain was as smart as everyone says, you'd know that."

"Everyone counts Ishta," Data retorted. "The Federation was founded on a shared appreciation and acknowledgment of the fundamental value of all individuals."

"Then the Federation was founded by idiots."

"You are saying this because you are frustrated," Data said. "I understand, because I feel it too. But, we must strive for patience, Ishta. Counselor Troi has been working very hard to secure you legal asylum within Federation space. If she is successful, you will have the right to remain here for as long as you choose."

Ishta rolled her eyes.

"So what?" she snapped. "I told you, I don't want that!"

"Even if it meant I could then apply to become your legal guardian?" Data asked.

Ishta frowned.

"I thought you said the Feds won't let a metal man adopt meat kids."

"They do not - at the moment," Data said. "But, Federation laws are designed to be modifiable. If our petition is turned down, we could appeal the case. Force the courts to reconsider. Give the legislators a chance to write new laws."

"That sounds like a load of crap," Ishta said. "How long will all that court shit take, huh? Five years? Twenty? By that time, I'll be old like you! Chances are, we won't even win."

"There is precedent, Ishta," Data said. "I have gone to court to fight for my rights before. It was difficult and, looking back, quite frightening. If I had lost, there is a good chance I would have been dismantled, and I would not be sitting here with you now. But, with the help of Captain Picard and Commander Riker, I was successful. My right to choose was officially acknowledged. And, here I am. Ready and willing to fight for our right to adopt each other. If, that is, you would choose me to serve as your legal guardian."

Ishta regarded him.

"Hmph," she snorted. "So, maybe your system worked, like, one time. But, what about your ship? Didn't you say there's no kids allowed on board?"

"It is left to the captain's discretion to make an exception," Data said. "But, even if he chooses not to allow it, I can always request a transfer to a ship designed to accommodate children and families. In fact, since returning to this compound, I have found myself seriously debating whether to leave Starfleet service all together. So, you see, there are options, Ishta. Nothing in our lives is set in stone."

"I think you're nuts," Ishta said. "Why the hell should you risk your fancy career for some useless Skin who's never even seen a school? I'm already too old to learn the stuff you Federation people need to know... No, I'm not worth it. It's just too late!"

Data blinked his amber eyes, his expression softening into a very slight smile.

"It is because you are worth it, that I am willing to take the risk and face the giants that stand before
us," he said. "But, I will require your assistance. Dulcinea."

"It's Ishta, and you're crazy as well as nuts," she said. "And an idiot."

Data glanced at her, his small smile twisting into a smirk.

"You say you are too old to begin learning 'Federation stuff,'" he said. "How about we put that supposition to the test?"

"What sort of test?" she asked warily.

"I will give you a homework assignment to complete. Just like Kay," he said. "It will give you something productive to do tomorrow while I help Kurak and Mikey. Are you interested?"

"Depends on what it is," she said.

Data smiled.

"Fair enough," he said. "For this assignment, I would like you to read a play based on a famous Earth novel first written in Spain between 1605 and 1615. The play is called *Man of La Mancha*. I would like you to find this play and its musical soundtrack using the computer's library database. I would then like you to read the text, listen to the songs, and write two pages explaining to me what you think of the story and the characters. Do you think you can do that, Ishta?"

"You want me to read an Earth book?" she said, wrinkling her nose. "In Standard?"

"The computer can read the text aloud if that is a problem. In addition, the play has been translated into Orion if—"

"No," she said defensively. "I know how to read Standard."

"Then, you will do the assignment?" he asked.

She shrugged.

"Yeah, sure. Whatever."

He smiled.

"I want you to come to me if you require any assistance, no matter how minor. Even if I appear to be busy. That, too, is part of the assignment."

Ishta sucked in her cheeks and sighed.

"Yeah, fine. You know, it's getting pretty stuffy in here. You want to go eat something?"

"The rest of the group is currently having their dinner in the cafeteria," he said. "Do you wish to join them?"

"Not really," she said. "But I'll go if you're going."

"Then, I will accompany you," he said, squeezing his way to the front seat, where there was slightly more room to open the speeder's front door. He waited until Ishta had jumped out and closed the back door before dousing the lights and turning off the speeder's battery, plunging the cramped stable into darkness.
"Too bad you don't blink in the dark like a traffic beacon anymore," Ishta commented. "Can you see?"

"I am equipped with night vision," Data said. "But, if it helps, I brought this."

He pulled out his tricorder, and held up its glowing screen.

"Not very bright, is it," she said dryly.

"Then, hold my hand and I will guide you across the compound," Data offered.

Ishta scowled but took his hand, listening to the horses sigh and stamp as the two of them walked out of the stable into the chilly, windy, starlit night beyond.

"You know, we didn't really solve anything back there," she said.

"I know."

"Would you really leave your ship to be my guardian?"

"I would."

"Data?"

"Yes, Ishta," the android asked, looking down at her dark, starlit face.

"What if you do all this stuff... challenge the Federation, face the courts... and it doesn't work. What if you find out a cheap Skin really isn't worth the trouble after all, and you did all this fighting for nothing?"

Data stopped their walk and took her other hand, looking her straight in the eyes.

"Ishta," he said. "I know your experiences have taught you to feel... worthless. Less than. As an android, I have faced similar disfavor. My mechanical nature offends and frightens people - even those I have never met. All through the academy and my early career, I was bullied and mocked, ignored, overlooked, threatened and told repeatedly to keep quiet and know my place. It got to me, Ishta. Even now, there are times... dark times... when I sincerely doubt my value and my purpose. Even my status as a living being... But, do you know what happens, Ishta, if we give up on ourselves?"

"The bastards win?" she said.

Data snorted a startled laugh.

"Yes, Ishta," he said. "That is correct. The bastards win."

He sighed a little and looked up at the stars. After a moment, Ishta followed his gaze.

"I will do all I can to assure you that you are worth my time and care," he promised her. "Not for anything you can do or provide. I do not believe in that 'use or be used' philosophy. I value you because you are you. The only you this universe will ever know."

Ishta rolled her eyes.

"Good grief..."
"But," Data added, "if you are to join me in this fight, you must do your part as well. You must work to build up your confidence and sense of self-worth."

"Yeah," she scoffed. "How can I do that, when I already know how much I suck?"

"You do this," he said, looking back at her. "You risk trusting the word of another. You try new things even if you're not sure you can do them. You ask questions and keep reaching, keep stretching until, eventually, you demonstrate to yourself that, maybe, you don't suck quite as much as you suspected. It is a quest, Ishta. A quest...not to be human, as I once thought. But to accept and value yourself. Despite everything that may have gone wrong..."

Ishta hissed low and kicked at the sand between them.

"Idiot," she muttered.

"Cynic," he responded in the same tone, and she looked up at him with a smile.

A strong gust of chilling wind sprayed sand over them both. Data shivered and rubbed his arms.

"God, it's cold," he complained, reaching up to shake the sand out of his already wind-blown hair. "Come on. Let's head back to the cafeteria before the others send a search party out looking for us."

*******

The warmth of the corridor was a welcome relief after the freezing desert night.

Data ran his fingers through his wild hair, trying to brush it back into some semblance of its customary neatness as he followed Ishta toward the cafeteria's sliding doors.

"It looks better like that, you know," the girl commented when she noticed his flustered struggle. "Slicking it back all the time makes you look stupid."

"Thanks for your opinion," Data said, smoothing his palms over the sides of his head to make sure no stray, wild wisps stuck out around his ears. "But, I have maintained my hair in the same style since my activation."

"Why?" Ishta asked.

Data paused.

"I do not know," he said, and resumed his preening. "I suppose I prefer a tidy appearance."

Ishta shrugged.

"OK," she said. "But, you look like a geek."

She went through the sliding doors, leaving Data to glance around the corridor for a reflective surface.

A metal support pole wasn't the best mirror, but it was better than nothing. Data stared at his oddly curved reflection and frowned.

His accustomed style did look a bit severe over his new features. Perhaps, if he brushed it to the side…

Data blinked and straightened, startled by his own behavior. Had he always been so vain? Or was
this concern he was feeling regarding his looks something new?

"I really am an idiot," he said, roughly pushing his hair back the way he'd had it before. "Why should it matter to anyone if I comb my hair back, or choose to…"

A soft humming began in the cafeteria, slow and sweet and faintly eerie.

Data knit his brow and walked through the sliding doors, to see Kurak standing before the podium where the archaeologists had given their presentations less than an hour before. She had changed her clothes and was now dressed in formfitting Klingon armor with high boots and a leather tunic long enough to brush her heels. Her wavy, waist-length hair hung loose over her spiked shoulder armor, and she held a bat'leth sword in her hands.

The rest of the group watched from the fold-out table, most of them just finishing their dessert. Ishta joined them with a loaded tray of her own, more focused on eating than listening to Kurak's memorial for a dead woman Ishta had never met.

But, Data stood as if frozen, his senses overwhelmed by the layered aesthetic of the moment. Golden light caught the highlights in the Klingon woman's hair, the gleaming sword she wielded becoming an extension of her arm as she transformed violent fight moves into a slow, graceful dance.

All the while, she sang with the strong voice of a trained soprano…a piece from a Klingon opera Data had never downloaded into his memory. The words were in Klingon, a rather ancient dialect, but the android had no trouble translating…

*The sun is sleeping quietly*
*Once upon a century*
*Wistful oceans calm and red*
*Honorable corpses laid to rest*

*For my dreams I hold my life*
*For wishes I behold the night*
*The truth at the end of time*
*Losing faith makes a crime*

*I wish for this nighttime*
*To last for a lifetime*
*The darkness around me*
*Shores of a solar sea*

*Oh, how I wish to go down with the sun*
*Sleeping*
*Weeping*
*With you…*

Data felt his breath catch, his pulse rise with the sad, soaring melody. The singer held him enraptured and he couldn't look away…not even to see if Ishta was watching…appreciating the skill…the art of her heart-wrenching dance…

*Sorrow has a Klingon heart*
*From my lord, I did depart*
*I sailed before a thousand moons*
*Never asking where to go*
After two hundred days, this fight
Was then decided by a night

A moment for the poet's play

And now, there's nothing left to say

I wish for this nighttime
To last for a lifetime
The darkness around me
Shores of a solar sea

Oh how I wish to go down with the sun
Sleeping
Weeping
With you...

Kurak's voice faded and Data blinked, only then discovering the tears running down his nose, his cheeks.

He swallowed quickly and wiped them away, feeling the skin of his face burning all the way up to his ears. The dance was over, but images of Kurak's lithe form continued to move in his mind. Unfamiliar emotions quivered inside him, and he had to turn away, concentrating on calming his pulse and returning his breathing to normal as he strode for the replicator.

Even then, he barely heard Captain Picard praising her performance…Kurak inviting the others to share their memories of her friend, Melinda Baker…

Data closed his eyes and sighed, pressing his flushed forehead to the cool, metal wall as his meal materialized in the replicator slot.

The strange, powerful feelings were fading, which he had to admit was a relief. It was the music that had affected him…the beauty of the aria. That was all.

...wasn't it?

Of course, that was all. He didn't even like Kurak. He detested the way he'd seen her treat Kahlestra. And, her words and behavior had made it pretty clear she didn't care much for him either.

Data sighed again and grabbed his tray.

It was nothing. Simply an emotional response to an unexpectedly moving song. The feelings had nothing to do with Kurak. Just him.

It had to be. Because, if it wasn't, working with Kurak tomorrow might prove far more complicated than he'd anticipated…

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

References Include - TNG: The Measure of a Man; "Don Quixote" by Miguel de
Cervantes Saavedra; "Man of La Mancha" by Dale Wasserman with lyrics by Joe Darion and music by Mitch Leigh; and the song "Sleeping Sun" by Nightwish (Oceanborn, 1998). I altered the lyrics to read more like a Klingon Opera. ;)

Am I the only one who thinks Nightwish songs like "Sleeping Sun" and "Ghost Love Score" sound exactly the way Klingon Opera would sound if it was real? (my cousins seem to think I am... LOL!)

Please Review! :D
Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Morning dawned bright and cold on the desert planet of Nineveh IV. In the windy clearing between the gleaming domes of the archaeologists' compound, Tu'Pari walked the horses, giving them a little exercise before cleaning out their stalls. Kahlestra watched them through a heptagonal window, absentedly jabbing her Kuaizi sticks in her bowl of squirming racht.

"Kahlestra," Kurak scolded, speaking in Klingon as she always did when they were alone. "Kuaizi are for lifting your food, not stabbing it. There is nothing worse than half-dead racht."

Kahlestra tossed her Kuaizi sticks on the table and shoved her bowl of writhing worms across to her.

"You eat them," she said, also in Klingon.

Kurak closed her eyes, her thin, ridged nose widening as she breathed a long, slow sigh. When she opened them again, her eyes were a burning glare.

"You will eat your breakfast," she growled. "You know how difficult it is to raise fresh racht on this dry world, and you have not been keeping up with their feeding schedule."

Kahlestra slid her eyes toward their family dome's small kitchen, where their smelly little bucket of living worms sat in the sink.

"The racht were not important," she said. "Not while I worried you might die! Like Dr. Baker…"

"Kahlestra—"

"She was running beside me when those kidnapping slavers vaporized her," Kahlestra snapped. "She was holding my hand. This hand!"

She showed her mother her blistered scars, made shiny by the salve Dr. Anders had given her, and Kurak set her jaw.

Kahlestra scowled, her dark eyes hooded by her ridged forehead.

"You should thank Data for all he did to save me. You should be proud a man like him calls me his friend! But, ever since you recovered, you have treated him with contempt and dishonor!"

"I do not want you becoming emotionally attached to that Starfleet machine," Kurak grunted and rose from the table, snatching Kahlestra's bowl and dumping the long, fat worms back into the bucket. Those that were no longer moving were quickly devoured by those that still were. "You've spent enough time away from your studies as it is. You cannot afford more distractions!"

Kahlestra snorted.

"You getting shot and me getting kidnapped by slavers are 'distractions'? Your best friend was killed, Mother, and all you seem to care about is me finishing my stupid homework!"

"Kahlestra…!"

"What if I don't want to go back to that awful school?" Kahlestra demanded, getting up from the
table to face her mother's tensed back and shoulders. "What if I want to stay with you? Get educated in the Federation, where I can actually be something after I graduate! A doctor - a surgeon, even!"

Kurak kept her back turned and her voice low and calm.

"The courts will not allow it. Your father will not allow it. You know how fiercely traditional he is in his beliefs, and the views of the courts are much the same. If he should challenge my—"

"Damn my father, and damn the courts!" Kahlestra roared. "Let them all rot within the cursed gates of Gre'thor!"

Kurak turned, her eyes wide.

"Kahlestra, do not curse—"

"It's what I want! It's what we both want!" Kahlestra cried. "To stay here - to do as we please when we please without fearing what he might think, what he might do—!"

"I pledged my oath before the court," Kurak said, her voice as stiff as her posture. "I promised I would bring you up in strict accordance with your father's beliefs and values - the beliefs and values of his House. To break that vow would be his invitation to claim breach of contract - to take you to his home, where I could not protect you. You know his younger daughter, your half-sister, has already had her betrothal ceremony. Do you think he would hesitate to bind you the same way - the way my father bound me? Do you think I wanted to marry at seventeen, to pledge my life, my body to that...that...!"

"It doesn't have to be like that!" Kahlestra exclaimed. "I looked it up at school, and I know if you found another husband, if he adopted me into his House, my father would lose all claim to me. He would lose all power over you! We would never have to think of him again!"

"No." Kurak bared her teeth, and Kahlestra blinked, taken aback by her sudden fierceness. "When I left your father's House, I tasted a freedom I had never known. A freedom I have fought and struggled to share with you. I will not surrender that. Not again!"

"How can you say we're free if he still has the power to take me away?"

Kurak straightened.

"It is not proper for a child to discuss these matters."

"But... What if the man you married wasn't from the Empire?" Kahlestra pressed even though, inside, she knew she'd lost her.

"No."

"What if he wasn't Klingon—"

"Enough!" Kurak roared. "I will hear no more of this. You will do your assignments and you will return to the Klingon school your father chose for you. Behave properly, keep your grades up, be respectful and, when you reach the Age of Ascension—"

"My father will still hold authority over my life, just as he holds authority over yours," Kahlestra spat. "The rites of adulthood are not the same for women as they are for men, and you know it."

Kurak glared.
"We all have our duties in life," she said. "Mine is to raise you. Yours is to learn and follow our ways. Klingon ways."

She snarled and turned away again. Her stiff shoulders stooped just slightly and her voice grew low and quiet.

"Marriage should not be a duty," she spoke to the wall. "It is not something to be forced…not a directive to obey… A life union should be the choice of both parties, and such a union can not exist without respect. Without that, I will be no one's wife."

"But, that's how it is in the Federation!" Kahlestra tried. "They believe in love, and respect is a big part of that. Data knows. And, you can ask Dr. Crusher! She was married and has a son—"

"Daughter!" Kurak snapped and spun around.

Kahlestra stiffened, well aware she'd pressed the issue far too far.

Her mother advanced on her, her eyes ice hard.

"You will speak no more on this subject," she ordered fiercely. "Not now, not later."

Kurak grabbed a padd from the table and strode across the small living room toward the dome's outer door, calling over her shoulder: "If you will not eat good racht, eat some zilm'kach fruit and get back to your studies. I have work to do."

Kahlestra snarled and slammed her scarred fist against the table.

Kurak did not look back. She walked through the sliding doors into the chilly desert morning - only to gasp when she found Data standing just outside the dome.

His pale face reddened awkwardly when he saw her, and he quickly smoothed a hand over his wind-ruffled hair.

"Hello," he said, and tried a smile. "Good morning. It seems we are to be partners today."

"Data!" Kahlestra grunted, sliding a cold glance toward her mother. "What else?"

"Homework," Kahlestra grunted, sliding a cold glance toward her mother. "What else?"

"Ishta also has an assignment," Data told her. "And, though she will not admit it, I fear she greatly doubts her ability to complete the work to her own satisfaction. Perhaps, if you—"

"My daughter has her own work to complete," Kurak snapped, stepping between Kahlestra and the
"She has no time to waste on that Orion ha'DibaH."

"Mother!" Kahlestra exclaimed.

"No, no, you misunderstand!" Data said, his face reddening again under Kurak's angry glare. "I would not suggest Kahlestra leave your dome without first receiving your permission. But, I do have a proposal we may all find beneficial. If I may explain...?"

Kurak gave a wary grunt, but Kahlestra said, "Yeah, go ahead!"

"I was speaking with Mikey on this topic last night while modifying the stasis field I developed to aid his upcoming surgery, and he made a suggestion I found startlingly insightful."

"What did he say?" Kahlestra asked.

Data glanced at Kurak.

"He suggested, if the two girls were do their respective work together, in the same room, the competitive spark that exists between them may prompt Ishta to overcome her doubts. She may treat the assignment more as a challenge to conquer than as a test of the scholastic skills she fears she sorely lacks."

"Then, I wouldn't have to do anything!" Kahlestra said, catching on at once. "I'd just sit there and do my homework and she'd do her homework, and that would be it!"

"Yes, exactly," Data said. "But, your mother must be agreeable to the idea."

"Well, Mother?" Kahlestra asked. "Can I? I did get a lot more done when I did my work in the clinic with Mikey and Ishta and Counselor Troi. It was a lot easier to concentrate knowing I wasn't missing anything. And, it sucks so much having to sit alone in our dome all day!"

Kurak bared her teeth in a terrible scowl, which only grew fiercer when she saw Kahlestra reach for the android's hand.

"Very well," she rumbled under her breath, and both Kahlestra and Data shared a brilliant smile. "You may do your work in the company of that Orion girl. But I want you to complete four skill packets instead of three, and I will review your work tonight."

"Yes, Mother. Thank you!" Kahlestra cheered, and rushed forward to clasp Kurak around the middle.

Kurak rested a hand on her daughter's shoulder, then used it to push her toward the dome.

"Collect your things, and remember to eat a good lunch," she said.

"I will!" Kahlestra said, still beaming. "Thanks, Data!"

As the dome's doors slid closed behind her, Data turned his smile to Kurak.

"I appreciate your underst—" he started, only shuffle back with an alarmed blink when he saw Kurak glaring at him with such coldness in her eyes he actually felt the need to swallow.

"I...?" he stammered in befuddlement.

Her snarl deepened.
"The lab is this way," she spat and strode ahead.

Data moved quickly to catch up.

"Kurak!" he said, "Please know, it was not my intention to offend—"

"Only to interfere?" Kurak snapped, spinning around to face him.

Data blinked again.

"No," he said. "Not at all! I merely—"

"Did I not tell you to leave my daughter to me?"

"I apologize. I was thinking only of the benefits your daughter's example may—"

"My daughter has responsibilities, android," she snarled. "Responsibilities she cannot be allowed to shirk. Do not attempt to play us against each other in this manner again."

Data shook his head, completely flummoxed by her accusation.

"I did not—"

But she had marched ahead again, her strides so long and quick he'd have to jog to close the gap.

Data sighed and reached up to rub away the sudden stinging in his eyes, his pulse throbbing to a whirl of awkward emotions he couldn't start to figure out.

"Dammit..."

He'd imagined this morning so differently... He'd pictured himself greeting Kurak at her door...complimenting her on the wrenching beauty of her aria... He'd seen the morning sun dancing on her hair as they walked together through the sand...their minds meeting on a strategy to return her lab to working order...

He couldn't express exactly why, but he'd wanted so badly to make a good impression. To show her that, despite the reluctance they had both voiced at the meeting, he had been looking forward to learning more about her. Surely, someone who sang with such passion could not be as cold or close-minded as she seemed...

But now...

Dr. Crusher had warned him. She'd told him to give Kurak space, to respect her decision to isolate her daughter, and what had he done?

Set himself up as a threat, that's what he'd done. A challenge to her authority. Any walls blocking their communication now would be entirely of his own making.

"It seems every approach I try with her is wrong," he muttered, a cloud of misery rolling over him as he trailed the angry Klingon to her ruined lab. "Why must someone so talented be so...so frustratingly hostile!"

To Be Continued...
References Include - TNG: Devil's Due; Redemption; Birthright; Rightful Heir; Suspicions; Firstborn; DS9: Melora; Sons of Mogh; VOY: Barge of the Dead. 'Kuaizi' is Chinese for 'chopsticks.'

Thanks so much for reading, and for all your wonderful reviews! I hope you enjoyed this chapter! Until next time! :D
**Medical Log: Commander Beverly Crusher, CMO, USS Enterprise-E**

**Reporting from the runabout USS Blackstone, Nineveh IV**

Preparations for patient Michael 'Mikey' Applewood's multi-organ transplant surgery are nearly complete. The work and expertise of my head nurse, Lt. Alyssa Ogawa, has been invaluable, as has the assistance provided by Howard: an Orion-built duotronic robot recovered from the same illegal trafficking ring that had been holding Mikey without treatment.

Pediatric surgery is, perhaps, the most challenging of all surgery; and, in this day and age, where practically every type of cancer is easily treatable with - at most - a course of injections, pediatric oncology tends to be viewed as a somewhat anachronistic specialty. Mikey's case is, without question, the most advanced I, my head nurse, and my colleagues at Starfleet Medical, Mars General, Luna Exo-Oncology Labs, and the Vulcan Science Academy have yet seen outside of historical records and texts. To reiterate my initial case log entry: In my medical opinion, Mikey's life-threatening condition would not have developed this far had his chronic ill health not been criminally neglected by his captors.

Children's bodies are amazingly resilient, but when they crash, they crash hard. I am certain I would be unable to ethically undertake today's endeavor if not for the adjustable stasis field developed here, on this world, by Lt. Commander Data. No matter the ultimate outcome of this one extreme case, I recommend that the immediate and wide-ranging value of Commander Data's invention be officially recognized by Starfleet and Starfleet Medical. Technical report to follow.

Additional: The abuse and neglect Mikey and countless trafficking victims like him have been forced to endure on our watch is a moral outrage that should neither be tolerated nor overlooked by Federation authorities and Starfleet Command. An official protest is currently in the works that will contain the details and results of today's operation, as well as supporting letters and signatures from my aforementioned medical colleagues; eyewitnesses Dr. Freja Anders, Lt. Alyssa Ogawa, Lt. Commander Data, Commander Deanna Troi, Commander William Riker, and Captain Jean Luc Picard; among others.

Dr. Crusher scrolled to the top of the page and ran her eyes over the report she'd just written. Her face and shoulders felt stiff and she realized how deeply she'd been frowning as she'd typed, her anger at the whole situation roiling like water rising up a geyser.

She sat back in her chair, drawing in a long, calming breath through her nose…

The 'submit' button sat at the bottom of the page, big and green with softly rounded corners. Once she hit it, all her accusations, promises, and recommendations would become part of the Enterprise's official records, of which all but personal logs were automatically sent to be reviewed and archived by Starfleet Command, and Captain Picard.

Crusher tapped 'submit,' stood, and strode out of the runabout sickbay's cramped little office with no second thoughts.

"Alyssa," she called, reaching for her lab coat. "How long until the organs are ready for transplant?"
"No more than three hours, Doctor," the nurse reported. "They're doing incredibly well."

"Excellent," Crusher praised. "Then, come join me. I'd like to run through one last simulation before Mikey's operation."

******

The strong stench of scorched metal and fused plastic hung thick and dense in Kurak's lab.

Data set the sliding doors to stay open, then picked his way across the charred and blackened wreckage to open the doors at the far side of the lab, near the dome's small office.

The Klingon glared at the ruin, her lip curled in dismay.

"This crossbreeze should soon freshen the air in here," Data said as he made his way back toward her. "Shall I check the primary console? If the core is intact, it may be safe to restore power."

"What is the point," Kurak growled, clutching her elbow in an attempt to reign in her frustration. "As I said before, it will take days to clear this mess - weeks to recover or reconstruct any lost data files —"

"That is not necessarily the case," Data said, scanning the extent of the wreckage with the critical eye of a space battle veteran. "Much of this damage seems largely cosmetic. The underlying circuitry may yet be intact. With your permission…?"

Kurak grunted.

Data hesitated, uncertain if that grunt was an affirmative or merely an expression of exasperation.

"What are you waiting for?" she snapped. "Instructions?"

"No," he said, getting right to work removing the console's outer panel. "The equipment here is standard issue. I am quite familiar with...ah...!"

He crouched lower and angled his head, pushing his way into the computer's dark, lifeless insides.

Kurak heard a low click, then a rising hum and the scarred computer console lit up.

Data rose back to his feet with a satisfied look, then noticed all the soot-stains on his hands and clothes. Batting at the stains only smudged them further.

"Well, so much for this outfit," he joked, wiping his hands on his trousers before quickly fixing his hair. "But, as you can see, the central console is operational, if in need of some repair. I will require tools and access to the cafeteria replicator. Do you have a diagnostic kit I might use?"

Kurak seemed to expand and, for a moment, Data feared he may have offended her again, although he wasn't sure how. Then she sighed through her nose and nodded.

"I will find you your tools, android," she said. "How long do you think these repairs will take?"

"No more than an hour for this console. Possibly less," Data said, tapping experimentally at the glowing touch pad. "It may require another day to get your entire lab back to its full operational status. That is better than weeks, is it not?"

He offered her a smile.
Kurak just glared at him.

Data sighed and turned his eyes back to the console.

"The important thing is the core does seem to be intact," he said. "Once I've made the repairs, you can run a thorough diagnostic. It may be that your files and programs have not been lost at all."

"My concern was not for my work, but for Dr. Baker's," Kurak said grimly. "I learned long ago, it is best to keep personal back-ups of all my files in a separate location. Melinda preferred to keep her work 'at work,' as she put it. She trusted the computer system and uploaded her back-ups to our subspace network only twice a week, weather permitting."

Data regarded her, noting her stiff, guarded posture, the way the tilt of her ridged head kept her eyes in shadow...

"I am sorry you lost your friend," he said. "I've been meaning to tell you how much I admired your performance at her memorial service last night. It was...quite beautiful."

"Klingons do not mourn the dead," Kurak said.

"That song seemed to suggest otherwise," Data pointed out. "The lyrics and plaintive tone of the piece strongly implied—"

"What does a Federation android know of Klingon music?" she snarled.

"Perhaps not as much as I should," he admitted. "My studies have concentrated mostly on human society and culture. However, I—"

"'Studies?" She barked a scoffing laugh. "How like a machine to interpret a biological civilization in terms of cold, analytical facts. Life is not a schoolroom, android. Do not presume to speak of things you cannot understand!"

Data straightened, his amber eyes burning with deep and powerful anger.

"Do you think I cannot understand grief?" he demanded, advancing a few slow steps. "The anger and guilt that comes of knowing you survived when she...she did not..."

He swallowed hard and looked away, pinching the bridge of his nose.

The Klingon stared into his face for a long moment, then bared her teeth in a snarl.

"We are wasting time," she said. "Go. Replicate what you need. I will find you that tool kit."

She marched toward the office and Data stared after her, suddenly wondering if he should follow, if he should apologize for losing his temper...

But, the moment passed quickly, and so did his doubt. He had no wish to apologize to her. His anger toward her still burned hot...mingled now with a more familiar sadness...

Data took a last look around, mentally listing all the re-surfacing and replacement parts he'd need to start the repairs, then he turned and strode out of the dome.

*******

Silarra watched the soot-smudged android leave the Klingon's lab, noting his expression, his posture...
She had witnessed his reaction to Kurak's performance the previous evening, seen the android's skin flush, his breath catch, his eyes follow the Klingon woman as she danced... She had observed him preparing for their morning meeting, the time and care he'd put into choosing his wardrobe, brushing his hair 'just so'...

Now, she smiled, her confidence rising as she slid down from her perch over the open door to Kurak's lab.

Starfleet's brilliant mechanical man had confirmed his weakness - an Achilles heel as old as civilization itself.

Fears and feelings she could mold, manipulate. With enough skill and subtlety, Silarra felt certain she could guide her android nemesis into becoming his own worst liability. An emotional time bomb to deploy when she chose, turning her mission's most dangerous stumbling block into her most powerful weapon.

As long as she wore the right face...

******

Data felt a slender hand on his shoulder and he turned, startled enough to stumble back when Kurak pushed him, hard, against the dome's outer wall.

"What—" he started, but his question was muffled when the Klingon woman pressed her lips to his.

Data's eyes widened and he tried to pull away, anxious to clarify her thoughts, her intent...

But the woman's kisses were fierce, insistent, and Data felt his program responding to the physical input she provided, his pulse rising to drown out his louder doubts. Slowly, he closed his eyes, allowing her to press in closer, breathing her scent as he sank his fingers into her long, thick hair...

"I thought..." he managed to mumble as her sharp teeth nipped at his sensitive ear, "I thought you did not like me..."

"You are a fool," the woman said, staring straight into his amber eyes.

"Then..." Data blinked and tilted his head. "I do not understand. Why...?"

She kissed him again, then pulled swiftly away, leaving the android bleary and bewildered.

"Klingons do not court favor," she said. "They conquer that which they desire."

Data stared at her and swallowed hard; a warm, joyous shiver sparking deep inside him.

"Kurak...? Does this mean you—?"

"Leave now," she snapped, her eyes and expression as cold as ever. "Replicate what equipment you need. Unless this energy source decides to miraculously reveal itself, we have a great deal of work to do."

"Agreed..." Data said, staring wonderingly after her as she strode into the dome.

His legs felt weak, as if his power cells had again been drained. A quick diagnostic revealed that was not the case, but he still felt strangely off balance as he made his way across the warming sand, his swirling thoughts taking him back to his escape with the children through the desert...the question Ishta had so randomly put to him...
"I beg your pardon?" he'd said.

"It's no big deal," Ishta said, her blue eyes fixed on the darkly blushing Kahlestra. "I was just going to ask you if—"

"Ishta, don't!"

"If you've ever been in love," Ishta finished, speaking right over the Klingon's protest.

"Do you want the truth?" he'd asked them.

"Yes," Ishta said quickly. Kahlestra just nodded.

"Then, no," he admitted. "I have never been in love. At least...not yet."

"Then you can fall in love," Ishta pressed. "That is, you can actually—"

"Data!"

Commander Riker grinned and waved him over.

Data froze in place.

Had Riker seen...did he know...?

Slowly Data walked closer, his eyes wide and uncertain...

"You look like you've had an interesting morning," the commander said, noting the soot stains on his clothing. "Care to join us for some breakfast?"

"I... Um, actually, Will, I—"

Riker regarded him.

"Are you all right, Data? Has something happened that I should know about?"

"No...! Not as such..." the android hedged, then shook his head. "Perhaps I could use some refreshment. Thank you, Will."

Riker looked at him for a moment longer, then gave him a kind smile.

"I heard you spent all night working on that adjustable stasis field of yours. You're probably just a little tired."

"Yes...that must be it..."

Data cast a quick glance back at Kurak's lab, uncertain why he felt such a strong impulse to avoid the truth rather than tell the commander what he and Kurak had done, what she'd said...

Riker clapped a brotherly hand on his shoulder.

"Come on, Data," he said. "I know you've tried my sourdough pancakes. How about an owon and sausage omelette this morning?"

"It sounds...intriguing..." Data said, and Riker laughed, leading the way to the cafeteria dome.

As he followed the commander inside, a cool wave of relief washed through Data, and he began to
Until his eyes fell on Counselor Troi, and his emotions tightened up all over again...

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

References Include - TNG: Time Squared; In Theory; Hide and Q; The Battle; Night Terrors; Suspicions; Redemption II.

Hi Everyone! I hope you enjoyed this chapter! Next Time: The situation gets even more complicated for Data as Mikey's surgery begins. Stay Tuned, and thanks so much for your comments and reviews! :D :D
Before the emotion chip, Data's positronic brain had functioned like a smoothly running station with many multiple trains of thought moving along both parallel and interweaving tracks. It was still like that.

Only now, the maps of routes and stops had become so much more complicated. And they kept expanding.

Gut feelings, intuition, physical sensation - all conspired to carve out raw, sometimes unpleasantly rugged landscapes for the android's thoughts to navigate, adding new links to the tracks, new crossings and bridges, strong physical responses to what had once been primarily intellectual stimuli. Emotions had forced Data to look beyond the basics of his ethical programming, to know the abrasive conflict between feelings and facts - to choose subjectively, even selfishly, and defend those choices without the certainty of a cool, unbiased position…

To learn he was vulnerable. Susceptible to mistakes, emotional injury and emotional pain…

Just like any conscious, sentient, organic mind.

By the time Data had placed his replicated materials on an anti-grav sled and sat down at the table with his omelette, the joyous wonder he had felt outside had cooled and congealed into doubts. Instead of feeling pleased, even proud, to discover a strong, talented woman like Kurak found him...desirable...his analytical mind kept asking why? Why had she kissed him like that? What had she meant when she told him...

*Klingons do not court favor. They conquer that which they desire.*

Could he have misread her before? Had he attuned his perceptions so firmly to human norms that he had mistaken her Klingon signals of attraction for hostility? Had her advance - her challenge - been serious, or was she toying with him? Testing how far she could push the machine, how far he might be willing to go before…

*No.*

Data refused to be that gullible. He refused to be a novelty, to fall victim to manipulation, intentional or otherwise. As he'd told Deanna that first night by the cave, the night he'd deliberately shed his old skin: he'd come too far to be used like that again. To allow his curiosity - his most private desires - to be exploited. As they'd been exploited by Ishara, by the Borg… Even Tasha…

*Data, I'm only going to tell you this just once. It never happened.*

He felt a strong mental flinch at the memory; the sharp, lingering pang of her rejection. The awkward sting recalled other, similar feelings…memories of failed or misleading interactions overlapping, interweaving like conversations in a crowded room…

*I barely even know you, Data, but already I completely trust you. I even consider you a friend… You were so kind and attentive…I thought that would be enough…*
...as close as we are, I don't really matter to you...not really...

I feel pity for you. Your existence must be a kind of walking purgatory. Neither dead nor alive. Never really feeling anything. Just existing. Just existing...

Are you familiar with physical forms of pleasure...?

Stop it, Data's mind shouted over the rising din. Stop it! Stop, stop…!

"Data?" Riker's voice broke into Data's thoughts, snapping the android back to the present, and the people gathered around the cafeteria table. He blinked rapidly and sat straight up.

"Sir!"

Riker regarded him with narrowed his eyes; Troi and Picard mirroring his concern.

"You seemed to kind of zone out there for a moment," he said. "Are you all right?"

Data looked down at the breakfast he'd barely touched, unable to help the warm flush he felt rising up his neck, his face…

"Apologies if I appear distracted," he said. "I have…a great deal on my mind…"

Picard's expression seemed to soften.

"Quite understandable," he said. "Your little friend's surgery is today and, according to Dr. Crusher, it's your modified stasis field that may just make the difference. It's only natural you'll be feeling a little nervous about the outcome."

Data felt a stab of guilt at the way the captain had misinterpreted his demeanor...made worse by his own strong reluctance to reveal the truth. But, how could he tell his captain what had transpired between Kurak and himself? How could he admit that he had allowed his preoccupation with the Klingon scientist to divert his concern for Mikey to a far less prominent track?

"I'm sorry if I seemed a little brusque at the meeting last night, Data," Picard said, his kind tone making the android's fingers fidget. "If you wish to stay with young Mikey during the procedure, you should do so."

Data blushed again and glanced down at his plate, feeling as though Troi's eyes were boring straight through his skull, laying bare the innermost workings of his positronic brain…

"Yes, sir. I appreciate that," he managed to say, rising to his feet and backing toward the replicator to dispose of his breakfast tray. "And thank you, Will, for a most interesting omelette. I...I am sorry I cannot stay, but I must take these materials to Kurak's lab."

He gestured awkwardly to his loaded anti-gravity sled.

Picard nodded approvingly, getting up to dispose of his own breakfast dishes.

"Of course," he said. "And we have our work to do as well. If I don't see you at lunch, Mr. Data, good luck. That goes for Mikey's surgery, and to the success of your invention."

"Thank you, sir."

Data smiled, genuinely gratified by the captain's words, and pushed the narrow sled through the cafeteria dome's sliding doors.
Once the doors had closed behind him, Troi approached Picard by the replicator.

"Counselor?" the captain questioned, frowning slightly at her troubled expression. "Is everything all right?"

"I'm not sure," she said. "Data's emotions were all over the place just then. I feel almost certain he is hiding something."

"Are you sure it's not just worry?" Riker asked as he joined them. "Data has gotten pretty attached to those kids he rescued. The thought of losing one of them...especially after he put so much time and work into that new stasis field of his..."

"I thought of that, Will, and it's certainly a factor," Troi said. "But, I can't help feeling there's more going on."

"Can you be more specific?" Picard asked.

"No...not exactly," Troi said. "But he does seem extremely anxious, Captain. I can't be certain, but I suspect it may have something to do with Kurak."

"Kurak?" Riker chortled. "Well, there's your answer. I know I'd be pretty jumpy if I had to work in close quarters with an angry Klingon."

"Will, this isn't funny," Troi started to protest. "Data's inexperience—"

But, the captain was shaking his head.

"I understand your feelings, Deanna," he said to her. "And, you were right to come to me with your concerns. But, we are not Mr. Data's babysitters. Emotionally inexperienced though he may be, Data is a mature individual and, if we are to evaluate his performance objectively, we must allow him space to feel his own feelings and make his own decisions accordingly. Therefore, Counselor, if you do not sense anything imminently dangerous or concerning, I believe the best course of action is to leave him alone."

"I agree," Riker said. "From what I've seen so far on this trip, I think he's doing just fine."

Troi sighed and nodded her acknowledgement.

"You're right," she said. "I suppose I'm still getting used to sensing so much...well, anything really, from our friend."

She smiled bracingly and straightened her posture.

"Well," she said, moving toward the inner exit. "Back to the bureaucrats. My contacts have promised I should have a more definitive response regarding Ishta's status by the end of the day."

"That should help ease some of Data's anxiety," Riker said.

"Indeed," Picard agreed, his serious demeanor beginning to brighten as he and Riker followed her into the round, tube-like corridor. "Now, Will, how about we go see what Drs. Tu'Pari, Anders and Kapoor have been cooking up in the control room?"

"Yes, sir," Riker said, though behind his back Riker and Troi shared an amused, long-suffering look. As they parted down separate branches, Troi offered Riker a warm, Betazoid gesture of support.

After all, with stakes so potentially high, both officers felt it their duty to support the captain's
enthusiasm for the archaeologists' mystery - at least until they could all feel certain they could keep
the Stairway's strange energy source from falling into enemy hands...

*******

Data had barely made it ten meters when he heard someone hurrying after him through the sand. He
stopped the anti-grav sled and looked over his shoulder, his dark eyebrows shooting up in surprise.

"Deanna!" he exclaimed, trying hard to clamp down on a spike of anxiety. "Was there something
else you wished to discuss with me?"

"Don't play innocent, Data," Troi teased. "It doesn't suit you."

"Sorry?" He blinked, bewildered. "I'm afraid I do not understand."

Troi's lips twitched, the corners pulling up into a tiny smirk, and Data felt his face grow warm again.

"You've been hiding something from me," she said, giving his arm a light, playful nudge.

Data flinched away, surprised by the informal contact.

"No!" he exclaimed. "No, I... It's nothing, Counselor."

"Now, Data," she admonished. "We both know that's not true."

Data grimaced, his amber eyes turning helplessly from the sand to the washed out desert sky.

"I...I don't..."

"Discussing your feelings can help put them in perspective," she coaxed. "You know you can talk to
me."

Data seemed to freeze for a moment, his eyes very wide. Then he sighed, seeming to deflate under
her dark, Betazoid stare.

"Kurak and I shared some rather...passionate...kisses this morning," he admitted quietly. "She... um...approached me...as I was leaving her lab."

"And...?" Troi prompted. "How did that make you feel?"

Data fidgeted in the sand, wondering if it was actually possible to 'die' of embarrassment...or,
perhaps, suffer some debilitating electrical short...

"I was...confused. Until that moment, I had believed Kurak saw me as a threat to her authority over
Kay. Her demeanor toward me had been consistently hostile and dismissive. I did not expect..."

"What, Data?" Troi prodded. "What happened?"

Data shook his head, his expression pinched with uncertainty as Kurak's words replayed in his mind.

...Klingons do not court favor...They conquer that which they desire...

"I believe...she issued me a challenge," he said. "But, I am not sure I wish to accept. I'm not even
sure I like Kurak. I was quite...unsettled...by the way I've seen her treat Kay, and her previous
conduct toward me leaves me in doubt as to whether her...romantic advances...are serious. I would
never wish to...to move forward...only to hear her say...it never happened..."
He trailed off with an awkward wince, fearing he'd revealed far too much…

Troi nodded thoughtfully, her dark eyes seeming to glint in the sun.

"Would you like to know what I think, Data?" she asked.

"Indubitably, Counselor," he said earnestly, and her small smirk bloomed into a full-on smile.

"I think you've already made up your mind, and all this stress and worry is an attempt to justify the decision to yourself."

"Justify...to myself?" Data frowned. "But, Counselor, why would I—"

"Klingons aren't exactly subtle when it comes to expressing their feelings, Data," she said. "If Kurak approached you that directly, I'd say it's a pretty strong sign she finds you attractive. And, I don't think you'd be vacillating like this if you weren't already inclined to accept her 'challenge,' as you put it. Do you disagree?"

Data blinked, looking uncomfortably overwhelmed as his amber eyes shot from side to side.

"But," he said, "what would be the point of initiating a...romantic...relationship when we have less than a week and a half of leave time left to spend together?"

Troi gave him a fond look.

"Data," she said, "not all close relationships have to be long-term. The question is, do you really want to waste what little time you have to get to know each other?"

Data shook his head, then buried his face in his palms.

"I don't know!" he muffled through his fingers, dragging his hands down his tortured face before looking back up at her. "I don't know what I want! The kisses we shared were so...unexpected…"

"But not unwanted?" Troi pressed, her question triggering another unsummoned memory, another unwelcome voice from his past…

...You enjoyed it...that surge of emotion inside you... It was unlike anything you've ever felt before…

Data swallowed.

"...no..." he confessed, his voice barely a whisper.

"Then, you do know."

Data sighed deeply and lowered his gaze to the hot, coarse sand swirling over his shoes.

"I admit, I found her performance last night to be...exceptional," he said. "I...I feel there must be so much more to her than she has, so far, allowed me to see, and the notion that I...that she may be willing to…"

He sighed again, and offered Troi a slight, bashful smile.

"You are correct, Counselor," he said. "I find Kurak immensely intriguing, which is itself...quite attractive… And yet…"

Data tensed his jaw, uncertain how to phrase what he was feeling. He had told the counselor of his
moment of temptation. His dream to be part of a family unit; his longing to know what it was to love, to be loved and truly feel it...

"Perhaps…" he said. "Perhaps I will accept her challenge. Once I am confident that Mikey's surgery has been successful."

Troi's eyes seemed to dim.

"Well, it is up to you," she said. "But, don't leave it too long, Data. You wouldn't want Kurak to feel rejected."

…it never happened...

Data swallowed again.

"No," he said. "No, I would not."

Troi's broad smile returned, and Data sighed, gesturing awkwardly to the anti-grav sled.

"I must… Kurak really is expecting these supplies…"

"Yes, of course," Troi said. "I've held you up long enough. Good luck, Data."

"Thank you, Deanna. As always, your advice is valued, and much appreciated," he said, returning her smile before reactivating the sled and hurrying off across the sand.

Troi watched until Data and his loaded sled had vanished into the dome. Then, she moved her eyes - a brief, deliberate flutter - and both 'Troi' and her smile vanished in a golden swirl of energy…

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

References Include: TNG: The Schizoid Man, The Naked Now, Legacy, In Theory, Descent, Disaster, Redemption II; the movie First Contact.

Stay tuned for Chapter Forty, coming right up!
Kurak snarled at her data padd, then pushed it aside and leaned back in her flimsy office chair.

The android had returned nearly an hour ago with an anti-grav sled loaded with materials. She could see him hard at work through her office's long, rectangular window, crouched half-in / half-out of the primary console with his blinking, buzzing tools.

Kurak pinched her lips together and closed her eyes, rubbing her ridged forehead with her hand.

The whole situation still seemed surreal. Just the idea that Commander Data, Starfleet's celebrated sentient android - the officer who had unmasked the Romulans aiding the traitorous Duras during the Klingon civil war - that he was out there repairing her lab…

She and the android had barely interacted during Kurak's time aboard the Enterprise-D, and seeing him again the clinic, comforting that sick little human boy… If the robot, Howard, hadn't told her, she never would have recognized the man she had overheard sharing memories of his daughter as the same unsettlingly lifelike machine she'd seen on the Enterprise bridge.

She wanted to learn more about him. He had saved her daughter…just as Melinda had been trying to do when those honorless raiders vaporized her in cold blood, denying her the chance to defend herself, to so much as see the face of her killer…

Kurak clenched her jaw, trying to picture her friend sitting at the desk across from hers, her dark curls like tightly wound electric coils…

But, it was difficult. Waking up from a coma to find her best friend gone - to learn she had been murdered trying to protect Kahlestra while she, Kurak, had been unconscious, unable to defend her friend, her daughter, her lab…

Why?

Why had the raiders come that day, at that time? They had kept their work so secret, published only their most basic findings. How had the raiders known...

Kurak knew how much Melinda had been looking forward to meeting Commander Data and Captain Picard. To meeting all four Enterprise officers. It had been Melinda's idea to host them at the compound, to show them around the ruins.

But, given the timing, Kurak had to wonder… Could Melinda have suspected their discovery of that ancient energy source had already made their compound a target for attack? Could she have hoped the presence of Starfleet officers might serve as a deterrent? And if so, why hadn't Melinda told the rest of them? Why hadn't she told her?

Kurak shook her head. It was no use pondering the motives of the dead.

And yet...

If that had been her purpose, her dear friend had saved Kahlestra twice. She owed Melinda a great debt of honor…a debt which, according to tradition, she now owed to Data, since he had - however
unknowingly - taken up the banner of her fallen friend, completing Melinda's mission by bringing Kahlestra safely home.

But, how could she risk cultivating any sort of friendly relationship with a machine? If the Klingon courts should hear of it - or worse, her ex-husband… The story could be twisted so easily against her. How many tawdry jokes had she heard among her ex-husband's coarse-minded friends about Federation scientists too awkward to find a mate creating robots for their own perverse ends? Any whiff of impropriety…of behavior considered 'deviant' by the more conservative factions…and she could lose more than custody. She could be stripped of her honor, her reputation, any chance of being hired within the Empire…

No. Best to keep her distance. Kahlestra was probably still young enough to get away with a little hero worship, but Kurak could not allow herself to drop her guard. Not for the android officer or any Fed.

No matter how impressive…

...or how deeply indebted she felt toward him for what he had done for her family…

Kurak swore through clenched teeth and rubbed her tired eyes. Kahlestra was right. Leaving her ex-husband's House had not set her free. As long as he remained a threat to Kahlestra's own freedom and ambitions, he held them both trapped, stunted, bound to him with chains of fear. And it would only get worse as Kahlestra grew older, more independent…

Kurak fisted her hands and pressed them to her stomach, the blinding-hot fury roiling inside of her nearly unbearable.

A knock on the doorframe made her lift her head, her eyes narrowing when she saw the android standing there with that small, nervous smile.

"What do you want?" she snapped, and the android blinked as if he'd been slapped. Kurak's jaw tightened, but she didn't soften her angry glare. She couldn't allow herself to weaken…

"Apologies if I interrupted your work," he said, and she scoffed.

"Hardly," she said. "I've been trying to trace the energy flow through the Stairway structure in the moments before and after that wall opened. Where did it come from, where did it concentrate? What was the effect on the dampening field?"

Data tilted his head curiously, stepping closer to peer at the padd on her desk.

"Can I presume from your frustrated tone that your endeavor has been unsuccessful so far?"

"It's these damn padds," she snarled, snatching her work out of his view. "It's like trying to plot five dimensional coordinates using a child's graphing calculator. How much longer will you be with the repairs?"

"That is what I came to tell you," Data said. "I believe I have completed repairs to the primary console. If you would restore main power to the lab, I will check for surges and run a diagnostic test to ensure the core is once again fully functional. Then, you can check whether your friend's files have survived this ordeal unscathed, as it were."

He smiled, but the expression faded when she didn't smile back.

"Kurak…" he said.
"What?"

He regarded her for a long moment, then sighed and closed his amber eyes.

"Never mind. If you would please accompany me...?"

Following quaint human custom, the android stepped aside to let her precede him out the door, then followed her into the main lab. While she headed to the generator controls, the soot-smudged commander sank back to his knees and reached under the console.

"Until I repair the rest of the lab, there is the strong possibility of a power surge," he called to her through the machinery. "It would be immensely frustrating to have done all this work just to watch the core fry all over again. The replicator cannot provide the type of shielding required, and I am unwilling to...procure...the needed materials from the runabout until I am certain they will not be required to help sustain Mikey's adjustable stasis field. It shouldn't be a problem, though. From here, I can ensure no harm comes to the console when you restore full power."

Kurak wrinkled her nose.

"How?" she said. "By using your own body?"

"Much of my body framework is made up of tri-polymers - a non-conductive material," he said. "But, don't worry. I have absorbed far more energy than this dome's generator is capable of producing, and lived to tell about it."

He looked up from under the console just long enough to flash her a smile before saying, "All right: now!"

Kurak hesitated just a moment, then did as he had ordered.

The restored console came to life with a slow, smooth hum.

"It looks brand new," she said, moving across the room to examine his repairs more closely.

"Yes," Data said, still under the console. "I— Ow! Shit!"

He jumped to his feet, hopping awkwardly as he shook his left hand as if trying to dislodge a desert spider.

"Ow, shit, dammit, ow!"

Kurak couldn't help herself. She laughed out loud at the android's comical little dance.

"Not so invulnerable as you thought, Commander?" she taunted.

"It would seem not," he agreed, chuckling self-consciously as he eyed his hand, and the console, for signs of damage. Not finding any, he shook his throbbing fingers again. "I'm afraid I'm still getting used to this new skin."

"Could you not feel pain before?" she asked.

"Not as such," he admitted. "Certain...unpleasant sensations...were always part of my diagnostic program, but they were nothing like as overwhelming."

Kurak regarded him, her heavy brow furrowed over her nose.
"Then, why change?"

"Why indeed," Data said and laughed again, then winced, flexing his fingers. "I think the pain is starting to fade."

"May I see?" she asked, and he willingly held out his hand.

Kurak took it, frowning at the deep red marks she saw on his fingertips. The marks felt warmer than the rest of his hand, just as she'd expect if she or Kahlestra had experienced a minor burn - bad enough to hurt but not to blister. Which seemed strange since, according to the console's diagnostic display, the shock he'd absorbed would have been more than enough to stun a human into unconsciousness...

"Is this...organic skin?" she asked uncomfortably.

"No," he answered, his eyes fixed on his hand in hers. "It is artificial. Like me."

She blew on his fingers, as she would a child's, but to her surprise he shuddered and quickly pulled away.

"I...I'm sorry," he stammered, his pale features reddening with embarrassment. "I'm still..."

He took in a long breath and slowly let it out.

"The first time I experienced...pain..." he told her. "I was being held captive by the Borg. I am still learning to...to disassociate what they did to me from..."

"You don't have to explain," Kurak said. "I have known many warriors. All have suffered trauma of one kind or another."

"I am not a warrior," Data said.

Kurak barked a scoffing laugh.

"This from the starship commander who smoked out the Romulans and cut short a war that could have devastated the Klingon-Federation Alliance?"

He blinked at her, and she smirked at the startled look on his face.

"Call yourself what you will, Starfleet Officer," she said. "I do know who you are. I know much of what you have done. And...Data..."

She hesitated just a moment, just long enough for the memory of Kahlestra's voice fill her head, for her child's burning anger to fill her soul...

...Damn my father and damn the courts! Let them all rot within the cursed gates of Gre'thor!...

It was a sentiment Kurak strongly shared, for more reasons than even Kahlestra knew. Swallowing back her doubts, her fears, the Klingon woman took a breath...and made her choice.

"...I acknowledge the debt of honor I owe to you."

She raised her head, just slightly, her eyes fixed firmly on his as she admitted, "I never did properly thank you for rescuing my daughter. For that, I apologize."

"I assure you," he said, "she has returned the favor."
"I'd like to hear about that," Kurak said. "Kahlestra has told me very little of her…adventures."

"I would be pleased to tell you of your daughter's bravery," he said politely, and took a slow step forward, still watching her.

"Kurak," he said, "about this morning…"

"What of it?"

The android's eyes seemed to flicker, and he took in a bracing breath, reaching out to pluck something from his pile of materials - something she couldn't quite manage to glimpse before he tucked it behind his back.

"I… That is… When you…" he started, then grimaced and tried again.

"I have been told that if a relationship…any relationship…is to succeed, it must be based on strong foundations," he said. "And…um… Regarding our…interaction this morning…"

"Interaction…?" she queried, wondering if he could be referring to their disagreement regarding his unwelcome interference with Kahlestra's study schedule.

"You must admit, it was rather...unexpected," he babbled awkwardly, "and - while I am not at all adverse to the overtire - your somewhat…combative…approach, coupled with your previous, rather dismissive attitude toward me…" He stopped himself, then tried again. "I feel... That is, if you genuinely wish to…"

He stopped again, then held out the hand he'd been concealing, offering her what looked like a long-stemmed flower.

Kurak had lost the thread of his confusing, rapid-fire patter, not really caring how he felt about her reprimand. Her daughter's education was her responsibility - a responsibility she had no intention of 'sharing' with anyone. But, she took the flower and turned it curiously in her hands, realizing it was not organic but made of metal that had been intricately folded and twisted into this delicate shape…

She only half-listened as he went on.

"Please know that while you may…perhaps…have already 'conquered' me, as it were…" the android prattled, his pale face beginning to turn red again, "I believe that...if this is to progress... It would be beneficial to learn more about each other. To that end, I wish to propose - that is - suggest…"

He fidgeted his feet, then straightened his shoulders and regarded her directly.

"Kurak, would you care to accompany me on a trail ride this evening? It would give us a chance to talk with each other."

Kurak raised her eyes from the gift and regarded him closely…his smooth, human features, the openness of his expression…so different from Klingon men… His amber eyes were so earnest…and the flower…

Was all this talk the Federation man's attempt to be friendly after a perceived conflict? Or was there something more…?

"Did you make this?" she asked, gesturing to the flower.
"Yes," he said. "If you do not like it—"

"No," she said. "No, it's... It's really quite... unique."

_Kahless_... she swore to herself.

What would Melinda advise? As intriguing as she found the android - that is, the android's invitation... Could she really risk...

What, though? What would she truly be risking? The android was an official visitor, a tourist, here on leave to see the ruins. And, if her suspicions about Melinda's reasons for wanting him and his fellow Starfleet officers to stay at their compound were correct, going for this trail ride would give her a chance to probe deeper into what they knew, and why they had come.

"Very well," she said. "I accept your invitation. After all that's happened, I could do with some fresh air, a chance to clear my head..."

Data's mouth dropped open, and his entire being seemed to light up from within.

"You... accept?" He beamed so happily, she couldn't suppress a small smile of her own. "Excellent. Wonderful! Thank you. I—"

"Data," she said.

"Yes, Kurak?"

She gestured to the console he'd repaired.

"The diagnostic...?"

"Hm?" He blinked, then laughed. "Oh, yes, of course. Back to work. There is much to do..."

"I will find a suitable place for this," Kurak said, taking her metal flower to her office.

As she walked away, she heard the android begin to whistle. She wasn't familiar with the lively tune, and his whistling wasn't exactly... on key... but it made her smile to herself just the same.

"Strange man..." she commented to Melinda's desk. "I think you would have liked him."

For Data's part, he felt as though his joy had inflated his chest like a balloon. If the computer diagnostic work hadn't been there to ground him, he imagined he might just float away. For the first time in his life, he found himself 'walking on air, 'dancing in the clouds,' and he never, ever wanted the feeling to end, happily mixing song lyrics in his head as he attempted to whistle a very old tune:

_Just to register emotion - jealousy, devotion_

_And really feel the part_

_Just because I'm presumin'_

_That I could be kinda human_

_If I only had a heart..._

To Be Continued...
Chapter End Notes

References Include: TNG: The Schizoid Man, The Naked Now, Brothers, Encounter at Farpoint, Legacy, In Theory, Descent, Disaster, Redemption II; the movie First Contact; "If I Only Had A Heart" from The Wizard of Oz, lyrics by E.Y. Harburg.

Thanks so much for your fantastic reviews!!! I'm so glad you're enjoying my story! :D
"Enter!" she called, smiling when she saw Data stride in through the sliding doors. Or, perhaps, 'dance' might have been a better word.

The android seemed to have a giddy glow about him, and he beamed a great smile the moment he saw her.

"Good afternoon, Beverly!" he greeted.

"Hello, Data," the doctor greeted back, not quite sure whether to return his smile or pull out her tricorder and give her friend a quick check-up. "You seem quite chipper."

"'Chipper'?" Data repeated, his eyes flicking to the side. While Data no longer defined terms out loud like an interactive thesaurus, she could tell he was looking it up. After a brief moment, his eyes focused and his smile grew even brighter.

"Why yes!" he said. "Yes, I suppose I am!"

"Any particular reason for this jubilant attitude?" she teased.

"There is," he told her, his pale face flushed with pride as he revealed: "I have a date this evening."

Crusher raised her eyebrows.

"A date? Who with?"

"With Kurak," he said, as if this information were obvious.

Crusher stared, not quite certain she'd heard him right…

"Kurak?"

Data smiled a bashful confirmation.

"Yes, Doctor," he said. "She set me the challenge this morning when she kissed me outside her laboratory."


"Her advances were quite…insistent," he told her. "I had initially intended to decline her overture, but once Counselor Troi helped me to…unpack…my own feelings, I realized—"

Crusher held up a staying hand.

"Wait, Data," she said. "Stop right there. Are you telling me that Troi encouraged this?"
"Is that so surprising?" he asked. "Kurak is an intriguing female, I am a passionate male…” He tried to maintain a smoldering look, but his irrepressible smile rather ruined the effect. "I invited her out for a short trail ride, just to talk, and she accepted! Oh, but Doctor, I am nervous. I feel… God, I haven't felt so much conflicting emotion since the awful overload I experienced on the Amargosa Station. And yet, somehow…”

"You want to savor every moment?" Crusher said, empathy warming her wary eyes as she watched his all-too-human face. Wesley had worn a similar look when he'd fallen into his first crush…and how well she remembered her own experience…

Data's amber eyes lit up from within.

"You understand!" he exclaimed. "I knew you would! Do you have any advice for me? I…I have never… Well, not since I installed the emotion chip, and before that the only woman I ever 'officially' went out with was Lt. Jenna D'Sora, and she and I…we were not…”

"Data," Crusher broke into the babble. "I know this isn't what you want to hear right now. But, my advice is not to make too much of this. Take it slow. Remember, you will be returning to duty aboard the Enterprise in a little over a week."

"That may be debatable…” Data lowered his eyes, speaking so quietly Crusher had to strain to hear him.

"What was that?"

"I said, of course you are correct, Doctor," Data said quickly, quite aware she knew that he was covering. "I understand that this…whatever it is between Kurak and myself…cannot be long-term. But, as I am learning, what one understands and what one is feeling are often two entirely different things."

He snorted a slight laugh through his nose and shook his head. He had washed up and changed his soot-smudged clothes before coming to the runabout and, though he had combed his hair back in its accustomed style, he had chosen not to treat it to stay that way. The result was a hank of hair fell forward in a surprisingly natural-looking wave, just brushing his forehead.

Crusher resisted the motherly impulse to smooth it back, and gave his shoulder a warm squeeze instead.

"You're doing fine, Data," she assured him. "For all her defensive bluster, I know when Kurak cares, she cares deeply. I'm sure the two of you will have plenty to discuss on your date."

Data raised his eyes to hers, and opened his arms for a hug she warmly returned.

"Thank you, Beverly," he said, and pulled away, turning his gaze toward her scan. "But, I have been selfish. Speaking of all this when my thoughts should be with Mikey. Is he awake, Doctor? May I see him before the surgery?"

"Of course you may, Data," she said. "He's in the next room. I believe Kay and Ishta are with him right now if you'd like to spend some time together. I just wanted to go over this one last time before we begin."

She gestured to her scans.
"Will you be available to observe the procedure?" she asked him.

"The captain has given me permission to stay, Doctor," Data said. "Although, as this is my leave, I would have done so anyway..."

Crusher smiled.

"Then I'll have Alyssa replicate you a gown," she said. "I think we'll both feel more comfortable with you there to keep an eye on the technology...just in case..."

"I understand, Doctor," Data said. "I would be honored to observe."

"Thank you, Data. We'll be ready soon."

Data nodded once, then left through the sliding door to the main sickbay.

Crusher sat back behind her desk, her lips stretched in a small, bittersweet smile.

"So, our Pinocchio has discovered love..." she mused. "This better not be some Klingon test. If that woman hurts him, I'll..."

But, she knew she couldn't protect her android friend. Data had boarded the roller-coaster, and the ride had already begun. All she could do was cross her fingers and hope he'd still be smiling at the end.

*******

Data entered the main sickbay to see Kahlestra and Ishta sitting at a fold-out table set up next to Mikey's biobed. A quick glance at Mikey's readings showed his biorhythms were stable, but Data found it more reassuring to see the boy sitting up and laughing with the girls.

"I hope I am not interrupting," he said as he approached, but the children broke out in a cheer.

"Data!" they cried happily.

"I knew you'd keep your promise," Mikey said, shooting Ishta a triumphant look. "See? I told you he'd keep his promise!"

Kahlestra jumped up to grab the android's hand and pulled him into their group, saying, "Ishta and I didn't want Mikey to feel lonely, so we did most of our homework in here this morning. Nurse Ogawa said it was OK. You can tell my mother I finished three of the skill packets already, and I'm going to do the last one while we're waiting for Mikey to finish having his surgery. And Ishta's almost halfway through that play you asked her to read!"

"Oh yes?" Data asked, pulling over a lab stool so he could join their little circle. "What do you think of the story so far?"

"I think you humans are all nuts," Ishta grunted, spinning her padd in place on the table with her finger. "What kind of lunatic thinks some scuzzy old inn is a castle and a windmill is a giant? And the music sucks, by the way. Did humans really used to sing like that on ancient Earth?"

"Only in musicals," Data joked, unable to hold back his smile. "But, I am pleased to see how far you've gotten, Ishta. I really am looking forward to reading your report. You're both doing wonderful work."

Ishta hunched her shoulders and rolled her eyes, but Data was certain he caught a tiny smile creeping
"Are you going to stay in the waiting room with us?" Kahlestra asked.

"No," Data said, and looked at Mikey. "Dr. Crusher has invited me into the operating room to observe."

Mikey's eyes grew wide and bright.

"You mean…"

"Yes, Mikey," Data assured him. "I will be right there with you the whole time."

Mikey sighed with deep relief and slowly sank down to rest his head against the biobed's shiny pillow.

"That's good," he said quietly. "Not that I was really scared or anything," he added, staring straight at Ishta. "I just…"

"It's all right, Mikey," Data said gently. "I'm sure we all understand how much courage it takes to face an operation like this. We're all very proud of you. Even Ishta, or she wouldn't have come in here to spend time with you. Is that not correct?"

Ishta grunted and shrugged.

"You already lasted longer than I thought, Cancer Boy," she admitted, and gave Mikey's arm a light punch. "Try not to die in there, OK?"

"Yeah," Mikey said, smirking as he rubbed the place she'd hit. "I'll give it a shot."

Kahlestra glared at Ishta.

"Why do you always have to be such a jerk?" she said.

"I told him not to die," Ishta retorted. "How's that being a jerk?"

"You know you—"

"Data," Mikey's tired voice interrupted the girls' burgeoning argument. Data gave both girls a warning stare, then moved closer to Mikey's side.

"Yes, Mikey," he asked.

The boy reached out a hand to give the android's fingers a powerful squeeze.

"How much longer?" he asked quietly.

"Dr. Crusher said she and Nurse Ogawa would be ready in just a few more minutes."

"Data?"

"Yes, Mikey?"

Mikey swallowed, his nervous eyes darting around the bright, clinical room before he said, "Will you sing to me again? Like you said you would?"

"Certainly, Mikey," Data said. "What would you like to hear?"
"Something nice," he said. "Like the one you sang before, in the speeder."

"'When I Fall In Love'?" Data said.

"Yeah, but a different one," Mikey said, his eyes wide and intense. "So I know it's safe... you know... To go to sleep...?"

Data nodded, and sandwiched the boy's hand warmly between his own.

"All right, Mikey," he said gently. "I think I know a song like that."

Kahlestra and Ishta moved their chairs a little closer to the pair, both girls sharing a solemn look as he began to sing:

Goodnight sweetheart, till we meet tomorrow
Goodnight sweetheart, sleep will banish sorrow
Tears and parting may make us forlorn
But with the dawn, a new day is born (so I'll say)
Goodnight sweetheart, I'll be right beside you
Goodnight sweetheart, you know my love will guide you
Dreams enfold you, in each one I'll hold you
Goodnight sweetheart, good night...

Dr. Crusher and Lt. Ogawa came into the room while Data was singing. The medical officers approached quietly, gently shooing the girls into the runabout's central lounge, then administering Mikey's sedative while finishing the rest of their preparations.

But the android didn't stop. He kept his eyes on Mikey's face as the boy slowly relaxed against his pillow, gently stroking his hair as his bright eyes began to close...

Goodnight sweetheart, till we meet tomorrow
Goodnight sweetheart, sleep will banish sorrow
Tears and parting may make us forlorn
But with the dawn, a new day is born (so I'll say)
Goodnight sweetheart, I'll be right beside you
Goodnight sweetheart, you know my love will guide you
Dreams enfold you, in each one I'll hold you
Goodnight sweetheart, good night...

"That was beautiful, Data," Dr. Crusher said sincerely. "I'm sure that he appreciates it."

Data nodded, taking in a rather shaky breath through his nose.

"Yes, Doctor," he said.

"Come on," she said, taking him by the arm as he got to his feet and reluctantly let go of Mikey's hand. "Time to scrub up and get into our gowns. And Data..."

He looked at her, his head just slightly tilted, and she smiled.

"I want you to remember," she said, "no matter the outcome... Mikey has this chance because of you."

Data nodded and swallowed, his lips pressed tightly together.
"Beverly..." he asked her. "Do you... Do you still have a 'good feeling' about this operation?"

"I do, Data," she said, and gave his hand a friendly pat. "Let's get started."

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

References include - TNG: In Theory, Legacy, Encounter at Farpoint, Evolution; the movie Generations; 'Goodnight Sweetheart' (1931) by Ray Noble, Jimmy Campbell, and Reg Connelly from the 1991 album Ol' Yellow Eyes Is Back (lyrics slightly altered).

Your comments and reviews are always welcome! Thanks so much for reading! :D
The sun had just started its early-evening descent, but the desert wind still blew as hot and dry as it had at midday.

Data took a swig of water from his canteen, then urged his horse, Sagebrush, into a quick, three-beat canter, enjoying the rush of air against his skin as he closed his eyes and opened his arms to the wind.

"Yeeee-haaaaawww!"

Kurak watched the android ride, her stony expression betrayed by the glint of amusement in her eyes.

"Nom qet! We run!" she ordered her horse, and it broke into a gallop, kicking up coarse trail dust as they swerved to overtake the android. "Fast! Faster!"

Data opened his eyes as they approached and resumed his grip on the reigns, delighted to find she seemed willing to play.

"Howdy, Darlin'," he shouted over the thunder of hoofbeats, tipping an imaginary hat. "You wanna race?"

"Are you always this strange?" she teased.

"Not at all," he called back. "But today, right here, in this moment… I feel very, very happy! So, if you will forgive the exuberance after so many hours of anticipation, pent-up tension and anxiety, I shall now stand on my stirrups and release a whooping cry. YAAAA-HOOOOOOO!"

He laughed brightly and sat back in his saddle.

"You try!" he invited.

Kurak shot him a look, but willingly tilted back her head and released a controlled, yodel-like hunting yell.

"YAAHLLLAAAAYAAHLLLAAAYAAHLLLAAAYAAHLLLLOOOOOO!"

"Excellent!" Data cheered, and she gave him a toothy smile.

"I, too, am pleased the operation succeeded," she said as the pair of them dropped back to a pleasant trot. "Your doctor friend believes your adjustable stasis field will now ease the human child's recovery?"

"She does," Data confirmed. "Mikey's chance of surviving the trauma has risen to a very encouraging eighty-six percent. If no complications arise over the next twelve hours, those odds will rise exponentially."

"You really care about that boy, don't you," she said. "It's not the usual Starfleet 'all done in the line of duty' with you. His welfare, and the welfare of that Orion child - it is personal."
"I have become used to them," he admitted.

"Is this because you lost your own daughter?"

Data blinked, and made Sagebrush stop short. Kurak turned her horse around until she and the android faced each other.

"Is that what you think?" he demanded. "That I am only reaching out to these children to 'fill a gap,' as it were?"

"You tell me," she challenged, their eyes meeting for a long, charged moment. "Isn't 'noninterference' the Starfleet way? You drop in, fix a problem, then disappear again into the sunset? No families, no strings, no long-term commitments?"

"That is not the case," Data protested.

"Then how do you explain your captain and that doctor, or your friends Riker and Troi?" she said. "I have eyes, android. I know you Starfleet people tend to avoid relationships that threaten to last longer than a two-week shore leave."

Data wrinkled his brow, looking as if he'd been struck across the face.

"What exactly are you asking me?" he demanded.

"Those children look up to you, Commander," Kurak said. "Kahlestra looks up to you. She and that Orion child believe the promises you've told them. I want to know if you intend to deliver, or if I should prepare to explain to my daughter why her android hero seemed to evaporate the moment he returned to his ship."

"'Evaporate'? But, surely it is not possible for…"

Data trailed off, utterly bewildered, his head tilting about like a bird's until a realization began to dawn.

"This is about trust," he said, watching her face carefully to see if he'd read her correctly. "You want to know if you can trust me to continue to care for you, for Kay, for Ishta and Mikey even after my official leave has ended."

She straightened her posture and lifted her chin, fixing Data with an intimidatingly regal stare.

The android sighed through his nose and lowered his gaze to where his hand rested against Sagebrush's warm mane.

"It is true that I have a duty to my captain, and to the Enterprise," he said. "But that ship…it is not the ship I knew. It lacks the community…the sense of family…that allowed me to develop my confidence and personality. I feel - no, I know. I know that I have grown more in the handful of days I have spent here on this world than I have in over a year back in that…that stifling environment of constant suspicion and fear that has clouded our missions since the rise of the Dominion…and the return of the Borg. We are not the organization we once were. We have become smaller, colder, more reactive and less curious."

He sighed again and shook his head, running a hand through his wind-blown hair.

"I know this is not the answer to your question," he said. "But…right now…I feel I am, perhaps, facing a transition. My desires no longer seem in synch with the demands of my career. And I…I do
"Is it your intent to leave Starfleet?" she asked curiously.

"I admit, I have considered the possibility," he said quietly. "I have also considered the possibility of requesting a transfer to a ship more in tune with my own ambitions. A ship that, unlike the Enterprise-E, provides accommodation for children and families. But...I am still uncertain. I don't know what is best. I can only tell you what I told Ishta...although, as she pointed out, it leaves the situation unresolved..."

"What's that?"

"I want to adopt her," he said, lifting his gaze to meet Kurak's. "It has long been my dream to have a family...children and a wife to love and support, who will love and support me in return. My android status makes it complicated. But, even if the Federation courts prevent me from petitioning to serve as Ishta's legal guardian, even if we must be separated, I will still do all I can to provide her the support she needs to thrive. I will not break contact. That was my promise, Kurak. And you can trust that I will keep it."

Kurak furrowed her deeply ridged brow.

"Data," she said. "As a Starfleet Officer, are you not a citizen of the Federation? Does a Federation citizen not have rights?"

"So I've been led to believe," he said, rather bitterly. "Though I have had occasion to wonder over the years if there is not a double standard where I, and those like me, are concerned."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

Data snorted darkly and almost smiled.

"I was constructed, not born, you see, as was my daughter, Lal," he said. "Our 'artificial' status seemed to give certain parties the idea that electronic beings like us were not 'people' in the same sense that the Federation's biological citizens are 'people.' These parties viewed our construction as intellectual property belonging to the Federation in general, and to Starfleet in particular. They believed that gave them the right to challenge my parental rights, to...to attempt to 'confiscate' my child for their own purposes..."

He shook his head, sniffing hard as his wiped his dusty face against his sleeve.

"By Kahless..." Kurak muttered. "I did not know..."

"No, you would not," he said, releasing a shaky breath as he worked to calm the threat of tears. "The fact of my child's...malfunction...was released to the general public. The contributing 'cause' was not. The flesh peddlers who kidnapped your daughter were of much the same mindset - viewing living beings as commodities, not as people. I have been pushing the captain, Dr. Crusher, Counselor Troi, Commander Riker, and your friends to bring the activity of these black market slavers to the attention of the Federation authorities. But, somehow, I doubt much will be done. In the current political climate, maintaining the peace with the Cardassians tends to outweigh the exploitation of border colonies like Mikey's...many of which lost the protection afforded by the Federation when the treaty was signed and the border redrawn."

Kurak nodded, her expression grim and thoughtful.

"I believe I can understand how you feel, Commander," she said. "Growing up, I was treated in
much the same way by my parents and, later, by the husband they chose for me. Once I grew to be a teenager, my father traded me away for land and status, phrasing the whole sordid deal in terms of 'tradition,' 'honor' and 'duty.' When I tried to refuse, he threatened to kill me just to save face and he would have succeeded had my brother not intervened on my behalf. He risked his life and his honor to save mine, but was unable to prevent the marriage."

Data blinked in dismay, his amber eyes crinkling at the edges

"I was not aware such…traditions…were still practiced within the Klingon Empire."

"Maybe not in the cities, or the newer colonies," she said. "But, in the more conservative, traditional districts, such practices are still viewed as private, family matters; an extension of patriarchal honor and ancient values not to be interfered with by the state. For that reason, arranged marriage and child marriage is still considered legal within the Empire. To my mind, though, it is an ancient barbarism, an atrocity I will not allow my ex to inflict upon my daughter. I will kill him first."

"An understandable sentiment," he commented, and her expression softened, just for a moment.

"You wished to see the ruined city," she said, looking out over the golden sands ahead. "I'd say it is not more than a kilometer away from here. Our horses seem rested enough. Do you still want to race?"

Data smiled a slow smile that grew into a broad, delighted grin.

"You got it, pardner," he drawled playfully. "I'm game if you are."

"Then, on my signal," she said, as they moved their horses to stand side by side.

"Nom qet!" she shouted, and their race was on.

"Qet rur SuS!" he shouted back as their horses charged together down the trail. "Run, Sagebrush! Run like the wind!"

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

References include - TNG: Redemption I/II; The Offspring; A Fistful of Datas; The Measure of a Man; The Quality of Life; Evolution; Datalore; The Schizoid Man; Legacy; Journey's End; and the movie First Contact.

Please review! :D
The ruined city nestled in a cleanly excavated square hole, its curving arches, tumbled walls, and narrow pillars poking out against the desert above like the bones of some giant fossilized animal.

Data and Sagebrush tore past the trail-side watering station mere moments before Kurak and her horse, winning the race, quite literally, by a nose.

Kurak swore colorfully, but took the narrow defeat with good humor, even laughing as Data and Sagebrush pranced a mock-victory lap around the brick shelter, making bows to an imaginary crowd of admirers.

"You're good," she acknowledged breathlessly as they dismounted and led their panting horses into the little rest-stop. "I would not have thought a man who has spent his life aboard starships could handle a horse so well, or a loosely packed trail like this. Not even a man who was 'constructed' rather than 'born'."

Data laughed and smiled at her.

"Captain Picard is an avid horseman," he said, giving his hot, dusty face a quick scrub with water from the pump, then offering Kurak a turn, before rinsing out and filling a couple of bowls for the horses. "I have had occasion to accompany him on trail rides in the holodeck. But, I must confess, Sagebrush is the first non-holographic horse I have come to know. When we first met, I worried how a living horse might react to an android rider. But, Sagebrush did not seem nearly as concerned as I was. And now, I think we have become good friends."

Kurak grunted, and pushed her long, wavy hair back behind her shoulders.

"After such a run, the horses should not drink too much at once," she warned as he set the bowls down. "We should let them drink a bowl each now, and another before we head back."

"Understood," he said, and gave Sagebrush a friendly pat before ducking out of the shaded shelter back into the sun.

"You know," he commented, casting his gaze out over the bent trees and sparse cacti toward the reddish mountains beyond, "this landscape is quite beautiful. When it is not attempting to kill you with ground quakes and sandstorms, of course."

He glanced and her and smiled, then took a few steps forward, opening his arms to the panorama spread out before them.

"I feel such a strong urge to paint right now!" he exclaimed, wiggling his fingers. "I must remember, if we do this again, I should pack some art supplies in my saddlebag. This whole scene - I feel as if it is calling to me! I wish to capture it all, the play of light and shadow beneath those arches, the textures of the sand and eroded stone…"

"You describe the pull of the toH be'," Kurak said, moving to stand beside him. "The 'muses' I believe you would call them. According to Klingon legend, the toH be' ignites a flame within the heart of the artist to compel her to create. At times, the compulsion becomes so strong, the artist can lose herself in the flames…even sacrificing her life for her art."
Data regarded her, then looked away, turning his gaze toward the mountains.

"The toH be' must have been present last night," he said, shifting his feet awkwardly in the sand. "Although I do not have a 'heart', per se... I believe... I felt such a flame ignite within my hydraulic positive displacement pumps... when I heard you sing..."

He swallowed, then risked a quick glance back toward her.

Kurak caught his gaze, and held it with her own steady stare.

"What do you want from me?" she said.

Data opened his mouth, then closed it again, then reached out to gently take her hand.

"I..." he started, and she raised an eyebrow, as if to coax him on.

"I would like you to give me a tour of this site," he said. "Tell me everything you think I should know about these ruins, and the symbols your friend Melinda had been working to decipher. I have been running a cipher decryption program in the back of my mind for over a day now, and I believe I would benefit greatly from viewing the inscriptions here for myself."

Kurak gave him an acknowledging nod, and moved ahead to lead the way.

Data started to release her hand, but she did not let go, squeezing firmly and giving his hand an insistent pull.

Data's eyebrows lifted in surprise.

"Stay close to me, Commander," she said. "And watch where you step."

"As you wish," he quipped, and smiled broadly, his positive displacement pumps seeming to lighten with every step they took together.

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Data's tricorder hummed and buzzed as he turned a slow circle, scanning the oblong space behind and under the great arching door frame that marked the site's most ancient cluster of buildings.

"I am picking up an energy reading," he said to Kurak, who'd been peering grimly past his arm at the small screen. "It is similar to the dampening field in operation beneath the Stairway, but far less intense."

He snapped his tricorder shut and replaced it in the holster he'd attached to his belt.

"Curious. No such readings have ever been reported in any other section of these ruins. Yet, when I passed through that archway, I felt oddly dizzy. And now, we detect this field..."

"Maybe it's you, Data," Kurak said. "We know the dampening field is sensitive to machinery. And you are as advanced a machine as this galaxy has ever produced."

Data cocked an eyebrow.

"Thank you...?" he said, then smiled to let her know he was not truly offended. "But, you may be correct. My presence in the cavern beneath the Stairway caused that dampening field's strength to jump significantly. The effects were most... uncomfortable..."
Kurak frowned and paced toward the nearest wall, tracing her fingers along the rough stone until she reached the great arch.

Deep, wedge-like gouges marked the towering doorway from the ground to the (long absent) ceiling. The gouges were quite small and badly eroded, but most were recognizable as cuneiform-like symbols, interspersed here and there with carved images that had probably once been quite detailed - faces in profile and wild beasts the wind and sand had smoothed and smudged beyond any clear identification.

"I wonder…" she said. "This part of the city is nearly contemporaneous with the Stairway structure. What if…"

She turned toward Data, her eyes wide and bright.

"What did you do to cause that Preserver wall to open?" she demanded. "What were the precise sounds?"

"You wish me to play back my memory file?"

"Can you do that?" she asked curiously.

"That, and much more," he returned with a sly smirk.

Kurak rolled her eyes.

"Kahless," she grunted. "If I did not know you were a machine, I would swear you were human. All day, you have been either flirting or cracking jokes, or both, when your mind should be on the task at hand."

"I am quite capable of multitasking," he teased, and she gave him a fierce shove the android was gracious enough to pretend to stagger back from.

"All right, all right," he said laughingly. "Just, allow me to put the excerpt you are about to hear in context, before you accuse me of 'cracking' another joke."

She stepped back and gestured for him to go ahead.

"We were in that cavern under the Stairway," he said. "The dampening field had made me feel quite ill - much, much worse than the brief spate of nausea I experienced entering this room - and Commander Riker had come over to check on my status. He asked me to tell him the story of how Howard and I had escaped the electronic holding cell our Orion captors had forced us to share. And I told him I had done it - in part - by attracting the Orion guard's attention with a song. A somewhat silly, marvelously irritating song for children with the potential to repeat endlessly unless the singer stops. Riker and I were singing that song together when Counselor Troi tried to contact us on our combadges. Atmospheric interference, coupled with interference from the dampening field, made her message difficult to decipher. But, these are the sounds you will hear when I play back the file."

As Kurak watched, Data cocked his head, his mouth falling open and his amber eyes going strangely vacant as the recording played out. Once it had ended, he blinked, closed his mouth, and straightened…

Only to feel a low rumble shake the ground. Dust and sand spilled from the ruins around them and Kurak moved quickly away from the wall.

"What was that?" she demanded.
Data pulled out his tricorder, but the rumbling grew worse. Kurak backed close against him as, together, they watched the stones that made up the inner curve of the great arch slowly sink down, down into the ground, revealing two silvery panels, one on either side. The two corners nearest the archway rotated with a grinding grumble, and two more panels gleamed in the orange light of the slowly sinking sun.

Data blinked and stared from one panel to another, finally turning his awed gaze to Kurak. "Did…did you suspect—"

"No," she said, her eyes just as wide. "Run a scan, Data - quickly! Track the energy fluctuations. We must record all we can in case this disappears again!"

"Agreed," Data said, the pair of them dashing from panel to gleaming panel.

"These symbols are very like the symbols on the Preservers' wall," Kurak observed breathlessly.

"Some are identical," Data acknowledged, scanning his eyes and his tricorder over every macro- and microscopic detail. "But this… Kurak! Kurak, look here!" he exclaimed, nearly jumping in place with excitement as she rushed to join him by the left archway panel.

"Look," he said again, gesturing with his hands as he spoke. "These symbols here - these are very like the Preserver symbols we've seen beneath the Stairway. But these…"

He indicated a patch of alien text just below the Preserver symbols.

"These seem to be a simplified…or, perhaps, more abstracted…version of these same symbols."

"Do you think it possible that the early inhabitants may have managed to adapt the Preservers' system of writing for their own use?" Kurak asked. "Or, could this be an example of a later, less formal writing style - perhaps similar to the difference between ancient High Klingon and the modern form we use today?"

"My guess would be the latter," Data said. "Especially because I rather doubt the humans who found themselves transplanted here would have been familiar with the Iconian language family."

"Iconian?"

Kurak looked down at the third, and lowest, block of text and brought a hand to her chest.

"By Kahless and all his teachings…" she gasped, clasping his arms as she fought to rein in her exhilaration. "Data… Data, do you realize what this could be…?"

"It is a key," he said, his expression practically glowing. "A key that may unlock the Preservers' written language in the same way the Rosetta Stone provided the key to deciphering ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics. And you found it, Kurak! I would never have thought to play that file in this location if not for you."

"We must contact the others," she said. "Tu'Pari will want to start work on the translation without delay… If only Melinda could have seen this! A Preserver panel bearing, not only two forms of their written symbols, but a variant of Iconian text!"

"I have some familiarity with the Iconian language family," Data said. "I am far from fluent, but there are several symbols I recognize. If I might hazard a rough translation…?"
"Go ahead," she said, and he leaned closer to the panel.

"I believe this section reads… 'Attention.' Something, something… 'official use only. Unauthorized trespass…'"

He glanced up at her, his lips quirked with amusement.

"This may have been a no entry sign! Posted here, perhaps, to limit the use of the Stairway to 'authorized' personnel." He laughed. "Incredible! This find could go a long way to proving Tu'Pari's theory that the Stairway might have served as the Preservers' equivalent of a transporter."

Kurak shook her head, and laughed a little herself.

"Of course, it would be something utterly officious and mundane," she said. "Even your touted Rosetta Stone was merely an official decree written by a group of priests to list the accomplishments of their pharaoh."

"Perhaps," he allowed. "But, by opening a path toward translation, that simple decree allowed us to peer into the minds, the thoughts and practices of an ancient civilization! To grow our understanding of our predecessors, and ourselves. What could be more wonderful?"

Kurak snorted, and regarded him closely, her dark eyes lingering on his face until his happy smile began to fade to confusion.

"What is it?" he asked.

"You are so human," she said. "Everything about you… And yet, somehow, you are unlike anyone I have ever met. You are certainly nothing like the expectation I held before you came here."

Data wrinkled his nose.

"Is that bad?"

"Not bad," she said. "Just…different…" She smiled just slightly and lifted an eyebrow. "I think I'm starting to like it."

Data's eyes widened. She leaned closer, and he mirrored her movements, feeling a draw he could only liken to a powerful magnetic force. The warmth of her face, so near his, made his sensitive skin tingle, and he felt his pulse rate rise, his eyes begin to close…

"Crusher to Data!"

The moment broke with a near-audible snap and the pair stepped quickly apart. Kurak turned without a word and strode over to inspect one of the two corner panels.

Data hesitated, uncertain, then slapped his combadge.

"Data here, Doctor," he said.

"Data, I'm sorry to interrupt your date, but we've run into a complication—" Crusher started, but Data cut her off.

"Is it the stasis field?" he asked, his anxious words practically running over each other. "Has there been a fluctuation?"

"No, no, Data, the field is functioning just fine," she said, her voice a calm contrast to his. "It's
Mikey. Data... I'm afraid we're starting to see some early signs of a recurrent genetic mutation."

"The cancer?"

Crusher sighed.

"Data, I think you should come back," she said. "I don't want to go into detail over the comm. But, if what I'm seeing in these readings is what I think I'm seeing, we may have uncovered a larger problem that's just as serious. And, potentially, just as deadly."

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

References include - TNG: Pen Pals; Starship Mine; Peak Performance; Contagion; and The Princess Bride. :

Next time: Something sinister may be at work. And what of Silarra's plotting? Stay Tuned, and thanks so much for reading! Please Review! :D
Chapter 44

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Silarra materialized aboard her small, cloaked ship and strode straight for the cockpit, dropping her holo-guise as she went. A message light blinked on the control panel, indicating a series of computer status updates.

The Suliban groaned and stretched before flopping her tired frame into the pilot's seat to peruse the updates.

"Encryption completed," she noted, tapping at the controls. "Firewall enabled. No tracers, no spybugs detected. No 'known' ones, anyway…"

She snorted.

"But, what's this…? Dammit!"

A second light indicated a recorded message and she knew - she knew - the Boss-man's goons had hacked her comm system again while she'd been observing planetside, despite all her scans and precautions!

Silarra grimaced, cold trepidation mingling with bristling irritation at the washed-out creep's continued interference in her operations.

"Impatient, micro-managing bastard…" she muttered, but she didn't dare ignore it. Scowling darkly, she activated her viewscreen to play the message he'd left her.

The sudden brightness of the Boss-man's colorless, painfully back-lit form made her flinch and squint, the bristling feeling in her neck and spine growing stronger as he began to speak…

"Silarra, my dear chameleon," he said in that soft, menacing whisper of his. "Another day is nearly done, and not a word from you? Well, I am not so inconsiderate. I'm giving you one more day Silarra. One more planetary turn to play those Federation fools with your hollow guises. If you can't deliver what I want by the end of that time, I'm sending someone who can. And as you well know, in this business it doesn't pay to come in second place."

The image snapped out, leaving the cockpit in relative dimness.

Silarra clenched her fists, releasing a terrible roar as she slammed them down on the console.

"How the hell does he expect me to grab that stupid energy thing in only a day?" she snarled.

She'd barely begun cultivating the damned android, charging up his feelings for that cold Klingon scientist. And, if the brain-numbing hours she'd just spent recording the other scientists and Starfleet officers babbling tech-speak in the control room was any indication of their slow-ass progress, they had at least half a week's tedious work of deciphering symbols and tracking energy fluctuations ahead before they'd even consider approaching that energy source again…

A frequency alert signaled that one of the Starfleet officers had activated a comm badge. Silarra immediately tuned in to overhear the doctor, Crusher, and the android already speaking through the crackle of atmospheric static.
"...I'm sorry to interrupt your date..." she heard the doctor say. "...we've run into a complication..."

A slow smile spread over the Suliban's textured face as she listened to the exchange; her spirits rising as a bolder, more daring plan began to take shape in her mind.

She'd intended to observe and provoke, to keep the love-struck android unbalanced long enough for the scientists themselves to lead her to her goal.

But, Starfleet's mechanical man worked faster than she'd given him credit for. A few preliminary nudges, and already he'd snagged a date with that chilling glare in Klingon form! That was to say nothing of the distraction afforded by the sickly human Skin. And now, she heard him hinting to the doctor of a major discovery he and that Klingon woman had stumbled upon while in the ruined city...

Silarra laughed and stood, aiming to grab a quick meal and a nap before heading back to work. With events below apparently heating up all on their own, she might just be able to meet the Boss-man's ridiculous deadline after all...and negotiate a fat bonus into the bargain!

******

Data threw a punch so powerful, the impact would have severely damaged the runabout's inner hull had he not pulled his fist back at the last moment. Instead, he opened his hand and leaned forward, pressing his palm, then his forehead, against the cool duranium alloy.

He had made it back to the compound in what had to be record time after contacting Picard and the other scientists to join Kurak at the ruined city. While Picard, Nat and Freja rode on horseback, Tu'Pari took the speeder, handing the vehicle over to Data with the understanding the Vulcan would ride Sagebrush back to the compound once they'd investigated Data and Kurak's discovery.

Data had arrived in the sickbay at a run, his words running over themselves with worry. Dr. Crusher had done her best to calm him down, to explain the apparent cause of Mikey's unexpected relapse. And now...

"I'm so sorry, Data," Crusher said, hesitant to move closer to her enraged friend. "This isn't the news any of us wanted to hear. But, it's not as bad as it might sound right now."

"Not as bad...?"

Data slowly turned his head, his brow deeply furrowed.

"Not as bad?" he said again. "You tell me Mikey's genes have been adversely affected by exposure to biochemical weapons. You tell me the nature and extent of the damage indicates these bioweapons were specifically engineered to target human DNA replication - that, despite the surgery, Mikey's life-threatening tumors will continue to occur and recur, ad infinitum, unless all corrupted code can be identified and purged, and then—"

"The point is, Data," Crusher broke in, "we now know the underlying cause of Mikey's illness. I've contacted my colleagues at Luna Exo-Oncology and Mars General with the scan results, and they seem very optimistic about the procedure and Mikey's prognosis. Mikey's family have already provided genetic samples, and—"

"No, Doctor," Data said, shaking his head. "That is not the point. That is not nearly the point."

Crusher sighed.
"Data, I don't—"

Data straightened and met her gaze with his somber, amber stare.

"The weapons that injured Mikey and killed his immediate family were deployed by Cardassian soldiers," he said, and Crusher tightened her lips. "If your diagnosis proves correct, it can only mean these were bioweapons, purposefully designed to eradicate human colonists from Cardassian territory under the guise of radiation exposure while leaving the land safe for Cardassians and other species to inhabit."

"But that's…" Crusher gasped, and trailed off, too shaken to complete the thought.

"A deliberate act of genocide," Data finished for her. "Perpetrated against colonists who, unlike the Native American tribe on Dorvan V, never officially revoked their Federation citizenship or acknowledged the treaty ceding their colony to Cardassian jurisdiction."

"My god…" Crusher whispered.

"If Mikey had not been rescued from that Skin Dump…if he had not received immediate care from a top-tier diagnostic physician… This crime may well have gone unnoticed and unknown. Perhaps forever."

"But, Mikey's genetic scans provide hard proof of their activities along the border," the doctor realized. "And, now that we do know…"

Crusher sighed through her nose.

"We have to tell the captain," she said. "He'll have to contact Admiral Nechayev, and inform the Federation Council."

"Doctor," he said, "you intend to transport Mikey to the primary Luna hospital in New Berlin, do you not?"

"I told you, Data, it's his only chance."

"Then, I would recommend waiting to contact anyone about this until you reach deep space. Transmissions from this planet suffer from atmospheric interference. There is a possibility even a secure channel could be intercepted."

Crusher regarded him.

"You think whoever sent those raiders to attack this compound could still be out there?"

"It would be foolish to discount the possibility," Data said, his pale features pinched and tight as he began to twist his hands and fidget his feet.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"I'm sorry, Doctor. I feel…I need to move - I need to walk."

"That's understandable, Data," she said. "This is a lot to take in. Just, do me a favor and stay close to the compound, all right?"

He nodded.

"I will inform the captain and the others of this development in person," he said, and cast his eyes to
the shimmering energy field encapsulating the biobed where Mikey's small body lay prone and unnaturally still.

"You are certain Mikey's condition will remain stable?"

"Thanks to your adjustable stasis field, he should make it to New Berlin just fine," she assured him gently.

Data nodded again, then took in a deep breath and slowly let it out.

"Thank you, Beverly," he said. "I will return…to say good-bye…"

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

References Include - TNG: Journey's End; The Wounded.

Thanks so much for reading my story! Your reviews are always welcome! :D
Deanna Troi pulled her hair back with her fingers and fastened it in place with an elegant clip carved from a single piece of sugandh wood, from Betazed. The wood's fragrance had a soothing effect and she closed her eyes, letting the muscles in her neck and shoulder start to relax…

"Hey, there."

She opened her eyes and sat up, startled to see Riker striding into the control room's side office to straddle the chair beside hers.

Normally, she could sense Riker's unique emotional presence long before he could get close enough to surprise her, but tonight…

There was something off, something…shielded…?

"You look tired," he said, his bearded face soft with sympathy. "Long day?"

Troi sighed and rubbed her temples. Maybe it was exhaustion playing tricks on her mind. The dull ache behind her eyes did make it hard to think…

"How would you feel after jumping through bureaucratic hoops all day," she said, and looked up at him, letting her eyes trace the familiar curve of his face, the shape of his eyes, his mouth…

The few streaks of gray she saw in his beard made her lower her eyes again, and her expression tightened.

"I dismissed Data's outburst of anger over that article as an overreaction, a sign of immaturity," she said. "And, I did it again last night. Perhaps because I didn't want to believe the prejudice he spoke of was that serious. Not in this day and age. But now… I think Data's right, Will. We've known him so long, we've been there with him all these years, watching his social development, his emotional growth— He's part of our family. Even when he removed his skin, it was impossible for us to view him as anything but a person. But out there…"

She sighed again and shook her head.

"I've gotten the Federation's Department of Social Services on board with sponsoring Ishta for Federation asylum as a 'vulnerable person'. She will be allowed to stay. But no one, not one official I spoke to, was willing to consider letting 'a machine' apply to be her permanent legal guardian. The fear I sensed in their voices…it was deep, almost primal - far more then just a politician's fear of 'losing votes' in a volatile political climate. One of the social workers I spoke with told me the very idea of granting an android the responsibility of raising a 'living' child gave her 'chills.' Oh, Will…"

She raised her eyes to his.

"When I think of Data's kindness, his accomplishments…the sacrifices he's made to defend the Federation… How can I tell him…"

"From what I've heard," Riker said gently, "I think Data already knows."
"It isn't right, Will," she said. "It isn't fair. He's always admired humanity - he's worked so hard to emulate the best of what we are. To be let down like this… Shut out from the very thing he's always…" She took in a slow breath before admitting, "Sometimes, I worry…"

"Data isn't his brother, Deanna," Riker told her before she could finish the thought. "And, he's not a child we have to protect. Give the man more credit."

"He's vulnerable, Will," Troi countered. "More vulnerable than you know."

Riker's lips twitched, and he seemed to swallow back a chuckle.

"He's hit a crossroad, that's all," he said. "We've all been through it before. Give him some time to explore his options, feel his way around."

He smiled warmly and reached out to take her hands, the pair of them rising to their feet.

"Data's a smart guy," he said. "I'm sure he'll pick the right path."

Troi returned his smile, stepping closer to melt into his embrace…

She felt a flash of cruel satisfaction - his hand pressed against her back…

"You're not—!" she started, but her voice was already fading, unconsciousness reaching out to claim her as the little side office dissolved into transporter sparkles…

'Riker' smirked at the space where Troi had stood, then moved his eyes, his holographic image shifting as Data's voice crackled over the comm…

"Attention: Commanders Riker, Troi and Crusher. Captain Picard has returned to the compound. He requests that you join us in the cafeteria for a meeting in five minutes."

'Troi' tapped the comm panel, her dark eyes glinting as she spoke.

"Acknowledged, Data. I'm on my way. Troi out."

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes

References include: TNG: The Price; Man of the People; Silicon Avatar; Datalore; Descent; The Measure of a Man; The Schizoid Man; The Offspring; Thine Own Self. Sugandh is a Hindi word for "fragrance."

Until next time! Please review! :D
Chapter 46

Picard steepled his fingers and looked around the cafeteria table at the grim faces of his gathered officers.

"Is there no way you can treat the boy here," he said to Dr. Crusher. "Or with the medical equipment aboard the Enterprise?"

Dr. Crusher shook her head.

"This has always been an extreme case, Captain," she said. "Thanks to Data's invention, we can keep the boy alive, but the extensive genetic restructuring Mikey needs if he is to recover requires specialized training and facilities. The Lunar colonies have the best available, and the doctors there are eager to help."

"And, you're certain Cardassian weaponry is responsible for the boy's condition?"

"The damage is irrefutable, Captain," Crusher said somberly. "Mikey's chronic condition is evidence the Cardassians have employed biochemical weaponry specifically engineered to adversely affect human DNA."

Riker leaned forward.

"If the Cardassians have been targeting human colonies, why hasn't this been reported before now?"

"It has, Commander," Data said quietly. "But, said reports have been sourced to Maquis terrorist cells operating along the border and largely disregarded as exaggerated propaganda. Until now, no 'official' investigation into these claims has been made."

"The Maquis are not exactly what Starfleet would call reputable…" Troi muttered. "And, didn't the treaty remove those colonies from Federation jurisdiction?"

"Many colonists refused to acknowledge that treaty," Data said. "Their unwillingness to resettle or renounce their Federation citizenship and claim to Federation protection has placed both governments in something of a Catch-22 situation, while allowing the Maquis to grow in strength and influence. Any attempt at compromise has, so far, only deepened a terrible dilemma in which mutually conflicting conditions allow for no escape."

"Save one," Picard intoned grimly and sighed through his nose. "Fortunately, for now, the Federation and Cardassian leaders recognize none of us can afford another war."

"I don't know about that, Captain," Riker said. "A premeditated act of genocide seems pretty warlike to me. And we know from past experience, when it comes to Cardassian expansion, diplomatic appeasement doesn't always work."

Data's jaw tightened, and he turned his amber eyes toward the captain.

"While I agree that resorting to violent conflict is, in itself, a defeat," he said, "The realities in front of us cannot be ignored. Mikey survived what the adults around him presumed to be a radiation attack. But, physical evidence now indicates the weapons used were far more insidious than that. The conclusion to be drawn is clear. The Cardassians were purposefully clearing the planet of recalcitrant human colonists to settle in their own people. Those they didn't kill, they sold on the black market, and it all happened right under the Federation's nose."
"Under our nose, perhaps," Picard said. "But beyond the reach of our legal system. The attacks
occurred in what is, officially, Cardassian space."

"Captain, what we are discussing here is a clear and blatant human rights violation," Crusher said.
"Surely, before either side starts bandying about the threat of war, the Federation diplomatic corps
should be able to justify an official investigation into the matter. With Mikey's medical records as
proof—"

"Doctor…” Picard broke in, then sighed. "Beverly… You’re right. If it's true that the damage done to
Mikey, and his colony, was indeed caused by genetically targeted bioweapons, the Cardassians
should be held responsible, and accountable, for the crime. I am aware that, due to adverse
atmospheric conditions, the Ninevehan government has refused the Blackstone permission to take off
until morning. I will, therefore, record a message for Admiral Nachayev tonight which you, Beverly,
can then transmit once the runabout has left the Ninevehan system. If necessary, you may leave the
runabout with its modified stasis field in New Berlin. Just be sure you, Nurse Ogawa, and your pilot
Lt. Exupéry return to the Enterprise as soon as you've delivered that boy safely to the hospital."

Dr. Crusher nodded.

"We will. Thank you, Jean-Luc."

"Captain," Data said. "Permission to accompany—"

"No, Data," Picard said. "While I understand your desire to accompany your young friend, I know
you realize the situation we face here is at least as important. If Tu'Pari's theories are right, as long as
that energy source beneath the Stairway is active, it remains a threat not only to this world, but to
Earth as well. Finding a way to control and, if possible, deactivate it must remain our first priority -
especially since this ancient artifact has already attracted the attention of violent black market
raiders."

"Raiders who could have been hired by anybody," Riker added. "And, if that Stairway really is a
quantum tunnel somehow writ on a macro scale—"

"It could link this world to any point in the galaxy - at any point in time," Troi finished for him.
"Clearly, that kind of power is too dangerous for anyone to ever risk using. Including the
Federation."

Data folded his hands on the table, tightening his grip until his fingers began to turn white.

"I do understand, sir," he said quietly. "I just… I had to ask."

Riker's expression softened.

"I know all this has been hard on you, Data," he said. "But, just think - if you hadn't been here, we
never would have seen the energy source behind that wall. And what about that new discovery -
those tablets you and Kurak found in the old ruined city this afternoon?"

"Thanks to that discovery, we may soon learn the true purpose of the Stairway, and the meaning
behind the Preserver symbols," Picard said brightly. "Tu'Pari, Nat and Freja intend to spend the night
working to translate the symbols on the panel, not only into words, but into musical notes. They are
planning another expedition to the cavern under the Stairway for tomorrow afternoon. And, I want
you to be there, Mr. Data. If you feel up to facing those dampeners again."

"I do. I will, sir," he said. "Thank you."
"Excellent," Picard said. "Then, if there's nothing else…" He glanced around the table. "It's getting late. Let's adjourn this meeting and get a good night's rest for tomorrow."

There was a group acknowledgment, and everyone got to their feet.

"Data," Troi said, hurrying after the android before he could make it to the sliding door.

"Yes, Counselor?" he asked, turning to face her.

"You seemed so upset back there," she said, glancing to the table. "I was wondering if you planned to work again tonight. Assisting Kurak? Helping the archaeologists with their translations, perhaps?"

"Kurak is spending the evening with her daughter," he said. "And, if the archaeologists wanted my help, I am certain they would have asked for it before now," he said, rather flatly.

"Now Data," Troi said. "I'm sure no one would mind if you—"

"Deanna," Data said, "I realize you are trying to help. But, while Drs. Tu'Pari, Anders and Kapoor may tolerate my presence here - even appreciate the role I have so far played in advancing their research - I have no wish to step on anyone's toes. Unless I am explicitly called upon to render assistance, I intend to mind my own business."

"In that case, I recommend you try some relaxation," Troi said. "Maybe activate your dream program for a few hours?"

"Perhaps I will," Data said. "But later. Right now, I feel…"

"Restless?" Troi suggested. "Angry?"

He sighed and raked his fingers through his hair.

"I think I will walk to the runabout," he said. "I wish to spend some time with Mikey. Before…"

Troi placed a hand on his shoulder and he leaned very slightly into her touch.

"Has your contact come to a conclusion about Ishta's status?" he asked.

She nodded, and his eyebrows shot up.

"Why didn't you say anything?" he asked.

"To tell you the truth, Data, I wasn't sure how," she said.

Data frowned.

"You mean they—"

"No, Data. Ishta can stay. The Department of Social Services has agreed to sponsor her as a 'vulnerable person'. But, they won't allow you to apply for guardianship," she said, looking him straight in the eye. "You can't adopt her. The restriction they set was very clear. An AI can serve a family as housekeeper, nanny, babysitter, or tutor. But machines cannot legally form or join a biological family unit, either by marriage or adoption. I'm sorry, Data."

Data blinked several times, his jaw working, his Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed...

"If you want to talk…" she offered.
"No."

He swallowed again, and shook his head.

"No, thank you, Counselor," he said. "I think…"

He rubbed his hands over his face, then turned away, toward the door.

"I should have… I thought…” he croaked, clearly struggling not to show he’d already past the verge of tears. "I'm sorry, Counselor. I greatly appreciate all your efforts on Ishta's…and my…behalf. Please… Sleep well. I'll see you in the morning."

Troi watched the distraught android race from the room, out into the dark, windy night, and smiled. A few flicks of her eyes, and Freja Anders strode after him through the sliding doors…

To Be Continued…
The chirp of the door signal barely made it through the sound of giggling laughter coming from Kahlestra’s room. Kurak left her padd on the leather couch and strode across the dome's small living room to answer it.

"Good evening, Kurak," Freja Anders said as the doors slid open.

Kurak frowned at her.

"Why are you here?"

"Kurak," the blonde woman said. "I know you and I have never been as close as you were with Melinda. But, we have been colleagues for a long time."

"What of it?" Kurak demanded.

Freja stiffened a little, but didn't back away.

"Nat and Tu'Pari are still drooling over the panels you found with that android today," she said. "But, my brain needs a rest. Before I headed off to bed, I wanted to stop by to congratulate you again. You may have been the newcomer to our team but, after today, you'll be the one remembered for cracking this puzzle wide open."

Another burst of giggles sounded from inside the dome, followed by music and singing. Freja tilted her head, catching a lyric about a 'golden helmet' being mistaken for a 'shaving basin'. Or, perhaps, it was the other way around…?

"Sounds like a party in there," she said.

"Kahlestra and her Orion friend became quite distressed when they learned the human child will be leaving for the hospital in the morning," Kurak told her. "Since she exceeded expectations with her homework today, I conceded to her request to host a 'sleep-over'. She, the Orion, and the robot Howard are in there now, playing the soundtrack of some ancient Earth musical."

She grimaced, and Freja laughed.

"Well, I like ancient musicals," she said. "Mind if I come in?"

Kurak grunted, but stepped aside.

"Can I offer you some tea," she asked her guest, more out of politeness than any desire to retain her company.

"Oh, I'd love some. Thank you," Freja said as she took a seat on the leather couch. "Peppermint tea would be lovely."

Kurak grunted again, and headed to the replicator.

"Kurak," Freja called after her. "May I ask you a…rather personal question?"
Kurak returned with a steaming tea cup and handed it to her before sitting on the adjacent chair.

"What do you want to know?"

"It's probably nothing," she said. "I mean, he's been just wonderful with the children, and I know he's been helping to repair your lab. But, don't you find it...just the slightest bit..."

"What?" Kurak demanded, her shoulders tensing defensively. "What are you trying to say?"

"Mother! I heard voices!" Kahlestra called, running into the living room. "Is Data— Oh... Hi, Dr. Anders."

"Why, hello Kay!" Freja greeted warmly. "Your android friend isn't here. He's in a meeting with the other Starfleet visitors."

"Oh," she said again. "Well, when he's done with that, Ishta wants to show him her report! I just read it over for her, and I think she did great. But, Data's really got to see it!"

"Tell Ishta she can show Data her report in the morning," Kurak growled. "It is late, now, and time for sleep."

"You're still awake," Kahlestra pointed out, and Kurak bared her teeth.

"Prepare for bed," she ordered. "Both of you. I have had enough of your laughing and noise."

"Oh, Kurak, it's a sleep-over!" Freja said. "Let them have their fun."

Kurak scowled and rose to her feet.

"Excuse us," she said, guiding her daughter into the kitchen.

"I told you, daughter." she said in Klingon, once they were alone. "I don't want you getting too attached to Data - or your Orion friend. You know both of them will be leaving here soon."

"Well, what about you?" Kahlestra retorted, also in Klingon. "You were with Data all day! You even went trail-riding with him! And I notice you're not calling him a 'machine' anymore, or 'that android.'"

Kurak pursed her lips.

"I admit," she said, "you were right about him. Your friend Data is a person, and a good man. But, no matter how good or clever an android is, he remains an android. And, a man who is also a machine cannot challenge your father, Kahlestra. The courts would not allow it."

"That's stupid," Kahlestra spat.

"That may be," Kurak said. "But, you must understand, daughter. I want you to be safe. Above all things, I want your life to be your own."


Kurak blinked and straightened.

"Kahlestra—"

"I don't want to be kept 'safe,' Mother," Kahlestra snapped. "I want us both to be free. I want to live..."
in the Federation and be a doctor and I know you want that too, so don't even try to say you don't."

Kurak clenched her fists, her sharp nails digging into her palms…

"The Federation is not perfect, Kahlestra," she said. "They have faults and prejudices, just as the Empire does."

"I don't care," Kahlestra snarled. "I told you, I don't want to go back to that school."

"Then listen to me now," Kurak hissed. "Learn from my experience—"

"I'm sick of listening!" Kahlestra shouted. "Why can't you understand? I'm not you, Mother! I don't want to be frightened and angry all the time! You can't live your stupid life over again by always controlling mine!"

Kurak drew herself up with a dark, cold glare.

"You will apologize."

Kahlestra met her glare for glare.

"I will not," she said, deliberately switching to Federation Standard. "I've been doing some reading of my own, Mother. I've been reading about human women, and all the accomplishments they've made over the centuries. There was this one woman - the first female to be promoted to the rank of Rear Admiral in the United States Navy. She said, 'Ships in port are safe. But that's not what ships were made for.'"

The girl's glare deepened.

"I pick my study topics because I find them interesting," she said, "not because I worry whether the school masters will approve. I choose my friends because I like them and they like me, not because I fear what my father might think! That's why I'm not like you. And I won't apologize for it!"

Kurak rumbled low in her throat.

"Go to your room."

"I'm already going!" Kahlestra shouted, the pair of them storming away in opposite directions. A moment later, loud music began blasting from the direction of Kahlestra's room. Kurak heard the two girls shouting and laughing, and it only made the muscles in her back and shoulders grow more rigid.

Keeping her gaze fixed on the wall, she said to Freja, "I apologize for my daughter's behavior, and for mine. Such private matters should not be aired before guests."

"Don't be silly," Freja said, getting to her feet. "You should have heard the fights I used to have with my mother."

Kurak snarled, her posture as stiff and straight as a duranium support strut.

"Hey, Kurak," the blonde woman said in her soft accent. "If you need some time to calm down… unwind… I'd be happy to stay here for a while and watch the kids. I remember, after our fights, I used to head off on my bike. I'd ride around for hours to release the steam. Then, when I got home, it was much easier to face my mom again and talk, you know? Really talk. If it worked for me, maybe it'll work for you and Kay?"

"This compound has no bicycles," the Klingon grunted.
"It does have a gym," Freja pointed out. "We'll be fine here until you get back, I promise. After all, Howard and I did watch the kids while you were injured, and they came through all right."

Kurak regarded her human colleague, her dark eyes hard and sharp.

If she stayed, her ears assaulted by the whine of her daughter's human music, she knew the angry feelings in her heart would only fester. But, to feel the weight of a bat'leth in her hand...to move her body in rhythm to the soaring cries and thundering drumbeats of a real, Klingon opera...

"Very well," she growled. "I will trust you."

"That's great!" Freja said. "Take all the time you need. I mean it. You'll feel a lot better when you get back."

Kurak nodded, just once, then grabbed her bat'leth from the wall brace and stomped out into the cold desert wind...

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

References include - TNG: Cost of Living; New Ground; Firstborn; Man of La Mancha - Barber's Song/Golden Helmet of Mambrino.

Reviews and comments are always welcome! Please let me know what you think! :)
Moonlight flooded the compound, casting more shadows than light.

Kurak heard a shuffle behind her - heavy footfalls running through the sand - and she turned with a warning cry, her bat'leth raised in a defensive stance—

"Kurak?"

Data came to a swift and graceful stop, his amber eyes narrowed.

"What are you doing?"

Kurak lowered her weapon, but not her guard or her searing glare.

"I am going to the exercise dome," she growled. "Why are you following me?"

"I was not following you," Data said.

"I heard you running."

Data's pale face grew pinched, and he averted his eyes, brushing back his windswept hair.

"I… I was heading for the runabout," he told her. "To sit with Mikey. But… I could not. When I reached the ship's entrance, I…became overwhelmed with…with feelings of remorse, and… There was so much anger... So, I began to walk, then run…and I kept running. This is my fifth lap around the compound's perimeter. I thought…perhaps…this running might serve as an emotional release."

"Has it?" she asked.

Data shook his head.

"No. The anger remains. Only twice since installing my emotion chip have I felt so frustrated, so… helpless to…to…"

He clenched his fists, his feet fidgeting in the sand.

"I…I need to do something, but what can one do when the situation is so much larger than one android…one impossible dream…"

Kurak blinked at the familiar phrase…a phrase she remembered hearing in a song coming from her daughter's room…

"You are the one who told the Orion child to study that musical Earth play," she said, and he gave her a curious glance. "It is your fault that she and my daughter have been playing its soundtrack all evening."

Data raised his eyebrows.

"They have?"
She snorted.

"You have had quite an influence on those girls," she said. "They want so much to impress you, they have spent their entire 'sleep-over' acting out scenes from that damn play of yours, and dancing together to its music. If Freja had not volunteered to watch them, the noise might have provoked me to destroy the computer interface in Kahlestra's room."

She raised her bat'leth, her expression turning wry.

Data wrinkled his nose.

"I presume that is…a joke?"

She smirked, and Data returned with a small smile.

"Is that the reason for your trip to the exercise dome?" he asked her. "To escape the noise for a while?"

Kurak looked down, grasping her elbow with the hand holding her bat'leth. She could have left it there…let him believe the line she'd fed to Freja, and herself… But, standing beside him, watching his emotions play across his face…

There was something about this man…something warm and unguarded that reached past the defensive shields she'd worked a lifetime to build. He was always honest, always himself, while she…

…show me myself without the shell…

A lyric from her favorite Klingon opera rose like smoke through her mind, and she felt herself step closer, close enough to brush her arm against his sleeve…

"To be truthful," she said quietly, "the sleep-over did not bother me. In fact…it pleased me to watch the girls interact. I want my daughter to enjoy her childhood, and her friends. But…to borrow your own words…Kahlestra and I face a situation much larger than ourselves. And that anger…that frustration… It drives my child's animosity toward me. The pain of it…of knowing that I cannot grant her the life she wants…that I must comply with the orders of the court just to protect what freedom she does have…"

She shook her head fiercely, her long hair falling over her shoulders.

"That is why I am heading for the gym. You are welcome to accompany me, if you wish."

Data looked into her face, his amber eyes catching the moonlight.

"Thank you," he said and smiled, just slightly. As they began walking together, he added, "My friend Worf never invited me to spar with him back on the Enterprise-D, although he often asked Commander Riker along. It is likely he assumed I would not be interested. But, sometimes I wondered if he thought my innate strength and agility might, in some way, negate his enjoyment of the contest."

Kurak quirked an eyebrow.

"Are you saying, android, that you cannot be beaten?" she said.

Data shrugged, his eyes holding a distinctly playful smirk.
"I think I am saying, you are welcome to try."

Kurak bared her teeth in a genuine grin.

"Oh, not me," she said. "My skills are well honed for a scientist, but they do not compare with the prowess of a warrior like Commander Worf. Our gym is equipped with a holoprojector. I'm sure we can find you a suitable foe. And, if not," she smirked. "I'll program one for you."

"I accept your challenge," Data said cheerily. "But, if you do program an antagonist for me, be careful how you phrase the character description. Aboard the D, we ran into trouble when a misspoken instruction unintentionally caused a holodeck character to become self-aware."

Kurak regarded him.

"You are making that up."

"I assure you, I am not," he said, and smiled a little sadly. "The Enterprise-D was a very special ship. Our voyages with her were like nothing I could have credited before I stepped aboard. I'm sure there are many stories I could tell you that you would not believe."

"You sound like you miss it," she observed. "Is your present assignment so different?"

"Is there a difference between night and day?" he said dryly, and sighed, looking up as they approached the exercise dome. "But, as I learned tonight, running circles in the dark will get you nowhere. Please," he gestured to the entrance. "After you."

******

Data jumped over his opponent's weapon and swung his replicated bat'leth with the grace of an acrobat. The cutting blow severed a key link in the towering robot's arm, hindering the mobility of its hand and fingers, but the robot was still fast - fast enough to snag the back of Data's vest and lift him into the air...

Data felt his feet leave the floor and quickly shrugged off the vest, the shirt beneath it ripping up to the collar as he kicked himself free and fell into a roll that brought him right back to his feet.

But, the massive robot was already there, swinging two swords with the force and power of a hydraulic crane. Data dodged like lightning and came back fighting, the shirt's flapping fabric and slipping sleeves becoming enough of a hindrance that he had to tear it off and continue the fight bare-chested, calling laughingly to Kurak: "Now, I feel like Captain Kirk!"

Parry...Riposte...Lunge... Leap...Spin...Flip...Roll...Stab...

Kurak watched, enraptured by the movement, the breathtaking skill of his performance... As the fight in the dome's center ring progressed, she felt her breath catch and quicken, pumping her arms in shadow victory every time Data landed a blow...

For an android who had so recently chosen to update his outward appearance, Data's body looked surprisingly average. He did not appear overweight, but neither did he have the sharply defined physique of an athlete. Quite the contrary: beneath the dark hair, his pale torso had the softly rounded look of a healthy, if largely sedentary, human male - a look that belied entirely the strength and speed she was witnessing now.

She had to wonder...was it an attempt to blend in...to hide his android nature? Or, was that how Data truly saw himself...an intellectual, generally non-athletic man with the brain and skeleton of a
Judging from his initial textbook moves, the way she'd watched him learn to handle and manipulate the bat'leth and adapt to each opponent she threw at him, she found herself leaning toward the latter option. And, for some reason, the thought of it made her smile.

The giant robot was beginning to slow and lurch, the damage from Data's targeted cuts and blows taking an obvious toll. Its glowing photoelectric cells turned from yellow to red and it raised its weapon for a crushing blow…

Data ducked and lunged, extending his bat'leth in a move so smooth, the Klingon weapon may well have been an extension of his own arm. The sharp point pierced deep into the towering robot's central power cell and it crumpled to the ground in a juddering hail of sparks, the holographic image fading the moment its massive head touched the floor.

"Match Winner: Lt. Commander Data," the computer announced, the record number of game points he'd earned floating proudly in the air as Data retrieved his weapon.

He jogged over to Kurak, his breathing only slightly labored after that incredible display. His pale face was flushed, his hair damp with sweat, but he grinned from ear to ear, his amber eyes seeming to glow from within.

"Nice try," he teased. "Pitting me against a larger machine. But the match was over as soon as I realized its operation depended entirely on a single, centralized power source. Perhaps, next time, you could improve the opponent's design by providing better outer shielding and an alternate—"

Kurak balled up a towel and threw it at his face.

"Attempting to design your own foe?" she scoffed, though she couldn't quite manage to hide her smile. "As if I would give you so great an advantage."

Data caught the towel before impact and used it to mop away the sweat, laughing as if amused by the very necessity of toweling off after a fight like that.

"It seems my modesty program is in working order," he joked, blushing a little as he arranged the towel over his shoulders and chest like a little cape. "I believe you owe me a new shirt."

"That is easily replicated," she teased back, making absolutely no move toward the replicator. Instead, she caught and held his gaze, her stare steady and unblinking until he shyly looked away.

"So…" He cleared his throat, moving toward the control pad for the holoprojector. "I believe it is your turn to enter the ring. Do you wish to continue with the bat'leth, or choose a different weapon?"

Kurak shook her head.

"I tire of fighting these mindless opponents," she said. "I think we should try something else. Something that requires more precision…and control…"

Data tilted his head.

"What do you have in mind?"

"Kahlestra informed me that you can dance," she said, her eyes again homing in on his as she closed the distance between them. "Would you be willing to allow me to teach you some Klingon routines?"
"Absolutely..." he said, swallowing as she drew away to take up a striking pose with her bat'leth.

"I will show you the traditional moves from my favorite aria, from the opera Ha' qul," she said.

"'Come Fire'?" he attempted to translate, aware her odd pronunciation affected the meaning, but unable to determine what that meaning was without more contextual phrasing.

"That would be a modern translation," she said approvingly. "But, in ancient High Klingon, qul implies a ring - an unending circle of flame. Ha' qul tells the story of Brynhildest, a contemporary of the great Kahless and the first female ever to enter Sto-Vo-Kor as a warrior. Are you familiar with her tale?"

Data slid his eyes to the side and grimaced, just slightly.

"I am sorry," he said. "I'm afraid my knowledge of Klingon literature and artistic culture is sorely deficient - a deficiency I intend to rectify as soon as possible. Please, tell me her story."

Kurak inclined her head, his earnest curiosity making her feel far more pleased than she probably should...

"The story takes place in a time before the Klingon people killed their gods and claimed dominion of the temporal realm for themselves," she said, moving back to illustrate her story with deliberate moves and twists of her bat'leth. "Brynhildest was born the daughter of the Wandering God, the Chief of All Things. But when it came time for him to find her a mate of suitable rank and status, she defied his orders and eschewed her immortality, choosing to live on the mortal plane rather than be mated to a man she did not love.

"There, she encountered Kahless locked in combat with his brother. No matter how long or how fiercely they fought, they always reached a stalemate. The brother of Kahless observed Brynhildest watching them and suggested she decide the winner of their fight, but she refused, proposing instead that the brothers fight her.

"They accepted in jest, mocking her as they would a child who dared to voice so brazen a challenge. But their joking stopped as the fight grew serious and the god's daughter revealed her true skills.

"Brynhildest declared the man who could defeat her in combat was the only man she would have as a mate. Knowing by now that neither would be able to defeat her on his own, the brothers joined ranks against her, agreeing between themselves that, if they should win, the next fight between the two brothers would determine which of them would be her mate.

"Disgusted by their scheme, Brynhildest withdrew from the fight and hid until dark before striking out to seek her fortune. But the brothers never forgot her or her oath, each man vowing to challenge her again.

"The father of Brynhildest, infuriated by her defiance, appeared to Kahless and offered him a special sword. This sword had been imbued with the immortality Brynhildest had shed, and could grant whoever wielded it the power to defeat her.

"Kahless set out at once on this quest. Word of Brynhildest's growing reputation as an undefeated warrior led him to a castle where he and Brynhildest fought again. This time, though, it was Kahless who withdrew, publicly forfeiting the battle when it seemed clear to all observing that he stood to win. When she asked him why, he replied it was not her body he wished to conquer, but her heart.

"Brynhildest was touched by the words and deeds of Kahless and the two soon feel madly in love. But, Kahless's scheming brother conspired to drug Kahless, making him forget Brynhildest and her
love. It was in that bewildered state that his brother kidnapped Kahless and had him sent to a very distant country, where Kahless met and wed a powerful queen whose kingdom gathered tribute from many lands.

"But, Kahless's brother did not stop there. He continued to woo Brynhildest, counting on her broken heart to soften his path. But, Brynhildest refused him and took a poisoned draught of her own. This poison did not kill, but gave its victim every appearance of death. Unable to revive her, the furious brother of Kahless locked Brynhildest's body in a tower alongside the magic sword Kahless had used in his fight against her. He ordered a fire to be set in a circle around them - a fire impossible to pass through that was to burn in perpetuity. For, he said, if he could not win Brynhildest, no other man ever would.

"Brynhildest lay sleeping within the ring of flame for many years until the son of Kahless learned of her fate and vowed to free her from his uncle's selfish curse. The son of Kahless endured many adventures and gained much wisdom before arriving at the castle where she had been imprisoned. Once there, he used the knowledge he had earned on his quest to pass safely through the flames and awaken the sleeping Brynhildest.

"Upon opening her eyes, Brynhildest mistook the son for Kahless and her heart was filled with joy. But the son was wise enough not to deceive her, and he told her all. He told her of his uncle's scheme to rob Kahless of his memory, of his father's marriage, and of the day a traveler revealed to Kahless the depth of his brother's treachery and the truth of Brynhildest's fate. He said that, before his own death, Kahless had fought and killed his brother and, if she wished, she could reclaim her immortality and leave this mortal realm by wielding his father's magical sword.

"But, Brynhildest declined. Having learned that Kahless had passed to the land of the dead, she vowed to follow him. While the son watched in sadness, Brynhildest took her life with his father's sword. As her soul fled her mortal form, she saw Kahless stand to welcome her, as a warrior, through the gates of Sto-Vo-Kor."

Kurak lowered her bat'leth and looked to Data, who had been listening with rapt attention.

"That, in brief, is the story of Brynhildest," she said. "The aria tells only a fraction of her tale - the night she and Kahless declared the love in their hearts and shared a vow of blood never to betray each other. Do you still wish to learn this dance?"

"Yes," Data said. "Yes, definitely. It is a very moving and tragic story…not unlike the story of Brunhilde, from Earth's Norse mythology."

"You are so human," Kurak grunted. "Relating everything back to Earth! Perhaps this will broaden your perspective."

She tapped at the console controls, and a low, three-toned hum filled the dome. Cymbals crashed and the swelling hum burst into an energetic chant: forceful voices accompanied by the complex beat of drums.

Data gripped his bat'leth, uncertain what to expect, but Kurak grabbed his free hand, pulling him into the dome's center ring.

The music grew more involved, the drums joined by strings and horns and rich, electronic thrums. Data mimicked Kurak's movements, the clash of their bat'leths adding to the percussive beat vibrating the air around them…

_We used to swim the same moonlight waters_
Oceans away from the wakeful day…

A voice singing in ancient Klingon pierced the instrumental accompaniment like sunlight through a storm, her strong, bittersweet tones rising above the roiling thunder of the chorus…

*My fall will be for you…*

*My fall will be for you  
My love will be in you  
If you be the one to cut me  
I'll bleed forever…*

As the song progressed, so did Data's feel for the dance. The swells of sound stirred his spirit and quickened his breath, and he felt his pulse rate rising to match the thrumming beat.

The music seemed to affect Kurak the same way, and she upped the pace of the game, introducing new steps and movements he easily matched. Their dance became a challenge, a test of agility and control…

*A siren from the deep came to me  
Sang my name my longing  
Still I write my songs about that dream of mine  
Worth everything I may ever be…*

Their weapons clashed like cymbals, and Kurak locked her blade with his. He spun away, then tapped her blade to claim the lead in their dance, forcing her back with graceful blows she met and then turned, twisting their joined weapons until both fell to the floor.

Data bent to retrieve them, but Kurak pulled him back upright - a move he teasingly turned into a playful twirl. She twirled right back and gripped his arms, his shoulders, their dance becoming more of an improvised tango as the music took a more fanciful tone. Never fully breaking contact, she circled around him, then leaned far back, trusting him to maintain her balance as she kicked her leg high over his shoulder. He helped her twirl in place, then circled around her, their arms raised high as he pulled her close against him. She turned in his arms and he lifted her into the air, spinning in close, graceful steps as she circled them both around the ring…

Kurak leaned back, allowing herself to melt into the motion, the exhilarating sensation of flight, and she realized she'd never felt so confident in her movements, such trust in her partner's strength…

He lowered her down in an ice-dance like twirl and she pressed close against him, her heart hammering not from the dance, but from something far more powerful…

A spike of fear made her breath catch, and Data stopped the dance, his flushed face tight with concern…

"I'm sorry," he said. "I became…carried away… Did I hurt you?"

"No, not at all," she assured him, her eyes drawn to his lips, his eyes… She brought her hand to his cheek, and he looked at her curiously, his own breath beginning to catch…

*Bring me home or leave me be  
My love in the dark heart of the night  
I have lost the path before me  
The one behind will lead me…*
He closed the distance before she could think, and she responded fiercely, kissing and biting and nipping at his lips, his jaw, his ear… The music continued its pounding beat, mirroring the throbbing in their veins, the unfamiliar passions that surged through their internal systems as the two dancers, previously so graceful, staggered awkwardly backward…narrowly missing gym machines and consoles as she pushed him hard against the wall…

"I never…" she gasped, her fingers clawing over his chest, his shoulders, before sinking into his hair, "I have never known a feeling like this…"

"Nor I," he said, his voice undeniably shaky as he kissed her neck, her lips... "Perhaps… Do you wish this to stop?"

"You would do that…if I asked…?"

"Of course," he said, and looked straight at her. "Are you asking, Kurak?"

She pursed her lips and stared at him, her gaze drawn to his eyes… She knew they were synthetic, engineered, just as he had been. But, watching his face, the depth of feeling she saw there…

"I have been taught from childhood that the body we inhabit is merely a shell," she told him, maintaining her unblinking stare. "Klingon philosophy holds it is the spirit that matters - the will to fight and to grow…"

"Are you saying…" Data blinked rapidly, forcing the words out as if afraid of the answer. "Do you not see such a 'spirit' in me?"

"Foolish man," she said. "In the words Kahless spoke to Brynhildest: Your will shines through your frame like flame through a paper lantern."

Data worked his jaw, too touched to respond in words. He brought his fingers to her hair and leaned forward, the pair of them sinking into a passionate kiss that deepened as the music swelled all around them…

\[
\text{Take me, cure me, heal me, bring me home}
\]
\[
\text{Every way, every day}
\]
\[
\text{I keep on watching us sleep}
\]

\[
\text{Relive the old sin of}
\]
\[
\text{Adam and Eve}
\]
\[
\text{Of you and me}
\]
\[
\text{Forgive the adoring beast}
\]

Her hand found his and she clutched it tightly, sinking her sharp nails deep into his palm. It took all her strength, but she persisted, bearing her teeth in a fierce smile as she withdrew her nails to reveal a trickle of red…

"Ach!"

Data winced in pain, his wide eyes fixated on the fluids leaking from his palm, but he didn't pull away. Instead he stayed very still, watching in amazement as she wrapped his 'bleeding' hand around hers and pressed his fingers into her own palm.

He swallowed, and squeezed her hand as gently as he could, calculating the pressure needed to break her skin's epidermal layer without causing any damage that might leave a lasting scar.
Kurak breathed in and bit her lip, seeming to savor the pain. As soon as she saw her own magenta blood, she pressed her palm to his, locking their fingers to force their blood to mingle…

Data turned his gaze to hers, his expression overwhelmed.

She smiled and pressed in closer, raking her free hand lightly over his jawline.

"There is a thin line between pleasure and pain, rage and passion," she told him. "Never before was the choice mine to make…not under my father's roof, not with my ex-husband… But tonight…" She punctuated her words with slow kisses, moving from his ear toward the corner of his mouth. "I choose. I choose…Data-oy…"

He recognized the Klingon suffix, a term of endearment shared by lovers, and he turned his head to capture her lips with his.

The excitement he felt, the warm, spreading joy… it was like nothing he had read, nothing he could have imagined…

And, yet, something held him back. A cold spike of doubt… Even… fear…

"Kurak-oy…" he whispered against her hair. "Please… tell me this is happening. Just, say…"

"This is happening," she spoke into his shoulder, his neck, and he blinked back the sting of unexpected tears.

"Is it possible to fall in love so quickly?" he asked. "Will we still share this feeling… once the music ends…"

… or, his analytical mind added, are these incredible sensations merely a physical response to my emotion chip stimulating the production of synthetic hormones in my positronic brain… driving up the dopamine system, exciting the nucleus accumbens…

Kurak pulled back enough to wrinkle her nose at him.

"Humans dither and they talk," she said. "They allow fear to dim their passion. But, a Klingon…"

She kissed him, then kissed him again. "A true Klingon…"

"… a Klingon conquers that which she desires," he whispered, the emotion in her eyes a mirror for his as she smiled.

...She desires me…

Data closed his eyes and held her close, reveling in the warmth of her body, the feel of her lips against his skin as the Klingon aria rose to a thundering climax…

Redeem me into childhood
Show me myself without the shell

Like the dawning of a new day
I'll be there when you say
Time can never hold our love

My fall will be for you…

My love will be in you
If you be the one to cut me
I'll bleed forever…

My fall will be for you
My love will be in you
You were the one to cut me
So I will bleed forever…

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

References include - TNG: Elementary, Dear Data; Ship in a Bottle; Heart of Glory; A Matter of Honor; The Emissary; Reunion; Redemption; Firstborn; The Naked Now; In Theory; Data's Day; Legacy; TOS: Requiem for Methuselah; the movie Generations; the novels Sarek and Metamorphosis; Man of La Mancha - The Impossible Dream; 'Ghost Love Score' by Nightwish from the 2004 album Once (lyrics slightly altered).

The story of Brynhildest was mostly based on a combination of the Völsunga saga and the Nibelungenlied.

Well, I didn't make it. I was holding a sort of race with myself to see if I could get the second phase of this story done before May, but now it's May and there's still a ton of story left in this part of the story. But, hey, I gave it a shot and now the plot has been advanced. Sorry for spitting out those chapters so fast, but I think a big part of it was anxiety. The prospect of writing out this chapter right here has been intimidating the heck out of me for months. I've never been comfortable trying to describe emotional stuff like this and I'm always terrified it'll come off as analytical and unrealistic. I watched hours of shows like The Love Boat and I even interviewed my sister while I worked to plot it out. But, I had to push through it to get to another scene I've been longing to write out since this story began and I did push through it and now it's done! I hope you'll let me know what you think of how it turned out.

Your comments and reviews are always welcome! Thank you! :D
Hi everyone! I'm back from the whole novel workshop and it was AWESOME! I got some extremely insightful and encouraging feedback on my original middle-grade sci-fi novel and I'm already working on the revisions. Next up: Agent Queries! Yikes! But, if it works out, who knows? There might be a book out there with my name on it in two or three years! :D

Wish me luck, and I hope you enjoyed this chapter. I really appreciate your patience with my slow updates! Thank you, and please review! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

What a day this has been
What a rare mood I'm in,
Why, it's almost like being in love…
There's a smile on my face
For each and every sentient race
Why, it's almost like being in love…

Data strode through the corridors of the Enterprise-E, inserting a happy little softshoe shuffle every few steps. The ship's stark, functional light fixtures seemed brighter today; stern-faced officers in their black and grey uniforms actually paused to return his beaming smile as the cheerful android passed them by…

Four months. It had been four months since he, Troi, Riker and the captain had returned from their two-week leave on Nineveh IV. Three months, twenty-six days and four hours since Captain Picard had approved his and Kurak's joint request to authorize Kurak's new position as a civilian energy-field specialist and allow both Kay and Ishta to stay with them aboard the ship pending the Federation's final decision regarding the android's 'living' status and his fundamental rights. Among the issues under consideration were Data's right to form a family unit, to create and adopt children, to form a legally recognized union with a biological partner…a partner who was not, herself, a Federation citizen…

The doors to his new, larger cabin slid open and two smiling faces turned to greet him. Smiling back, he took up a crooning stance just inside the doorway and continued the song he'd been singing on and off since before his shuttle docked:

Oh, the music of life seems to be
Like a bell that is ringing for me.
Yes, me!
"Data! Data!" the girls exclaimed, leaving their homework to tackle him with questions. Spot meowed and stretched on the back of the sofa.

"Data, you're back!" Kay cheered.

"What did they say!" Ishta demanded.

"Do we get to stay together?" Kay asked. "Are they going to let us be a family?"

"I will tell you everything as soon as your mother returns home from her shift at the lab," he promised, turning up the gain on his audio-receptors until his ears picked up a familiar pattern of swift footfalls in the corridor. "Which should be in…four…three…two…"

He pointed to the door just as Kurak came striding in.

"Data!"

"Kurak!"

"Welcome home!" they chorused as they embraced. Data reached out a hand, inviting the smiling Klingon to join him in the final set of his impromptu song and dance as the two girls laughed and cheered.

And from the way that I feel
When those bells start to peal
I would swear I was sliding…
I would swear I was sliding…
I'd swear I was falling in love, love, love!
I'd swear I was falling in love!

"Data!" Kurak exclaimed as she caught her breath, narrowing her eyes to study his face. "Does this mean—"

"The verdict is in, my darling," he confirmed, spinning them both around and around the carpeted floor. "In the eyes of the courts, I am as conscious and living as the next man. With this decision, we are now free to share our lives and raise our children as we see fit - without the threat of Federation interference."

"Then, you can actually adopt me into your Family!" Kay exclaimed. "I'll get to study here, with you, and my father can never force me back to the Homeworld!"

"Yes, Kay! In addition, Kurak and I can finally legally share custody of Ishta," Data said, drawing both girls into his little happy dance before looking back at Kurak.

"I cannot thank you enough, Kurak, for volunteering to act as Ishta's primary guardian," he said. "Just the fact that you came here, to this ship, with me…that you were willing to put yourself, your family through this bureaucratic and judicial nightmare…"

"We became a family on Nineveh IV," the Klingon asserted. "You and I and the children. The bonds we have forged together are real, and they are strong. I could not allow your government to divide us, or to separate my daughter from her Orion sister."
The two girls shared a smile.

Data's amber eyes welled with emotion, and he touched his partner's beloved face.

"Oh, Kurak," he whispered, drawing in close for a deep, heartfelt kiss. "Kurak-oy…"

Kay and Ishta squealed and pretended to hide their eyes in disgust, but their delighted giggles gave the game away.

"Oh my god, we have to tell Mikey," Kay said, rushing for the family's private comm panel. "He and his grandparents just have to come to the ceremony!"

Kurak and Data broke their kiss to glance at Kay.

"What ceremony?" Kurak asked.

"Your wedding, of course!" the girl exclaimed, already activating the screen. "Duh! I'll bet you can get Captain Picard to do it. And Uncle Geordi can be the best man, and I'll make the biggest, most amazing blood pie! It'll be so big, you'll have to get a special table just to hold it up!"

Kurak seemed about to protest, then paused, her dark eyes drawn back to Data's amber gaze.

"A life together will not be easy," he said softly. "An android and a Klingon…"

"I'm sure this galaxy has seen stranger couples," she said, and smiled. "I do love you, Data-oy. These past months, I have known for the first time what it is to have a partner, a true partner, in love as well as in life. If you do wish to formalize our union…to take the Oath…"

"Kurak-oy, there is nothing in my life I have ever wanted more," he said sincerely, switching from Standard to Klingon as he stared into her eyes. "To be known to the world as the husband of Kurak… There could be no higher honor."

"We have passed through rings of fire together," Kurak responded, also in Klingon, as she twined her fingers with his. "What better prize than the gift of our hearts' love?"

They kissed again, slow and melting. Data felt her fingers sink into his hair, her touch filling him to the core with familiar warmth as his eyes slid closed…

But, something was wrong.

That wasn't Kurak's hand tracing over the sensitive skin that covered his forehead, his jawline. It wasn't her fingers he felt trailing down his chest, his side...the unwelcome touch possessive, cold…and terribly familiar...

"Stop!" he exclaimed and tried to sit up, but something held him back. Metal restraints that gleamed in the artificial light. They clamped around his wrists, his ankles, his legs, his torso…

Data winced and squinted, struggling to see, to focus beyond the blinding light glaring only a few meters above his face. The air quality had changed, becoming heavy, humid; the temperature had risen to an uncomfortable level of—

39.1 degrees Celsius…

Whispers rustled through the shadows, around and through the invasive clusters of tubes and wires that spread like tumors through Engineering...and, from there, throughout the ship.
...Don't be frightened... he heard them say, the soft words echoing along an endless chain, link after link of empty minds awaiting the orders of one, just one...

"I am not frightened!" Data tried to assert. But, the lie was plain in his voice, the choked, shaky sound revealing the panic he felt rising in his chest.

...No...no, not this, not again!...

"Have you been enjoying your 'upgrade', Data?" the Borg Queen's slick, serpentine voice taunted from above. "Tell me this new 'skin' of yours wasn't an attempt to recapture the sensations we gave you. The caresses you felt here first...with me..."

"No!" Data cried, struggling against his bonds. "No, it is not the same! The skin grafts you forced on me while you held me in captivity were not a gift. They were a violation! Your touch was entirely unwelcome, and unwanted!"

"Indeed?" she scoffed, her omnipresent voice seeming to coalesce down to one location as she spoke. "Why lie to yourself, when we both know that you felt...pleasure...when I..."

Her lithe, shadowed form leaned in close, her long, smooth fingers running up and down his arm as she blew softly in his ear...

The physical sensations made Data gasp despite himself. He shuddered hard, his skin prickling in horrified revulsion as he tried to pull away...

"Why are you doing this!" he demanded. "You never cared for me! You wished only to control me, to manipulate me, and I—I... I did the same. Oh, god...!"

Data lurched straight up from his pillow, snapping back to consciousness with a deep, gasping breath.

Fading moonlight filtered through the slit-like windows of Kurak's small bedroom, highlighting her bat'leth, his bat'leth, and the other weapons, tapestries, and artifacts she had arranged on the walls and shelves. He felt movement beside him, heard her soft groan as she reached for the bedside timekeeper...

"Data?" she mumbled, her long hair a tousled mass of curls around her face and shoulders. "You're still here? It's after 0300. I thought we agreed..."

"Yes. I...I am sorry..." Data said, still struggling to sort between reality and his awful dream. "I...I believe I had a nightmare. Bad dreams have caused me to oversleep before. I just..." He shook his head. "I don't understand. Last night was so wonderful. Lying here, with you beside me... I did not expect..."

"Are you all right?" Kurak asked, sitting up to rest a concerned hand on his shoulder.

Data leaned gratefully into her warm touch, covering her hand lightly with his.

"I wish things were different," he said quietly. "I wish that...that you and I...that we could..."

"It's not over yet, Data," she said. "We have more than week together before you return to your ship."

"Then..." He turned to look at her, to see her eyes as he asked, "Then, you do want this to continue? You and me? Even though...it cannot last..."
"This is new ground for both of us," she said, meeting his gaze without wavering. "But, to rest beside a partner of your own choosing…to feel your own passions returned in full - why should it end after only one night?"

"Kurak, I have no desire to mislead you, or myself. But, after last night… The thought of leaving…"

"Data-oy," Kurak chided. "I know there is no manipulation here, no lies. You have your duties, and I have mine. As for the rest…” She smiled and squeezed his hand. "Why darken our present with concerns of the future? We are here, together, and we will be together for days to come. Let us focus on our present joy. As the poets say, love's fire may be fleeting, but the memory of its warming light can last a lifetime."

"The poets sound very wise," Data said, leaning in closer. She didn't pull away, meeting his lips with hers as he pulled her to him, her strong arms twining around his shoulders… "But, what if I don't want to savor a memory?" he whispered. "What if I want the real thing?"

"You have it now," she whispered back. "That is all either of us can promise."

"Kurak…” Data sighed and sat back, pushing a hand through his sleep-ruffled hair. "I know you do not wish the children to learn of this new development in our relationship, and I agree. This is not the time. But, if you are amenable, I would like to return here later this morning to help prepare breakfast for you and the girls."

"You know I have that early meeting—"

"All the more reason for me to come back," Data said. "I would be happy to watch the children while you are away, and we could all share a…a family meal…when you return from your meeting."

Data watched her expression carefully, searching for any sign that she objected to his use of the word 'family.' To his vast, unspoken relief, he saw none. Kurak just quirked an eyebrow, shooting him a playfully suspicious look.

"What sort of food do you have in mind?"

"I shall prepare whatever you ask for. Gagh, Rokeg blood pie, prune porridge—"

"Pancakes," Kurak said, her smile turning wicked as she watched his eyebrows shoot up. "Real, from scratch, freshly cooked pancakes. With tart berries and Klingon blood pudding, fried crisp and brown. Think you can handle that, android?"

"It will be my pleasure to oblige, my darling," he teased back, and she kissed him again, a fierce, searing kiss that blew all thoughts of food straight out of his mind.

"Kurak…if you wish me to leave before the children wake up…"

"They should sleep for another few hours," Kurak said, pulling him down beside her. "Besides, you sneaked in while they were still giggling in Kahlestra's room. I'm sure you could sneak out again if necessary…”

To Be Continued…

Chapter End Notes
References include - TNG: Phantasms; Yesterday's Enterprise; Matter of Honor; the movie First Contact; and "It's Almost Like Being In Love" from Brigadoon, by Frederick Loewe and Alan Lerner (1947), lyrics slightly adapted.

Your comments and reviews are always welcome! Please let me know what you think! :D
Chapter 50

Chapter Notes

Hi Everyone! Happy (almost) New Year! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Riker strode into the runabout sickbay, the heavy doors sliding closed behind him as he called, "Doctor?" He squinted through the dimmed, nighttime light. "Oh – Data! Is that you, there?"

"Good morning, Will," Data said. The android had pulled a lab stool beside the glimmering stasis field that surrounded Mikey's biobed. Now, he set down his glowing padd and rose to greet the commander. "Are you well? You are not usually up at this early hour."

"I'm all right," Riker assured him. "I was just looking for Dr. Crusher. Actually, I was looking for Deanna. Have you seen her?"

"Not since last evening's meeting." Data said, choosing not to recall the exchange he and the Counselor had shared.

Riker regarded his friend, fond amusement tweaking his lips as he noted Data's slightly rumpled, unshaven appearance. "I'm going to need more time to get used to this..." he thought.

Out loud, he said, "Data, I have to ask."

"Sir?"

"The facial hair," Riker said with a vague gesture to his friend's dark, morning stubble. "Is it part of the upgrade, or...?"

"Hm?" Data rubbed his chin, and smiled. "Ah, of course. No, I could always grow a beard, if I so desired. However, the responses I received when I tried it were...less than encouraging. So, I chose to inhibit its growth."

"Until now?"

"Just because I can control the rate of my follicle replenishment doesn't mean I have to," Data said, brushing back the strands of hair that had fallen over his forehead. "In fact, I quite look forward to shaving, and to regular haircuts, maintaining the length of my nails..." He looked down at his palm and squeezed his hand closed, a happy smile warming his face. "Besides," he said, stroking his rough cheeks, "does it not make me appear more manly?"

Riker choked on a snort of laughter and ended up coughing into his hand.

"Sorry, I'm OK," he said in response to the android's concerned look, and he grinned broadly through his own full beard. "You're right, Data. You're absolutely right. In many cultures, a beard is a sign of virility and strength. And, if you need any shaving tips, you can always ask me."

"Thank you, Will, but I am not unfamiliar with that particular human art form, as Geordi put it," Data said with a slight, wry smile.
"Of course," Riker said, and smiled back. "You look good, Data. You really do. Are you happy with 'the new you'?"

"I am still the same 'me', Will," Data said. "But, yes. I believe I am pleased with my upgrade, as a whole." He glanced down at his hand and squeezed it closed again. "Very pleased."

"Well, that's what matters, Data. Far more than anything we might think."

Data's pale face began to blush, and Riker nodded, not wanting to embarrass his friend any further.

"Have you been here all night?" Riker asked and moved closer to the stasis field, speaking quietly even though he knew the boy on the biobed couldn't hear him.

"Not all night," Data admitted, matching Riker's low tone as he followed after him. "The computers are set to transmit an alert should there be any power fluctuations or change in Mikey's status. But I felt, as the runabout will be leaving for Luna colony in the morning…"

"You wanted to spend some time with him," Riker said.

"Yes," Data said, his gaze also turned toward the unnaturally still child. "While I am quite aware that Mikey is currently unconscious of his situation and his surroundings, I…I just…"

"You didn't want him to feel alone," Riker offered, and gave his startled friend a small smile. "You care deeply about Mikey's welfare, and I think that's wonderful, Data. You always did have a big heart. Even before the chip."

Data opened his mouth, but Riker waved his hand before the android could speak.

"I know, I know," he said. "Technically, you don't have a 'heart'. But, you know what I mean."

Data's head made a bird-like nod and he smiled, just slightly.

"Yes, I believe I do. Commander—"

"Data," Riker chided.

"Of course. Will," Data corrected. "Would you mind if I asked you…a rather personal question?"

"Shoot," Riker said, pulling a chair up beside Data's lab stool and swinging his leg over to straddle the seat.

Data sat on the stool and pursed his lips, his amber eyes locked on his twiddling thumbs.

"Data?" Riker prompted. "You said you had a question. Care to tell me what's on your mind?"

Data breathed sharply through his nose, his feet twitching along with his thumbs.

"Are you familiar with the history of Captain Will Decker?" he asked quietly.

"Decker…" Riker repeated, straining his memory. "Decker… Yeah... He was slated to be then-Admiral Kirk's successor aboard the original Enterprise, but ended up serving under Kirk as his executive officer. Decker was lost in action, if I'm not mistaken. Something about an ancient probe. It had gained immense powers on its travels through the galaxy, then returned to threaten Earth. What was it called… V'Ger? Voyager? It was Voyager, right?"

"Voyager 6," Data confirmed. "Launched from Earth in the late twentieth century."
"Yeah, I thought so." Riker squinted at him. "Why are you asking about Captain Decker?"

"His is a love story," Data said, and looked up at his friend. "I believe it is, quite possibly, the most romantic story I know."

"Oh?" Riker said, struggling to hide his amusement. "You've developed an interest in romance now?"

"I have always had a certain curiosity about romantic love, and love stories," Data said. "But, this one holds special meaning."

"In what way?" Riker asked, his own curiosity growing when Data averted his eyes again.

"It concerns the union of organic and computer intelligences," the android said. "The abiding love that forged the two into one…"

"I see how a story like that might interest you," Riker said. "Why bring it up now?"

"I am curious," Data said, still twiddling his thumbs. "Will… Why is it that you and Deanna have not married?"

"Hmmph."

Riker rubbed a hand over his beard and blew out a sigh.

"That's a long one, Data," he said.

Data blinked at him.

"Are the two of you not in love?"

Riker grimaced.

"It's more complicated than that," he said, shifting uncomfortably in his chair. "Being in love is one thing. But, there's a lot of factors that go into making a relationship work, Data. Throw marriage into the mix, with careers like ours, and—"

"It's all right, Will," Data said, cutting him off. "I believe I understand."

Riker regarded his friend and leaned forward, resting his forearms against the back of the chair.

"Is that what you wanted to know?" he asked.

Data seemed to shrug.

"There are many ways in which the story of Captain Decker and his love, Lieutenant Ilia, parallels the situation that currently informs the relationship between you and Deanna," he said, still not meeting the commander's eyes. "I merely thought you might provide some insight."

Riker shook his head.

"Oh, no. There's more to it than that," he said, and he saw Data swallow - a tell the poker player in him just couldn't let pass. "You didn't bring up Captain Decker and that V'Ger probe to talk about me and Deanna. I think this is about you."

"Sir?"
"The union of organic and computer intelligences?" Riker repeated, the sly look in his eyes growing as he watched the android's pale face flush. "That's you and Kurak, isn't it? That date you two were on when you uncovered the new panel that's got the archaeologists here buzzing."

Data closed his eyes and let out a long, slow breath, seeming deeply relieved. Riker smirked. "That's it, isn't it," he said. "That's what all these round-about questions on romance and romantic stories is all about. It's nothing to be ashamed of, Data. If you and Kurak have discovered some romantic feelings for each other, and you both want to explore them, you have to know I'll support you."

Data nodded, and swallowed again. "Thank you, Will," he said quietly. "You once told me that...that when it really works between two people, the rewards are far greater than simple friendship."

"I remember," Riker said. "And I still stand by that."

"You also told me that such a relationship would be unlike anything I had yet experienced. And, I agree."

Data looked up then, his expression – his entire bearing – warmer, deeper, more incontestably human than Riker had ever seen before. "Data...?"

"I have been thinking," the android said with a philosophical air that also seemed unsettlingly new. "If life can be viewed as a puzzle, I have always felt like a corner piece. Two smooth edges leading nowhere, connected to nothing. But tonight, Will... Tonight, I discovered that is not necessarily the case. This new connection I have found with Kurak— It has revealed a whole new sector, as it were, placing me - placing us - at the center of a much larger image I feel is only just starting to come into focus."

He leaned closer, his intense amber eyes alive with passion, confusion, hope, fear...

"Am I making any sense, Will?" he asked. "Have you ever felt this way yourself? Could I be—"

He stopped himself, and looked away, running both hands over his bristly cheeks and chin. "When you...care for someone..." he said. "When you care this deeply... How do you know if what you feel is truly...love?"

Riker unstraddled his chair and moved to place a hand on his friend's warm arm. "Love comes in many shades and degrees, Data," Riker said. "But, when it strikes, you know. You always know."

"Yes," Data said, his gaze seeming to turn inward as a bright, tender smile spread across his face. "Yes...you are right...!"

The android's look of unabashed twitterpation made Riker's own expression soften. "Do I take it you intend to see her again?"

"We have plans to meet for breakfast," Data told him, rather proudly Riker thought. "Kay, Ishta, Howard and I will prepare the meal together while Kurak attends the morning meeting with her.
"Well, enjoy it, Data," Riker said, rather relieved to learn the android and the Klingon scientist were keeping their relationship social, at least for the moment. He stepped back and gave his friend a broad, genuine grin. "I still have to find Deanna."

"Would you like some assistance—" Data offered, but Riker waved him away.

"No, it's all right," he said. "Stay here with your friend. I'm sure she just stepped out early to visit the horses."

"Very well," Data acknowledged. "But, if you should need my help, I—"

"I know that I can count on you," Riker said as he headed through the sliding doors. "Just as I always have."

Chapter End Notes

References Include - Star Trek: The Motion Picture; TNG: In Theory; The Schizoid Man; The Quality of Life.

There's more to come, and pretty soon. Your comments are always welcome. Please Review! :D
"I don't know what Data did to that replicator, but I'll have to have him take a look at mine, once we all get back to the Enterprise. I must say, Jean-Luc, I haven't had an almond croissant that melt-in-your-mouth perfect since the week you and I spent touring the Loire Valley in France."

Dr. Crusher took Picard's arm and stepped with him out of the cafeteria dome into the chilly, early morning sunlight.

"Jean-Luc? Do you remember that?" she prompted. "The little bakery we discovered during our stroll by the river…?"

"Hm? Oh, yes. Of course," Picard said, and Crusher shot him a smirk.

"You haven't heard a word I've said."

"No, not at all," Picard protested. "I merely—"

"Don't apologize," the doctor said. "You're preoccupied, and I don't blame you. In fact, I almost find myself wishing I could stay here long enough to go down into those tunnels with you this afternoon. To be part of a discovery this momentous! It's something I know you've dreamed of your entire life."

Picard smiled.

"Momentous, yes," he said, the tempered caution in his tone not quite managing to mask the boyish anticipation in his eyes. "But, dangerous too."

He stopped their stroll and placed a hand over hers, suddenly quite serious.

"Beverly," he said, his voice almost a whisper. "Beverly, Beverly… The idea that we are this close to unlocking the mystery of these ancient objects, almost certainly left behind by the Preservers…to learning their purpose… The magnitude of this moment overwhelms me. But, at the same time—"

"At the same time," Crusher said, "this compound has already been attacked. If the energy source is what it appears to be – if the Stairway it powers is a portal of some kind…"

Picard set his jaw and nodded.

"Whatever that panel Data and Kurak discovered may ultimately reveal," he said, "none of the information we have so far uncovered can be openly released. The more we learn of its origins and purpose, the more certain I am: the Stairway and its energy source cannot be allowed to fall into unscrupulous hands. Better it were destroyed first. The records, the panels, all of it."

"Well." Dr. Crusher raised her eyebrows. "Hopefully it won't come to that."

"Indeed," the captain said grimly. "But, it wouldn't be the first such monument to fall in the face of suspicion and fear. Carthage, Alexandria, New Phenix…" He sighed. "When I imagine all the knowledge…the voices of the past that have been silenced forever by the passing of petty storms…"

"Perhaps not so petty," Crusher said. "Melinda Baker was murdered, Captain – the very scientist who extended you the invitation to come tour these ruins in the first place. Kurak was shot, almost to
death. Data and Kurak's daughter were kidnapped, apparently as part of the same raid on this compound. Now we learn the Cardassians have not only been exploiting border colonies and genetically targeting Federation citizens, they have involved themselves with illicit Orion Skin traffickers. And it's all somehow converging here, on this planet."

"Are you suggesting it might be more than coincidence?" Picard asked, his brow furrowing over his nose. "That the compound should be raided by scavengers just as we arrived? That Data should discover that foul Orion Skin Dump beneath yet another ancient site?"

"Data doesn't seem to think that those raiders were merely scavengers," Crusher said. "Those men came from somewhere, Jean-Luc. And, from what Data and the children have told me, they weren't acting alone. Someone was giving them orders."

"And you think that someone may be working for the Cardassians? Might even be a Cardassian?"

"I don't know," Crusher said. "But, I want you to be careful, Jean-Luc. Whoever is out there probably knows more than we suspect. About this site, about the energy source. About whatever it is that Stairway was designed to do." She pursed her lips and squeezed the captain's hand close. "I'm just glad we'll be getting Mikey away from here. Reports and scans are one thing. But I'm hoping Mikey's case will finally force the Federation to conduct a real, thorough investigation. We've turned a blind eye to Cardassian abuses along the border and elsewhere for far too long."

"Then, I'll also warn you to be careful," Picard said, his eyes boring into hers. "Remember to reveal nothing of your young passenger or his condition until you are well away from Nineveh IV, and you and your pilot are certain the runabout is not being followed."

Crusher's lips stretched in a fond smile, and she brushed her fingers over the captain's cheek.

"Remember when this was supposed to be a simple, relaxing outing?" she said. "It would be couple of weeks out in the sun, you said. You'd be riding on horseback, studying obscure ruins. And now…"

"Now, we stand on the cusp of unprecedented discovery," Picard said, moving closer to her. "The threat of conflict hovers over us, a child's life hangs in the balance…"

He glanced over the swirling sand toward the runabout, where he could just make out the figure of a tall, dark-haired man striding out into the glaring sun.

"And I'm faced with an android officer who has not only seen to it that this camp is filled with children, but who, before my eyes, appears to be developing into a singularly stubborn, flawed and passionate human being."

"I think Data would be very pleased to hear you say that, Captain," Crusher said.

Picard snorted through his nose and nearly smiled.

"Captain!" Data's voice called over the chilly wind. "Doctor!"

The three officers moved quickly toward each other, with Data catching up first.

"Sir. Doctor. I was just heading to the cafeteria to look for you," the android said, the edges of his loose, khaki jacket flapping and billowing in the desert wind. Crusher noticed his hair seemed slightly damp, as if he'd taken advantage of the water shower in the runabout's main bathroom, and his pale face looked smooth and freshly shaven. "The pilot has received news from the capital. Your departure time has been moved forward by three hours."
"Three hours?" Crusher repeated. "But that means—"

"You must take off within the next fifteen minutes or else wait for the next official window," Data said. "The government message was not coded, but I felt it best to tell you of this news in person rather than risk the comm system, just in case—"

"We understand, Mr. Data," Picard said. "Your prudence is appreciated, as always."

Data's posture straightened and he smiled.

"Thank you, Captain," he said, and turned his amber gaze somewhat shyly toward Crusher. "Doctor, I had hoped we would have more time to discuss—"

"Of course, Data. I'll send you an outline draft for your approval once we're both back aboard the Enterprise," Crusher assured him. "I want you to feel free to make any changes or additions you see fit. After all, that stasis field and any potential applications it may have – it's all down to you, Data. No matter the outcome, your work on Mikey's behalf deserves to be recognized."

Data blinked.

"Ah," he said. "Yes. Yes, thank you."

Crusher regarded him.

"Was there something else?"

Data seemed to blush and quickly shook his head.

"No. No, of course not. I am very much looking forward to developing this collaborative paper with you, Doctor. But, um..." His eyes darted quickly away from the captain. "As you must leave so soon, was there any message you might wish me to deliver to Deanna or, perhaps, to Kurak?"

Crusher's expression warmed with sudden understanding and she stepped forward to give her friend a swift, supportive hug.

"Tell Kurak from me," she said, "You can handle this. I think the both of you will end up just fine." She smiled. "Good luck, Data."

"And you, Beverly," Data said. "I will always be grateful to you for coming here. Thank you for saving Kurak's life, and for believing in Mikey. And, in me."

"Any time, Data," she said, already heading for the runabout. "Keep in touch, Jean-Luc! Remember, I want to hear everything the moment you two get back to the ship!"

Picard and Data watched, side by side, as Crusher disappeared into the runabout. A short time later, the engines roared, the sand kicked up, and the two men had to shield their faces as the craft lifted from the ground and shot off into the pale, morning sky.

"Good luck, Mikey," Data whispered after it.

Picard cast the android a contemplative glance.

"Data...?" he started.

"Yes, Captain?"
Picard regarded his officer for a moment longer, then shook his head.

"Never mind," he said. "It's none of my business. I just…"

He frowned a little and looked the android straight in the face.

"I'm proud of you, you know," he said, watching his friend's expression as Data blinked rapidly and raised his eyebrows. "You've faced up to a great deal during your short time on this world. In fact, if it wasn't for you…" Picard took in a long, deep breath, and gazed around the sunlit compound.

"I know you've been having doubts," he said. "But, I also know you are strong enough to assert your own mind and feelings. If there is something you wish to discuss with me," he invited. "Anything that might be weighing on your mind…?"

"Thank you, Captain," Data said, his pale face lit by a slight, crooked smile. "In fact, there is something I think I would like to talk over with you. Several things of great import to me, and to others. But, with all due respect, sir, if it is not inappropriate, I would ask if such a discussion cannot wait? I am due to meet Kurak, you see - I promised I would watch her daughter and Ishta while she attends her morning briefing - and if I am late, I fear she may think—"

Picard nodded and waved the anxious android away.

"Go on, Data," he said. "Go. We'll set up a time to talk later. Just you and me."

"I appreciate that, sir," Data said, edging backward. "Truly, I do."

"You will be joining our expedition this afternoon?"

"Of course, Captain," Data said, calling over his shoulder as he turned his shuffle into run through the diamond-bright sand. "Kurak and I will both be there! We cannot wait to see what effect our discovery might have on that ancient wall!"

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

Hi everyone! My holiday break ends on the seventh, so I'm hoping to get the time to finish more chapters this weekend. Thanks so much for reading. Please Review! :D
Kurak smiled to herself as she prepared for the day: making the bed, brushing her hair, rinsing and feeding the squirming racht in their sour-smelling bucket. She'd tried to stop, to school her face back into its usual stern scowl. But the smile kept bobbing back up like a balloon full of helium, making her feel deliciously attractive and light on her feet.

She heard the girls in Kahlestra's room, arguing then racing to see who would be first in the bathroom. Her small smile split into a grin and she found herself humming…her pulse still beating in time with the aria she'd shared with Data the night before…

He would be coming soon. Returning as he'd promised to watch the children and prepare their morning meal. He had made the offer as a kindness – he was a kind man. Yet, the thought of his approach, of his arrival at her door…

Enough, Kurak told herself firmly. This was to be no homecoming, no meaningful event. Merely a passing acknowledgement as he entered the dome and she left.

Still, the imagined scenario consumed her mind, the anticipation of seeing him again however briefly…touching his hand, his skin…

"By Kahless, what is wrong with me!"

Kurak sighed and sank slowly into her chair at the kitchen table. Her heart was pounding, her face felt so warm, and there was that smile again…that damned sappy grin she couldn't fight…didn't want to fight…

"Mother!" Kahlestra called, her racing feet like clomping hooves in the narrow corridor. "Mother, Ishta is hogging the bathroom, and I got there first!"

Kurak shot to her feet, pressing her cold fingers to her burning face as she fought to mask the unfamiliar feelings roiling inside her.

"Ishta is your guest, Kahlestra," she reproved. "You can get ready in your room."

"But I need to brush my teeth!"

"Brush them when she's done," she said, unable to catch a small gasp as she noticed movement outside the kitchen window. She rushed to see and called over her shoulder, "Hurry and get dressed, right now! Data is on his way. He'll be watching you girls while I attend the morning meeting with Drs. Tu'Pari, Anders and Kapoor."

"Data's coming here!" Kahlestra cheered. "Hey, that's great!" She smirked. "But, when did you decide he could babysit? I thought you said you didn't want me getting too attached to—"

"Data volunteered to do me this favor," Kurak interrupted sternly. "But, you have a point. I will tell him to go." She moved toward the door.

Kahlestra's eyes widened.
"No!" she cried. "No, don't! I'll get dressed!" She rushed back toward the hallway, then turned to look at her mother. "When will you be coming back?"

"In about an hour," Kurak told her, finding herself smiling once again. "We will share breakfast together. You and me. Your friend Ishta and that robot Howard. And Commander Data."

Kahlestra stared at her for a moment…long enough to make Kurak begin to wonder, rather uncomfortably, if she knew…if, perhaps, she had overheard…

Then, Kahlestra rushed at her, clenching her mother tightly around the waist.

"I apologize for my disrespect last night, Mother," she said in formal Klingon. "I know the sacrifices you make are for me."

Kurak closed her eyes tightly and swallowed, stroking her daughter's long hair.

"I want you to be happy, child," she said, speaking in Standard. "More than anything, I want your life to be as you would have it."

"I know," Kahlestra said, pressing in close. "I love you, Mama."

Kahlestra dashed away before Kurak had a chance to respond, already calling out to her friend.

"Ishta! Ishta! Data's coming over! Where did you put that essay?"

Kurak breathed deeply, pressing her clenched fists to her chest. Then, she ran to check the front window. Data looked as nervous as she felt, his eyes wide and his face flushed as he took a moment to straighten his windblown hair and jacket. A surge of warmth washed through her at the sight. On impulse, she took the metal flower he had made for her from the table where she'd left it the night before and tucked the long stem into her hair. Then, she burst through the sliding door and into his arms, the pair of them laughing and spinning several times before melting together in a heartfelt kiss.

"Kurak," Data whispered, smiling happily against her lips as she reached for his hand, pressing their scarred palms together with their fingers tightly intertwined. "Kurak-oy."

"Data-oy," she whispered back, laughing into his ear. "Has it only been a few hours?"

"Did you miss me?" he asked curiously, his amber eyes wide. "Really miss me? As much as I missed you?"

"O, my heart's blood," Kurak quoted between kisses. "To part from you is to part from breath itself. And, yet, it must be done. Tu'Pari and the others will be waiting."

Data held her close and breathed her in, chuckling as she nipped playfully at his ear, his neck…

"Mmm, my darling," he sighed happily, nuzzling her nose with his. "I believe I finally understand what Shakespeare meant when he wrote 'parting is such sweet sorrow.' The only sweetness I can find in this parting is in the anticipation of your swift return."

He ran his thumb over the crescent-shaped scabs on her palm and watched as she closed her eyes.

"You will come to me tonight?" she whispered.

"Only your word would keep me away," he said, and gently smoothed her hair behind her ear, his warm amber eyes seeming to glow when he saw she was wearing the flower he'd made for her. Kurak felt herself blushing and straightened quickly, covering his hand with hers.
"Kurak," he whispered. "I…I've been meaning to tell you… I have long wished to know what it might be like to…to spend the night beside a lovely woman, to wake from a dream to see her face close to mine and know…know that she… That we…"

He swallowed hard, and caught her eyes with his.

"You granted me that wish last night," he said. "That, and so much more. I will come to you tonight and every night, until you tire of me, or tell me to go."

"That won't happen," she said, her own heart fluttering as she watched the joy light his smooth, human face. "I give you my promise."

"And, I give you mine," he said unreservedly, laughing as she jumped up into his arms, their parting kiss long and deep and full of playful, knowing taunts that left them both yearning for the long day to be over, instead of just beginning.

"Don't forget my pancakes," she said, smoothing his jacket and allowing him to straighten the flower in her hair before striding out toward the center of the compound.

"They will be ready and waiting upon your return, my lady," Data teased, bowing low with a fond smile. "Don't be too long away."

Kurak watched him turn and walk into the dome, her legs caught somewhere between a run and a dance. Her heart was a drumbeat, her soul an inferno, and she never, never wanted the feelings he had sparked within her to fade. Even now, as she floated across the compound, the Federation android filled her thoughts, her senses… Her gallant, honest, brilliant warrior, as thoughtful and giving as—

"Kurak, excuse me. There was just one more thing."

"Data?" Kurak frowned up at the android's oddly blank expression, trying to back out of his grasp.

"How did you get all the way out here? What are you—"

The android smirked down at her, the look in his amber eyes giving her chills.

"No questions," he said, and pressed his hand firmly against her back. Kurak snarled and bit, but her consciousness was slipping, her attacker already fading away in a haze of self-satisfied laughter.

"My, my that android does work fast," Silarra said, still laughing as she shifted her form yet again. "The poor, trusting fool. He has no idea what he's in for!"

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

More story coming soon. Your comments and reviews are always welcome! :D
Deanna Troi groaned and pressed a hand to her painful head. With her other hand, she felt around for the wall, using the smooth metal to help pry herself into a sitting position.

"Ooowww… Where…?"

Even without opening her eyes, Troi knew she was no longer on the planet. She felt…distanced… from the compound…from her friends… But, beyond her empathic senses, a faint vibration buzzed through the wall and deck plates and there was a soft, encompassing hum, like idling engines, that made her suspect a small space craft, possibly locked in a parking orbit. The place was dimly lit, with a faintly electrical, lived-in smell of old tech, stale coffee and worn carpet.

Troi rubbed her fingers against the sides of her nose. Her head throbbed, her mouth and sinuses felt dry and scratchy, but she slapped a hand against her combadge, forced herself to speak…

"Troi to Picard," she rasped and coughed, working her jaw and blinking hard to try to wet her dry eyes and mouth. "Troi to Enterprise!"

A faint crackle of static, about as dry as her throat, hissed and went silent. Troi grimaced and rose slowly to her feet, swaying slightly as she fought back a wave of dizzy nausea.

"I was in the control room's office," she said, working to refresh her own memory. "I had been talking to Will about… No! It wasn't Will!" Her eyes opened wide and she pressed her hand to the place on her back where the imposter had touched her. "Oh, god, I have to get back, I have to warn them…!"

Troi could see the glow of the cockpit controls in the dim distance, past a shabby central living space. Looking around, she realized she'd woken up in a cramped, closet-like alcove at the end of a small corridor that contained a replicator, a full-length mirror, and a sliding door. At first glance, she seemed to be alone, but she had to be sure…

She moved to the door first, reaching out with her empathic senses. She did detect a living mind in there…more than one. They seemed to be unconscious, dreaming. If they had been abducted, as she had been…

Cautiously, Troi stepped through the doors into an even dimmer room. As her eyes adjusted to the dark, she could make out the shape of two bodies, two women, slumped on the worn out carpet.

"Dr. Anders," she gasped, hurrying to check the blonde woman's pulse. "Kurak! Are you all right?"

The unconscious women gave no response, not even when she gave their shoulders a sharp shake.

"I need to find some way to snap you out of this and get us all back to the compound," Troi said. "The replicator! Perhaps I can— Oh!"

A dark shape loomed in the doorway, tall and ominous. Troi blinked and backed away in alarm, unnerved by her inability to read the strange intruder.

"Who are you," she demanded, drawing on all her training to keep her voice steady and strong. "I
demand to know why we've been brought here."

The figure's eyes glowed bright blue.

"I am Howard," it stated, and Troi breathed a sigh of such deep relief it almost came out as a laugh.
"Your helpful home domestic droid. How may I be of service?"

"Howard!" she exclaimed. "How did you get here?"

"A woman with the appearance of Dr. Freja Anders pressed a site-to-site transporter device against
my shoulder," the robot responded in his helpful tone.

"When did this happen?" Troi asked.

"It happened late last night."

"Where were you when it happened?" she pressed.

"I was in the private dome of the scientist Kurak and her daughter Kahlestra," Howard supplied
cheerily. "My purpose is to serve. I was called upon to serve the woman with the appearance of Dr.
Freja Anders."

Howard looked straight at her and tilted his head, just slightly.

"Mistress Troi," he said. "Mistress Troi. Master Data said I was to serve you as I would him.
Mistress Troi. The woman who sent me here cannot have been Dr. Freja Anders."

"Why do you say that, Howard?" Troi asked.

"Because Dr. Freja Anders is here," Howard said simply. "My purpose is to serve. How may I serve
you?"

Troi smiled, just slightly, and placed her hand on the robot's silvery-green arm.

"Come with me," she said, leading him through the sliding doors. "I think— Gah!"

A force field flashed to sudden life, blocking them from entering the shabby living space. Troi cursed
between her teeth, but Howard seemed unfazed. Detaching his arm, he turned and held it out to her.

"I am here to serve," he said. "Please, allow me to lend you my hand."

Years of working closely with a rather literal minded android meant the counselor knew better than
to laugh in the robot's face. But, rather than accept the earnestly proffered appendage, she smiled
kindly and said, "No, Howard. I need to help Kurak and Freja. I'll leave it to you to get us past this
force field."

"As you wish, Mistress Troi," Howard said in his cheery way, and turned to face the shimmering
energy web. "I am here to serve."

To Be Continued...
Just a short piece to keep up the momentum, but there's more in the works! So stay tuned, and please let me know what you think! :D
"Then, Howard is not here?" Data said, looking around the dome's connected living, dining and kitchen space.

"Nope," Ishta said, sitting slouched over the dining table with her chin on her arms and her long, unbrushed hair covering most of her face.

"Hm. I must admit, I feel somewhat disappointed. Perhaps I should inquire—" Data paused and frowned. "No, I would not want to interrupt their meeting. Not so soon after…" He cleared his throat and looked away.

"I'm sure he's OK," Kahlestra said. "He must have left last night with Dr. Anders. We were asleep by then, so we didn't see him go. But, don't you think it's weird about Mother, Data?"

"Weird?" Data asked curiously. "What do you mean?"

"Well," Kahlestra said, "it's like, instead of just shutting me out, like she always does, I think, last night, she actually seemed to be listening to me. And she didn't say anything about my homework this morning. That's pretty weird." She opened her eyes wide and slammed her hands down on the table. "Kahless! Data, do you think she might be planning to let me stay?"

Data winced, his thumbs seeming to twitch of their own accord.

"I would not jump to conclusions just yet, Kay," he said gently. "As you yourself pointed out, the situation between your parents regarding your education is…quite complicated."

"Sucks," Kahlestra snarled angrily, and pushed her chair back so roughly, the table rammed against Ishta's ribs.

"Hey!" she snapped.

"Sorry!" Kahlestra yelled.

Data rose to his feet before the girls' anger could escalate.

"Kay," he said. "Please listen. To speculate without facts can only lead to frustration. As the great detective, Sherlock Holmes, warned, one cannot build bricks without clay."

"'Bricks without clay?'" Ishta peered at the android through her long curtain of hair. "Is this your talky android way of saying her mom's gonna keep her stuck in that Klingon school forever?"

"Not at all," Data said. "If anything, I'm saying that things can change. Often, when we least expect. Unfortunately, the linear nature of our experience of the spacetime continuum means we do not have the information required to predict our own futures. When so much of the framework that affects our lives is decided by outside agents – by parents or superior officers, by bureaucrats and politicians we will never meet… It is important to acknowledge what we, ourselves, have accomplished so far on our own behalf."

Ishta snorted.
"Like what?"

"Like our meeting," Data said. "Helping each other survive the desert. Allowing Mikey a chance of recovery."

Data walked to the living room window, staring out at the pale, blue sky.

"He is on his way to Luna colony now with Dr. Crusher, to undergo radical genetic treatment," he said. "Already, his grandparents are waiting there to greet him. Given the terrible circumstances of his illness and abduction, such a reunion may have been thought impossible. And yet it is about to become a reality. Because we acted. Because we cared."

He turned back to face the girls, his amber eyes as warm as the sunlight filtering in through the window behind him.

"I don't know if Kay will be allowed to attend the school of her choice," he said. "I don't know if the Federation authorities will ever allow a machine like me to adopt, or even join a family unit. I cannot make those promises to you children, or to myself. What I do know is that we are here together, and we will be together for days to come. Let us focus on the present, and not dwell on future verdicts that are beyond our direct control. For all we know, dreams that seem impossible now may turn out right in the end."

"Good grief," the young Orion said dryly. "Why does this sound so familiar…"

"Perhaps because you, Ishta, are very perceptive," Data said, and chuckled as he turned back to the window. "To dream the Impossible Dream," he sang teasingly. "To fight the unbeatable foe / To bear with unbearable sorrow / To run where the brave dare not go…"

The young Orion groaned and rolled her eyes, but Kahlestra scampered quickly to her room, returning to shove a data padd into the older girl's hands.

"Wha—?" she protested. "Kay, come on—!"

"No, go do it," the Klingon insisted. "Show Data your essay!"

"Yes please, Ishta," Data said eagerly. "I am quite curious to read your thoughts on the story of Don Quixote."

"It's not a big deal," Ishta said, her hair hiding her blushing face as she thrust her arm toward him, the padd dangling from her hand like a day-old fish. "It's a stupid play about some crazy old guy who thinks his dreams are better than what's really out there. It's sad, if you ask me. Tragic!"

"Is that why you started crying when that Aldonza character went to Don Quixote when he was dying and sang him that Dream song?" Kahlestra teased as Data took the pad and flash-read the girl's short essay. Then, he slowed his reading speed and read through it again.

Don Quixote is not real and dreaming of a better life is not enough to make it real. Stupid Sancho followed him around. He said he liked him. But, that's not why Aldonza went to find him. His dream made Aldonza very angry. She knows you can't live in a fake castle. You have to fight in real life. That means hard work and pain and she knew that more than any of those rich jerks. Don Quixote is an idiot. He hurt her worse than anyone because he was the only one in her whole life who made her care about herself. He made her dream she could be a better version of herself. Someone who didn't hurt and hate all the time. Someone who wasn't hurt and hated. He couldn't give her that dream because he was stupid and he died. He hurts her and makes her doubt and then she gets attacked and she screams at him. But even though he hurt her worse than all those stupid men did,
she still goes to find him when he dies and lets herself believe that her dream can be real. In the end, she becomes Dulcinea by herself. She learns and fights very hard until the life she wants is not impossible. Then, her name is Dulcinea.

Data blinked and lowered the padd, his expression deeply thoughtful as the girls' argument came back into focus around him.

"I did not!" Ishta shrieked, grabbing a pillow from the couch and thwapping Kahlestra with it.

"You did too! I saw a tear!" Kahlestra laughed and hit back with a pillow of her own.

"It wasn't a tear! My hair was still wet! I'm only going to use sonic showers from now on!"

"You were crying! You think Don Quixote was right to believe in his quest! You think Aldonza was right to believe in him, even though he died!"

"Shut up!" Ishta screamed.

"Ishta," Data invited, and opened his arms. Ishta seemed to hesitate, then rammed into him head first, clutching his bicep and pressing her face into his sleeve.

"This essay is very brief," he said, allowing her her space as she leaned heavily against his side. "The margins are rather wide and you chose quite a large font."

"You said it had to be two pages," Ishta muffled into his arm.

Data laughed fondly and stroked her tangled hair.

"Did you enjoy the assignment, Ishta?" he asked her.

She shrugged, but didn't pull away.

"You are right about Dulcinea," he said. "It may not have been what he intended, but Don Quixote did hurt her. Far more than he may have realized."

"He didn't know anything," Ishta mumbled.

"Did she not grow stronger, once she learned to care about herself? Once she began to believe she was someone worth caring for? Is that not a worthy quest?"

Ishta shrugged again, and slowly pulled away, her dark hair sticking out in all directions.

"Would you like me to brush that out for you?" he offered. "I could pull it back in a braid, then we can start preparing our breakfast pancakes."

"I can do it," Ishta said, and headed for Kahlestra's room to find her hairbrush.

"Braid my hair, Data!" Kahlestra said, and the android smiled.

"Very well, Kay," he said and patted the high kitchen chair. "Hand me an elastic and take a seat up here."

"What kind of pancakes are we making?" the young Klingon asked as she took her seat. "Chocolate chip? Blueberry?"

"Your mother requested real, from scratch, freshly-cooked pancakes," he told her. "With tart berries
and Klingon blood pudding, fried crisp and brown."

Kahlestra turned to stare at him.

"Really? That's what she told you to make?"

"Those are her very words," the android assured her. "Why?"

"That's her birthday breakfast! We only ever have those pancakes on special occasions."

"Hm!" Data's eyebrows shot up and his face broke out in a surprised, rather goofy grin. "Ah. Indeed?" he said, clearing his throat in an attempt to mask his secret glee. "Then, she must consider this morning quite special. Perhaps because we are all here to share it?"

"Maybe." Kahlestra shrugged. "Like I told you, she's been acting pretty weird all morning."

Data's happy grin broadened and he finished up Kahlestra's braid with a bright, elastic snap.

"You're all set," he told her, using his android strength to lift the girl down from the chair as if she were weightless. Kahlestra laughed in delight.

"Tell me," he said, "what is required to make these special occasion pancakes?"

"Well, for one thing, they're not really 'pancakes', like the round Federation-style pancakes you had the other day. They're Klingon," Kahlestra told him. "The batter is kind of thin and really bright yellow, and you squeeze it out from a bottle to make a kind of swirly web shape. Before they get too crisp, you fold the webs around the berries like cones and serve them with the fried blood pudding. Sometimes, there's this super spicy, brittle caramel drizzled over the top!"

"This seems far more complex a project than I anticipated," Data said, anxiously rubbing his chin. "After all, I have never actually cooked anything before. And we have little more than half an hour, now. Do you know if your mother has a favorite recipe we might consult?"

"Well, she doesn't cook much. Usually we just use the replicator for everything – except the racht, of course." She glanced at the squirming worm bucket in the sink. "But wait! She has a bunch of Klingon recipes stored on one of her padds. I'll go get it!"

*******

The recipe, once they found it, was written entirely in Klingon, and seemed even longer and more convoluted than Data had feared. The flavorings were specialty ingredients unique to the Klingon homeworld, and each of the many steps employed precise measurements, exact timing, and expert-level folding and blending techniques and terms Data had never heard of, let alone attempted.

"You know what I think," Kahlestra said, smiling wickedly as she watched Data and Ishta stare dolefully down at the long rows of complex instructions. "I think my mother really likes you."

"What?" Data blinked in alarm.

"She set you a challenge, Data," Kahlestra said. "It's a doozy, too. She wouldn't do that unless she likes you, and she wants to see if you like her enough to complete it. It's a Klingon thing."

"A Klingon thing?" Ishta smirked and gave the android a teasing nudge. "Well, Data? You said you'd never been in love. Want to make out with Kay's mom?"

Data stared helplessly, his ears burning. His entire face felt hideously hot and red...
"Shut up, Ishta!" Kahlestra exclaimed. "It's not like that!"

"Yeah, then what's it like?"

"She knows Data's my friend. She wants to be friends too. That's all!" Kahlestra shouted. "That's all, OK!"

Ishta snorted.

"Whatever. You're the one who brought it up."

Kahlestra's eyes widened dangerously, but Data placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Whatever your mother may have meant," he said, "the task is ours now, and I mean to do it right. These ingredients will be difficult to replicate, and we don't have much time. I say we head to the cafeteria dome and set up our workstation there. Will you girls come with me and work together as a team?"

"Team Pancakes!" Kahlestra cheered.

Ishta pressed a palm to her face.

"Good grief..."

Data smiled at her and held out his hand until, reluctantly, she took it. Kahlestra quickly grabbed the other.

"Excellent," he said, giving both their hands a happy squeeze. "Let's have some fun!"

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

References Include - Sherlock Holmes: The Adventure of the Copper Beeches; The Impossible Dream (song, 1965), lyrics by Joe Darion.

More story is in the works! Stay tuned, and Please Review! :D
Silarra closed her fist around the little data chip in its smooth plastic case, a surge of triumph bubbling up inside her.

It wasn't just the android – all these Federation fools seemed so trusting, so innately inclined to believe what they saw with their naked eyes! Even after several days of close observation, Silarra found their open attitude disorienting, alien. But, it seemed genuine and, so far, incredibly easy to manipulate…

Despite the 'veil of secrecy' the scientists had tried to spread over their work, while wearing the guise of first Dr. Anders, then Kurak, Silarra had come across no passwords, no body scans, no genetic identifiers of any kind standing between her and entry to their central workspace. The human scientist, Kapoor, and the Vulcan, Tu'Pari, had greeted her 'Kurak' that morning with genial comradery and barely questioned her claim that Dr. Anders had chosen to sleep in, rather than attend their early meeting.

They had shown her all their diagrams, talked her through the progress they had made translating the strange Preserver symbols they had found on the wall that enclosed the Stairway's mysterious energy source. And, as the briefing came to a close, Kapoor himself had pressed a copy of their coveted Rosetta stone into her palm.

"And this contains everything," she'd said, remembering to mask her giddy incredulity with Kurak's Klingon gruffness. "All the scans you made yesterday, the codes, the new translations—"

"Everything we worked out last night is on that chip," Nat had assured her, covering a large yawn with his hand. "But, don't worry. The original files, we coded and backed up literally everywhere, in every format imaginable. So, if there's another ground quake, or those raiders should attack again – if an asteroid should hurtle down and blow up our entire computer system – we're good. But, you're the energy field specialist. If you can use these translations to figure out the system down there, find a way to stop that damn field from draining our equipment — maybe even find a way to remotely control the energy source itself…? If you could get us something before we head back down there this afternoon, that would be great."

"I'll see what I can do," she'd said curtly and walked out with the data chip into the bright, desert morning…

Now, the Suliban chameleon smirked as she strode jauntily across the windy compound toward Kurak's private dome. Kapoor had gone for a nap, but she could see Tu'Pari's slender form in the sandy distance, heading off to see to the horses.

"Ridiculous people," she snorted. "How the Federation got to be such a force in this quadrant is a mystery to me."

She shook her head and stretched her arms and neck, exposing more of her skin to the sun.

"I think I'm going to make that creep's deadline after all," she mused smugly to herself. "Now, what's left to round up? I have the scientists' data, and that blonde scientist to interpret it. I've recovered the stolen robot, snatched the Federation empath… That sickly little Skin is out of range, but he was due to be a loss at any rate. The Klingon woman's a bonus, a pawn to knock the android off the board..."

She raised her chin, her smirk growing into a wide and wicked smile.
"That's it. That's what's left. Only that android could get in my way at this point, and thanks to that kiss the other day, I have him rolling like a ripe berry in my hand. Or, rather, in 'Kurak's' hand." She laughed. "Squash that metal sap, and the path to profit is wide open. I nab the two remaining Skins, follow those idiot scientists down to the Boss-man's precious energy source, and I'm on my way. And, this time, that cheap bastard will have to pay up, with none of his usual tricks."

She clenched her fist tighter around the data chip, and turned her gaze to the sky.

"Hear that, Boss-man, you washed-out freak!" she crowed to herself. "I'll demand every credit you promised me, and more. I'll have everything you want gathered up on my ship. In my possession! That makes this my game. And, I play to win!"

*******

"So, it's the Klingon saffron that makes the batter such a vivid yellow," Data observed as he used the squeeze bottle to swirl another picture-perfect web of batter into the sizzling pan.

"I really like the smell of those greenish seeds you put in there," Ishta said, sniffing deeply as the delicate pancake browned and caramelized.

"Mmm, indeed," Data agreed, flipping and catching the lacy pancake, then tipping it out onto a plate with about half a dozen more — all exactly the same. Kahlestra took the dainty crepe to another plate, placed a small spoonful of bright red and purple berries in the middle, and quickly rolled and folded it into a double-cone that she passed on to Ishta while Data swirled more batter into the pan. "The scent is reminiscent of cardamom, an Earth spice," he said, "but the flavor is more like blend of mace and cayenne…perhaps with a pinch of fennel?"

"That's what makes these pancakes go so well with the blood pudding," Kahlestra said happily. "All those spicy flavors!"

"What is it with Klingon food," Ishta said, using a long fork to drizzle hot pepper-spiked caramel over the pancakes Kahlestra had rolled up. "It's like, if it's not trying to strangle you or bite your face, it's gonna burn your mouth off! Can't you ever have something that's just sweet, without all the pain?"

"Hey, if it doesn't fight back, it's not worth eating!" Kahlestra said and laughed.

The little team had been working an assembly line, each with a different task. After replicating all the ingredients and cooking tools required to accomplish their mission, Data had made use of his android speed to grind the spices and whip up the batter in record time, much to Kahlestra's, and even Ishta's, amazement.

"Look at him go," Kahlestra had said, her eyes wide with admiration. "It's like watching a holovid on fast forward!"

While the batter sat and 'hydrated', Kahlestra had shown Ishta how to brown the blood pudding and Data prepared the caramel topping. The first batch had burned, much to his alarmed dismay, for he had followed the instructions exactly. But, the second batch seemed to be behaving in accordance with the parameters specified in the recipe. Every time the sugary ooze seemed to harden up, a few seconds on the hot plate brought it back to a usable, flowing consistency.

"That's it!" Kahlestra announced proudly, stepping back from the platter of rolled and folded pancakes she and Ishta had artfully arranged around the central pile of crisp, blood pudding. "I don't think we can fit another pancake on this platter!"
"I don't think we can eat all the pancakes on this platter," Ishta observed, giving the impressive pile an appraising look.

"Then, let us pack up our materials and head back," Data said, and frowned at the bottle in his hand. "Hmm. We still have quite a lot of batter. It seems rather a shame if we don't use it."

"Let me, let me, Data!" Kahlestra exclaimed. "I want to make a pancake!"

"Well," Data considered, "I suppose we still have some time. But, please take care, Kay. The pan is quite hot."

"I want to make one that looks like a targ!" Kahlestra said, using the squeeze bottle to carefully draw a roughly targ-shaped outline, then fill it in with batter. "Ishta, hand me a spatula!"

The young Orion grabbed a spatula and walked over to peer at Kahlestra's creation.

"Not too bad," she allowed. "You think you can flip it?"

"Just watch me," Kahlestra said, and forced the spatula under the still-runny pancake.

"Ooph!" Data winced. "Kay, perhaps you should wait until—" But, she'd already flipped it over… no longer a mighty targ, but a rounded, wrinkled mass.

"Ha!" Ishta laughed. "Look at that! It's a tribble! Kay made a tribblecake!"

"No – no way!" Kahlestra cried in disgust and jabbed at the ruined pancake with her spatula. "Die! Die! I can't stand fluffy, evil, crop-munching tribbles!"

Data's eyes widened, but he couldn't help a small, amused smile as he moved swiftly in to take the hot pan and the spatula and scrape Kahlestra's pancake blob onto a plate. "There you are, Kay," he said. "Now, you may stab your tribblecake all you like."

"Wait, wait, I have an idea!" Ishta exclaimed, grabbing the nearly empty bowl of berries. "Can I have the rest of that batter?"

"You must be careful," Data warned, and Ishta rolled her eyes.

"Please, I'm not an infant," she said. Still, Data watched over her shoulder as she used the last of the batter to squeeze a small round circle into the pan, then filled the center with a spoonful of berries. Once the top was bubbly and mostly dry, she flipped the pancake gently, then slid it onto a plate.

"Kay! Watch!" she said, a wicked smile spreading over her face as she smashed the spatula down hard on the little pancake. The hot berries inside burst in a gory, reddish-purple mess and the watery juices spread all over the plate. "Now, that's a tribblecake!"

"Awesome!" Kahlestra shrieked. "Ishta, that's awesome! By Kahless – Data, we have to remember this. I want tribblecakes for breakfast every day!"

Data laughed a bright, unreserved laugh the girls found quite contagious. Soon, they were all laughing together; a warm, wonderful feeling Data wanted to wrap around his 'heart' and hold close for as long as he could.

"Oh," he gasped, "I don't know when I've had such a marvelous time. I certainly hope you girls are hungry. Kurak's briefing will be ending soon, if it hasn't already, and we must get these pancakes back to Kay's dome. Now, who will help me carry these things back to the replicator for disposal?"
"I will!" Kahlestra volunteered, and rammed full-force into Data, wrapping her arms around his waist in a fierce hug. "Can we do this again tomorrow?" she asked, looking up at him. "Can we do this every day, until you have to go back to your ship?"

"We'll see, Kay," Data said, deeply touched. "I would hope so."

"Fantastic!" Kahlestra cheered, then tugged on his sleeve, getting him to bend down so she could whisper in his ear. "Don't tell Ishta," she said, "but, it's really OK with me if you do like my mother. Do you think you might like her, Data? You know, like like her?"

Data leaned back and regarded the girl carefully. He knew he couldn't lie to her, and yet, at the same time...

"I find your mother to be...an enormously intriguing woman," he admitted, feeling a far deeper truth warming him from the inside like a secret flame. "It would please me greatly if we could be friends."

Kay beamed like a landing beacon and hurried to help Ishta, who had already started moving their messy mixing bowls and assembly plates from the fold out table to the replicator.

Data watched them work together, a sharp, bittersweet pang stinging in his chest...his sinuses...

Can we do this again tomorrow? Kahlestra's plea ran through his mind. Can we do this every day...?

Sniffing in a sharp breath, Data swallowed his feelings back and hurried to lend the girls a hand.

To Be Continued...
Chapter 56

The sound of happy laughter could be heard well outside the Klingon woman's dome. Silarra checked her timekeeper, then straightened her shoulders and set her disguised face in a patently Klingon scowl.

The door slid open and the android stepped out into the warming wind, his amber eyes still bright from laughing.

"Welcome home!" he exclaimed, racing across the sand to greet her as if he were a child himself. "The girls and I have everything prepared for our morning meal together! All we are missing is you. Kurak-oy..." His smile warmed and he leaned in close, reaching for her hand.

She slapped his hand away, but before his smile could drop too far, she grabbed his arm and pulled him roughly out of the wind and into the shadowed part of the dome, away from any doors or windows.

The android chuckled, seeming befuddled, but clearly willing to follow her lead.

"I missed you," he confessed and leaned against the prefab dome's rounded metal exterior, ducking his head a little to meet her eyes as he raised a hand to gently smooth his fingers through 'Kurak's' long wavy hair. "I hope you will be pleased by my efforts to meet the challenge you set. I know the children found this morning's culinary adventure most enjoyable. In fact," he said, grinning happily, "we had 'fun'!

Silarra regarded him, her lips stretching in a cold sneer. The android blinked and cocked his head like a curious bird.

"Kurak?" He cupped her hands between his. "My darling, you have not yet said a word to me. Is there something wrong?"

"'My darling'," she snorted and pulled away from his touch. "You really are a fool. Haven't you figured it out by now?"

"Figured what out?" Data blinked again, his warm expression fading into a concerned frown. "I do not understand. Has something happened to upset you?"

Silarra snorted, then shoved him hard against the wall in an echo of the move she'd used outside the Klingon's lab. The android's eyes widened in alarmed confusion, but he responded quickly enough when she pressed a fierce, devouring kiss against his lips. His amber eyes closed, his arms rose to embrace her, gently at first, then with rising, genuine passion until—

"Wait!" he gasped and pulled his head back. "No, please, stop. I—"

He shook his head and stepped away, pressing both hands to his temples.

"I apologize. I do not know what is wrong. The images from my nightmare… Why would they...now...? I don't..."

Silarra couldn't help it. A bubble of laughter rose up inside her and she released a scornful cackle.

Data stared at her, his mouth just slightly open. She could almost hear the strange mental click that made his head twitch, leaving his face so drained of color it almost seemed gray.
"You are not Kurak," he realized, then rushed at her, his android speed actually frightening the Suliban chameleon as he pinned her arm against the dome wall. "Who are you," he demanded fiercely. "Where is Kurak! Speak to me!"

"You want me to talk?" she sneered, infuriated by the way she'd let him surprise her. "Process this, then, android. There is no Kurak."

"That is a lie. Whatever game you are attempting to play here, I don't find it amusing," Data said coldly. "Tell me the truth. Reveal your identity and the purpose of this attempted deception. Now!"

"I'm telling you, fool," she hissed, glaring into his unsettlingly convincing human features as she gathered her confidence around her like a protective mantel. "The Klingon scientist, Kurak, was killed before you and your Federation friends even arrived at this compound. Vaporized in her lab by that Nausicaan – ffssshht! – just like poor Dr. Baker." She laughed again, watching his expression pinch, his eyes flick back and forth in disbelief horror. "Once she was gone, I slipped in to take her place. That's all there is to it."

"No," he asserted. "No, what you say cannot be possible. Dr. Crusher treated Kurak's wounds. She would have known if—"

"My holographic guises have fooled experts and computer systems alike across three quadrants. I am very good at what I do." She smirked, stroking his cheek with her free hand. "As you yourself can attest, I'm sure. Data-oy…"

"Stop it!" he exclaimed, shaking away from her touch. "Stop lying! Tell me what you've done with Kurak. If she's been harmed in any way—"

"How hard must I hit to force this fact through your thick, metal skull," Silarra snarled. "You never got to know the real, living Kurak, Data. The horseback race to the ruins? The night you thought you shared together?" She leaned in close and deactivated her holographic guise, pressing her greenish, pebbled cheek to his ear as she whispered, "It never happened, Data. You were with me all along."

"Gah!" the android cried, leaping back and rubbing his ear as though her words had literally burned him. "It is not true," he insisted angrily. "It is not possible! Whoever - whatever you are, whatever your mission here... You will not get away with this."

"Oh, really," she said. "What if I were to tell you that I already have? And, it's all thanks to you. Data-oy."

"Do not," he warned, his expression turning dangerous. "You will explain the meaning of that statement. What is it that you want from me!"

Silarra tilted her head back and laughed, only adding to his angry confusion.

"Oh, you are a fool!" she chortled. "I've never known such a naive and bumbling idiot! Can you really be so stupid?" She smirked at him. "Well. Perhaps you are too dense to realize the the facts, Commander. But, the truth is, I hold your reputation, your entire career, right here, in my hand. In other words," she said, "reveal me, Data, and you reveal yourself."

The android wrinkled his forehead.

"What is this?" he demanded. "What are you trying to say? I do not understand—"

"You think I don't know about that article?" She smirked at his startled expression. "You think I would approach you like this, unaware of how the Federation you claim to serve has come to view,
and fear, their android anomaly? The 'unstable' android who traded in his mechanical calm for the 'instability' of emotions. So untrustworthy. So immature." She laughed. "When I think how willingly you allowed yourself to be led by your emotions. How eager you were to engage in a relationship with a supposed colleague! How you let yourself - your entire mission here - be compromised by a spy you failed to detect...!"

"That is not...!" Data covered his mouth and swallowed, a look of cold horror quickly crawling across his bloodless face. "No... Oh, god...!"

"I still can't believe how easy it was!" Silarra crowed, advancing now as he began to back away. "Getting you to notice me. Getting you to fall...and so deeply. It took hardly any work at all." She smirked. "I guess a little Klingon opera really can go a long way."

"No. No!" He shook his head, almost stumbling in the loose sand, but she kept talking, kept sauntering nearer, nearer...

"You didn't tell anyone about the aria we shared, did you," she said. "So, how could I know of our dance if I wasn't there? Hmm? How could I know how much you yearned for that connection; how desperate you were to feel... So desperate, that you ignored the warnings from your dream program. You kept your true feelings from your colleagues, talked yourself into believing in me, in us. And you never caught on to the truth, did you, Data. Never allowed yourself to acknowledge even the smallest clue that you were being led on, duped, manipulated!" She scoffed. "No, you saw only what you wanted to see, heard only what I wanted you to hear, just like any fool who lacks the experience, the maturity, to see into the hearts of other beings."

The android flinched as if he'd been hit. Silarra straightened and placed her hands on her hips, her cold eyes gleaming as she stepped in for the killing blow.

"You want to know what I saw last night, android?" she whispered tauntingly, staring straight into his wide, amber eyes. "A pathetic, gullible toy. A computer program with a human face. You're more of a mannequin than a man. I can think of no living woman who would willingly give her love to a mechanical thing like you."

"Why would you do this," the android whispered, his voice cracking with hurt and anger. "Why..."

"I have a job to complete," she said simply. "And you were in my way."

She smiled, watching as he choked and gasped, losing his fight to hide the shattering impact of her words...to keep the tears from falling down his tortured face...

"Consider me your Knight of the Mirrors, Don Quixote," she said slyly and pressed her hand against his shoulder. "Forcing you to see yourself as the rest of the galaxy sees you: the fool of an android that deluded itself into believing an 'emotion chip' and an upgraded 'skin' might actually transform it into a Terran man!"

She laughed, watching his hunched form shimmer and fade as her transporter beam took hold.

"Oh!" she gasped, holding her side. "Oh, that worked better than I'd hoped! And now..." She reestablished her 'Kurak' guise and strode back to the dome's sliding door. "To collect the Bossman's missing Skins..."

*******

Data felt the tingle of materialization fade, the beam's momentary paralysis lift, and he reflexively scanned his new surroundings.
A cave, the calm, computer-part of his brain reported. He was in a cave, facing out toward the desert sun. The faint, faded scent of hay and horses filled the air, and there was a dull electrical hum…

That was as far as he could process. His pulse still throbbed in his throat; there was a roaring in his brain that threatened to overwhelm his thoughts, his senses…

Data took a sharp, hitching breath and swallowed, hard. He felt numb, shaky, like a character from an ancient cartoon who'd just felt a tightrope snap beneath his feet. As long as he stared ahead, straight ahead without breathing, without blinking, he could stay suspended, floating, right where he was. But if he should look down…

"A Suliban," he said, his voice a strained, unfamiliar sound. "A Suliban intruder has infiltrated the compound. I must warn the others. I must inform the Captain…"

The small scabs on his palm no longer stung, but they made his skin feel pulled and tight as he slapped his hand to his chest.

There was no communicator there. He had neglected to transfer it to the new shirt Kurak had replicated for him when he'd changed his clothes the night before. At the time…it just hadn't seemed important...

The blank roaring in his mind grew louder, his staring eyes leaking tears that dripped from his nose, his jaw. He knew he had a duty to leave this place, but he couldn't bring himself to move, to think. The calm space where he floated seemed so precarious.

*Her words were lies. Designed to cut and manipulate. I knew…I felt that they were falsehoods. Yet, I doubted my progra - my...intuition. I listened to her. And I failed to act. I failed to prevent this. Why...why did I not act...?*

The dull hum suggested an energy field, his computer mind prompted from that calm place behind the haze. Perhaps placed there to prevent his exit. With a sharp, jerky motion, he reached out a hand —

The jolt of a force field shot up his fingers and he spun away with a gasp, clutching his stinging fist to his chest.

That's when he saw the cave's back wall.

"My mural," he whispered, reaching out to press his trembling hand against one of the dozens of outlined hand prints he had painted there back at the beginning of their trip…before he'd been kidnapped…before he'd tried on his new skin… Above him, an image of frozen movement…four powerful horses bursting through a sea of reaching hands… To the side, he saw his signature in alphanumeric code, the dedication he'd written to his daughter: *To my beloved Lal…*

And below that, the Suliban had placed a small mirror.

*Consider me your Knight of the Mirrors, Don Quixote, her mocking voice echoed through his mind. Forcing you to see yourself as the rest of the galaxy sees you...*

Data stared at the reflection he cast in the glass. At the composite features he'd so carefully chosen. He'd told Geordi... He'd hoped to build a new identity; a stronger, more perceptive, more emotionally mature persona he and his superior officers could be proud of. Someone confident, a leader the Federation, and its media, might trust. Someone who wouldn't feel so alone…

Data stared down at the scars on his hand. Touching several access points, he pulled off the sensitive,
synthetic covering, flexed his metallic fingers, watched the little diagnostic lights blink and glow in the dimness...

The Suliban was right about one thing, something dark and cold whispered inside him. His 'upgrade' was a farce, a lie. He wasn't a man, he was a positronic computer housed in a humanoid form. Attempting to think or act otherwise would be as nonsensical as an aircraft believing itself to be a bird.

The roaring blank enveloped his mind…and with it, the sense that he was falling. Bending toward the cave's cold floor, the android folded in on himself, his back and shoulders rocking, his mouth gaped wide in an agonized cry that only sounded when he finally drew in a trembling breath.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

******

"It's no good, Howard. This isn't working."

Deanna Troi leaned her shoulder against the corridor wall and rubbed her tired eyes. "There has to be a way through this damned force field. If we can just get to the cockpit controls, I— Ooh!"

She winced, her neck and shoulders tensing as an agonizing surge of emotion smashed against her Betazoid senses.

"Mistress Troi?" Howard said, clomping awkwardly toward her. "Mistress Troi, I am here to serve. How may I serve you?"

"It's…it's Data," she gasped in alarm, clutching her hair with her fingers as she waited for the rushing wave to pass. She took a deep breath through her nose and let it out slowly through her mouth, straightening slowly as her muscles began to relax. "Something's wrong, Howard. Something is very wrong."

"What's wrong with Data?" a harsh voice demanded. "Where the hell are we?"

Troi turned to see Kurak standing in the doorway, the dim light making her hard eyes gleam. Soft groans came from the darkened room behind her, and Freja Anders stumbled out to stand by the Klingon's side, her eyes blurred and her long blonde hair sticking out from her braid in all directions.

"You're awake!" the Betazoid said in relief. "I wasn't sure the replicated stimulant would work. Do you need anything for your head? I know, when I woke up here, I had a terrible headache."

"It is of no consequence, Counselor," Kurak said gruffly. "Just answer my questions. Where are we, and what has happened to Commander Data?"

Troi regarded her, sensing something far stronger than simple concern for a colleague driving the Klingon's fierce demeanor. Knowing better than to comment, she said, "We seem to be in a civilian craft. My best guess would be, we're locked in orbit around Nineveh IV. The cockpit controls are just ahead, but there's a force field blocking the way. As for Data…" She shook her head, struggling to sift through the powerful impressions that were still swimming and surging through her mind. "I'm afraid he may have been hurt. I'm not sure how, or by whom. But something is going on, down on the surface. Something sinister, I'm certain of it."

"What of the children?" Kurak demanded. "Data was with them when I left home this morning. Can your Betazoid senses tell if they are all right?"
Troi strained and stretched but, ultimately, had to shake her head 'no'.

"I'm sorry," she said in frustration. "If we could just get to those controls—!"

Kurak snorted and strode past her, giving the shimmering energy field a sharp thwap with her fist.

"Go on, see to Freja," she grunted as Troi reached out to the moaning human. "I will handle this."

"Thank you, Kurak," she said, and hurried to replicate a painkiller for Freja's headache and a glass of water for each of them.

"I am Howard," Howard said, ambling up to the Klingon in his cheery way. "How may I be of service?"

Kurak regarded the robot, then reached for the detached arm he'd been holding in his remaining hand. The robot gave it to her willingly, watching with wide, glowing eyes as she pulled back the silvery-green 'skin' to reveal the basic metal and wire 'skeleton' underneath. Muttering to herself, the Klingon scientist removed several components from the wrist and forearm, then carefully inspected the wall's edge, where the force field was projected.

"Howard," she said. "How's your internal shielding? Is your body's framework made of non-conductive materials, like your Master Data?"

"I am designed to be easily transportable, for my Master's convenience," the robot reported, his even-toned voice sounding oddly like a sales pitch. "As such, I am constructed of lightweight materials: silicon, aluminum alloys, and durable plastics with a flexible, stain-proof silicone sheath tinted a fashionable—"

"Enough!" the Klingon snapped, grabbing his functional hand and pressing the components she'd scavenged into his palm. "Take these and jam one into each of the two small nodes over there." She pointed them out on the wall, right at the threshold between the corridor and the living space beyond. "You will receive a powerful shock, but you must press them in and not let go until the field shorts out. Do you understand my instructions, Howard?"

"I understand, Mistress Kurak. I am Howard, your helpful Home Domestic Droid. I am here to serve."

"Then stop talking and do as I say!" she ordered.

The robot obligingly stepped up to the wall. It took some careful manipulation to jam both nodes with only one workable hand, but Howard managed it.

Then, came the shock. Arcs of electricity shot out from the walls to coil and snap around the robot's metallic-green form. Howard's body trembled and shook against the blinding, crackling onslaught; a strange, whining cry seemed to escape from his throat. But he followed his orders. He didn't let go, even as his metallic skin began to melt, filling the corridor with an acrid stench…

Kurak winced, but would not allow herself to look away. If this was to be the robot's end, she intended to make sure his actions would be remembered as an honorable sacrifice – machine or not.

The fierce overload lasted only a handful of seconds before dying down with a soft, electrical sigh. The force field gone, Kurak strode past Howard's trembling, smoking form into the shabby living space.

"Computer! Lights!" she ordered.
Nothing happened.

"Probably operates on voice recognition," she grumbled. But the cockpit controls still glowed so she headed over there – until the distinct, tinkling hum of a transporter beam made her pause and turn around.

"Kahlestra!"

"Mother!" Kahlestra exclaimed, her eyes wide with frightened disorientation. "But, you were just—"

A second beam materialized and Ishta stumbled, off-balance beside her, her nails dark with someone else's blood.

"I said it was an imposter!" the Orion snarled, pointing toward Kurak. "That's your mother, there! Now, where is Data?"

"I don't know. I don't see him! Where are we?" Kahlestra asked, staring around the dim, cluttered space. "Mother, what's going on? There was an intruder - a woman who looked just like you, and she— Kahless! - what happened to Howard? Is he OK?"

Troi and Dr. Anders came rushing out of the bedroom before Kurak had a chance to explain.

"Kay! Ishta!" Freja exclaimed, opening her arms to give the reluctant girls a hug. "So, whoever this shape-changer is who is behind this kidnapping is targeting the children too. It must be over that energy source. Melinda warned us, but we didn't..." She sighed and shook her head, her long braid still a wild, rumpled mess behind her. "How could we possibly think our small discovery could mean so much? She was right after all. We should have been more careful with our data from the start. And now..."

"Now, we're here," Troi said. "And the intruder or intruders, whoever this may be, is down at the compound, probably posing as one of us. Freja, Kay, Ishta – I want you to look around in here. Try to learn anything you can about our identity-stealing 'host'. Kurak, let's you and I see if we can contact the surface and find a way back to the site before it's too late!"

"But Data—!" Ishta insisted.

"We will look for Data once we've found our way out of here," Kurak said, clenching her scarred hand into a tight fist. "If I should find our 'intruder' has harmed him in any way, I will personally see to it they regret they ever came to this world."

To Be Continued...
Silarra hiked swiftly alongside Picard, Riker, Tu'Pari, and Nat Kapoor, doing her best to mimic how the android, Data, held himself, how he kept his breathing even and steady, how his hips and shoulders moved as he walked. This close to her goal, she couldn't risk slipping on any detail that might draw attention, that might make the remaining Feds suspicious of her guise. A cough at the wrong moment, an out of place phrase, and she could find herself blocked. Cut off from the energy source the Boss-man had sent her to collect. If that happened, no number of data disks, captured Feds or recovered Skins would appease his anger. More than the reward he'd promised, Silarra couldn't risk losing the bargaining leverage possessing the energy source would bring her. It was the only way she could be sure the creep would let her leave his employ healthy and alive once their deal had been concluded.

The Suliban spy had spent the morning making brief appearances in various guises. Appearing as Troi, then Freja, then Kurak, she had answered questions and made excuses explaining why she couldn't be joining the rest of the group in the cavern under the Stairway. The Starfleet captain, Picard, had accepted Silarra's excuses, begrudgingly. But, as she'd anticipated, he had insisted that 'Data' come along.

"I want a record of this moment," he'd said. "An independent account from an objective observer. Beyond that, Data, you've earned this. We're witnessing history together, my friend. An ancient artifact from a civilization long gone may soon reveal secrets it's been hiding beneath the sands here for millennia." He'd moved closer, clapping the disguised Suliban on the shoulder. "This is why we explore, Data. This is why we travel. Come on. Let's see what's down there."

No doubt, the android sap would have found such a speech from his commanding officer inspiring. Silarra just wanted to move. As she walked beside the older human she had to remember to keep her strides steady, trying not to pant or squint too hard as they marched further out into the windy heat and the glare of the early afternoon sun.

"There's another reason I want you along, Mr. Data," the captain confided as they walked, falling back and speaking softly so only she could hear him.

"Sir?" she queried, cocking her head exactly as she'd seen the android do.

"In case we are attacked, I know I can count on you to help me disable, or even destroy that energy source if necessary."

"Of course, Captain," the Suliban said.

"I meant it this morning, Data, when I said I was proud of you," the older man went on. "We may never have come so far with this if it weren't for you."

"I appreciate that, sir. As always, I am proud to be of service."

"Yes, well," the captain said. "Let's pick up the pace a bit, shall we? We don't want to fall too far behind!"

*******

Howard jittered a bit as he walked, and his voice seemed to buzz now and then. But, apart from some fried motor circuitry and some melted 'skin', the robot seemed to be functioning pretty well.
"I am — bruzzz — here to serve," he said. "How may I — bruzzz — serve you?"

"How about we send Howard back to the clinic?" Kahlestra suggested as she and the rest of the escapees searched the compound for their friends. "Or, to the control room, maybe? He could keep watch there while we keep looking for Data and the others! Maybe even call for help?"

"That's not a bad idea, Kay. But, in his condition, I wouldn't feel comfortable sending him there alone," Troi said. The Betazoid counselor had been in full commander-mode since overseeing their escape from the intruder's orbiting ship. Under her guidance, Kurak and Freja had managed to decode enough of their captor's passwords to operate the transporter and return to the compound. Now, she turned to Dr. Anders and said, "Freja, you go with Howard to the control room. Be sure to keep an open channel. I can't sense anything out of the ordinary just now, but that doesn't mean our intruder won't return. Remember, this woman can appear as any one of us. Be careful."

"Right, Commander. I'll stay alert," the scientist said, heading for the main dome and ordering the juttering Howard to follow.

Ishta kicked at the sand in frustration.

"We've been all over this damn place, and we still haven't found Data!" she said, glaring up at Troi through her long, dark bangs. "You said you could sense him back on that stupid ship. Why can't you sense where he is now!"

The force of the young Orion's anger and worry made Troi blink. The protective feelings…the sense of attachment she felt…The bond this girl had forged with her android hero was real, and it was strong. If Data felt the same way…

She glanced at Kay, only to sense a similarly anxious stew of emotions simmering behind the child's eyes. Looking into Kurak's steely expression as the scientist glared down at her tricorder's screen, at the way the Klingon woman held her clenched fist so close to her beating heart, Troi began to realize…

...I fear, Counselor, that I am not the man I hoped I would become…

...Data...I know you've been hurting. You want so much to love, and to be loved, and it's terrible that your own caring nature has been tearing you apart...

...I did not do this because I wanted to mimic humans, or attempt to convince anyone that I was a biological human being. I did this because I honestly feel it is a more accurate reflection of who I am...what I was designed to be... I am a man born of human imagination, but I am a man, just the same. And now...now that I have chosen to stop hiding...to stop denying...

"Oh, Data..." She sighed, her own heart aching for her android friend. But, this wasn't the time for reflection, she told herself, and there was nothing she could do here and now that would change the Federation's attitude toward his situation. With Data missing, an intruder on the loose, and Will and the captain likely halfway to the Stairway with Tu'Pari and Nat, her main priority was not to discuss relationships and feelings, but to keep everybody calm and focused.

"It's not that simple, Ishta," she tried to explain. "I'm only half-Betazoid. My powers can only—"

"I know where he is," Kurak announced and raised her tricorder, revealing a Starfleet combadge attached to the device. "This is Commander Data's combadge," she explained, her sharp glare warning Troi not to ask why she had it in her possession...although, the counselor believed she could guess. "It is programmed with his unique bio-signature."
"Data has a bio-signature?" Kahlestra asked curiously.

"Of course," Kurak told her. "Data has a pulse, thought patterns, brain waves. His body is full of electrical rhythms and impulses, just like yours or mine. I used this tricorder to scan for his android signature, and I found a match. He is several kilometers back along the trail, at the first rest stop outside the capital city. And, I believe, he is alone."

"Then, let's take the speeder and pick him up, quickly," Troi said. "We still don't know what our intruder is up to, and Data may be able to help us put the clues we've found together. Hopefully, before it's too late."

******

Data stood in the darkest part of the cave. He had cried himself out some time ago, but his breathing was only now beginning to slow back to normal. His throat ached from the painful sobs, his amber eyes still burned. But inside...

Inside, he felt empty. Hollowed out...like a soulless machine…

"Shut up," he snapped angrily, and the dark voice in his head shrank away. But it wasn't gone. The loathing self-doubt still lurked in his psyche like a hulking black slug, oozing feelings of shame and failure like slime trails through his neural nets.

"Some Starfleet Captain I would make. Let alone a full Commander," he said grimly, rubbing his rough, tear-streaked face with his hands...one warm, the other smoothly metallic.

He hadn't yet replaced the section of synthetic skin he'd torn away. He'd left it in the corner by the mirror, floppy and hollow like a Halloween prop. It wouldn't take much to set it back into place, reconnect the nerve endings, the flow of chemical nutrients...

But he didn't feel like going over to pick it up.

He didn't want to see his reflection in that mirror. Not now...after all that damned selfish crying… Good god, he'd seen the children display more self-control!

"I should be finding a way out of here, not wallowing around in this pitiful bout of self-loathing," he snarled. "How much time have I wasted? What harm might that Suliban woman already have done!"

The vibrating thrum of speeder engines made the android grow very still. He listened closely, upping the gain on his audio receptors until he was able to judge the vehicle's direction, calculate its changing speed as it slowed to a stop outside the cave… He heard doors open and slam, the sound of running footfalls on the sand…

"Data? Data!"

He knew those voices! Kay and Ishta were calling for him, hurrying in the direction of the cave…

A spike of guilt struck him hard...the thought that the children he had left alone had now come to his rescue... But Data quickly shook it away. The Suliban intruder may have succeeded in tricking him, hurting him, but it was a relief to know his lapse in judgement hadn't brought harm to Ishta and Kay. They were here and they were safe, and that was far more important than his injured pride.

The android smirked to himself, rather darkly. Who would have guessed he had an ego to bruise?

Data blinked and rubbed his face again, this time checking the mirror to make certain any trace that
he'd been crying had been sufficiently erased. His eyes still looked red rimmed and rather bloodshot, but that could be put down to the stress of captivity. Couldn't it?

"Stay close to us, girls!" Troi's voice called. "Don't run too far ahead!"

"Data!" Ishta shouted again. "Data! If you're here, answer me!"

"Ishta!" Data called back to her. "I am here!"

"It's Data!" Kay cheered. "Ishta, it's Data! He's OK!"

The girls burst into the cave, but Data warned them to keep back.

"There is a force field in operation," he told them, wishing he could see past the curve in the cave wall to the deep alcove where the hay was stored. "Look around the stable – see if you can locate a switch or control device that may—"

"There's something here, near the hay," Kahllestra called back. "Let me see if I can reach…"

"Wait, Kay – press nothing yet," Data called, but he realized as he spoke that it was too late. The hum around him faded out in a soft, electronic sigh.

Data tentatively kicked at the space where the force field had been with the toe of his boot. When nothing happened, he took a step forward, then rushed to the center of the cave.

The moment they saw him, the two girls ran into his arms, Kahllestra cheering and Ishta drubbing his upper arm furiously, shouting, "You idiot! Don't you ever disappear like that again!"

"What happened to you, Data?" Kahllestra asked, clutching her arms around his waist. "Did your hand get damaged? How did you end up in this cave?"

"An evil wizard attempted to bamboozle me with lies and mirrors," he said, glancing at Ishta. "But, it seems my brave Dulcinea has come to my rescue."

Ishta snorted and gave his arm another slap before burying her face in his sleeve.

"Deities! I hate you so much," she muffled.

"And me, Data!" Kahllestra said, latching onto his blinking hand. "I found the controller!"

"And you, Kay, my fierce warrior-scholar!" Data said proudly, playfully raising his arm until her toes left the ground.

"Don't forget us, Data," Troi said teasingly as she and Kurak entered the cave.

Watching Data with the girls, feeling the love and trust that wound between them as they laughed together… It brought back so many feelings from Troi's own childhood…faded memories of her father's warm smile…the safety she'd felt when he'd wrap her in his arms…

Ishta deserved to have those feelings. Data deserved it. But, what could she do? In about a week, Data would have to return to the ship. The Federation would send an advocate and a social worker to pick up Ishta before that. And, aside from some long-distance correspondence, that would likely be the last time they'd see each other. Possibly for the rest of their lives.

Yet, watching them now, sensing the happiness they felt just being together, Troi couldn't tamp down a growing conviction that forcing them apart so soon would be wrong. Her work as ship's
counselor had taught her that hope was a fragile thing, and not to be toyed with. She couldn't risk raising Ishta's hopes, or Data's, by offering platitudes or promises she couldn't keep just to make herself feel less guilty. Still…

She would have to talk to the captain again. Convince him, as she had been convinced. Surely, with the right argument, he would come to understand how—

"Mother!" Kahllestra shouted, snapping the counselor out of her thoughts. "Mother, you were right! That shape-changing intruder trapped Data in here!"

"So I see," Kurak said, her bearing stern and grim. "Go back to the speeder, Kahllestra, and bring your friend."

"I'll watch them," Troi offered, cutting off the girls' protests as she herded them both back out into the sun. She didn't know what exactly had transpired between Data and the Klingon scientist, but she could sense they wanted privacy. For feelings that strong, she was willing to give them some space…as long as they didn't take too long…

Data eyed the Klingon, moving slowly closer as he listened to Troi and the children clamber back into the speeder and slam the doors.

"You have my communicator," he observed, nodding to her tricorder. "I take it that's how you found me?"

"What happened to your hand?" she demanded, reaching out to grab it. With surprising gentleness, she opened his blinking fingers and rubbed her thumb against the metal mesh of his palm, over the place where the scars from her nails would have been.

"Can you…feel…without your skin?" she asked.

Data swallowed, his eyes fixed on her face. He could see no sign of fear or disgust in her expression, no hint of rejection. But there was concern…

"I can calculate the warmth and pressure of your hand in mine," he said quietly, adjusting her grip so he could see the scars on her palm. "But, it is not the same. Kurak…I must—"

"The intruder took your form before attacking me," the Klingon told him, her eyes fixed firmly on his. "In the moment before I lost consciousness… I doubted you, Data. I believed that you had—"

"Kurak, she did the same to me," Data broke in, not wanting, or needing, to hear the rest of her confession. "She told me you had been killed when the Nausicaan raider attacked your lab. She said she had taken your place. That all that I thought we had shared…never happened…"

Kurak bared her sharp teeth, a low growl sounding deep in her throat.

"Hu'tegh QI'yaH!" she swore. "I will rip her tongue from her lying mouth, the filthy piece of… Baktag!"

Data raised his eyebrows, touched, and a little amused, by the strength of her invectives.

"The sentiment is most appreciated," he said. "But, Kurak…there is something I must ask. Where were we…the first time we kissed?"

"First of all, you kissed me. And, we were inside the exercise dome, of course," she said, moving closer when she saw real pain sear his expression. "Data, what is it?"
"I am only beginning to realize how long this spy has been among us," he said, unable to bring himself to tell her the entire truth. "She knew things, Kurak. Knowledge that should have belonged only to you and me. She used me…used us both…and I—"

"No," she said, squeezing his metal palm. "There has been no deception between us, and there will be none now."

Staring into his amber eyes, she very deliberately kissed the exposed metal of each of his fingers.

"My gentle warrior," she whispered in Klingon. "How could you doubt the joining of our hearts' blood?"

Data closed his eyes and lowered his head, breathing in sharply through his nose.

"Kurak-oy," he said. "You know…that I am not human. That I am a machine. I would never wish the feelings we share to be used to…to compromise you, or Kay, in any way. Perhaps…before we allow this to grow any further…we should consider—"

"It is too late for thoughts like that," she said. "What the intruder knows, she knows."

"But, Kurak—"

"Data," she said, taking both his hands and linking their fingers together. "This morning, you spoke of a wish you say I granted. Well, you too granted me a wish last night. My wish to know the love of a good and honorable man."

Data blinked and stared, the feel of his pounding pulse in his throat forcing him to swallow before he could speak.

"You...you believe me such a man?" he asked.

"I know it," Kurak said firmly, and he blinked again. "The husband my father chose for me was never such a man, neither in the marriage bed nor out. For far too long, now, I have been afraid to fight him. I have lacked the confidence, the self-assurance to stand up and defend what is mine by right. But, not anymore. I refuse to live another day in my ex-husband's shadow. You have given me the courage, once and for all, to break free. And to take my daughter with me."

Data tilted his head.

"Do you mean to say, you intend to remain within the Federation? Both you and Kay?"

"It was never my choice to place my child in that school," Kurak hissed. "When my time here is up, I will return to the Empire and demand the right of full custody, as I should have done during the divorce. As I would have done...had I not been so afraid…"

"I cannot imagine you afraid, Kurak-oy," Data said in Klingon as he stared into her eyes. "That which you desire, you conquer. As you have conquered me."

"My fall will be for you," she whispered, speaking against his lips as they came together in a passionate kiss. "My love will be in you…"

"Kurak," Data spoke between kisses. "Kurak-oy."

"All right, you two, you've had long enough," Troi's voice burst through Data's communicator. "The girls are getting antsy, and we still have a spy to find!"
The effect of Troi's voice was like a splash of icy water over both of them. Kurak winced. Data laughed and moved the little comm badge from Kurak's tricorder to his jacket.

"Acknowledged, Counselor. We're on our way," he said, and closed the channel. "But first, Kurak, there is something I would like you to see."

Taking the Klingon scientist by the hand, he led her to the back of the cave, where the glow of the afternoon sun made his painted horse mural seem eerily alive.

"Data," she gasped, moving closer to the work. "By Kahless… Did you paint this?"

"Yes," the android said. "The work is dedicated to my daughter. Lal."

Kurak looked at him, her normally stern features deep with unspoken emotion. Taking his blinking hand, she gave his cheek a kiss and said, "Thank you. For sharing your heart with me."

"That is my honor," he replied just as warmly, and reached down to pluck his synthetic skin from the stony ground and stuff it in his pocket.

As they turned to go, the mirror in the corner caught their reflection: a man and a woman striding purposefully side by side, their palms pressed close and their fingers twined tightly together.

*******

"The Suliban intruder must be working for whoever hired those raiders," Data said from the back of the speeder, where he sat between Kahlestra and Ishta. His left leg jiggled with impatient anxiety, but he didn't seem aware of the new tic, leaning forward like a backseat driver to keep an eye on the dashboard controls. "Look at the clues – at those of us she chose to target, and how she went about her scheme. That is why I say, if she wasn't at the compound when you arrived, she must be with the expedition party. If she should gain access to that energy source—"

"All right, Data, you've made your point. We'll head for the Stairway first," Troi said, increasing speed as she veered away from the compound.

"Thank you," Data said, bracing himself against Troi's and Kurak's front seats as Ishta and Kahlestra tried not to bump into each other in the back. "You know," he commented, leaning forward again, "I am discovering I much prefer piloting a ground speeder to being a passenger in one. I find the forces in the back here particularly unsettling to my inner ear and my digestive system. Perhaps, on our return trip, I might be allowed to drive?"

"Data," Troi said, more amused than annoyed, but not about to show it. "Sit back and keep your eyes on the horizon. The ride will be over soon. Look, the Stairway is already coming into—"

She gaped suddenly and her dark eyes opened wide.

"Will!" she cried. "Data, something's wrong."

Data leaned forward again, craning his neck to see out the window, when the sand beneath their speeder rippled and shook like an ocean wave.

"What was that!" Ishta exclaimed.

"It felt like a ground quake," Kahlestra said, pressing her forehead against the back window as she peered at the sandy expanse beyond.
"It could have been a ground quake," Data said anxiously. "Or, it might be a sign that the expedition has reached the cavern wall and are attempting to access the energy source. Let's move faster, Deanna, please!"

"I've already got it floored, Data," she said, spending the next few moments concentrating her entire mind on making it to the monument without overshooting the mark. "Strap in tight, everyone," she warned. "This is going to be a rough stop."

Data protected the children's heads and spines as the speeder whipped around the massive Stairway structure to land beside the most visible tunnel entrance. The moment the vehicle stopped moving, the android was up and out, dashing across the sand and into the tunnel like a streak of khaki lightning.

"Counselor!" his alarmed voice sounded over her comm link, barely a minute later. "I am in the tunnel, not far from the main site. But, the quake has caused a cave in. I believe the expedition party has been trapped inside the cavern."

"Is there anything you can do to get them out?" she asked.

"The tunnel appears most unstable," Data reported. "I am attempting to make use of the fallen debris to shore up the walls while I try…to create…a shaft through…the rubble…"

"Data?" Troi called out. "Data, you're breaking up!"

"Please…remain…the speeder… I will…"

His choppy voice faded into static. Troi slapped her combadge again and again, trying to reestablish contact, but she got only silence.

"I'm going down there," Ishta said, moving toward the speeder door.

Troi locked it first, earning a scathing glare.

"You'll do nothing of the kind," she said. "If the tunnel is as bad as Data says, any of us going down there will only make things worse."

"I don't care!" Ishta cried. "You can't lock us up in here when Data needs our help!"

"You care for Data a great deal, don't you," Kurak said, her hooded glare fixed on Ishta's wide, blue eyes.

"I don't care about anyone," the Orion snapped back. "Data's an idiot! He sees things the way they should be, instead of how they are. And it's gonna get him killed if you don't let me go after him!"

"Why should that bother you, if you don't care about anyone?" Troi asked.

Ishta screamed a scream so loud, the metal in the speeder kept vibrating even after she'd stopped.

"I hate you all!" she shrieked. "I want to get out of here! You have to let me out!"

"Ishta, shut up and look!" Kahlestra said, pulling at the Orion's lashing arm. "There's something going on out there. I think Data's found someone!"

"Unlock the doors," Kurak said, and Troi did, the four of them spilling out to race across the burning sand.
Data met them at the tunnel's entrance, his dark hair gray with dust and his normally pale face bright red and streaked with sweat and grime.

"The captain is all right, but Will is injured," he reported rather breathlessly. "The captain is supporting him and should arrive soon. I have Drs. Kapoor and Tu'Pari here. They are both unconscious, but appear to have suffered only minor cuts and abrasions. I will carry them to the speeder, and then I must go back. The Suliban is still inside."

"You don't have to go back in there for her. She's a spy!" Ishta protested.

"She is also very dangerous, and in a position to become more so," Data countered, hefting the two archaeologists back over his shoulders and hurrying with them toward the speeder. "The Preserver's wall is, indeed, standing open. But, the Suliban has blocked herself inside the cavern. I must get to her before she figures a way to tamper with the energy source. Do you understand, Ishta?"

Ishta scowled darkly and started to open her mouth, but Kahlestra spoke first.

"She understands, Data," she said. "We both do."

Ishta swore under her breath and kicked at the sand.

"You better come back out of there," she warned him. "Because if you don't, I'm going in, and none of these damn Feds can stop me!"

"Your concern for my welfare is appreciated, Ishta," Data said, settling the unconscious men into the back seat and turning to face both girls. "Please understand the concern I feel for you and your safety is every bit as strong. Stay with Kurak and Counselor Troi. I will return to you as soon as I can."

He started to go, but Ishta slammed into him, squeezing him tightly in a full-on hug.

"I love you, you metal idiot," she muffled into his chest. "And I hate you for making me say it!"

Data blinked and returned her hug, smoothing her hair back behind her ears with his metallic hand before bending down to place a fatherly kiss on the top of her head.

"I love you too, Ishta," he said, his jaw tightening a little as, reluctantly, she let him go.

"Data," Kahlestra said, standing very straight as she brought her hand to her chest. "Qapla!"

"Qapla!" he returned, and bent down to hug her too. "Listen to your mother, Kay," he said. "She has your best interests at heart."

"I know," Kahlestra said, and pulled back to look him straight in the eye. "I love you, Data."

"And I you, Kay," he said warmly, and straightened back up. "Stay here," he told both girls. "The wounded will need your help."

And, before either of them could say another word, Data was gone, racing back to the tunnels at inhuman speed.

"Data," Troi said, catching the android just as he streaked past. "You're not going back in there!"

"I must," Data said. "The Suliban spy must be stopped."

"Then, I'll go in with you," Picard said, handing the badly limping Riker over to Kurak. The captain's head and arms were badly scratched, blood stained his clothing, but only some of it was his.
Much of it belonged to Riker.

"With all due respect, sir," Data said, "given the instability of the underground structure, and the likelihood of another quake, it would be far safer if I were to go in alone."

"Mr. Data, I—"

"He's right, Captain," Riker said, his voice a pained whisper. "I...I can't let you go..."

"Then, you're both teaming up on me, is that it? My first and second officers, telling me what I can and cannot do?"

Data's eyes widened.

"But, it is for your own safety, sir," he rushed to explain. "Starfleet regulations clearly state—"

"He's joking with you, Data," Riker said, his smile cut off by a sharp wince. "Go."

"Yes. Go on, Data," Picard assured him. "Stop that damned mercenary before she gets away. Just, keep your commlink open."

"Sir," Data acknowledged, and vanished into the tunnel.

"Quite a guy," Riker commented, hissing and wincing as Kurak helped him limp slowly toward the speeder. "With or without emotions."

"He has an artist's soul," Kurak said, keeping her gaze fixed straight ahead. "But his heart is the heart of a warrior."

Riker couldn't help a little smile.

"He'll be OK," he assured her. "If anyone can stop that shape-changing creep, it's Data." He gasped in pain and groaned a little. "I still can't believe it took us so long to see through her disguise."

"What gave her away?" Kurak asked.

"The energy field down there," Riker told her. "She'd disguised herself as Data, and when the field's in operation, it affects the real Data pretty strongly. Last time it gave him something of a migraine, I'm afraid. But, the Suliban - nothing. No reaction. Acted like she didn't even know what we were talking about."

Kurak snorted.

"So, there are some things about us that she does not know. Hopefully, the field will not affect him now."

"Nah," Riker grunted. "Data's tough. He'll pull through. Just give him time to—"

A staticky crackle passed through his comm badge and they heard Data's voice...a faint, distant echo beneath the windy hiss...

"...energy source cannot be dislodged from its... ...You must not try to approach... ...Silarra, please listen to me! You will destabilize—!"

A terrible light washed over the landscape, spreading out over the ancient ruin like a holographic image of the grand, impossible structure it once had been. For a brief moment, a flash faster than
thought, they saw the Preservers' vision brought to life - an intricate portal of infinite dimensions all braiding and swirling and dancing, as fleeting and fragile as soap bubbles in a storm. And, just as fast, it was gone. The light, the soap bubbles, all of it. Only the strange ruins remained, sandy beige beneath the glaring desert sun.

Then came the rumble, and everyone dropped to the searing hot ground. Riker cried out in agony, but Kurak helped to hold him steady as they rode out the fierce, roiling quake.

When it finally ended, some eight minutes later, Picard jumped to his feet and immediately slapped his combadge.

"Data," he shouted. "Picard to Data! Commander Data, please respond!"

He ran back to the tunnel entrance, but the quake had left it completely blocked. Kurak's tricorder scan revealed no life signs.

And no sign of Commander Data.

"Try scanning for his component elements," Troi suggested. "That might at least let us know if he's still down there."

Kurak tried, then she tried again. She tried dozens of variations on dozens of scans over the days it took the team to dig their way back into the cavern.

But they found nothing.

Data was gone.

To Be Continued...

Please Review!
Chapter 58

Chapter Notes

**Author's Note:** This chapter marks the start of the third and final phase of this story. I hope you'll enjoy the ride. Please let me know what you think! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"This is the second time you've let us down, Kertz," the Romulan officer warned, his dark eyes menacing as he leaned in closer to the screen. "Some are speculating you may have an ulterior motive in this game. That your operation has, perhaps, been compromised."

"Oh, please." The Boss-man snorted and leaned back on his red sofa, his wide brimmed hat keeping his features masked in shadow. "Don't you Romulans get enough conspiracy and corruption on your own world? Now, you must project your paranoia onto me?"

"If I'm wrong, then where is the merchandise you promised us," the Romulan demanded. "And what of this 'ancient energy source' you've touted and teased this past week? If you think such an obvious con can get you back into our good graces—"

"You've seen the recordings," the Boss-man countered, his low hiss an unsettling counterpoint to the Romulan's booming anger. "That damned Federation android stole my goods, destroyed my property, and now—"

"Enough."

A female voice sounded from the dimness behind the Romulan officer, her own image well out of the frame of his viewscreen. The Boss-man snarled, his shadowy form seeming to sink deeper into his clothes.

"Commander," the Romulan said, starting to rise. "I—"

"Stay where you are," she said, and he sat back down. "This won't take long."

"Commander," the Boss-man acknowledged the off-screen voice. "I was just telling your impudent lackey, here, how I have been the unfortunate victim of—"

"Spare me your excuses," she snapped. "Your operation was contacted for one purpose, and one purpose only. If you cannot now deliver, then we have nothing to discuss."

"Nice bluff," the Boss-man sneered. "But, we both know, I hold the winning hand here. You won't walk away, because I have what you need. My Cardassian agents assure me, replacement merchandise is on its way, even as we speak. And I can give you my personal guarantee: this time, the full order will go through."

"What makes you so sure?" she demanded.

The Boss-man leaned forward, the lights around him making his bleach-white suit seem to glow.

"My chameleon may have missed her mark," he said, "but her blunder with that energy source did..."
manage to serve one purpose. Whether she vaporized herself or got crushed to death when the tunnels beneath the ancient Stairway collapsed, all reports agree: when she went, she took that interfering android out with her. The handful of Feds still at the site are so tied up trying to solve his 'disappearance', they wouldn't notice if a fleet of ships entered orbit, let alone a single Maquis shuttle. So, lower your shields, Commander, and trust in Father's promise. When the merchant ship arrives, there'll be nothing to get in our way."

"You say the android is dead?" the woman said.

"Deactivated, destroyed – whatever term you choose, he's not here, and that's good enough for me," the Boss-man said.

There was a long moment of silence on the Romulans' end. So long, the officer on the viewer glanced warily over his shoulder, giving the Boss-man and his busy staff of slaves a full-screen view of his pointed ear.

"We'll keep to the deal, exactly as stated," the woman said at last. "But, I warn you not to be so cocky. I've seen that android in battle. His cunning is not to be underestimated."

The Boss-man gave a dismissive wave of his white-gloved hand.

"What are you saying - that a machine would fake its own destruction? On an a middle-of-nowhere, dried-up rock like this? For what reason?" He snorted a laugh. "There are no battles here, Commander. Beyond that, my chameleon's reports indicate the most the android ever suspected of my operation was a small-scale Orion smuggling ring. Which is all any outsider was ever meant to suspect. So, you see? My safeguards remain in place."

"Just the same, I don't trust this news," the woman said grimly. "If that android is alive…"

"It wouldn't matter," the Boss-man said. "Not in the long run. So calm down, sit back, and watch the Federation news feeds. That'll reassure you – the plan's already taken on a life of its own. Like I said at the start: my secrets know how to guard themselves."

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to Part III! I want you to know, your reviews really mean a lot. I've got so much plot-stuff tornado-ing around in my head, but your comments and reactions on each chapter help me process and design the emotional arcs for this story. Your input really matters to me - it's like, I'm working to build this crazy-complex roller-coaster while it's moving and I gotta know if you're there, enjoying the ride along with me - so please let me know what you think. Thanks so much for reading, and stay tuned for more on this, and my other stories, coming soon! :D
Chapter Fifty-Nine

Data squeezed and climbed his way through the collapsed tunnel beneath the ruined Stairway, his boots and clothing scraping against uneven rocks and rubble. Dust and sand rained down in choking clouds, sticking to the sweat beading on his synthetic skin as he moved through the near-pitch darkness. He panted and coughed, his newly sensitive respiratory system fighting to keep his throat and lungs clear and his internal temperature steady despite the stifling heat. But he kept going, kept pushing forward, his drive to find and stop the Suliban intruder overriding his caution…the terror of being crushed, trapped, buried alive beneath the sands of Nineveh IV…

"Shut-up," the android told his turbulent thoughts, efficiently filing and locking away the awful scenarios his fears sent flashing through his positronic mind: losing his chance to build a future…to keep his promises to Ishta and the other children he'd rescued…to grow the warm connection he'd found with the Klingon scientist Kurak… "Concentrate. Remember why you are here. If the Suliban mercenary who infiltrated our compound should manage to deliver the Stairway's energy source into enemy hands, if the Romulans or Cardassians should learn to operate the Preservers' quantum tunnel, the established timeline – all of history – could be vulnerable to their self-serving manipulations. The Federation, everything we are, could be wiped from existence…as if we had never been…"

Fallen debris from the recent ground quake had blocked Data's access to the cavern housing the opalescent wall that had shielded the Stairway's mysterious energy source for thousands upon thousands of years. But the android could hear movement beyond the rubble, his sensitive ears picking up a woman's frustrated grunts, hisses and swears.

That confirmed the Suliban had survived, that she was still there, inside the cavern. He had to find a way through to her, without collapsing what remained of the tunnel.

Data stepped back and tilted his head from side to side, running his optic sensors through the entire electromagnetic spectrum as he analyzed the best way to approach the blockage. Determining it would be fastest to melt the loose rock into a new arch, then vaporize the rubble near the center of the obstruction, Data pulled out his phaser and got to work. A dampening field was in operation in the tunnel and the chamber beyond, indicating the ancient energy source was still in place and functioning. Unfortunately, its effects reduced the strength of his phaser beam and left Data feeling distressingly weak and headachy. Still, he kept working, kept listening, dividing his attention between acoustically tracking the Suliban's movements and the task at hand until slowly, slowly, he began to break through…

"I told you," he overheard the Suliban say, "I'm in the cavern right now. The energy thing you want is right in front of me. I just need more time to find the frequency—"

A male voice sounded through a crackle of comm unit static, low and snake-like. "I'm not interested in your excuses, Silarra. Only in what you can deliver."

"Then get off the damn comm and let me work!" the Suliban snapped. "There's crazy interference in here, you have no idea. I'm going to try the transporter again, and I'll get back to you when I'm good and ready. Until then, consider this channel blocked!" She cut communications and growled, "…bastard…"
"Transporter..." Data repeated, his amber eyes widening as his brain's computer-quick calculations prompted a terrible realization. "Silarra, no!" he exclaimed and burst through the narrow opening he'd carved, ducking low to avoid contact with the glowing rock above his head. "Do not attempt to activate your transporter! You may inadvertently trigger—"

The Suliban turned and shot a super-heated plasma beam straight at him. Faster than human thought, Data ducked and rolled out of the way, staring in aghast amazement at the branching pattern of molten glass the beam had left in the sand where he'd just been standing.

"Stay out of my way, android," she snapped. "Or my next shot brings the ceiling down on your head!"

Realizing the high probability that she might actually carry out that threat, Data slapped his combadge, hoping the dampening field would allow some word, some record of events to get through to his colleagues...the friends he had left waiting outside...

"The energy source cannot be dislodged from its housing," he told the Suliban, keeping his voice as steady and forceful as he could manage. "You must not try to approach it again."

"I know what I'm doing," Silarra snapped, keeping her plasma weapon trained on the dangerously fissured concrete just above him as she inched through the narrow opening in the opalescent Preserver wall. Streaks and flashes of crackling energy lit the darkened space beyond, twisting and braiding into complex colored patterns that branched and faded far too quickly for the naked eye to follow.

"You do not know, or you wouldn't be doing this!" Data countered, his growing fear for her safety injecting his shouts with tangible desperation. "Silarra, please listen to me! You will destabilize—"

A violent blast of colored light forced the android to blink and shield his eyes. Silarra shrieked, and Data dashed after her into the crackling space, hunching his shoulders against the onslaught of hissing, sizzling energy closing in all around him. The air in there was difficult to breathe, he felt his hair rise all over his body, his skin begin prickle and itch, but he didn't have time to analyze these uncomfortable new sensations. Squinting through the branching, braiding light, he focused in on Silarra's silhouetted form, saw her crawling beneath the energy arches, reaching through the snapping whips of electricity—

"No!" he gasped, struggling to force his way through the swirling storm of power and light, to get to her before she could make contact with the energy source. Ducking low, he could just see it, pulsing like a living heart at the center of the rising maelstrom. "Silarra!" he yelled, barely able to hear his own cries over the humming, crackling turbulence. "Silarra! Don't touch the—!"

A bolt of blue lightning struck the Suliban mercenary, engulfing her in its blazing heat. For a fleeting instant, Data saw her flash-charred body, still a coherent whole, until the wind increased and her form disintegrated into wild swirls of dust.

Choked by a surge of horror, Data tried to back away, covering his nose and mouth with the collar of his jacket. But, something held him in place; an overwhelming force he could feel but couldn't see. A dark vortex opened above the pulsing energy source, the wind twisting, forming into a whirring funnel suffused with braiding, crackling arcs of color that closed tight around him, entrapping the android like a fish in a net, binding his limbs, squeezing the air from his lungs until he couldn't breathe, he couldn't scream...

Data jolted back to conscious awareness in a totally unfamiliar environment. Lurching into a sitting position, he blinked and rose slowly to his feet, his mouth falling open as he scanned his eyes over
his surroundings.

The readout from his internal diagnostics claimed everything was normal which, given the circumstances, might have sent him into a spate of incredulous giggles...if not for the unnerving silence all around him.

He seemed to be standing on one of perhaps infinite steps. The steps seemed to be floating, unattached and unsettlingly translucent, yet together they formed a vast, spiraling stairway. There was no clear edge to these stairs, no railing, no sense of beginning or end. And, though the stair he was on seemed firmly stationary, there was a sense of movement around him...odd, undefined swirls and eddies that glittered and fizzed through a dim haze of sourceless light.

Looking down at himself, Data saw the dirt from the collapsed tunnel still clung to his clothes, his skin. He ran a hand through his hair, wiped the sweat and grit from his face, noting that he still seemed solid, the various rhythms of his android systems still pulsing away, just as they should.

"I don't think that I am dead," Data mused, his soft whisper like a thunderclap in this strange place. "Could I have been pulled into the Preservers' Stairway? Is this peculiar landscape my mind's attempt to interpret their quantum tunnel? And if so...how the hell do I get back?"

Data pulled out his tricorder, but the readings were hopelessly scrambled. Frustrated, he slipped the device back into its holster and looked around, weighing his options. Options that basically boiled down to a choice between staying put and attempting to climb the Stairway.

Data chose to climb.

The smooth, glass-like stairs all looked exactly the same. To make sure he'd be able to identify the one he'd been standing on should he need to return, Data moved his combadge to his shirt, took off his dusty jacket, folded it neatly, and set it down beside him. Then, cautiously, he climbed up to the next step.

An odd sensation rippled through him the moment he began to move. He looked up to see a row of ghostly figures had telescoped out in front of him, one on each step, each frozen in a slightly different pose like a collection of paper dolls. Turning around, Data saw a similar effect stretching out behind him, only this time he could see the figures' faces.

Or rather, face. A face that changed in appearance from realistically human; to metallic with red, green and yellow blinking lights; to pale, white-gold the further back he looked.

"A time-snake," he realized with a startled gasp. "My time-snake. These images must represent slices of time, illustrating my own movements from past to present to future."

Looking around, he realized the flashing, fizzing swirls and eddies had changed as well, intensifying to the point where he could just make out faint impressions of other spiraling stairways, each with dozens, hundreds, millions of branches appearing and fading all around him, all sporting their own telescoping time-snakes.

"Might this be a representation of alternate timelines? Visions of probability...of choices I have made, or am yet to make?"

There was no answer, but the longer he looked, the more braids and branches he saw until he began to feel uncomfortably insubstantial and light-headed. Focusing back on his own stairway, Data climbed to the next step, then the next...taking the place of, then passing through, the hazy images he found there. As he climbed, he noticed a soft glow limning the edge of each step he passed. A glow
remarkably similar to a transporter pad at the very beginning of a transport cycle.

"Hm. I wonder…"

Data edged cautiously closer to the edge of the next stair, hoping it wouldn't tip or unbalance as he shifted his weight away from the center. Fortunately, the translucent strip remained firmly flat. But as he reached the edge, the glow seemed to intensify, rising like a misty haze to reveal a series of dream-like apparitions. He saw his pet cat, Spot, being stroked and fed by his best friend, Geordi La Forge; Captain Picard and Counselor Troi standing in his quarters aboard the Enterprise-E, looking at the display case where he kept his medals. They seemed to be talking, but the images were fading and he couldn't see, couldn't hear…

"Oh, god…" the android gasped, his emotions reeling as he rushed back through his ghostly doubles down to the step where he'd left his jacket. As he fought to calm himself, to slow his breathing, his mind went to a play he'd performed once for the captain, Charles Dickens's A Christmas Carol, and the words Ebenezer Scrooge had spoken to the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come.

"'Are these the shadows of the things that Will be, or are they shadows of the things that May be only?' he quoted. "And if they are real…is there a way to pass through? Could these steps be portals back to reality? Each leading to a different point along my own timeline? Or, are they merely mirages, impressions of my own fears reflecting back at me…?"

Without his tricorder, there was no way to gather the data he required, no way to test his shaky hypotheses. Not without actually attempting to walk off the edge of the step and into the haze beyond.

"No. No way. That is not something I am prepared to do. Not yet," he said, an involuntary shiver raising goosebumps on his arms. He rubbed them and turned a full, frustrated circle on the step, turning his gaze straight up…

Something was watching him. Something nebulous and insubstantial, but very definitely real. Data blinked and staggered in alarm, but managed to keep his balance on the step.

"Who are you?" he queried the barely visible something. "How long have you been observing me?"

The something pulsed and glimmered and Data felt an odd impression down deep in his brain…a wordless sense of intense curiosity he found he could somehow translate.

"No," he answered out loud. "I am not one of your children. Though…I suppose you might say, I am the child of your children's ingenuity." He snorted a very slight laugh. "Might that make me your grandchild?"

The something glimmered in delighted amusement, and Data had to smile.

"Did your people create this quantum tunnel?" he asked.

A host of nonverbal sensations flooded his brain, and Data clapped his hands to his head, struggling to make sense of the onslaught. As he did he made a mental note to ask Deanna if this intensely invasive contact was anything like the experience of Betazoid telepathy.

The something seemed to realize its approach was too strong and quickly pulled away. Suddenly terrified that he'd be left alone, Data reached out, desperate to call it back.

"Do not leave me! Please!" he cried. "If you are a descendant of the Preserver species, if you do indeed represent what they have since evolved to become, then you know that I do not belong here.
If you could please assist me – tell me what I must do to return to my own place in time—"

A surge of fond pity washed through his mind, and the glimmering something sank down to envelop him. As it faded, Data realized he knew what he had to do. Slipping on his jacket, he dashed up several steps, strode off the Stairway's glowing edge…

And stepped onto the busy, bustling bridge of what appeared to be a Federation starship.

"Captain!" the security officer alerted, her phaser already trained on the unexpected newcomer.

"What the—" The captain scowled. "Just who the hell are you, mister, and what are you doing on my bridge?"

Data blinked helplessly, staring from one unfamiliar face to another, noting the strange cut and colors of their uniforms, the sleek shape of the security officer's weapon…

"Oh my…oh, god..." the operations officer stammered, standing and moving closer on slightly shaky legs. "Oh my god…Data? Data, is that really you? But…but how…!"

"Commander, do you know this man?" the captain demanded, and the officer nodded, his awed gaze turning from his scanner's unmistakable readings to the android's dust-streaked clothes and hair, his wide amber eyes…

"Yes, sir. I believe so," he told her. "It would seem…utterly impossible! But, if I'm right, this man – this officer – has been missing for over thirty years."

A rippling murmur broke out among the bridge crew. Data shook his head in incomprehension, feeling a chilling lurch in his digestive tract, as though the deck had suddenly vanished beneath his feet.

"Thirty…?" He swallowed hard, fighting to stay calm, to keep control… "No… But...how… Who…?"

The operations officer hurried to support the swaying android, placing a strong hand on his shoulder.

"I wouldn't expect you to recognize me," the man said kindly. "But, you saved my life, Commander. My name is Mikey. Lt. Commander Michael Sean Applewood."

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

References include - TNG: Time's Arrow I/II; Devil's Due; The Measure of a Man; Justice; the TNG novel Metamorphosis; Star Trek: First Contact; TOS: All Our Yesterdays; A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens.

I hope you enjoyed this chapter! Please let me know what you think! :D

Thanks so much for your comments and reviews! They are deeply appreciated! :D
Counselor Deanna Troi strode into Kurak's lab, only to pause by the door, her eyes widening as she stared around at the busy wall panels and blinking consoles.

She'd seen the dome after the raiders' attack on the compound – a scorched out husk of sparks, fallen debris and charred metal, the walls scarred by phaser burns…

And, while a faint stench of stale smoke and melted plastic still lingered in the air, Troi found herself amazed at the extent of the repairs Data and Kurak had managed to accomplish together in so short a time.

The Klingon scientist raised her head, her dark eyes like volcanic glass beneath the shadow of her long, wavy hair. She'd been hard at work, leaning over the central console, her hands flying over the keypad, but she straightened when she saw Troi.

"You've come for Ishta."

It wasn't a question, but Troi nodded.

"I'm afraid so. We just got word that the social worker's shuttle has received permission to enter orbit. They'll be here soon."

Kurak clutched her elbow and turned her head, working her jaw as her gaze hardened.

"The girls have been studying. In my office," she said.

Troi nodded again, but instead of heading for the small corridor, she approached the console, casting her eyes over multiple screens displaying animated maps, scrolling data, and detailed representations of energy fields and wave formations the counselor couldn't begin to translate into useful sense.

"Any progress?" she asked.

Kurak bared her teeth.

"Not enough," she growled. "Not nearly enough! And time is running short."

She turned to look Troi in the eye.

"Do you, Riker and your captain truly intend to leave this place at the end of the week? To return to your ship without your second officer?"

"It's not like that," Troi said defensively. "The captain is concerned it might draw too much attention if we were to remain here with the Enterprise. But, that doesn't mean we won't be monitoring. This will remain a very active investigation. In fact, we'll be sending some of our top engineers and security personnel to——"

Kurak snarled and turned away.

Troi closed her eyes, taking a moment to let the Klingon's powerful emotions slap against her, then wash through.
"Kurak, we're doing the best we can," the Betazoid said. "All of us. But you must understand—"

"I understand." Kurak grunted. "Every Klingon understands himself to be expendable, and easily replaced. I just did not realize the Federation's Starfleet harbored a similar attitude toward its officers."

Troi pursed her lips together, refusing to let the Klingon woman's bitter hurt seep into her own mind.

"I can't promise you we'll find him, Kurak," Troi said. "But, if Data is out there, and he's still functional, there's a very good chance he'll find us."

"Then, again, you leave it to the android to save himself. As you did following his kidnapping by the honorless raiders who attacked our compound!" Kurak snorted. "I may have been left unconscious by the attack, but Tu'Pari, Nat and Freja told me of the incident. And, I don't recall hearing of his Starfleet colleagues conducting any particularly concerted search efforts on his, or my child's, behalf."

"Sounds to me like you have it backwards," Troi said, standing up to the Klingon's cold glare. "At the time, we had no way of knowing if Data and Kay were still on the planet, or if they'd been transported off world. We trusted Data to follow procedure; to learn the strengths, weaknesses, and motivations of his captors; and do all he could to return to us. Just as we trust him now. As for believing him expendable…!" Troi shook her head. "Absolutely not."

Kurak crossed her arms and lowered her ridged brow, her glare unwavering. Troi set her jaw and cast her a glare of her own.

"We all know Starfleet service involves risk," she said, her voice sharpening as she reflected some of the Klingon woman's hostility back at her. "As an officer, Data has always accepted that risk, just like the rest of us. That does not mean we consider him dispensable or expendable in any way. And, while others may have the training to carry out his duties aboard ship, we all believe Data, himself, to be irreplaceable. Not because he's an android. Data is a unique personality, same as any one of us, and we value that. He's our friend. Our family. We won't be giving up on him, and we won't stop looking for answers. No matter how long it takes."

Kurak stared for a moment longer, then lowered her gaze and drew in a slow, sharp breath.

"How is it, Counselor…" she said with some difficulty. "How is it that one soul can come to mean so much to so many…in so short a time…"

Troi moved closer, close enough to rest her hand on the Klingon's arm. Kurak glared at it until she pulled away, but she sensed the scientist's defenses were softening. That she was letting Troi's words get through.

"You mean as much to him," Troi told her. "You and Kay…and Ishta too."

Kurak swallowed and shook her head.

"I should know better by now than to hold out hope," she growled angrily. "The hope that we will find him…that anything will change… And yet…"

"If Data was drawn into the Preservers' stairway tunnel, or whatever it is," Troi said, "you can believe he will find a way to return. He's come back to us before, when we all thought he'd been lost. And now, he has more reason than ever to make his way home."

Kurak blinked a few times and sucked in her cheek. Troi smiled kindly and moved back, allowing
her more space.

"Good luck with your analysis," she said.

Kurak grunted, returning her attention to her work. Troi watched her for a moment longer, her own heart caught in a troubling tangle of doubts and fears. Then, she turned and headed down the corridor, working to brace herself for her confrontation with Ishta.

But, when she got to the office, Ishta wasn't there. And, neither was Kahlestra.

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

References include - TNG: Time's Arrow I/II; Contagion; The Most Toys; Tin Man; We'll Always Have Paris; Suspicions; Star Trek: First Contact.

60 Chapters so far! WOW!!!
Thanks so much for reading, and for your fantastic, encouraging comments! They really mean a lot, and help me understand my story better. Thank you! Your reviews are always welcome! :D
Hi everyone! I wanted to get this posted two days ago but, every time I sat down to write, something else came up and I kept getting interrupted and interrupted until I finally managed to sit down and finish the chapter today. LOL! Hope it doesn’t sound as discombobulated as my brain felt while I was trying to write it out! Next up: a new chapter for Mr Mxyzptlk, which has also been in awkward stop-and-go progress this week. Thanks so much for reading, and for your awesome reviews! I hope you enjoy this chapter! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Ishta! Ishta will you slow down!" Kahlestra called over the rising wind. "My legs aren’t as long as yours!"

The Orion girl stopped short and closed her eyes, letting the dry desert gusts pelt her face and arms with coarse sand.

"Where are we going, anyway?" the young Klingon said. "Or, did you even plan that far ahead when you ran out of my mother's lab like that?"

"Will you stop saying 'we'!" Ishta spun on the younger girl, her messy jet-black braid whipping behind her. "I didn't invite you. Go back to your homework before they notice you're gone!"

"Not without you," Kahlestra said with her most stubborn glare. "Kahless, this sand really hurts. The wind's getting worse fast."

"That's fine with me. I want it to hurt," Ishta grunted. "More wind means no footprints, and no one will be dumb enough to follow me." She glared down at Kahlestra. "Except you."

"I'm not the one being dumb, Ishta!" Kahlestra retorted, already having to shout even though they were only a few feet apart. "You know Data wouldn't want you out here alone. He'd say—"

"I don't care what he'd say!" Ishta snapped. "He's not here. And I'm not going anywhere with that damn Fed social worker. You heard what that Betazoid shrink was saying back there."

"I don't want you to leave either," Kahlestra admitted. "But Counselor Troi's been working really hard to help you. Don't you want to stay in the Federation?"

"I don't care!" Ishta shrieked at the top of her lungs, turning her face toward the sky. "I don't care what happens! I'm not leaving here without Data."

"Ishta—"

"No!" she shouted. "I heard those Fed scientists talking. I heard Commander Riker and Captain Picard. None of them believe he's dead! They think he got sucked up into that stupid Stairway somehow, but after that big ground quake wrecked the tunnels they're all too scared to go find him! I'm not!"
She reached in the pocket of her jumper dress and pulled out a little data chip in a clear, protective case that she held in front of Kahlestra's face.

"What's that?" Kahlestra asked, shielding her eyes against the whirling wind and sand.

"The Vulcan found it. Down in the cavern when they couldn't find Data and that shape-changing intruder who caused all this mess. They said it's full of codes – the sounds we need to get that stupid Stairway working again!"

"You stole that?"

"You don't have to come," the Orion taunted, gripping the little data chip and shoving it back into her pocket. "If you're too much of a coward to—"

"I'm not a coward!" Kahlestra shouted. "But, I'm not stupid either. And this is stupid, Ishta! Data wouldn't want you to get yourself killed!"

"I told you, I don't care!" Ishta screamed. "Data may be brave and smart and know everything about school shit and starships, but he's a dreamer, Kay. A damn idiot dreamer, and dreamers don't last! They don't make it - I know, I've seen it again and again. That's why he needs me!"

Kahlestra squinted at the taller girl. The swirling wind was whipping her hair, blowing her long bangs over her flushed, green face, but there was a hitch in her voice, a silvery sheen to her deep blue eyes that she couldn't hide. She blinked hard and turned away, pretending to wipe sand from her face, but Kahlestra could see the tear tracks through the dust.

"Kahless..." the Klingon muttered, and she sighed. "Look... This wind is really getting bad. It'll probably pass by pretty quick, but it's no good standing here getting our skin ripped off by all this sand! Let's wait it out with the horses, OK? Then, when the storm's over, I'll go to the Stairway with you. Maybe we'll find something the grown-ups didn't see."

"And that damn social worker?" Ishta demanded. "And the lawyer advocate whatever she's bringing with her?"

Kahlestra smirked.

"They can't take you if they can't find you. And I know plenty of places to hide. Come on!" she said, raising her arm to shield her eyes as she and Ishta raced for the stable – neither of them able to hear or see the lurching figure following them through the sandy haze...

******

The instant he got off bridge duty, Lt. Commander Michael Applewood dashed for the closest turbolift, on his way to Sickbay, where the captain had sent their 'impossible' guest for a thorough examination.

"Headed down to see your android friend, Commander?" the captain said.

Applewood paused at the sliding doors and turned to face her.

"Yes, sir," he said.

Captain Jhilli Zh'shrythaa stood and regarded her chief operations officer with a grim expression, her delicate blue antennae twitching over her feathery white hair. For a moment, Applewood held his breath, wondering if she would forbid the visit. Then, her antennae relaxed, and he felt his breathing
"All right, Mike," she said. "But, remember what we discussed. Until we know more, I don't want this android learning any more about our present time than he already has."

"I understand, Captain," Applewood assured her as he continued into the 'lift, adding "Thank you," just as the doors slid closed.

******

"Doc Nathan," Applewood said as he walked into the CMO's office. "How did it go with Commander Data? Did the tests come out all right?

Dr. Nathan Birnbaum greeted the commander with a smile, but Applewood saw a shadow of concern in the old man's crinkled eyes.

"Your android friend is marvelous, Commander," the doctor told him. "That's just what he is – nothing short of a marvel! In fact, that's a good part of the trouble. The way those incredible programs can so closely mimic human systems...affect his physiognomy..."

"What do you mean?"

"It's to do with how he says he traveled here, to this time," the doctor explained. "On the one hand, our scans do seem to confirm the android's story – that he arrived here by passing through a quantum tunnel. But, the physical effects of such travel...without any proper shielding or prior processing of his molecular structure and brain patterns to fit in with our time period..." He shrugged and shook his head. "Well, that's something I can't really help him with. He'll just have to wait out the symptoms I'm afraid, and even then his subatomic particles may never resonate at the same frequency as ours. Unless we find a way to send him back to his own time frame, he'll always be slightly out of tune with our reality."

"Out of tune?" Applewood repeated and furrowed his brow. "Symptoms? Look, Doc, is Data all right or not? Can I see him?"

"Hm? Oh, of course, Commander. Of course," the old man said, taking Applewood's arm as he led him to one of several small, private rooms just off the main infirmary. "Your friend is in here. I'm sure he'll be mighty glad to see you."

Applewood frowned thoughtfully, but brightened up his expression when he saw Data sitting on the medical cot surrounded by holotablets and floating screens, all covered with rapidly scrolling information. A surreal sensation washed over him, and he shivered just a little.

"Hey, Data," he said, walking into the room. "Whoa... You know, seeing you here, on that cot... It's kinda like déjà vu, but in reverse."

"I acknowledge the irony," Data said and laughed. Pulling a pair of listening devices from his ears, he jumped up to greet the slightly taller man with a broad, proud smile. "Hello, Mikey! Or, should I say Commander Applewood?"

"It's Mikey to you, Data," the man said warmly, running his gaze over the android's face, his amber eyes, his dark hair. Data seemed rather pale, the lines around his eyes and mouth a little deeper than he remembered, but he didn't notice anything particularly concerning. "How are you feeling?"

this future world in which I've so unexpectedly found myself."

He gestured to the dozens of holographic screens and windows floating around his bed. Applewood noticed, with some curiosity of his own, that much of the information displayed there seemed to be about ancient and classical Klingon literature, music, artwork, and poetry.

"I have been taking advantage of my time in this room to catch up on some personal research," Data explained. "Unfortunately, I have had to confine my searches to...older documents. It seems your captain has taken the precaution of blocking my access to records dated after my…disappearance."

"You'd do the same if the situation were reversed," Applewood said. "Knowledge of the future can be a dangerous thing."

"Indeed," Data said, aiming a wry smirk at his guest and the futuristic technology all around them. Applewood snorted a little.

"Yeah, well, you know what I mean," he said.

"Of course," Data said. "And, you need not worry about me taking advantage of my android nature to 'hack' the system, as it were. I gave my word that I would behave myself. Still, it is enormously frustrating to find one's curiosity blocked in this fashion. Can I presume the doctor has 'filled you in' on my...situation?"

"Just hints," Applewood said, grabbing a stool and scooting closer to the bed. "It's so strange to see you like this, Data, after all this time. You really do look just like I remember you. Though…maybe not quite as tall…"

Data smiled.

"My height has not altered since the day of my initial activation," he said. "But, you have changed quite a bit. I can barely express how pleased I am to see you so well." He took the man's hand and gave it a warm squeeze, his lips twitching upward as he made quick note of the ring he wore, and several other telling details. Looking in to Mikey's eyes, he asked, "Are you happy, my friend?"

Applewood chuckled and returned the squeeze before letting go and leaning back on the stool. "I suppose I am," he said. "I've had a pretty good career so far…and more." He sighed. "I wish I could tell you everything that's happened, Data. There's so much I'd love to show you…so many people I want you to meet! People I know are dying to meet you…"

"But, you have your orders," Data acknowledged. "For now, I am to be kept 'in the dark' regarding future events until a way can be found to return me to my own time. Meanwhile…"

"Meanwhile, here we are," Applewood said. "We're the same rank now, you and me. Though, I think I might actually be older than you were when we met. Quite a bit older. What were you then, thirty-four? Thirty-five?"

"How old are you?" Data asked.

"Uh uh. No clues," Applewood said, and the android snorted.

"I do not see the harm in letting me at least know what year I've come to," he grumbled. "We once had a visit from a time traveler back on the Enterprise-D, and he— Ooh, agghaa…" Data gasped and doubled over on the cot. "Oh, not again…"

"Data? What is it? Oh god, Data, are you OK?" Applewood exclaimed. "Doctor!"
"No…no, it is passing," Data gasped, his ragged breathing starting to slow. "And I am certain your Doc Nathan has set the ship's computer to track every subatomic fluctuation rippling through my molecules."

The android looked up, and Applewood was stunned to see several stands of gray shining in his dark hair. Gray he knew hadn't been there just moments before. The android's face looked different too… slightly older, rounder…

"Quantum fluctuations…" Applewood realized. "Oh, no… Data…"

"It is as the doctor said," Data told him. "I am out of synch with your reality. Apparently, I will continue to age in waves, like this, until my quantum resonance pattern aligns with that of this time… at which point, I will appear to be the same physical age I would have been had I not hopped forward through that quantum tunnel, and instead lived through the past thirty-odd years."

"That'll put you somewhere in your late sixties," Applewood said, doing some quick math in his head.

"It is my own fault," Data said with some humor. "When I upgraded to this new skin, I neglected to deactivate my aging program. Still, it will be a curious experience. To know what it is to age… To see myself as an older man…" He smiled. "Is that not a fundamental facet of the human condition?"

"Can you deactivate the program now?" Applewood asked. "Stop this effect before it goes any further?"

"No. It would be like trying to halt the ripples in a pond," Data said, rather poetically. "To prevent these symptoms, I would have had to deactivate my aging program before I entered the Stairway. And, even then, there would have been some physical effects. My systems are not completely immune to the passage of time, after all."

"What if we were to find a way to send you back in time?" Applewood asked. "Would the effects reverse themselves?"

"I would hope so," Data said. "But, it would depend on the manner of my return. It was my exposure to the unshielded forces within the quantum tunnel that affected me in this way. It is likely that, to reverse the effects, I would have to return the same way I came."

Commander Applewood narrowed his eyes.

"We're a pretty long way from Nineveh IV," he said. "And, I don't just mean physically. A lot has happened that you don't know about."

"I am intensely aware of that," Data said. "It is a primary reason for my frustration! That, and my confinement in this small space. As my name indicates, my function is to gather and interpret information. It is difficult enough finding myself so far displaced from my own time…from all that I…" He shook his head and closed his eyes, as if swallowing back a sudden pain. Straightening up, he said, "I do not like being 'left out of the loop' like this. Denied access to the answers I seek. In addition…"

He pursed his lips and flicked his amber eyes toward the door, as if concerned about being overheard. Leaning forward he said, "Mikey."

"Yes, Data?"

"I have been withholding some information of my own," the android confessed.
Applewood frowned. "Data—"

"Only because I worried that what I have to say might make me appear less credible to your
captain," Data hurried to explain. "Admittedly, we have had only brief contact. But, from what I
have observed, she seems a rather…stern…individual. Not exactly given to leaps of imagination."

Applewood rubbed his chin, smirking behind his hand.

"Maybe she can be a little…let's say 'inflexible' at times," he admitted. "But, she's a brilliant
strategist, Data. One of the sharpest tacticians I've ever come across. That's meant a lot to us."

Data filed that comment away with a thoughtful nod.

"And you, Mikey?" he asked. "Would you trust that the story I have to tell is true? No matter how
outlandish it may sound to you?"

"More outlandish than your sudden appearance on this ship? More outlandish than what's happening
to you?" Applewood smiled dryly and shook his head. "Data, you appeared on the bridge this
morning looking like a man in your early thirties. Before my eyes, I've seen you age about ten years.
And, if Doc Nathan's tests are right, by tonight you'll probably look about seventy. Whatever you
have to tell me, how could it possibly be stranger or more impossible to believe than that?"

"You make a very good point," Data said, amusement crinkling the corners of his eyes. "Very well, I
shall tell you."

He moved closer and leaned forward, lowering his voice to a near whisper.

"I believe my arrival here was not an accident," he said, his amber eyes wide and earnest. "I
encountered a being while inside that quantum tunnel. A transdimensional entity, possibly a
descendent of the Preserver species. It directed me to the portal that led me here. To this time. This
ship. To you, Mikey."

"Directed you…how?" Applewood asked, squinting his eyes.

"There were no words. Not as we understand them," Data said. "Only impressions. Impressions I
found I could translate. When I told the entity I wished to return to my own place in time, it
surrounded me like…like a pulsing membrane. I felt myself moving, climbing the Stairway under its
direction. I regained control only after I found myself here. On your bridge."

Applewood lifted his eyebrows and drew in a long breath.

"The entity you describe…it didn't come here with you, did it? That is, you're not still—"

"No, no, the entity is gone," Data assured him. "Every scan and diagnostic has confirmed my
systems are functioning within normal parameters, even given the…discomfiting…quantum
fluctuations that have afflicted me since I came to your time. But, Mikey," he said. "That being knew
what I was asking. It knew where and when I belonged, yet it chose to send me here."

"Any idea why?" Applewood asked.

Data regarded him, his expression somber.

"It is my function to gather and interpret information," he said. "The entity reminded me of that in the
moment before I felt its influence fade from my mind. There is something here that it wants me to
know. Something I must find out and bring with me once I have discovered a way to return home, to
my time. I understand your captain's reluctance to allow me access to 'future knowledge.' But if I—"

A yellow light began flashing in the corner of the holographic wall panel beside the android's medical cot. Before either of them could do much more than blink, a voice burst from Applewood’s commlink. A voice Data recognized as that of the ship's first officer, Commander Lennie Hugo.

"Commander Applewood, report to the bridge."

"Acknowledged," Applewood said and stood, looking rather torn.

"Go," Data told him. "We can talk later, once whatever crisis has arisen has been resolved."

Applewood nodded and turned to go, only to stop short when Data said, "Please give my best regards to your wife, Keleea Dod. And to your children, Sean and Lidzi."

"How the hell—!" he exclaimed, spinning on the android. "I thought you promised you wouldn't hack—"

"I did not break my word," Data said, looking rather smug as he sat back on the medicot. "It was a matter of simple observation. Well...perhaps not that simple."

"Data..." Applewood advanced on him.

"Your ring," the android explained. "It is inscribed with your wife's name. The names of your children appear to have been added later. Do you wish me to tell you more of what I've learned about you and your colleagues so far?"

Applewood narrowed his eyes.

"OK, Data, you've made your point," he said, and shook his head. "I'll talk to the captain about letting you out of here. But computer access is another story. I—"

"I am willing to take things 'one step at a time'," Data said. "And I do not wish to keep you during a yellow alert situation. But, if you could please inform your captain that I would like meet with her? I believe we have a great deal to discuss."

"I'll do it, Data," Applewood said. "And I'll be back, I promise. As soon as I can. I don't want you going through these quantum fluctuations on your own."

"Your concern is most appreciated, my friend," Data said, his amber eyes warm. "Thank you."

Applewood gave the android's hand a firm squeeze, then turned and strode out of the room, practically jogging as he made his way back to the bridge.

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

References include - TNG: We'll Always Have Paris; A Matter of Time; Inheritance (mentions Data's aging program); Elementary Dear Data; Ship in a Bottle; TOS: All Our Yesterdays. Nathan Birnbaum is George Burns's real name, and a sort of peripheral reference to the humpback whales George and Gracie from the original crew's time
traveling adventure in Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home. Also, when I was trying to imagine what the doctor might look like, for whatever reason (maybe the whales) I kept getting a picture of George Burns in my mind, so I just went with it. LOL! :)

Your comments and reviews are always welcome! Thank you! :D

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