

Another Gambit

Picard noticed the wayward dig team at the archeological site immediately. The team had four members—not so wayward in that. However, they took and ran, instead of staying to examine. Picard knew that objects were not to be removed from the site. So he did what came naturally from the curiosity of man.

He asked questions.

A seedy bar sat near the dig site, a bar for the many travelers that came through the area. At first, Picard watched from a corner table as the team members interacted with others at the bar. Two of the members were solidly working on getting good and hammered. The other made rounds throughout the bar, talking. The other sat at a table and watched. The two drunks were one male and one female. Picard couldn't identify their species aside from being humanoid. Both were tall, dark hair, ears recessed into the head instead of sticking out like a human's. The other member had ridges on his forehead that swept out from just above his nose. Light and white hair also swept out just above the ridges. The rest of the hair on his head fell to his shoulders in a tangled mess. The Starfleet captain watched with growing interest as the third man approached three Nausicaans. Most sane people avoided unattached Nausicaans at all costs. Pirates and thugs, the Nausicaans made trouble for everyone in the quadrant aside from those for whom they worked. The third man seemed to issue a challenge to the largest of the mask-faced humanoids, easily towering over two meters. After issuing the challenge, the third man pointed to the fourth man of the team who sat quietly in the corner.

Noticing the third man pointing at him, the fourth man stood up. As he watched him, Picard felt like amending the term man and replacing it with youth. The boy could be no more than seventeen, eighteen at the most. For his age, he was well developed, lean muscles wrapped his frame, opposite of the hulking Nausicaans, this youth was made to be quick. Out of the four-man team, the youth was the only human and *not* close to two meters tall. His reddish hair was cropped short and the youth's gray eyes glared over at the third man. The youth spoke across the room to the third man in a voice carrying a gravity far beyond his scant years. "I don't think this is a good idea, Baran."

And thus Picard learned the name of the third man. Baran. On his part, Baran shouted back, "Too bad, I've already issued the challenge. There's to be a fight, one on one, you and this Nausicaan. I believe his name is Grimp." Baran turned to Grimp. "Grimp, meet Matthew. Matthew, meet Grimp."

A name for the youth. Matthew nodded at Grimp. Picard noticed the boy's fists clench.

"And with that, I will take your bets!" Baran announced to the bar patrons. Quickly, the patrons crowded Baran at the bar. Credits were exchanged in ever-growing amounts. "Who do you think?" someone asked Picard as he passed by him on the way

to the bar. “My money’s on the Nausicaan. There’s no way a human male can take on a Nausicaan bare handed, not at any size. And that boy’s got no size at all, he’s got muscle, sure, but he’s lean and wiry. The Nausicaan will crush him and not break a sweat.”

“Nausicaans don’t sweat,” Picard replied.

The man snorted and continued on his way.

The money exchange slowed to a trickle. “Betting is closed,” Baran shouted over the din. “Proceed outside to watch our main event.”

Curiosity would not let go of Picard and he moved with the crowd into the night that had fallen on Dessica II. Three floodlights attached to the walls of the bar’s building provided light enough for the audience to watch the two contenders. A circle formed around them, a throng of shouting people, shouting for the blood of a good fight. The fighters moved to the middle. The Nausicaan literally towered over the human youth. The boy, Matthew, stood toe to toe with the larger being, face set in determination and a fury in his eyes to match. Picard realized that the fury was meant for Baran, the man who’d gotten him in this mess, and not the Nausicaan he faced. But the youth would need that fury if he wanted to survive the fight. Matthew kept the glare on Grimp as he backed slowly away, allowing some distance. Due to the Nausicaan’s larger bulk and much longer reach, the boy would have to close distance suddenly and work inside Grimp’s reach, while at the same time, avoid getting crushed by the Nausicaan’s weight.

“Begin!” Baran yelled.

Matthew replied with a shout to Grimp, taunting him. Picard started when he realized that the boy had taunted Grimp in Nausicaan, not an easy language to master. Grimp reacted predictably and immediately charged the boy. Matthew easily dodged the charge, practically dancing around the Nausicaan. Then Matthew misjudged his distance and the Nausicaan’s arm caught his chin, sending him to the ground. Grimp moved in quickly and Matthew rolled out of the way, sweeping with his leg as he did. The boy’s foot caught Grimp’s ankle and sent him down. As the Nausicaan got up, Matthew struggled to his feet. The Nausicaan’s sharp fist armor had cut open Matthew’s cheek and blood dripped down the side of his face.

The the shock and pleasure of the crowd, Matthew grinned and taunted the Nausicaan again. The crowd shouted encouragement. Again, Grimp charged the boy. This time, instead of dancing out of the way, the boy grasped the Nausicaan’s wrist and forearm and sent him crashing into a crowd that scrambled over each other to get out of the way. The circle formed up again, moving with the fighters. As Grimp got to his feet, the boy lashed out with his foot and caught the Nausicaan in the head, snapping his head sideways. Grimp replied by charging again. Matthew danced again, but Grimp had started to catch on and clotheslined the boy as he went diving past. The youth went down quickly, the blow to the throat would flatten anyone, even another Nausicaan. Grimp moved in to take advantage of the boy’s momentary inability to breathe. As

Grimp's feet closed in to crush him, the boy kept rolling out of the way. The Nausicaan moved in again, the boy rolled toward Grimp and met him with a kick upwards. Caught off guard, Grimp fell backwards as the boy jumped to his feet and delivered another kick to Grimp's head, this time pushing the Nausicaan's head upwards. Grimp landed headfirst. The boy moved in again and Grimp managed to pull a knife out of his boot.

Picard held his breath. He'd seen this move before and not soon enough, before a Nausicaan had stabbed him through the back and taken Picard's heart with him. Only the implant of an artificial heart had saved his life. On this backwater planet, there would be no such facility available. The boy would die if he didn't see the knife. Picard found himself shouting a warning, a warning lost in the din of the excited crowd.

However, Matthew saw the knife himself, caught Grimp's wrists in a fisted blow, knocking the knife loose. As the knife fell, Matthew dove and snatched it. With blinding speed, Matthew got to his feet. And he taunted the Nausicaan again, pitching the knife from hand to hand. Rage consumed Grimp and he charged the boy without any strategy. Matthew stepped aside, kicked upward and the resulting connection with the Nausicaan's head sent Grimp to the ground. Matthew followed and held the knife to Grimp's neck. "This fight is over," Matthew said in Standard.

No argument came from Grimp or his compatriots. Instead, the other Nausicaans shouted dismay, threw credits at Baran, and transported off, leaving the youth in the circle of the crowd, Grimp's knife still in hand. Matthew stood, threw the knife to the ground, and walked back into the bar.

Baran collected his credits. Obviously, he'd used this ploy before. The boy was a trained, skilled fighter and his size and youth deceived others. Baran would issue a challenge, bet on the boy, and the takers would lose their money and respect when the boy won the fight. Matthew, however, seemed a very reluctant participant. Picard wondered what sort of hold Baran held over the boy. As the patrons crowded back into the bar, Picard took the opportunity to ask several people about the four-man team. Once he got some vague answers, Picard went back to his corner table to mull them over. A quarter of an hour later, Picard looked up from his drink to find the team surrounding his table.

"You ask too many questions," Baran said. The first and second recessed eared people trained disruptors at him. The boy stood in the background, holding a dirty bar towel to his cut face. "And it's time for me to ask mine. What's your name, human?"

Picard realized that he couldn't very well give the man his real name and position. He'd be shot in an instant, most likely before he even finished his answer. So he answered with the last name of his archeological professor. "Galen," he said.

"Galen, what do you want with us?" Baran asked.

"You're looting archeological sites," said Picard.

The reply was a shot point-blank from a disruptor pistol.

Picard awoke in an unfamiliar ship. Obviously, he hadn't died. He sat up and took stock of his surroundings. He was in the ship's excuse for a sickbay, sitting on the only bed they had. "Don't stand up," someone said.

Picard looked behind him for the source. The boy stood at a counter, rifling through some supplies. His facial wound had been healed, but blood still stained his neck and clothing, along with the dirt ground in from the fight. "Why?" Picard asked.

Matthew turned around. "Because you hit your head before you transported and if you stand up, you'll probably fall over and I doubt I can lift you back up onto that bed."

Picard frowned. "Transported?"

The boy walked over, supplies in hand. "Yes. Our pistols are equipped with a transporter link. Makes stealing artifacts easier. Point and transport rather than fix coordinates and order a transport."

"Nice idea," Picard said.

"It was mine," replied the boy. "I got tired of treating all the injuries."

"Your the ship's doctor?" Picard asked. "You can't be more than eighteen."

"Sixteen," the boy corrected him. "And I'm not a doctor by any means. I'm just the only one who knows some of the equipment and can also treat stuff the old way. You know, stitches, splints, and a whole lot of incidental pain. I don't exactly have a good supply of advanced technology. Lucky for you, we managed to get this plaser and it won't hurt you at all fixing this gash in your head."

"You're actually concerned about me?"

"Of course not. Concern flows out of me unchecked. Imagine my surprise. Hold still."

An acerbic remark if he ever heard one. He wondered if Baran often heard remarks like that from Matthew and could see that Baran took his revenge by pitting the boy against foes that would obviously cause him some pain. Picard kept frowning as the boy held his head, shut the wound, and then stood back. Now Picard had a chance to feel something in his neck. His hand went to it and he shot a questioning look at the boy.

"Transponder. Baran equips the entire crew and any passengers with them. He has the control box. Delivers a nasty amount of pain to your entire nervous system if

Baran decides you've annoyed him. It could also kill you. Try not to piss him off too badly."

"You don't have one," Picard observed.

"I have a condition that allows Baran to cause me greater amounts of pain than that transponder ever could." His tone left no doubts that he didn't want to elaborate.

"What's your name?" Picard asked.

"Matthew," the boy replied. "And yours is Galen. Baran is coming in soon, he wanted me to tell him when you came around. You'd better do some fast talking if you want to stay alive."

"As an archeologist, I could benefit this ship."

"Mmm. I hope Baran thinks so, or I'll have a body to clean up." With that, Matthew left as Baran walked in the door.

Baran got straight to the point. "I'm the captain of this ship. You'd better tell me fast what use you'd be to me, or I'll kill you right here."

Picard needed information first. "As an archeological smuggler, I could analyze any of the objects you pick up. You leave half the artifacts on the site, you have to be looking for something in particular."

Baran tapped his foot on the ground. "And you think you can analyze these artifacts better than I could."

"Without a doubt."

"Prove it."

Picard found himself escorted none too gently to the cargo area, shoved into a chair at a console with a bin of artifacts beside it. "You have an hour. If you can't improve the identification process by at least a factor of five, I will kill you." Baran left.

The console contained the needed information to set the parameters. It also told him somewhat of what he was looking for. With that information, Picard set to work on the methodology. The subscan routines were taking much too long to provide information. With the long process of the subroutines, all the information wasn't being correlated before the analysis was produced. He set to work rewriting the routines and hoped he wasn't too rusty on his programming techniques. Half an hour later, Picard didn't notice the cargo door open.

Matthew walked in and began rifling through containers.

Picard looked up. "What are you doing in here?"

“I’ve been sent to babysit you. Baran thinks you might try to escape or something stupid like that. It’s not like I have better things to do. Gives me an excuse to look through all the things locked away in here and see if I can find anything interesting.”

“And what would be interesting?”

“Certainly not what you’re looking at. Pieces of clay pots and shards of clay plates. You clean them and study them and analyze them, then cobble them together to make...a clay pot. Which you knew in the *first* place. I’d rather read a book.”

The last thing Picard expected to find in a mercenary ship was a boy, much less a boy who read.

“Don’t give me that look, Galen. Just because I’m some kid on a twenty fourth century equivalent of a pirate ship doesn’t mean I’m stupid. And unless someone gets hurt or Baran makes some sort of bet or Baran needs some sort of strategic plan, I don’t have much else to do. Books at least show me what else is out there.” With that, the boy turned back to the bins and ignored Picard.

He turned back to his own work. Fifteen minutes later, he was done and had another quarter of an hour to wait for Baran to decide. He’d improved the identification process by a factor of ten. Baran needed him. The boy continued to ignore Picard. Picard watched him, reminded of something. He’d thought of it earlier, in the bar as he watched the youth and found out his name. Then watching the boy fight the Nausicaan, with the confidence only a young man could have and the wicked streak that made him taunt the Nausicaan. But it was the boy’s sense of humor and his physical features that caused Picard’s idea to continue.

Twelve years ago, Beverly Crusher had lost a son. Yet it wasn’t just Beverly who lost her son, it was also Jean-Luc Picard.

A year after Jack died, Picard had lost the *Stargazer* in the Battle of Maxia. On Earth during his court-martial, Beverly Crusher had been his friend and confidant. She’d helped him get through his self doubt and continue with his career. At some point, he’d admitted to her that he’d loved her since the moment he left her. Instead of sending him away, she said that during those months, she’d fallen in love with him. As Picard waited for the results of the court-martial and then for his next command, they had continued their relationship as best friends and as lovers. His assignment came through, another deep-space mission on the USS *Intrepid*. With promises to each other to keep their relationship, he’d left. They kept in touch intermittently, messages becoming fewer and fewer as the months passed. Picard received a message that caught his attention more so than any other since he’d left: Beverly was pregnant. He immediately took leave to go back to Earth. He’d wanted to marry her, take care of her and Wesley and the child yet to be born. She had refused. She wouldn’t be another planetside Starfleet spouse waiting while their partner explored space, never knowing if they would come home. Beverly was a match for Picard’s stubborn nature and wouldn’t give in to his arguments.

He would be an integral part of the child's life as his father, but she refused to be his wife.

Picard had departed again for his ship. Beverly sent him updates as her pregnancy progressed, and finally sent him notification that his son had been born. They'd chosen the name Matthieu, after Jean-Luc's great uncle, an astronomer. Again, Picard secured leave as quickly as he could and went back to visit. He'd been enraptured by his son, something he'd never intended to have because he concentrated on his career. Too soon, he had to leave again for his ship. The years passed and the visits continued. He and Beverly continued their relationship to some degree, but because of their separation, it wasn't as intense as it had originally been. The distance made them drift apart and if not for Matthieu, would have separated them entirely by the gulf of space caused by Picard's career and Beverly's own continuing career as a physician. Soon after Matthieu's birth, Beverly had been offered a position as assistant chief medical officer at the hospital in the Nehru Colony. She accepted the position on the colony near Cardassian territory.

They arranged a weekend's vacation on Pacifica to catch up and have Jean-Luc spend more time with Matthieu, who had recently turned three. While on one of Pacifica's beaches, Matthieu wandered off and out of sight of his parents.

They'd never found him. His body had also not been found and Matthieu was never declared dead. However, searches across the area had been entirely unsuccessful and the planet's security thought that Matthieu had been abducted. The planetary government had not come forward before about the recent rash of abductions on their planet, as it would ruin their tourist industry. But with the disappearance of a prominent Starfleet captain and doctor's son, they finally confessed the the problem. They suspected, along with Starfleet, that the abductions were for a growing problem with galactic slave trade and children were a high commodity.

The relentless and fruitless searching drove Beverly and Picard away from each other. After two years with no sign of their son, contact had dwindled to nothing. Seeing Beverly request the position on the *Enterprise* had shocked Picard and he'd fought it. He didn't want her to be reminded daily of what she had lost because of Picard: a husband, a son. Yet she was determined to keep the position, it was her career. He'd accepted her decision and they had slowly resumed their friendship and had become best friends once again. But the loss of their son stood between them, and a relationship beyond friendship remained out of the question. By an unspoken agreement, they told no one of their son, their prior relationship, or anything that might pertain to it. No one knew, except perhaps Counselor Troi, if she had read their records carefully. It explained his uneasiness around children, why he no longer liked them or felt comfortable around them.

Wesley had also kept the secret of his long missing younger brother. In fact, Wesley seemed to have rid him entirely from his memory, as if to cope by denying the fact that his brother ever existed. He had illustrated this when he'd asked Picard on the

shuttlecraft to Starbase 515 if he ever wished for kids of his own. The pain of the question had been staggering, something Picard never thought still existed.

And on this ship he'd found a boy the same age Matthieu would be now. From a glance at a note the boy had written on the supply checklist, Picard knew that he spelled it the Anglicized way instead of the French version. The boy had the same features of the four year old Matthieu, his father's gray eyes, hair a reddish blond, combining the two hair colors found on each side. Beverly had often said that aside from the red in her son's hair, he entirely took after his father, the parentage unmistakable. Picard didn't want to think he was fooling himself, but felt that he could see the face of his youth in Matthew. He began to hold a secret hope that he had found his lost son. Many questions needed to be answered and on this ship, there was no way to confront them directly.

Instead, Picard focused on ship's business. "Where is this ship headed?"

"Barradas III," the boy replied, not looking at Picard.

"What for?"

Matthew turned around with a sigh. "More archeological site raiding, what do you think? There isn't anything on that planet except for the Debrune ruins."

"Does it bother you at all the mess you make looting sites?"

Matthew sat on one of the bins and raised an eyebrow. "I don't think a smuggler like you has much room to talk."

"I've dealt with it in my own way. I wondered about yours since you seem to have a conscience, unlike most of us. You must have a lot of arrest warrants already and you're young yet."

"I'll tell you what I've figured out, Galen. There are two laws: a civilization's laws and Murphy's law. Criminals and there sort are punished by a civilization's laws. The good law-abiding folks are punished by Murphy's law. In the end, you do what you can and try and avoid punishment from any law. Murphy is often more heavy handed than society. At least, Federation society. I'd rather not be caught by the Klingons, I haven't heard nice things about Rura Penthe. New Zealand doesn't sound half bad, though." He dropped down from the bin. "Baran's coming," he said, and left the room.

Baran accepted Picard's work and allowed him to stay on board. The mercenary ship captain rubbed Picard entirely the wrong way. The man kept control of his crew by fear and force. Once a member of the crew, no one could leave unless Baran agreed to it. As the days passed on the journey to Barradas Three, Picard observed and interacted with the crew in the role of Galen. The key players were Baran, the Romulan Tallera, Narik, who seemed to be the ship's engineer, and Vekor, who acted as a security officer type. Tallera assumed the role as Baran's first officer. Matthew filled the

role as a jack of all trades, including strategist, doctor, engineering assistant, and archeologist. He also held Baran in complete contempt and would incite him at every moment. This tendency of Matthew's made Picard a natural ally. Other members of the crew threatened Picard more than once, and he took to keeping himself armed and ready, even in his own small cabin. Much of his time he spent in the cargo hold, running artifacts through the identification process. He continued attempts to gain information about the artifacts and about the boy, but no one was particularly forthcoming.

Tallera had provided the most information on one of her supervisory visits to the cargo hold. "Baran controls everyone on this ship with the transponders. Yet Matthew doesn't have one and to me looks to be the one person on this ship who threatens Baran's leadership," he'd asked her.

Tallera had graced him with one of her looks of simple superiority. "Matthew is easily controlled by his condition. He has an illness and Baran holds the boy's medication. Each dose only lasts for twenty four hours. So if Matthew truly angers Baran, Baran holds the medicine from him. Within twenty four hours, Matthew is rendered entirely useless until Baran decides to give him his medicine. The illness is entirely non-life threatening. Instead, it causes a pain which can't even approach the pain the transponders cause. The poor boy's hearing becomes hypersensitive and he has to hide in his cabin, because even a whisper from a crew member will cause agonizing pain. So you see why Matthew is compelled to cooperate."

Picard saw. He also knew that pain, knew that disease. Shalaff's syndrome, a rare congenital condition found in Picard males that manifested itself in early childhood. A disease that caused hypersensitivity to sound. The facts continued to add up. A day away from Barradas III, Picard was finally able to get Matthew to talk. The boy had found a baseball and a baseball glove in one of the cargo bins and had contented himself with throwing the ball against the bulkhead and catching it on the return bounce. Five minutes of this activity had irritated Picard beyond all reason.

"Will you *stop* that!" he said. "I preferred it when you were reading."

"I got bored. The intermix is fixed, no one is hurt, there's no need to figure out any battle plans, and I finished the last book on board. So if you can figure out something for me to do other than this, I'll do that."

"How did you end up on this ship?"

The boy shrugged. "I've been on it for four years. Before that, I was on a Cardassian world as servant. Slave, more like it. I didn't get paid, but I was fed and clothed. Then the man I worked for lost custody of me in a bet to Baran's predecessor and I've been here ever since."

"Where were you before Cardassia?"

"I don't remember."

“You don’t remember anything? Because it isn’t exactly normal for a human child to end up on Cardassia.”

The boy’s gray eyes focused on him in a harsh glare. “I don’t want to talk about it. Think of something else or I’ll start throwing the ball again.” He took the ball out of the glove and moved to illustrate.

“Fine. Why don’t you tell me about the book you just finished.”

Matthew nodded and sat on one of the bins. “Actually, just one thing really stuck with me, something said by one of the Native Americans profiled in the book. ‘If you do not talk to them you will not know them, and what you do not know you will fear. What one fears one destroys’. The ‘them’ he referred to were actually animals, but I think it holds true for most anything. Look at any civilization and its expansion and you’ll see what happens when one side doesn’t understand or even try to understand the other. Even the Klingons and the Federation, there’s still so much they don’t understand about each other, and there aren’t many attempts on either side to truly understand. So people fear Klingons. Yet, it’s the Romulans so many people fear because practically nothing is known about them. So, we fight them instead.”

“You know Tallera.”

“She’s one person. Knowing one person doesn’t change an outlook on an entire civilization. Besides, I know Tallera but I don’t understand her in the least.”

“Do you fear her?”

“She holds a lot of power on this ship.”

“That doesn’t answer the question.”

“No, I’m not afraid of her. Nothing here can compare to Cardassia.” Matthew’s eyes grew vacant for a moment, as if he were remembering the years there.

“Have you ever tried to escape?”

Matthew paused before he answered, as if wondering what Picard was getting at. “No. I’ve thought about it, sure. But escape would mean trying to find food and work and being stuck on a planet. Here, I can at least see new worlds and be in space and know where my next meal will be from. Besides, Baran keeps my medicine away from me like his predecessor did. I couldn’t even tell you what it is, much less what my condition is. All I know is that it controls me and what I do, and until I have a solution for it, I’m stuck here anyway.”

“Your condition?”

Matthew scowled at him. “Don’t play dumb. Tallera told me that she told you.”

Picard nodded, caught. "She did."

"Why the hell do you keep asking questions about me, anyway? And don't tell me it's concern, I haven't seen you make a concerned face."

Picard told a half truth. "I'm only trying to figure out why a kid is on a mercenary ship. There has to be some reason, some way you ended up on Cardassia and here on this ship. Obviously, you have human parents somewhere."

Matthew's eyes went vacant again. "When I was little, on Cardassia, I used to have this dream. About who I thought must have been my parents. I could remember more then, but as I grew up, it faded, and all I see now are silhouettes."

Picard could see the boy was growing more and more upset, his face becoming stony, his eyes starting to glisten. But he had to press. "Do you remember anything?"

Matthew dropped down from his perch and walked towards the door. In the doorway, Matthew said in a voice so quiet Picard had to strain to hear it, "My mother had red hair." Then he left.

Alone in the cargo hold, Picard struggled to keep a lock on his own emotions. He was certain, as certain as he'd been when he first held his infant son. It was him. This young mercenary in a backwater sector was his son. After thirteen years, after giving up hope, he'd found him entirely by accident. And because of the situation, he couldn't say a word, couldn't do a thing, still couldn't protect him, like he hadn't been able to thirteen years ago.

The following day, Matthew avoided Galen. Arrival at Barradas III provided a much needed diversion from the drudgery of slow galactic travel. A team of three was beamed down to the planet to search through the Debrune ruins. The principal players remained on the bridge, overseeing the entire operation. Matthew was on the bridge as well, in case any other ships showed up. One ship did arrive. The *Enterprise*.

Matthew announced it from his seat at tactical. "Sensors have detected a ship dropping out of warp," he said. "It's a Federation ship. Looks like a Galaxy class."

"Can we fight it?"

Matthew swiveled his chair around to face the captain. "Not if we want to live."

Baran frowned and fingered the transponder control device, a completely unconscious gesture he had in reaction to hearing information he didn't want to hear. "We have to get these artifacts."

Matthew thought for a moment. "We can use the planet's gravity well to shield us from detection by the ship. Once we get the artifacts, we can proceed directly to warp. Once the ship realizes we're here, we'll be gone, and we're practically untraceable on long-range sensors."

“Do it,” Baran said to the helmsman.

It didn't take long for the team on the planet to notify the ship of engaging Starfleet. Baran ordered Picard to the cargo hold to check on the new artifacts. Picard went to the hold, placed the artifacts into numbered bins, all the while wondering about the team on the planet. He felt the ship shudder as it went into warp. They'd escaped. His task completed, Picard went back up to the bridge. As he approached, he heard the conversation inside. Vekor, Narik, and Matthew arguing with Baran over a prisoner and what to do with him. A Starfleet prisoner. All three maintained that keeping him on the ship was deadly and inadvisable. From their point of view, Picard had to agree. Starfleet would chase them to find its officer, never giving up until they were captured. He heard the officer's name. Riker! It was Riker. A plan formed in his head and he stopped at an engineering console before he strode onto the bridge. “They're right Baran,” he said. “And you know it. Kill him, now.” Picard glanced just once at his first officer and the man's barely hidden look of shock.” Baran swung his head around to look at Picard. He continued. “If he has nothing to give us, then we should kill him now and be done with it. Everyone seems to recognize that fact except you.” Picard made his tone harsh and violent.

“I don't need a consensus to run this ship, Galen,” Baran replied, his own tone ice.

Picard felt the ship shudder as the bridge lights flickered. Narik bypassed the coupling and Picard's argument with Baran continued. He made Riker out to be a sorry excuse for a Starfleet officer, one facing a court martial. As the matter escalated, the ship shuddered yet again and a high pitched noise emanate from below. He'd locked the flow regulator, knowing that Riker was the only one here who could fix it besides him. Riker followed along, fixing the problem while the crew watched frantically.

With a smug look at Picard, Baran ordered Tallera to put Riker in quarters. As Riker walked past Picard, he said, “Still wish you'd killed me?”

All going according to plan.

Picard wasn't able to speak to Riker until hours later. He found him waiting in the tiny room left open. Checking the corridor left and right, Picard entered the room. He caught Will's eye. “We don't have much time,” he said. He had to get the entire plan out and to Will before anyone realized he'd paid Riker a visit.

Riker regarded him with shock, shock much more apparent than he'd shown on the bridge.

Picard spoke. “I hardly expected to see you here, Will.”

“I was trying to find the people that *killed* you,” Riker said, voice strained. “People at the bar saw you vaporized.”

That explained Riker’s look. Everyone thought he was dead. He couldn’t imagine what Will must have gone through, what Beverly must still be going through...he stopped that line of thought and explained to Riker how the ship’s transporters worked through their weapons. Then he explained how he’d ended up as a part of the ship’s crew, the oddness of the artifacts that Baran was after, and how Will needed to gain Baran’s confidence.

“There’s more, Will,” Picard said. “But I don’t have enough time to explain.”

Riker nodded.

The door opened as Baran walked in. Picard punched Riker in the jaw.

“What are you doing here?” Baran shouted.

“Getting some answers,” Picard immediately replied. “Just because you couldn’t get him to talk—” He stopped when pain lanced through his entire body, sending him to his knees.

“No one conducts an interrogation on my ship without my permission,” Baran said. “Is that understood?”

Picard answered by getting to his feet, glaring at Baran, and leaving.

Arrival at the next planet failed to bring relief. Picard managed to convince Baran to use Riker in order to get to the planet’s surface without destroying the tiny Federation scientific outpost. Riker’s plan failed, but Matthew interfered with Baran’s orders to destroy the outpost. Instead of firing when ordered, Matthew recalibrated the disruptors to fire a phase-resonant pulse, explaining as he went along. “If I can hit their shield generator at precisely the right frequency, I can knock their shields offline with one hit. Firing.” A pause as Matthew read the readouts on the console. “Their shields are down.” The boy turned to face Baran, who gave him a look that burned through the boy and into the computer bank behind him. Picard was certain that if the boy had a transponder, he would be on the floor, writhing in pain.

The *Enterprise* showed up and only through subterfuge were Riker and Picard able to get the ship through without being blown to pieces by the their former ship. Once out of sensor range, repairs commenced and Picard found himself back in the cargo hold. The visit from Tallera had been most interesting and Picard mulled over it back in his cramped quarters. The door opened and he whipped around, phaser in hand.

“Nice to see you too,” Riker said.

Picard gave Riker a wry grin. "I've had a few unpleasant experiences." He realized Riker was being less than smart in visiting him. "What are you doing here?"

Riker explained Baran's plan.

"You were always after my job," Picard said.

Riker smiled. "What else did you have to tell me? This is the first time we've had to talk since then."

Picard sighed, giving his first officer a serious look. "Will, sixteen years ago, I had a son."

Will sat back, surprised. "Sir, I didn't know."

"Not many people do, don't worry. After the Battle of Maxia, I was court martialled, as usually happens when you lose a starship. During my time on Earth, I stayed with Dr. Crusher, who was my support as my best friend throughout the entire ordeal. Suffice to say we ended up beyond friendship and became involved. Once the court-martial was over, I was assigned to the *Intrepid* and left Earth. We stayed in touch and one of her messages was that she was going to have a child. I wanted to marry her, she refused because she wasn't going to be a Starfleet wife again, never knowing if she'd see her husband alive after he left on his ship. Months later, our son Matthieu was born. We got together when we could. Our romantic relationship had ended when she refused to marry me. Yet we remained friends and raised our son together as much as we could despite our careers. When Matthieu was three, he went missing on Pacifica. We never found him." Picard felt the pain of loss creeping into his words. He stopped talking.

"Where are you going with this? I mean..." Riker stopped. "The kid. Matthew. You think he's him?"

Before Picard could answer, Riker did himself. "I think you're right," he said. "I can see it. When I first met him, I thought he was familiar somehow. Now I see it. He looks like you." Riker grinned. "Except for the hair."

Picard gave him a rueful smile. "Thank god he got his mother's hair."

"We have to get him off this ship," Will said.

Picard nodded. "That's exactly what I was getting at. If we have any moment to get Matthew aboard the *Enterprise* and keep him there, that's what we'll do. I'm not going to lose him again."

Riker nodded. "I think we're going to have to start a mutiny on this ship." He got up.

"Yes. I'll get to it," Picard said.

Riker left.

As Picard continued his work after a nap, he made sure to stop and talk to members of the crew about the need for a new captain. Once he'd made rounds, he went back to his work in the cargo hold. The door opened behind him and he turned to see Tallera. "Who are you?" she asked.

Picard blinked. "What?"

Her tone became accusatory. "You're no smuggler, and I don't think your name's Galen."

She pulled a phaser out and pointed it at him. "You will tell me who you are and what you're doing on this ship or I will kill you right now."

Picard couldn't comprehend how she'd figured him out. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I will not play games with you. I found the message you sent to the *Enterprise*. When Riker sent the command codes to drop their shields, you sent a transmission to them on the same frequency." Her eyes narrowed. "You're a Starfleet officer."

Picard shook his head, opened his mouth to protest.

She interrupted him. "Do not argue with me. It is the only logical conclusion."

She holstered her phaser. "My name is T'Paal, I'm a member of the V'Shar."

Picard couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Vulcan Security?"

"That's correct. I infiltrated this ship a year ago posing as a Romulan mercenary. I am here to investigate a possible threat to Vulcan."

"What sort of threat?"

"First things first, Galen. Who are you?"

He realized he had no choice. If he didn't tell her, she would kill him because letting him live would jeopardize her mission. "I'm Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the USS *Enterprise*."

T'Paal nodded and explained her mission, about the Stone of Gol and how she wouldn't allow it to be assembled, even if it meant destroying the ship and everyone on it. Picard nodded his assent. T'Paal left the cargo hold so Picard could think over his options.

Minutes later, Matthew walked through the cargo hold door. He stopped when he saw Picard. "What the hell are you doing here?" he asked. "There isn't anything else for you to analyze."

"I could ask you the same thing," Picard said. "There isn't anything for you to read here."

"I'm not here for books, I'm here for supplies. Don't bother looking for me in a few hours. I'll be..." he paused. "Indisposed."

Picard crossed his arms. "Baran didn't allow you access to your medicine."

The boy searched through a bin of medical supplies. "No, he didn't."

"How long do you have?"

"I told you. A few more hours. And I won't let anyone in, so don't try to act all concerned and check in on me or something like that. No one is allowed to see me like that." The boy faced Picard, his face set exactly how Picard's was when he'd made a decision that he wouldn't chance no matter what the opposition. "*No one*," he emphasized and walked out.

So the moment Baran chose Riker to lead an assault team on the *Enterprise*, Picard knew that it was their chance to get Matthew aboard the ship. Riker recognized the same opportunity and assigned Matthew to the team. Will practically dragged Matthew to the equipment area, Matthew protesting the entire time. "Look, Riker, I won't be of any use in about an hour. I'll be a liability and Baran will kill us all if we fail."

"It won't take us that long. If it takes us more than fifteen minutes, we'll all be dead."

"You don't understand! I won't be able to complete this mission."

Riker thrust a phaser rifle into the boy's arms. "You will. You have my word that it won't take more than fifteen minutes."

"How the hell am I supposed to be able to take your word? You're a traitor and a coward, leading an assault on your own ship that you abandoned because you wouldn't face a court martial. You're more pirate than I am, you did all of this of your own choosing."

Riker pushed Matthew up against the nearest bulkhead, grasping him by his shirt collar. "You will do as I say or I will kill you myself," he said, then let the boy go and picked up his own phaser rifle. He spoke to the entire team, "Get to the transporter room."

With the threat of being killed, Matthew didn't offer up any more argument. They transported to the shuttle bay of the bigger ship. Lt. Worf and another security officer were there. Riker shot the other officer and leveled his phaser at Worf. "Don't," he said.

Picard began to search the inside of the shuttle with Matthew as Narik searched the outside.

Riker commanded one of the mercenaries to watch the shuttlebay door. Picard and Matthew exited the shuttle. "It's not in here," Picard reported to Riker. He turned to Worf. "Where's the artifact?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Worf replied.

"Where's the Klingon pilot?" Riker asked. Picard saw Riker give Worf a look to communicate it was safe to tell him.

"He is in the Observation Lounge with Data and Troi," Worf replied.

"How far is that?" Matthew asked Riker.

"It's twelve decks away," Riker replied.

Matthew frowned. "We can't just waltz right up there and take the artifact. The ship's security will stop us."

Riker backhanded the boy, sending him crashing to the ground and skidding to a stop in front of Worf. "That will teach you to keep your mouth shut," Riker snapped. "We'll transport up. Worf will be too busy with the *boy* to stop us." The remaining four members of the group entered the shuttle and transported to the observation lounge. Despite the coming trials, Picard felt relief that his son was staying aboard the *Enterprise*, even if Matthew had no idea why.

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Matthew's hand went to his face, stung and shocked at what had just occurred. He'd been betrayed by the traitor and handed over to the enemy. He had to escape. As the rest of his team boarded the shuttle, Matthew got to his feet and took a step forward. Worf tackled him from behind, pinning him to the ground. Matthew struggled. This Klingon was a lot smaller than the Nausicaan he'd fought weeks ago. He could get out of this, he had to. Matthew brought his legs up and locked the Klingon in them. Then he twisted and rolled to break the Klingon's grasp. But the Klingon wouldn't yield. Instead, Worf grabbed both of Matthew's arms and twisted them painfully behind his back.

Matthew grimaced, he hadn't been pinned like that in a long time. He also knew he couldn't get out of it.

"I advise you to stop struggling," the Klingon said in a deep voice.

Matthew couldn't argue with that and stopped.

The Klingon hauled him to his feet and escorted a sullen Matthew to the brig.

Riker found him there half an hour later. The boy was pacing the length of his cell, steadying a glare at the guard. As soon as he saw Riker, he began shouting at him. "What the hell do you think you're doing? You double-crossed us, didn't you? What kind of person are you? This is absolute bullshit."

Riker scratched his head. He'd known the boy would be angry, but didn't think he'd be quite this angry. He wanted to talk to Matthew and calm him down before he went and talked to Dr. Crusher about the entire situation.

The boy continued. "You practically *gave* me to the Federation. Now I'll be handed over to their authorities. Or maybe I'll be extradited by the Klingons and spend the rest of my life on Rura Penthe. All while you get off without any sort of punishment for what you did."

Riker finally found words. "Look, Matthew, this isn't what it seems. There's an explanation for this that won't land you in trouble."

Matthew crossed his arms. "I don't believe you."

"You have to, because I'm telling you the truth." Riker stopped. Matthew's hands had gone to his ears to cover them. Will had no idea how to react. He never would've thought this kid to use tactics employed by little children. "Stop that. Covering your ears isn't going to stop me from talking."

Riker realized something was wrong. Matthew's face had contorted into a mask of pain and he's started to sink to his knees. "What's wrong?" Riker shouted.

Matthew collapsed to the floor, tears rolling down his face, and curled into a fetal position. Riker turned to the guard. "Get that forcefield down," he ordered.

As the field went down, Riker ran into the cell. He knelt down next to the boy. "What's wrong?" he asked again.

"Stop!" Matthew shouted. Then he cried out in pain and passed out.

Riker hit his communicator. "Riker to transporter room. Two to beam directly to Sickbay."

The medical staff rushed into action as they materialized. Dr. Selar called for Dr. Crusher to report to Sickbay for a medical emergency. Riker and two of the nurses lifted Matthew onto a biobed. As they positioned him, Beverly Crusher came through the doors at a fast pace. "What happened?" she asked, pulling out a medical tricorder.

“This is the mercenary that Worf captured during the raid. He collapsed in the brig. He was holding his ears when he fell, obviously in a lot of pain.”

The doctor grabbed a hypospray and administered it to the boy. “That will sedate him until we can figure out what’s wrong.”

Riker realized she didn’t know. And if Matthew’s eyes were closed, she might not see it as quickly and easily as Captain Picard had. “Doctor, can I talk to you in your office? I can give you more information.”

She nodded. “Of course.”

They entered her office and Riker plunked himself in one of the chairs in front of her desk. She sat on her desk and crossed her arms. “What’s going on? Data gave me the rundown on how you and the captain arranged for your ‘death’ so you would be able to stay here and Jean-Luc could mutiny on the mercenary ship. Data mentioned a prisoner had been taken, but he didn’t say that it was a *child*. Will, what were you thinking? Ordering a child to be held in the brig?”

“Data ordered that,” Will said. “I was still incapacitated. I was going down there to get him out.”

“Tell me about this boy. What was he doing on that ship?”

Riker fidgeted for a second, not knowing how to explain to one of his friends that the boy laying on the bed outside was her lost son. He went slowly. “His name is Matthew. He was a reluctant part of the crew of the mercenary ship. The captain of that ship kept control of everyone through pain, as you found out. I don’t know much about him, except that he’s sixteen and human.”

Riker saw the worry in Beverly’s eyes, a worry he’d seen in Picard’s eyes on the mercenary ship. One entirely separate from the situation with the ship and the mercenaries and whatever artifact was being assembled as a weapon. A worry about hoping for the best and fearing it to be false. He sighed. “Captain Picard thinks that he is your son.”

For a moment, Beverly didn’t move. Then she practically flew to the window of her office and looked out at the biobed, studying the boy and his features. “Will, what color are his eyes?”

“Gray.”

“Did the captain—”

He interrupted her so she wouldn’t have to ask the entire question. “He explained everything to me. I also agree with him. Beverly, I’ve seen him when he’s awake. He’s intelligent, well spoken, stubborn, and has a hell of a temper. When he gets an idea that

he won't change, he gets this look on his face, the same look the captain gets when he'd made a decision and isn't going to change his mind. He has his father's eyes."

"I know," Beverly whispered. She turned to him, all business. "Will, tell me exactly what happened."

"When I walked in, he started shouting at me. He feels that I betrayed him and is quite pissed about it. I was trying to explain, and in the middle of my explanation, he covers his ears. So I think he's being childish, which is entirely out of character for him. He can be very serious and hasn't given any impression that he'd act childish. I kept talking and he fell to the floor, curled up. His face was twisted by the pain he was in, I don't know if I've seen anyone in more pain. I got the guard to let the forcefield down and ran to him. I asked him what was wrong and he shouted at me to stop. Then he passed out."

"I know what's wrong," she said, and ran out the door.

She took a hypo and got a sample of Matthew's blood. She put it in the reader and waited at the display for the results. The DNA strands appeared on the screen. "It's Matthieu," Beverly said.

Riker knew from the tone that she meant her lost son. That Matthew the young mercenary was also Matthieu Picard, the three year old abducted from Pacifica.

The doctor was studying the DNA strand more closely. "It's Shalافت's syndrome," she said.

"What?" asked Riker. "I've never heard of it."

"It's very rare. It's genetic. It usually manifests itself in early childhood and causes an acute hypersensitivity to sound. A mere whisper can cause untold amounts of pain. When he shouted at you, it must have overloaded his brain, causing him to lose consciousness. Sort of an auto shutdown sequence. There's a couple ways to treat this. Once is a daily medicine to control the symptoms and keep the patient's hearing normal. The other is a permanent fix but I doubt a mercenary ship would have had access to the technique."

"Can you fix it?"

Beverly nodded. "It's actually a fairly easy procedure."

"Are you sure that you should do it?"

"Will," she said in a warning tone.

"Okay," he said. "But I am going to get Deanna down here."

The doctor sighed. "Fair enough."

Riker went into the doctor's office as she ordered her team into action. He tapped the communications panel. "Riker to Counselor Troi."

"Troi here."

"Deanna, I need you to come down to Sickbay."

"On my way."

Riker watched through the window as Beverly stood over her son's bed. He could see her fighting the emotions that had to be rolling through her right now. She traced the contours of the boy's face, smoothed out the hair on his head. Deanna walked through the sickbay doors. Dr. Crusher didn't notice her. Riker waved Troi over. "What's going on?" she asked him.

"I take it you've read Dr. Crusher and Captain Picard's files in their entirety."

She gave him a puzzled look. "Yes, why?"

Riker tossed his head in the direction of the occupied bed. "The boy on the bed, the one Worf captured from the mercenary ship...Dr. Crusher did a DNA scan. It's Matthieu Picard."

Deanna's hand flew to her mouth. "Oh my God," she said.

"I know," he replied. "I know."

Dr. Crusher refused to leave her son's bedside. They had completed the operation without any difficulties. He was asleep and she would stay there until he woke up. As he slept, she studied him, studied the features of her son that she hadn't seen since he was three. The lines that had only been hinted to when he was a baby had become fully realized in his adolescence. Before her was a young man, gone was the softness of a small child. She felt like she was looking at sixteen year old Jean-Luc, the same facial structure, same dimpled chin, same body structure, same ears. She knew that when he opened his eyes, it would be more of the same. The differences came out in his nose and hair. His nose was smaller than his father's, his hair the same reddish blond he'd had as a baby. Beverly had been convinced it would turn to a light brown as he got older, as many Picards had blond hair as children that turned brown as they entered adolescence. Jean-Luc's nephew René had that hair, the latest pictures sent by his mother Marie had shown the boy's hair had begun to turn chestnut. But Matthieu's hair hadn't changed color. Instead, he'd kept the color inherited from his Howard side.

"How are you feeling?" Deanna Troi asked from beside her.

"I don't know," Beverly replied. "Everything. I'm thrilled, I'd given up hope that I'd ever see him again and thought that he was truly gone, perhaps even dead. And here he is, and I realize I missed thirteen years of his life. And I hate that."

“You aren’t to blame.”

“Am I? If I had kept a better eye on him, if we had kept a better eye on him, but we didn’t even notice until he was already gone.”

Deanna put her hand on Beverly’s shoulder and squeezed it. “You aren’t to blame. You’ve gone over this so many times, both you and the captain.” She paused. “Will said that Matthew didn’t recognize the captain when he was on the ship.”

“He was only three. He might not even remember us.”

“That’s what I was going to say. I didn’t want you to be taken by surprise if he doesn’t recognize you. That if he doesn’t, it isn’t that he rejects you, it’s because his entire world has been turned upside down again and it will take some time to fix. Perhaps being on the ship with you and his father will bring back memories of having parents.”

“I hope.”

Sickbay’s doors opened and Will walked through. He came over to where the women sat. “I wanted to let you know that the situation with the mercenary ship is under control. The mercenaries on the surface of Vulcan were captured, as were the ones left on the ship. Federation Security on Vulcan has taken them into custody. Captain Picard is cleaning up and he said he will be down here shortly.”

The doors opened again and Captain Picard entered the room.

Without missing a beat, Will said, “And apparently he meant it when he said shortly. I’ll be on the bridge,” he told the captain, and took his leave.

Beverly got to her feet. “Jean-Luc,” she said, and found that she couldn’t say anything else, everything threatened to spill out. Picard recognized this and took her into his arms and held her.

“I know,” he said into her hair.

The rest of the medical staff suddenly found things to do in the other rooms of Sickbay. Deanna kept her seat next to Matthew and held his hand, allowing the doctor and the captain privacy.

“He doesn’t know who I am anymore,” Picard said, confirming what Deanna had told her minutes before. “But in a conversation on the mercenary ship, he told me that he used to dream about his parents and all he could remember now is that his mother had red hair.”

His words unlocked the tears she’d held at bay for hours. They fell onto the captain’s uniform, relics of joy and sorrow. She collected herself and looked up at Jean-

Luc. Tears had fallen on his cheeks as well. "Let's go to my office so my staff won't feel so intrusive."

He followed her. She couldn't let go of his hand. She needed him and his strength, as she knew he needed hers. They sat down in two of her chairs. "He was on Cardassia," he said. "The Pacifica Security was right. He'd been abducted and taken and treated like a slave."

The pain that laced his words were mirrored in Beverly's. "How did he end up on that ship?"

"The captain before the current one, he apparently won a bet with the Cardassian that had Matthieu, and he was given as payment." Picard spit the word payment out as if it were dirty. "He was twelve. He wouldn't say what happened on Cardassia. Baran...Baran used Matthieu's Shalaff's Syndrome to control him. He'd keep the medication from him whenever he made Baran angry. The pain...the pain he must have gone through, it was nothing like the transponder pain. It's so much worse, I remember from when I was a child." He paused. "His medication, he told me on the ship that Baran had withheld the last dose and it would wear off within an hour of the team's departure for the *Enterprise*."

"He's okay, Jean-Luc. Will found him in the brig and it wore off as Will was talking to him. Once he was up here, we were able to fix it permanently. He won't have that pain anymore."

The captain's face grew dark. "But he'll have other pain." He squeezed her hand. "I couldn't protect him. The things they must have done to him."

"We have to..." she stopped, searching for the words. "He's safe now." She couldn't think of the right words and changed the subject instead. "We should change quarters."

"Pardon?" he said.

"He can't live with just one of us, not right now. He needs us both. We all need each other. There's open quarters that have three bedrooms, we should have the crew move everything from both our quarters into there."

The captain nodded. "Yes, yes, of course." He stood up to move to the computer terminal and write orders to be carried out immediately.

Beverly stood with him, keeping his hand in hers. This made him turn. "You'll have to let me go," he said. "Or walk over here with me."

She moved close to him and kissed him softly. Then she pulled away, her hands on his cheeks. "I need you," she said, surprised by her own actions.

He leaned in and kissed her as she had him, then wrapped his arms around her again. "You have me," he whispered in her ear. "You always have."

After a few moments, he let go and went to the desk, transmitted the orders and contacted Will to have them carried out immediately. Then they walked out of the office to go and sit with their son.

Matthieu's eyes opened slowly. When she saw them, Beverly knew exactly what Will hadn't quite been able to communicate using words. She recognized the eyes immediately, the eyes she'd looked at minutes after he'd been born. If she had seen his eyes when he was first brought in, she wouldn't have needed the DNA scan to prove who he was. "This is a dream," Matthieu whispered. "You can't be real."

"It's no dream," she told him.

"It has to be. I was captured by the *Enterprise* and in the brig and then the attack came. I must be dreaming, because whenever I was sick, I dreamed of you. I saw you and somehow I felt comforted. So you can't be real. Gul Ducet said my parents were dead. All I have left are memories that fade with every passing day. You're one of those memories."

"You're awake, Matthieu," she said, taking his hand. "I'm real. I didn't die. Your father didn't die. You were taken away from us when you were three."

The boy closed his eyes. When he opened them again, the fatigue had left them. He sat up. "I don't remember. I don't know who you are," he said to Beverly. His eyes went to the captain, standing behind the doctor. "And I know your real name isn't Galen." Sickbay's doors opened and Riker strode in, holding a PADD for the captain to read over since he hadn't been on the ship for weeks and the bridge for hours since he'd returned.

Matthieu noticed immediately and was off the bed and on his feet instantly. "You!" he said. "Traitor! It's your fault that I was captured." As he spoke, Matthieu vaulted over the biobed between himself and Riker. "You should be going to Rura Penthe, not me." The boy managed to land a well placed uppercut on the first officer, caught completely off guard. Riker dropped the pad and went into a defensive stance.

Medical staff came running in at the commotion. Dr. Selar called for Security. Matthieu kept coming at Riker and Riker did his best to fend off the boy without hurting him. Beverly snatched a sedative hypospray from a supply drawer and waited for a moment where she could catch Matthieu before he hurt himself or the first officer. Picard moved in to protect both Riker and Matthieu. The boy noticed Picard's movements. "And you! Were you an agent on the ship and decided that I was the one to be captured? It was a stupid idea, I wasn't the important one. You should've gone after Tallera, she wasn't a Romulan, she was a Vulcan." Matthieu's feet kept him out of the range of both of the men as they tried to contain him.

“There’s an explanation,” Picard said. “All this isn’t what you think. You aren’t going to be prosecuted.”

“That’s just another lie,” Matthieu said, backing towards the door. “You’re all lying to me, I don’t believe any of you.”

Lt. Worf chose that moment to burst into Sickbay with his Security team. Worf scanned the situation and took an immediate course of action. He executed a perfect tackle and brought Matthieu to the floor. As soon as they hit the deck, the boy had started to reverse the hold and free himself from the Klingon’s grasp. Riker and Picard rushed over and helped Worf hold the boy. Beverly came over, hypospray in hand. “I’m sorry,” she said to Matthieu and administered the spray. Within seconds, the boy went limp. The medical staff hoisted the boy into a biobed and activated restraints for when he would wake up.

The three men straightened their uniforms and caught their breath. “He is a warrior,” Worf said.

Riker rubbed his jaw. “And he has one hell of a right hook.” He turned to the captain. “I think you have your work cut out for you, sir.”

Picard nodded in agreement. “Unfortunately, I’d have to agree, Number One. He doesn’t remember who we are and instead he thinks we’re all enemies out to send him to the Klingons for prosecution.”

Worf drew himself up to his full height. “Captain, Klingons to not prosecute minors who were coerced into crimes.”

“I know that, Mister Worf, but Matthieu does not. And he doesn’t seem inclined to rational discourse at the moment in order for us to explain it to him. Apparently the sight of either Commander Riker or me causes him to be incredibly angry and perhaps violent.”

“A self defense mechanism,” Worf said.

“Explain,” Picard commanded.

“From what Commander Riker has told me, the mercenary ship seemed a lot like a Klingon ship. If you have been betrayed by someone on your ship, you must make sure they cannot do it again. I do not believe he sees you as a traitor, Captain, but as a threat and unreliable in regards to the truth. As for Commander Riker, the boy will continue to either confront him with his betrayal or he will attempt to escape this ship to get away from those whom he cannot trust.” The Klingon paused. “Captain, he must be kept under guard. He is a threat.”

Dr. Crusher couldn’t comprehend that her son would be a threat to the ship or the people aboard it. “Worf, do you really think that’s necessary? He’s only a boy.”

Worf shook his head. "Doctor, your son is a warrior. As you saw, he is not easily stopped and I do not want to take the chance that Security will not be able to respond in time if this happens again."

"He's also very good with ships and piloting. Given a chance, he could easily get to a shuttle and off the ship before anyone noticed," Riker added. "Look, I don't think he'd truly hurt anyone unless forced to. More than likely, he'll attack me as a diversion and attempt to escape from the ship."

Picard sighed. "I saw him fight a Nausicaan and win on Dessica II. Baran tended to use him as some sort of prizefighter. He'd bet with others that Matthieu could take whoever they could offer up and then make Matthieu fight. That's what happened on Dessica II, and I highly doubt it was the first time." He addressed Worf. "Mr. Worf, I want you to assign a security detail to Matthieu until this situation is brought under control. Will—."

"Captain," Worf interrupted.

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"I request to assign myself to guard Matthieu. While my officers are well trained in hand to hand combat, from what I have witnessed and what you report about the boy, I am not sure that anyone on this ship, aside from myself and Commander Data, could subdue him in an emergency."

Picard seemed to consider this information for a moment, then he gave a scant nod. "I see your point. Choose a stand-in for you at tactical while you are on this detail."

"Yes, sir," Worf replied. "Doctor, may I use your office?"

Beverly had been lost in thought as she listened. "What? Oh, yes, go ahead." She waved vaguely in the direction of her office.

"Will," the captain spoke to his first officer again. "What was it that brought you down here in the first place?"

Riker had since retrieved the PADD from the deck. "We are to pick up a delegation of the Cairn in two days in order for them to continue their application process to be admitted to the Federation. They're a race that previously had no knowledge of verbal communication. They had only communicated with one another by telepathy. Their interpreter and teacher of verbal communication will be accompanying them. She's..." Riker paused for effect. "An old friend."

Picard raised an eyebrow. "An old friend?"

Riker grinned. "It's Lwaxana Troi."

The captain frowned. "Well. That adds an interesting mix. Number One, I want you to stay out of Matthieu's way so that he doesn't have anymore outbursts like this. While we're underway to pick up the Cairn, you'll have the bridge so that I can concentrate on other areas."

The commander nodded. "Of course, sir. I understand."

"Once things are under control, we'll work on Matthieu not trying to assault you whenever he sees you."

"I have full confidence, Captain. I'll be on the bridge." Riker exited.

Beverly came out of her reverie when she felt Picard's hand on her arm. "Beverly?" he said.

"I'm fine," she replied. "I mean, as fine as you could expect. But I think we'll need someone neutral to help us gain Matthieu's trust. I can't imagine he can even leave Sickbay until he's able to do that. All he'll do is try to escape." She fought her emotions. "What if he doesn't remember us at all?"

Picard laid his hands on her shoulders in reassurance. "He does. But I understand some of what's going on because of what happened to me on Minos Korva. You have to hide those memories that make you happy, because if your tormentor sees them, he'll twist them and take them away, and you won't have any of them left. He's been sitting on them for so long that it's a reflex by now. He doesn't even know he's doing it. And he can't let them out until he feels completely safe, like he's at home."

"He hasn't had a home in a long time."

"And he hasn't felt safe, either. We'll get through this. We have to."

"I know," she said. She tapped her communicator. "Crusher to Troi."

"Troi here."

"Deanna, could you report to Sickbay? We need you here."

"On my way."

It was only moments until the door opened. "I was in my office," Troi explained. Her office was right next to Sickbay. "Commander Riker had just finished briefing me on what happened." She gave them both significant looks. "I know what needs to be done. The two of you need to go back to your quarters, your new quarters, and finish arranging things. I can't imagine the moving crew did it properly. Make your quarters a home, as it had been before. You need to pull up pictures, videos, anything from your time with Matthieu before he was abducted. Beverly, is it safe for Matthieu to be woken?"

“Yes. The sedative was only to keep him from harm.”

“Good. Once you’ve gone, I’ll have Dr. Selar wake him up and I’ll speak with him. Perhaps someone he hasn’t met will be someone he can listen to and understand. It’s a mess for him right now, as it is for both of you. Now go. He’ll be okay.”

Beverly took the captain’s hand as they left Sickbay.

Deanna watched them go, then turned to face Lt. Worf. “As for you, I need you to stay in the background.”

“Of course.”

Troi motioned to Selar as she walked over to Matthieu’s bed. Selar administered the sedative’s antidote and walked away. The counselor watched as Matthieu’s eyes opened. He started sitting up and was stopped by the restraint field. “You’ve restrained me,” he said.

“For your own safety,” Troi replied. “I’m Deanna Troi, the ship’s counselor.”

Matthieu’s head fell back on the pillow. “And I have no idea who I am.” His gaze flicked over to Worf standing against the wall next to the door. “And I’m guessing he’s here because of me.”

“Yes. Again, for your safety. I thought we could have a talk. I sense you’re very upset and confused.”

The boy raised an eyebrow. “Betazoid?”

“Half. An empath, not a telepath.”

“I don’t like talking while lying down and restrained. If I give you my word that I won’t try to hurt anyone or escape, can I sit up?”

Deanna considered this. She sensed no duplicity in him, he was telling the truth. Her trusting him would go a long way to him being able to trust her. “If you give me your word, we can even leave Sickbay and talk in my office. Lt. Worf will remain just outside my office door. He’s been ordered to guard you until further notice, so I can’t make any deals about that.”

The boy nodded. “Okay. You have my word.”

Troi motioned to a tech to shut off the field. Matthieu sat up slowly, rubbing the side of his head. He followed Deanna out into the corridor and into her office. “Sit anywhere you like,” she said.

Matthieu chose the chair closest to the door. His choice didn’t escape Deanna. “Habit?” she asked.

“What?”

“Your seat, you chose the one closest to the door.”

He nodded. “Yeah, habit, I guess. I never thought about it.” He didn’t allow his body to relax. Instead, he studied the room.

“In Sickbay,” Deanna said, “You said that you have no idea who you are. Do you think you could tell me what you do know?”

“I’m on the *Enterprise*,” he said slowly. “Before that, I was on a mercenary ship. I’ve never been to school, but I’ve read a lot, and am able to pick up languages fairly easily, I speak several. I’ve been trained in combat by various members of the crew as they passed through in service to the ship. A couple Klingons, a Romulan, a human. Before I was on the ship, I was on Cardassia. A slave.” He paused, his voice getting softer as he spoke. “I’m human. I’m one point eight meters tall. I weigh seventy four kilos. I have reddish hair and gray eyes.” His voice became almost a whisper. “And I know my first name is Matthieu.” His eyes went vacant.

“Has it always been Matthieu?”

He didn’t answer. She sense many more emotions from him than she had before. The anger had left, replaced by turmoil, sadness, fear. “What are you afraid of?” she asked.

“That this is real,” he said, still vacant.

“And what happens if it is?”

Matthieu stood up, shoving the chair backwards. “It can’t be!” he shouted. “This is another trick!” A trinket from a table had found its way into his hand. He threw it across the room into the window, where it shattered against the transparent aluminum and dropped in a glittering rain to the floor.

Immediately, Counselor Troi’s communicator beeped. “Worf to Counselor Troi. Do you need me to come in?”

She tapped her communicator. “No. It’s fine. Stay outside.”

Matthieu had paced the length of the room and stood at the far end. “The Cardassians took me back, and now they’re just showing me again what I lost, what I can never have. Why can’t you just beat me? It doesn’t hurt like this.”

Deanna felt the boy’s emotions roll over her and knew that he felt it tenfold in his own mind. He’d been tortured like this, shown his parents as if he’d been brought back, only to have them ripped away, again and again.

“It can’t be real. If I believe it’s real, you’ll take it away.” In one sentence, Matthieu had gone from a shout to a desperate whisper. The strength from his body had disappeared, drained.

“I promise you it’s real,” Troi said.

“I wish I could believe you.”

“You’re on a Federation ship. You’re nowhere near any Cardassians. They can’t hurt you anymore. This is real. You’re home.”

Matthieu looked stricken. He practically fell into the nearest chair. Deanna went and sat across from him, sensing the first flicker of hope in his mind. Until then, she hadn’t been entirely sure that Matthieu had any hope left. “I want to believe you,” he said.

“Let yourself believe what you hope is true and see what happens.”

They sat in silence. Minutes passed. Minutes turned to an hour. Deanna kept quiet, sensing every emotion the boy went over in his head. He had to be given as much time as anyone was willing to allow.

Finally, Matthieu broke the silence, staring outside the window at the passing stars. “It was hot. I didn’t want to go swimming, the water was too salty, so my brother went by himself. Mom and Dad were talking, I didn’t want to interrupt. So I walked down the beach, I was looking for tidepools. I finally found one behind a dune.” A slight smile was on his face yet his eyes held back tears. Deanna realized he was telling her what happened the day he disappeared. The boy continued quietly. “I was so excited, I knew Mom and Dad would like it. I turned around to run back.” His voice cracked. “But I never made it. Someone grabbed me from behind and put me to sleep. When I woke up, everything was gone. Everything.” Tears had managed to escape and he wiped them roughly off his face, valiantly maintaining control, much as his parents tended to do. He took a couple calming breaths and looked directly at the counselor. “I never told them that, no matter what they did to me, I never told them what I remembered. So I told you. And if you were them, I wouldn’t still be here right now.”

She sensed it immediately. He believed it was true.

“I’m sorry about your...” He trailed off and looked over where the remains of her trinket lay. “What was it?”

She laughed. “Don’t worry about it. It’s a candy dish a friend gave to me and I hated it. I think I kept it here hoping someone would break it.”

“I remember that people were trying to tell me what was really going on here, with this ship and the ship I was on before, and with Riker and Galen, who isn’t really Galen.”

“Do you know who he is?”

“My father...He was a Starfleet captain. Picard. It's him. I mean, he's him. I remember, I remember his face. How his eyes used to laugh when I did something that Mom tried to scold me for but couldn't bring herself to finish because she'd start laughing. Then she'd blame him and he would try to look sorry, but his eyes always told the truth. And Mom had hair like fire. She was a doctor, always taking care of people...that was her. She's the doctor that woke me up and I told her she wasn't real.”

Deanna felt guilt flood into Matthieu.

“And Dad, I said awful things to him, both of them. They must hate me.”

“Far from it.”

“How do you—.” He stopped. “That's right, you're an empath.” He tapped mindlessly on the arm of the chair. “Who is Commander Riker, really? Is he the traitor that I saw, or was there something else?”

Troi sighed. “Commander Riker is the first officer on this ship. He's actually an excellent, well respected officer. He and the captain used him being a rogue officer as a cover to have Riker gain Baran's trust. And it worked. The captain had figured out at some point when he was on the mercenary ship that you were his lost son. He told Will that if he had any chance to get you aboard the *Enterprise*, he had to make sure you stayed.”

“That's why he hit me in the cargo bay. So that Worf would capture me and keep me on the ship. And it had to look real to the others.”

“Yes.”

“What ended up happening to the ship and the crew?”

“Tallera went down to Vulcan with your father and two other members of the crew. I don't know their names. But Tallera assembled the Stone of Gal and used it to kill the crew members. The captain knew how to keep the stone from killing and Tallera wasn't able to kill him or the *Enterprise* crew members who beamed down to intercept them. The remaining crew members have been taken into custody by Vulcan security and the ship impounded.”

Fear shivered through him. “What will happen to me?”

“You'll stay here with your parents. Neither the Federation nor the Klingon Empire have pressed any charges against you. You're a minor and you were coerced. You never committed a crime.”

Relief. He said nothing.

“Do you want to see your parents?”

“I think so.”

“I’ll take you to your quarters.”

Interlude—

*Ashen Moon*

The old human died in the night.

His last command whispered around the cell, a whisper given with the last grip of a dying man's fingers, seeking the returned grip of a young promise. "Promise me you won't try it."

"I won't try it." A reply quick and sure.

"Promise me." Weak and desperate.

"I promise." But it was a promise given with no strength in the hand, no reassuring squeeze, no depth to the vocalization. With that, the old man had died.

Immediately, the boy broke his promise. His feet carried him to the beds of the others in the cell, the beds of the other children of the work camp, all younger than him, all Bajoran, save him. Their quiet eyes held questions that went unasked, answers given by the harsh reality in his own gray eyes. One by one he woke them up, bade them to put on shoes and warm clothing, told them to gather. The old man had put together this escape and they could carry it out. Matthew knew they could, he had planned it with the old man. He would get them all away from here and they would all live. There had been contact with a Cardassian guard who had arranged a transport for that night, they had a route through the back ends of the caverns with the entrance in the sewers of the cells. Matthew decided, as the old man had breathed his last and wrenched that promise from him, that the old man had merely lost his nerve. That he wouldn't do the same. He was ten, he was the oldest child held here by at least four years, and he was old enough to see the plan through, and young enough to keep his nerve. He wouldn't fail. After all, Garak waited for them at the other end and the old man said they could trust Garak.

The little ones followed him, little footsteps behind him, first in the dirt of the cells, then echoes of small splashes in the work camp's sewers. They moved in near darkness, and unlike most small children, they preferred the darkness. The night didn't scare them. What scared them was what they could see in the daytime, the lashes of the Cardassians, the threats of no food, no water, of death and disease.

They formed a chain of young forms desperate for hope, bound hand in hand as they crept along the trail. Soon they reached the maze of caves and footsteps skidded across pebbles and rocks. Matthew held the hand of the smallest, barely four years old, the water had been up to her chest. At least, Matthew hoped it was only water. He knew disease rode as strongly in the sewer waters as it did in the camps, but he couldn't remember how he knew such a thing.

Then he did. *My mother was a doctor.*

He shook his head. They had no mothers here, no fathers. He frowned.

“Are we going to be okay?” the littlest one asked. She had seen the change on his face.

“Yes,” he whispered. “I promise.” It was the second time that night he’d made a promise, the first time that night he meant to keep the promise he made. He gripped her little hand in his as tightly as he dared.

She met his promise with a nod of her small chin, hope continuing to burn in her dark eyes.

Ahead of them, the light from a moon bathed the landscape beyond the exit from the caves. The small group tread lightly ahead. Matthew cautiously stuck his head out of the hole, scanned the area. There, just beyond a mound of rock, stood Garak. A ship waited behind him, a shuttle or transport. An escape. Matthew walked out of the caves, leading the other six children, and they walked towards Garak. Thirty feet, twenty feet, ten feet, they could feel the freedom and hope descending on them now, they would leave this camp, this planet, and find their parents again. In Matthew’s hand, the littlest girl’s hand squeezed against his, she sensed it too.

Then another Cardassian stepped out of the ship and hope rained ashes on them all.

Madred. Gul Madred, the camp’s overseer.

Matthew came to a sudden stop, his limbs cold. The chain forged of held hands between the children collapsed as the hands went limp with fear. Cold shoved aside hope, slid in between them, separating them again. They wouldn’t die, they would only wish it were so.

“You thought you could escape,” Madred said.

“Yes,” said Matthew, the idea of telling an untruth not even occurring to him.

“That was your mistake,” said the Gul. “You thought.”

“No,” replied Matthew. “I trusted.” And he fixed a steady glare on Garak, eyes made steel by the betrayal, by the light of the Cardassian moon.

The two Cardassians let out loud laughs. Madred motioned for something, then guards came pouring out of the ship, one for each child, and then some. They seized them roughly, brought them to the holding cell adjoining Madred’s chamber. The tall guards took Matthew directly to the Gul, who waited behind his desk. “This was your doing,” Madred said, leaning back, steepling his hands.

“No,” said Matthew.

“The old human is dead.”

“I know. I watched him die.” The old man had been lucky. His death had been clean, almost painless, one last exhale followed by no inhalation and that was that.

“Who do you think killed him?” Madred asked.

Matthew wanted to give away nothing on his face, but he was ten, he had little control, and his gray eyes narrowed. “But he died quietly,” he said. No one died quietly from Madred’s hand.

“Yes. And that is how each of the other children will die,” said Madred, rising to his feet. “And you will watch all of them. Then you will die, but not as they do.”

Matthew felt his eyes close. They would die, then. They would all die and it was his fault. But there was solace in that the others would die without suffering. The door opened behind them and the first child was brought in. Madred took Matthew by the neck, dragged him to his feet, turned him to face the guards and the other child. The child Matthew had led to this impending death.

*At least it would be quiet.*

A baton was raised in the firt of a guard, another guard drew a shock stick, another lifted an instrument that Matthew had no idea had existed. No idea of what exactly it did, except that it would cause pain. Again that night, Matthew realized that a Cardassian had lied. *They would all scream.* And it wasn’t Madred would would cause the screams. It was his fault. He had broken his promise and led them here, to this place, to this pain.

By the time they got to the third child, Matthew was screaming himself, begging they let the others go, that he would take the place of each of them and suffer for them. By the fourth child, Matthew had closed his eyes and it took Madred and two guards to force them open. By the fifth child, Matthew struggled against them, trying to free himself and shield the other child from the physical torture from the guards.

The sixth child was the youngest, the smallest, the most innocent of them all. In all he had witnessed, in every scream of pain, he hadn’t cried. He wouldn’t give Madred that, wouldn’t give him what he wanted, wouldn’t give in and make the death and suffering meaningless. Then this child came in, dragged by the guards, her face wet with tears, and Matthew saw his second broken promise of the night. They would not be okay. They would have the worst pain ever imaginable, pain that couldn’t even be imagined, and then they would die. She would die.

And she did. “You promised!” her last words a shout to him, a weak whisper to the others, the whisper of a dying human that meant nothing to the Cardassians.

Matthew sobbed, his ten year old body dropping to its knees, hands coming up to cover his face to block the view of the tiny body in front of him, smaller than his own frail form. He'd promised. His word meant nothing.

Madred's hand went to the boy's neck, hauled him back to his feet. This would be it, Matthew knew. Now he would suffer and die as the others, and then he would suffer after he was dead, and he deserved it all. He had promised that they'd be okay and instead, he had caused their deaths. He readied himself for the punishment of the shock sticks.

It never came. "You will live," Madred's voice said.

Matthew turned, Madred's hand falling from the boy's neck. "You said I would die."

"And I said the others would die painlessly," said the Gul, teeth flashing. A finger pointed towards the door, a guard went through it, bringing Garak back. "Garak has sold you to a mercenary ship where you'll live out your days as a slave, just as you were here. Only now you have to remember every night, in each of your nightmares, in all your waking hours, the screams of the children you betrayed."

Except Madred's words were drowned out by the screams already in Matthew's ears. Screams and whispers of a broken promise, of pain and suffering, of his own horrible mistakes. His gray eyes fixed on Garak and he made his third promise of the night. He would kill Garak for what he had done. He would kill Garak for leading him into blindly making the other children die. Anger took him, anger so hot that its scalding brought cold. *This third promise I make will not be broken.*

But it did nothing to quiet the tumult in his own head.

As soon as they stepped out of the counselor's office, Matthieu broke his word. Troi had turned to Worf to give him a quick briefing about what had just happened and where they were headed. With Worf's attention on the Betazoid, Matt bolted. He had wanted to believe the counselor, that those people were his parents, that he was done with the mercenaries and free of being anyone's prisoner. But he knew better, he'd learned that when escape was promised, it wasn't true. Or if it did come true, it came as twisted as a wish from a monkey's paw.

Swearing under his breath, Matt headed towards the nearest shuttlebay, running over the ship's schematics in his head. He'd reviewed them for the assault on the *Enterprise*. Shouting sounded behind him. They'd noticed his disappearance, he hadn't much time left before security officers would swarm the decks looking for him. The shuttlebay would be on alert and he'd never get off the ship. A Jeffries tube led him into another tube and then into a far corner of the shuttlebay. Containers blocked his view of the officers on duty and in return also blocked the officers' view of him. Peering over the top, he saw that only two were present and were currently occupied by a readout on a tricorder. Recognizing his chance, Matt jumped into the nearest open shuttlecraft, triggered the hatch shut, and powered up.

More shouting came from behind him, officers outraged about getting caught with their proverbial pants down. His fingers tapped away with entering override codes and opening the bay's main door. The boy piloted the shuttle through and kicked into warp before the bay's doors had closed behind him. Matt stood and took stock of his situation. The craft he'd managed to get was a runabout, capable of a much higher warp speed than an ordinary shuttlecraft. It would also get a fairly good price from the right type of person. First, he had to get the *Enterprise* off his trail. "There should be a probe," he said to himself. "I'll send a probe with a warp signature of this shuttle and head in another direction." He nodded in agreement with himself and hauled one out of a cargo bin.

Tinkering with the probe's control panel, his mind wandered to what must've been happening on the ship. Certainly, he could see the disappointment that had to have been on the counselor's face at him breaking his word. It hadn't been her fault or some deficiency in her ability to judge character. For him, breaking a promise was a matter of rote. It happened, repeatedly. Any promises he *did* keep, those were the exceptions. His word meant nothing, he'd learned that a long time ago. As quickly as it had formed, the look of disappointment he'd imagined on Troi's face faded away. Only one disappointed look stayed with him, refused to go away, could never be replaced.

That little girl's.

Matthieu roughly shook his head, trying to change the track of his thoughts, trying to think of anything but that. So he recited his actions aloud, a litany that would make him think and listen at the same time and leave no room in his mind for anything else. "Change this code over. Reverse this polarity. Open another access panel, the smaller

one. Switch the chips over. Close the panel. Close the other panel. Then I get to launch this baby.” He slide the probe into a launch tube and sent it away. That done, he climbed back into the pilot’s seat and changed course. Laburnam Outpost was the better part of a day away, that would give him time to plan and assume another identity. He’d have to disappear and re-emerge elsewhere as someone else. The idea felt fine to him, he’d never been comfortable with himself anyway.

Then again, he had never been quite sure of who he was in the first place. The reflection of himself in the transparent aluminum looked back at him, a reflection of his own subconscious speaking up about what had happened in the past few weeks, days, even hours. *You did, once. You were very small. Your mother was a doctor, she had red hair.*

Matthieu glared at the reflection. “Shut up.”

*You’ve got red hair too, you know.*

“As if I hadn’t noticed,” he said, then dropped his head down. “I’m talking to my own reflection. This is ridiculous.”

*You’re only crazy if your reflection talks back to you.*

“I’m glad one of us has a sense of humor about this,” he said, then stood up and walked away from the window. He knew it wouldn’t help, for as long as he could remember, he’d always had a running commentary in his head. Though it wasn’t often that he argued with it aloud. At the main computer terminal, he pulled up a map of the current star system and its surrounding systems. The web began to weave itself amongst the stars, different ports, different trade routes, a million different ways for him to disappear. After all, it was a large galaxy. Anyone could disappear.

Before he could decide how he’d connect the dots, he had to find out where Garak was. A search function turned up the Cardassian rather quickly, the man had set up shop as a *tailor*, of all things, on a deep space station in orbit of Bajor. Matthieu located Deep Space Nine and worked his way back towards Laburnam Outpost. It could take a week or more to reach the station. A few more taps of the keys brought up a manifest of items for trade and wanted for trade at Laburnam. The time he’d spent aboard the mercenary ship had taught him more than a few things about the shadier parts of the galaxy. Starfleet equipment, especially their ships, were a hot commodity. The credits he could get from selling the runabout would be more than enough to get him to Deep Space Nine, even with all the necessary transport changes he’d have to make.

A message sent to a prospective Ferengi trader about the sale of the runabout, Matthieu settled back to read the information available about Garak. It wasn’t much, and certainly not enough to reveal the true nature of Garak’s current position. *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy.* Always a spy, no matter what the day job. Always leading people towards betraying themselves and others. He’d postponed fulfilling his promise for long enough,

staying on that mercenary ship, not even bothering try to escape. Merely escaping from the *Enterprise* wouldn't be enough. Garak was his target, nothing else mattered. Even if they'd been telling the truth, if that red haired doctor really was his mother, he wasn't meant to stay. He was meant for other things, and none of them were good.

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"I'm sorry, Captain. The shuttle went into warp as soon as it was clear of the *Enterprise*," a crewman said, his body tensed as if bracing for impact. "We haven't been able to track it." With the news given, the crewman waited for the coming impact of the captain's ire.

But it never arrived. Picard's eyes were pointed in the direction of the crewman, but they didn't see him. Instead, they saw past him and rested on the closed doors of the shuttlebay. Ideas for tracking methods drifted in and out of his thoughts, riddled by a profound sense of failure. He'd found Matthieu only to lose him again. There was no one to blame but himself. He should have known better than to let the boy out of his sight again.

"Captain?"

Picard jerked slightly, his eyes bringing the crewman back into focus. "Yes?"

The young man shifted his weight around, suddenly not knowing what to do when he expected to be scolded and instead, nothing had happened. "Am I to bring this report to Lieutenant Worf?"

Picard nodded slightly.

The crewman practically bolted from the shuttlebay. Picard remained behind, held fast to his spot in the cavernous room. Footsteps sounded behind him, the breeze from the person's movement carried faint wisps of perfume. *Beverly*. He closed his eyes, as the room had suddenly collapsed inward and become unbearably small. Images from the first time he lost their son came to him, first the words that she had spoken, followed by his own.

*"Jean-Luc, I can't find him."*

*"He was just right there." He shouted the boys' names. Wesley answered from just behind a pile of rocks, his voice followed by the sight of his brown-haired head over the top. No other voice came in reply. The waves crashed against the shore, the wind picked up and brought a chill with it.*

*"We have to find him."*

*"We'll find him, Beverly. He couldn't have gone far, he's only three."*

The voice that spoke to him now was hers again. "We have to find him."

His reply came from the automated Starfleet officer part of his brain before he had a chance to think and switch tracks to the father part of his brain, long neglected and dusty. "We have a mission to complete."

The captain felt the doctor's presence move from beside him to in front of him. Despite his better judgment, he opened his eyes to face her. He regretted the action before his eyelids were even halfway up, as her piercing gaze caught him up in its anger. For a moment, her eyes moved back and forth, trying to read his face, trying to see if he would take back what he said and correct himself.

But he couldn't think of a thing to say. It had been like this when Matthieu had first gone missing. The father part of him had always been neglected and dusty, even when the boy had been very small. Unlike commanding a starship, he hadn't the first idea how to react in this situation, and apparently, how he tended to react was entirely wrong. Yet he still couldn't think of what to say to dispel Beverly's anger or to assuage her worry.

Another moment passed, this time with her eyes locked to his. He knew the look. She was deciding what she would and wouldn't say and how she would say it. From experience, he knew it would hurt, but even the knowledge that it would hurt wouldn't lessen the pain any. "Then I'll find him," she said, the statement creeping between them like frost on a windowpane, obscuring everything.

She turned and left.

Nearby, an ensign working on a shuttle nacelle shivered. "It's a bit cold in here, sir," she said at his questioning look.

He had to agree. In fact, it was more than a bit cold. Leaving the perplexed ensign, he found himself exiting the shuttlebay and heading towards sickbay. His memories chased him down the corridor, but he kept his pace steady, unwilling to run away from them. The first time, he'd acted poorly. Psychologically, he knew why. He knew that when he didn't know what to do in a situation completely unfamiliar to him, he panicked. Never in any Starfleet situation had he panicked, he was too well trained to do so. But being put in a position where somehow he'd lost his child and had no way of finding him had rendered him into a fine state of panic. And he discovered that when Jean-Luc Picard panics, he becomes withdrawn. Starting with those first comments, he and Beverly had fallen into repeated prolonged silences as the days passed by without any leads. After a month had gone by, Starfleet recalled him to his ship.

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"I have to go."

"You can't be serious."

He looked at her. “You can’t expect me to give up my career.” This time, when she returned his look, though not a single limb on her body moved, he felt pinned. The urge for him to squirm snaked out into his own limbs. Silently, he commanded them not to move. He was a starship captain, and starship captains did not *squirm*. “We have to continue with the pretense of everything being normal.”

Beverly crossed her arms. “I want to go public.”

Picard responded by crossing his own arms. “Absolutely not. This is a private matter, we can’t let the galaxy know that we’ve lost our son.”

“If they know, then it’s that many more eyes to look for him.”

He recognized her point. The more people that knew, the more people that could look for him, and perhaps someone, somewhere, would spot him. But at the same time, it would be that many more people that would be privy to his personal life. Starfleet officers and Federation diplomats would know that he’d failed to protect his own child. How could any of them have confidence in a Starfleet captain who couldn’t even keep his own family safe? Then again, while his son was family, he wasn’t sure how to define the relationship he had with the woman standing in front of him. Finally, he spoke. “It would put my career on the line for this to be made public.”

When he closed his mouth over his last word, tension appeared between them as tightly strung as piano wire. Her blue eyes drifted downward and Picard found himself staring at the top of her head, at once grateful to be out of her piercing glare, yet afraid of what would happen when she looked back up. He knew her, knew that she was trying to form her emotions into coherent words. Then her eyes were on him again and this time he flinched before he could will his body not to. “Your career means more to you than your son,” she said, without any hint of question in her hard tone.

“That isn’t true,” he said.

“Then explain to me why you refuse to go public with the search, why you insist on going back to your ship.”

*Because I need to be where I’m in control, where I know what my role is and how to execute it properly,* he thought. “It’s where I need to be,” he said aloud.

The wire of tension pulled tighter. “You need to be with your family,” she said, her tone dropping to hardly a whisper.

“I can’t be with my son because I can’t find him, and you aren’t family. I mean—.” Her look made him physically take a step back as he attempted to explain what he’d meant by his comment. “I mean, you’re the mother of my child, but you aren’t my wife or my partner or my lover. I don’t know who you are to me anymore.”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said, ice lacing through her voice. “Matthieu’s father is Jean-Luc Picard, but I’m not sure if that’s really the man who’s standing in front of me. You see, Jean-Luc is a better man than one to run away to his ship when his son needs him. A better man than one to claim that the woman with whom he had a child and helped raise that child with wasn’t family.” She took a step backward. “If you happen to find Jean-Luc, let me know. I miss him.” Her eyes dropped away from his, she turned and was out the door.

The wire snapped between them, the released tension causing Picard to collapse into the chair alongside the wall behind him. In the days that followed, Beverly had gone public without him, not mentioning his name once throughout the entire public search that followed. After their last confrontation, she hadn’t spoken to him. Once and awhile, she would transmit a letter giving updates. His attempts to reply via face to face communiques went unanswered. Eventually, she had even stopped sending him updates and broke off contact with him entirely within the next two years.

2370

Picard leaned against the turbolift wall as he had leaned back in the chair all those years ago. He’d never gotten the chance to apologize for how he’d acted, for the words he’d said without forethought, without realizing how much they would hurt. The captain shook his head. No, it wasn’t that he hadn’t gotten the chance, he hadn’t taken it upon himself to make the chance to apologize. Instead of hiding behind unanswered communiques, he should have taken leave and gone to face her. Even when she came aboard his ship to serve as his CMO, he hadn’t taken the chance. He’d hidden from it, hidden it away as securely as his missing son.

But she had been right and he had been wrong. His career and his need for privacy shouldn’t have come before his son. Despite his protests that he didn’t care for his career more, his actions had shown otherwise. It seemed his body had realized the moment before he had and set him in motion to apologize before his mind had caught up to the same conclusion. The sickbay he walked into was entirely different than the one he had left hours earlier. Before, it had been filled, and now it seemed deserted, techs and nurses scattered to the corners. Through the frosted glass of the office window, Picard could see the doctor sitting behind her desk, intent on a readout on her terminal. She didn’t look up when he walked through the office door.

“Deanna, I think I’ve got a good possibility here. I never got the chance to tell him that his Shalaft’s was healed, so he’s going to be looking for that medicine again. This means if we can locate all the places where the medicine is stored, we can narrow the range of the search.” She looked up expectantly from the screen. “Captain,” she said, her voice going from enthusiastic to neutral, devoid of any emotion.

“You were right,” he said.

She frowned. “Of course I was. It’s a fairly simple deduction.”

“You were right,” he said again. “We have to find him.” Where her tone had stayed neutral, tiptoeing on the ice between them, he stepped out boldly, willing to let it break apart.

She stared at him as if he were a different person. “A starship could cover the ground much more quickly than any runabout could. And if Starfleet were alerted, the Federation news corps would be alerted as well, and hopefully the net would catch him.”

“You’re right,” he said. “I was wrong. It’s time I did something about it. The Cairn delegation can be transferred to another ship in the sector and we can resume the detached duty Commander Riker had been assigned while I was...” he paused, hunting for the right word. “Missing.” Even with putting thought behind his choice of words, he saw the pain pass across her eyes.

But she didn’t move from her seat behind the desk, kept the stare on him, even as Counselor Troi walked through the door. “Beverly,” said Troi, nodding. “Captain.”

Both of them nodded in return.

“I wanted to tell you what Matthieu said before he...left.” The counselor seemed to be choosing words as carefully as he had.

“Go ahead,” the doctor said, not looking away from Picard. Again, he found himself resisting the urge to squirm. She seemed to be the only person in his life who could put him in such a situation. The last people he recalled who could make him squirm, or want to squirm, were his mother and his son. A frown made its way to his mouth. His family were the only ones close enough to make him feel so vulnerable. Quickly, he looked over at Beverly again, the frown leaving, replaced by the hint of a smile. Her reply was to look quickly at Deanna.

The captain held in a sigh and shifted his attention to the counselor as well.

“He talked about the day he was abducted. He said it was hot, but he hadn’t gone swimming when his brother did.” She paused. “Does Wesley remember him?”

“We haven’t talked about it in a long time,” Beverly said.

“How long?” asked Troi.

“Since he was nine years old. We had a memorial, on Matt’s birthday. After that, we didn’t talk about it again.”

Picard looked over sharply. “You had a memorial?”

She met his look, neutrality replaced by the hard tone of before, in the shuttlebay. “You were away on the *Intrepid*. I assumed you had a mission to complete.”

“Beverly, you didn’t even ask me. If you had I would have—.”

She cut him off. "You would have what? Sent your condolences? Because you certainly wouldn't have attended."

"I'm sorry," he said.

"I'm sure," came her reply. Her attention turned to the counselor. "Deanna, it wasn't hot that day. It was cold and windy."

Picard remembered. Cold and windy, and yet both boys had insisted on going swimming. "They both went swimming," he said, addressing himself to the counselor. "They were only in the water for ten minutes before their lips were blue and teeth were chattering. Beverly called them out and they still protested even when they were on the shore and shivering." He remembered Matthieu's small voice asking about sand dollars, if they existed on Pacifica like they did on Earth. He remembered Wesley's older brother know-it-all reply that of course there were sand dollars on Pacifica, followed by Matt's younger brother challenge to see who could find one first.

Their little legs carrying them down opposite sides of the beach, each boy determined to be the victor over his brother. Him chuckling to himself, in spite of everything, reminded of the better days between him and his own brother. "They ran off to try and find sand dollars," he said.

Deanna frowned. "In our session, Matthieu said that he went looking for tidepools, walking off without telling either of you."

"We both knew where he'd gone, he was supposed to stay within shouting distance," the doctor said.

*"He couldn't have gone far, he's only three."* Picard heard the words as if he'd just spoken them, felt like that day, as if Matthieu had just disappeared. If only then he was the man he was now, he would have done things differently. Perhaps, they would have found him sooner. Then he realized both Beverly and Deanna were looking at him closely.

"He went far enough," Beverly said.

He'd spoken that statement aloud, for the first time since he'd originally said it. "Yes," he said. "He did."

Troi sat back, the frown remaining on her face. "I sensed only honesty from him. I don't see how he could have been telling a lie."

"I wonder how many lies he's told," Picard said. "This web of his, how much of it is truth, how much of it is false, and what he believes to be true."

The doctor crossed her arms, settling back into her chair. "Your son is a liar, Jean-Luc," she said. "Are you sure you're willing to let go of your privacy for him?"

He turned to her, settled his eyes onto hers, the deep gray a soft reassurance. “I don’t think he’s intentionally lying.” And he didn’t. After what he’d experienced at the hands of Gul Madred, he knew about the weave of truth and lies that wove itself around the most fragile parts of the psyche, a wall of lies to protect that which was true. The lies kept the truth away from the tormentor, hiding your vulnerability so that you wouldn’t be emotionally eviscerated. While he had been tortured only for days, how long had Matthieu been held by the Cardassians? After those few days, Picard had believed that he could see five lights. He believed it as surely as he believed he was born in France. “If lies were all you remembered,” he said. “And the truth nothing more than an intangible word, do the lies become your truth?” He shook his head slowly. “My privacy means nothing to me if I can’t let go of it to find my son.” The captain reached out with his hand to Beverly, offering himself in whatever way she would take him. “I promise I will do anything within my power to find him. It’s something I should have done long ago. I owe it to him, and to you, to make up for it now.”

A moment passed, two, then her arms uncrossed, her hand took his and gave it a soft squeeze. Her eyes remained on his, he could see that the ice between them had melted, that she saw that she was indeed family. Then she broke eye contact with him to look at the counselor, except she left her hand in his. “Deanna, we need to go over everything he’s told you and the captain, as well as any others, and try and figure out which are lies and which are truth. Maybe in this mess of things, we can figure out where he might be going.”

The captain stood. “I’ll go to my ready room and notify Starfleet so that the transfer of the Cairn can commence as soon as possible, as well as notification for the Federation news corps, that way people will know what face to look for.”

Beverly let go of his hand with a final squeeze. “Thank you,” she said, the threat of tears making her eyes glisten.

He nodded. “It’s the least I can do.”

Troi looked at one, then the other. “I think we also have some counseling to do between the two of you. There are a lot of things that remain unsaid, a lot of things that need sorting out. Parents of missing children often go through intense relationship struggles, partially out of not knowing what to do with the grief process of losing a child, of everything being on hold. I think you would both benefit from counseling. It would also benefit Matthieu once he’s back.”

“If we find him,” Beverly said, so softly that Picard barely heard it. But he did.

“We’ll find him,” he said. “You have to think positively.”

The doctor gave him a rueful smile.

“I also agree that counseling would be a good idea,” he said.

Both women looked at him in askance.

“What?” he said, raising his eyebrows. “I need to start doing things for the people who are important to me. I should have started a long time ago.”

Beverly looked at him steadily. “It’s been a long time since I’ve seen you, Jean-Luc,” she said. “I missed you.”

Troi raised an eyebrow at the two of them, the words lost on her. But they found their meaning with Picard right when they were spoken. “It’s been long for me, as well,” he said, then left to do what he said he would.

“We have a deal?” Nadek asked, his voice carefully metered to carry only to Matthieu in the din of the dark bar.

Studying the Ferengi’s dark beady eyes, Matt spun his glass of water around, the condensation wetting his fingers. “That isn’t a fair market price,” he finally said.

Nadek leaned forward on his elbows. “This isn’t a fair market deal.”

Matt’s lips formed a straight line. “You have a point,” he said. “But how do I know I won’t get a better price in this particular market?”

“And how do I know I won’t get a better deal simply by turning you in?”

Giving a sigh of defeat, Matt slid the PADD containing the lock codes of the runabout across the table to the trader. “You won’t,” he said.

Nadek took the PADD and stood. “Need a ride anywhere?” he asked, a trace of sarcasm evident in his tone.

Matt glared at him. The Ferengi knew perfectly well that he wasn’t going to ride anywhere in that runabout again. A flash of red in the corner of Matt’s eye caught his attention and he vaguely motioned the Ferengi away. The sooner that trader got out of his life, the better, and that flash of red had become much more important than any Ferengi black market dealer. The red signaled the people that would be looking for him: *Starfleet*. Keeping the glass of water in his hand, Matt scooted his seat deeper into the shadows. Then he set the glass on the table, wiped the ring of water off the table’s top, and put the hood of his robe up over his head. Now if anyone looked in his direction, they’d see the table and the shadows and none of the details of his face.

Red. He remembered three things from being small, from that short dream life that had happened before he became the property of the Cardassians.

*My mother had red hair.*

*My mother was a doctor.*

*My father wore a red uniform.*

Then another memory came to mind: his mother had worn a blue uniform, a uniform similar to his father’s in all aspects except the color. Flashes of blue and red Fleet uniforms slid into his mind and then out again, memories of people much taller than him, of a steady, baritone voice. Then another voice, softer and quicker, one that settled him in a much different way. Both of those voices made him feel safe.

He missed them.

But right now, he wanted Starfleet to miss him and those colors were the enemy, they'd be the ones looking for him. If they were smart, they wouldn't be wearing uniforms at all. Since they would be Starfleet, he was fairly certain they'd be an intelligent sort. Tossing a couple chits on the table, Matt stood and made his way through the periphery and out the door of the bar. Once out, he checked a manifest panel for outbound transports. One transport left within fifteen minutes and would be heading in the opposite direction of his final destination. Perfect. Matt keyed in a reservation to be paid in credits directly on his arrival at the dock. Careful to remain in the shadowed periphery, he ended up at the dock with only minutes to spare. The Denubian sullenly took his payment and indicated where Matt should take a seat. The boy sat down cautiously, checking the other passengers out of the corners of his eyes in surreptitious glances. None of them looked terribly clean-cut, sure markers of Starfleet officers and enlisted crew.

He settled himself in the seat for the hours-long journey to a useless starport. The dirt and grime of this darker part of the galaxy had started to dig its way into his pores, he could feel it again, part of his skin. There hadn't been enough time to come clean in his short time away from Baran's now defunct ship. He wondered if only Starfleet knew about his runaway status or if the Federation's news service had been alerted. If the news service knew, he could be entirely screwed.

"You're in my seat."

Matt frowned and looked up at the source of the rumbling deep voice that had given him the latest tidbit of information. Shock tumbled through him as he recognized the man. "Grimp," he said. "Do you even have a ticket?"

"I don't need any tickets."

"You'll need a ticket and a lot more than that if you expect to have my seat," Matt said, switching to Nausicaan to keep the conversation private.

The tall Nausicaan's yellow eyes narrowed. "You are a foolish human."

"I happen to like my seat." Matt looked back out the window as the transport vessel moved into warp. When he turned around again, Grimp had disappeared. Matt's vigilance hyped itself up more as he questioned if the Nausicaan had been entirely in his imagination. At least facing Grimp again was a familiar danger. Being tracked by people determined to find him was an entirely new situation. He hated new situations, he needed to know how he was supposed to react, needed to feel secure in that he *did* know how to react. Control, he needed control, so he could feel safe.

On this transport, safety was far from him. The hours passed quickly as Matthieu went over plans in his head, committing nothing to any written format. The ship shuddered at the hard docking at the new starport and the passengers stood to disembark. As Matt slipped out the door, he felt others pressing from the back, eager to be off the ship. The throng of people spilled out the large hatch and into the dingy

corridors of the backwaters of Federation space. Matt started to turn as he felt a large presence behind him, one that didn't move as the room became less constricted. The blade that slipped through the layers of his clothing felt cold as it passed along his skin, then hot as it slid across his ribcage. As the blade withdrew, it left a long, deep gash in his torso. Grabbing his side, Matt felt the warmth through his clothes. He swore and finished turning, finding Grimp there, his sharp Nausicaan teeth showing in a distinctly Nausicaan smile.

"Don't worry, little human, it won't kill you," he said in his native language.

"The what the hell did you do it for?"

"To see if you would kill me in return." The knife had disappeared within the folds of Grimp's vest, Matt hadn't even caught a glimpse of it, despite the evidence of blood seeping from his side. Pain had started to lance upwards. The Nausicaan leaned over, his fetid breath catching Matt full in the face. "And it seems you won't, little one."

Anger surged through him, but it was quickly tempered by something else, and he saw that Grimp would certainly kill him if he tried to fight. And he wasn't going to give the larger being what he wanted. "It seems I won't," Matt said, staring into the alien's yellow irises. He had other people to kill, Grimp wasn't anywhere near his list. In fact, his list contained only Garak's name. Violence for the sake of violence bothered him, and once he dealt with his promise, he didn't plan on ever having to kill again unless absolutely forced.

Disappointment momentarily clouded Grimp's face. Then he gave a shrug and walked away. Matt knew the ways of Nausicaans. Grimp had recovered his honor and wouldn't be bothering Matt again. Matt was surprised to find he didn't care in the least that he'd lost face with Grimp. Then he realized he never intended to see the alien again and dismissed the entire incident from his mind.

His side, however, had some objections. Matt kept one hand pressed to the wound through his clothing as he purchased a room for a night from one of the quasi-hotels located on the base. He paid in unmarked credits and the desk attendant asked no questions. Instead, he handed the boy the code key and waved Matt away. Once inside his small room, he ignored his side and checked the terminal for the latest Federation news feed. Some scrolling revealed that his fugitive status had been sent to the news corps outside of Starfleet.

"Dammit," Matt whispered as he read the report. "Dammit."

*—Missing Persons Alert: Starfleet has notified the Federation News of the disappearance of Matthieu Picard from the Galaxy-class starship Enterprise. Picard is the son of Captain Jean-Luc Picard and Doctor Beverly Crusher, both of Starfleet. The human boy is sixteen Standard years old, one point eight meters tall, and weighs seventy four kilos. He has gray eyes and reddish hair. He has no other identifiable markings. He will answer to Matthieu (also spelled Matthew) or Matt. He was last seen*

*in a Starfleet runabout in the Vulcan system. Relay any information leading to the whereabouts of Matthieu Picard to local Federation or Starfleet officials, or send a priority one message to the Federation Missing Persons Bureau.—*

A recent holo even accompanied the report. He stood and took a step away from the terminal, as if taking that step could distance him far enough away from the alert to keep people from recognizing him and reporting his whereabouts. "I'm screwed," he said, his entire appraisal of the current situation.

Then he found himself pacing and analyzing his situation, chasing the negativity away, trying to find the solution that was always there, waiting to be discovered by perseverance in searching for said solution. He'd lied to Troi about what'd happened when he was abducted. The entire incident in her office had been a sham. Of course, because Troi was Betazoid, his words had been touched by emotions from his true experiences, that way she would believe him to be honest. And he had been honest, at least where the emotions were concerned. But the actual words, the ones that supplied supposed facts, those had been entirely dishonest. It was a test for the two people claiming to be his parents. If they recognized the lie, they might well be the people they claimed to be. Even if it were true, it was all well and good for them, because he was long gone to them anyway.

He stopped, stock still, staring at his reflection in the viewport. *If they recognize the lie, if they really were his parents, they wouldn't stop searching for him.*

"Yes they will," he said aloud.

*They won't. Both of them, they're stubborn. You idiot, where do you think you got it from? Someone as hard headed as you can't come from easily frustrated and defeated parents.*

"Could be a spontaneous personality mutation."

*That's absolute bullshit and you know it. You made that up.*

"Just because I made it up doesn't mean it isn't true."

*Just like what you told Troi? How was that true?*

He didn't have to answer aloud, he didn't have to argue with himself. Because how he felt was entirely true. The fear that it could be real, that the dreams he'd locked away as a child at the advice of the old man were true. That all this time, he had another life trying to find him. But they couldn't want him now. Even though his prior crimes had been wiped away because his captive and minority status, he'd added new crimes to his rap sheet that couldn't be washed away with a captive status. He'd stolen a runabout and sold it, it would only be a short time until his missing persons alert was changed from a mere missing category to a fugitive category. And captured Federation fugitives always ended up in New Zealand.

Pain from his side reminded him to look at the wound Grimp had ever so kindly given him. Matt shucked off his outer robe, followed by his now torn jacket and shirt. The wound had started to close, dried blood crusted at the sides and stained the skin around the gash. He probed carefully at it with his fingers, making sure it wasn't deep enough to cause any real trouble. He'd have to find a first aid kit or some sort of sickbay to patch himself up.

*You need to find your medicine or nothing will matter as you writhe around in pain.*

"Right," he said. It had been well over twenty four hours since he'd been in the *Enterprise's* sickbay. Whatever drug the doctor had given him apparently was longer-acting than the one Baran used. But whatever it was, it would have an expiration, and he had to have a replacement handy by then. Whenever "then" would be. Putting his clothes back on, he went back to the terminal and checked the quadrant maps again. A Starfleet Medical Transport facility was within an hour's shuttle transport distance from his current location. If he could find some disgruntled Starfleet transportation corps officer, he could even catch a ride with them and hide in plain sight. A Starfleet ship would be the last place they'd look for him. At least, it would be the last place he'd look for himself and he thought they would think similarly to him in order to find him. Besides that, the port would have transports in and out constantly, logs could be altered.

Matthieu set the chronometer's alarm for five hours later and lay back on the bed. He kept his clothes on, unwilling to be caught offguard should someone somehow gain access to his room. Perhaps those people claiming to be his parents would give up as easily as they had when he went missing as a small child. Guilt crept through him at leaving them again, but it was chased away by the knowledge that they had given up the first time and left him in the possession of the Cardassians. If they really wanted him, if they really loved him, they wouldn't have given up.

At least, that's what he told himself. Yet somehow, he didn't find himself easily believing that they would give up so readily. But the reality was that they had in fact given up. So even if he was their son, even if he wasn't really worthy of having that sort of real family life, they weren't worthy themselves, because they had stopped looking in the first place.

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Beverly Crusher had already moved her eyes back onto the PADD she held when Data left the conference room. Jean-Luc sat at his usual seat and she sat just to his left, an assortment of padds containing false leads, leads, news reports, possible destinations, and all the records available for their missing son. "Sherlock Holmes," she said a dismissive tone.

"He meant well," Picard said, shuffling between two padds.

“And I suppose you’ll be taking a Dixon Hill persona?” she asked, raising an eyebrow at him.

“Did you notice I didn’t object to him not helping?” he asked, looking right back at her.

“Good thing,” she said, and went back to her padd. She watched him through her peripheral vision until she saw him concentrating on the padd again, then allowed herself to observe him as he worked. The events of the past few weeks had been overwhelming, between his supposed death and re-appearance, finding and losing their son once again. After all her arguments and refusals to marry him all those years ago, with the objection of becoming another Starfleet spouse, dreading the visit or the communique that would tell them that their loved one was dead, never to return, she hadn’t been able to avoid it after all. Instead of a stranger bringing her the news, she had found the news herself, staring at the readout of the DNA match, that the fragments of human cellular residue on some bar’s dirty wall were all that was left of Jean-Luc.

When she’d given the news to Will, the only thing that kept her from outright crying in front of her friend was continuing to talk in the jargon that was her work. The more jargon she could spew, the more her brain would think along those lines and not contemplate the possibility, the knowledge, that Jean-Luc was dead. The look on Will’s face had been a familiar one, she’d seen it before, on the officer sent to notify her of Jack’s death. In spite of all her protests, of all the steps she’d taken to keep herself distanced from Jean-Luc, the end result had been the same. In every regard except in name, she had become a widow again.

Data had taken Will’s place for the eulogy. Deanna stood beside Beverly, her closeness a gesture of support, but mentally, Beverly could see that her friend was preoccupied with Will’s captivity on the mercenary ship. The doctor closed her ears to Data’s eulogy, not wanting to hear his memories of the captain, instead, she relived her own regrets as they pummeled through her mind, paying no heed to her already devastated emotions. Even when their romantic relationship had largely ended due to their careers and extended separations and through her insistence that they wouldn’t marry, they had stayed the best of friends. At least, they had stayed best friends until their son’s abduction. Then she had drifted entirely away from him, whether out of anger or love she had never figured out. She knew at first, it had been anger. The absolute anger she’d turned onto him that first month, when he insisted on going back to his ship.

When he ran away.

Of course, grown men didn’t run away, instead, they just wouldn’t face their problems. But Jean-Luc had been the person she could rely on during those years before Matthieu was abducted. Then suddenly, the one person she needed desperately to be an anchor for her had disappeared, replaced by a stranger that kept squirming away from the reality of her personal life. The upheaval he left in his emotional and later physical absence had left her adrift, fighting with more anger and sadness than she thought she was ever capable of having. It hurt more than Jack’s death and she knew

why. With Jack, she'd been able to mourn, to say goodbye, even if it were through a funeral. With Matthieu, she had nothing except a gaping wound. Jean-Luc had left instead of staying to help her bandage it, as she would have done for him. But he hadn't an obligation to her beyond being the father of her child, after all, she'd refused to marry him, and then their romantic relationship had brought itself to an end. At the same time, he was her best friend, and best friends weren't supposed to turn tail and run.

They'd had intermittent communication after that confrontation ending in his retreat to his ship. Then she'd gotten the last call from the Pacifica deputy attorney general, two years after Matthieu had initially gone missing.

2361

"You have all the time in the world to start over again."

Beverly Crusher studied the diplomat who had just uttered those words. Replies shot through her mind in rapid fire bursts, yet none of them could be expressed verbally. Her mouth, usually so at the ready to say what needed to be said, refused to work. Instead, her brain worked desperately in trying to control the instincts her muscles had to reach out and throttle the man in front of her. After all, he'd just called off the search for her son.

No, not him, a committee. A committee that had consulted with her son's father and had only come to her once the decision had been made. Then her son's father hadn't even brought her the news himself, he was already off on his ship, well away from her and her temper.

A temper that now wrestled with her reason, her reason insisting that the man in front of her was the messenger, he was not the person responsible for her son's search being called off. Her muscles twitched in argument. In spite of him being a messenger, the diplomat was a handy target.

"Doctor?" the man asked.

Her eyes had drifted away, her field of vision fuzzy to the reality around her. In her blurry vision, she saw a little redheaded boy, lost in the crowd. It was a crowd she'd seen many times over in the past two years, a nameless crowd on a nameless world made up of a nameless people. Its only importance was that somewhere in that crowd, her little boy stood. She only had to find him. And as the man said, she had all the time in the world. Except that wasn't what the man meant at all. Not all the time in the world to find her son, but all the time in the world to make another. A replacement, as if he could be replaced. Neither of her sons could. Suddenly, she was absolutely sure that the diplomat had no children of his own.

A hand came down on her shoulder. "Doctor Crusher?"

This time, she looked up to meet his concerned gaze. Still, she said nothing.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

Her muscles twitched again at the audacity of the statement. *Oh, yes, I'm fine, my son is standing right behind you, so it was certainly a good idea to call off the search. Oh yes, I'm fine, I'm just going to rip your heart out. Better yet, why don't you rip mine out instead? It would certainly hurt less than it does now.* Aloud, she said nothing.

The man seemed to catch her thoughts. “I mean, given the circumstances.”

Finally, she was able to say what needed to be said. “I’ll be okay once I’ve found my son. Even if all the rest of you have given up, I haven’t. And I won’t. So you can take all your time in the world, stuff it into that emotion of yours you call pity, and turn it on yourself. I don’t need it and I never will.”

This time, it was the man’s mouth refusing to work, to say what needed to be said. Of course, one never particularly had a needed reply to being told off.

Beverly left him there in the conference room on Deep Space Five. The doors shut softly behind her, but just loud enough to nearly muffle the whisper from a man waiting in the hallway. Her son's father hadn't left on his ship after all.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“Me too,” she said.

For a moment, their paths crossed as they headed towards opposite ends of the corridor—he to his transport to his ship, she to the ‘lift to her quarters aboard the station. As they passed, their hands reached out, instinctively reaching for the other. Their fingertips brushed together, a final goodbye. Then they had passed entirely, marking that now each would carry out the remainder of the search alone.

Alone, like the little redheaded boy in the faceless crowd on the nameless world, all of them suffocating in the eternity of fruitless search and endless dreams of what was.

2370

After that last incident, she hadn’t been able to look at photographs of Jean-Luc—he reminded her both of the little boy she had lost and the friend that had gone away as a result. Her career decisions from then on were made for Wesley, to make sure he could stay with her, even if it meant she didn’t take ship postings. Wesley had objected, saying that should be out on a ship, that she was a good doctor for that sort of thing. Over and over, she’d told him, “You’re more important.”

At first, Wesley would reply with an “I miss him, too.” Whether the boy meant his brother or Jean-Luc or even his own father, she never knew, because she could never bring herself to ask. Yet even as she told her remaining son that she stayed off ships for him, she found herself longing to be on a ship anyway.

Because ships went places, and ships that went places had a better chance of running across her other son. Even as the years went by, that hope never left her, that one day, a ship would find her son. Eventually, Wesley had stopped mentioning Matthieu. When the posting opened up for the Galaxy-class vessel, she jumped at it, the opportunity to take Wesley with her on a ship, and that chance to be *on* a ship. She hadn't noticed until two weeks later who the captain was. In fact, Wesley had brought it to her attention, asking her, "Hey, isn't Captain Picard the man who brought my father's body home to us?"

"Yes," she'd told him, whispering to keep the emotion out of her voice. Her son had dropped the subject after that, he'd either forgotten about his brother entirely or had caught on to an unspoken agreement to not talk about Matthieu.

Her vision had gotten blurry and she blinked, clearing her eyes. She found that Jean-Luc had noticed her staring and was looking directly at her with those gray eyes that their son possessed. She averted her own eyes, feeling a flush creep into her cheeks at being caught. Did he know the direction of her thoughts? Always, the loss of their son had stood between them aboard the *Enterprise*. If Matthieu hadn't been abducted, she wondered where they would stand now. She'd intended to marry him one day, to join him on a ship once the Galaxy-class vessels were built. There had been rumors of them around the time they'd gone to Pacifica. His proposal had become a running joke between them, him asking whenever he saw her if she'd changed her mind.

"No," she'd say. "Not yet."

And she'd see, in his eyes, the hope he attached to her "yet." She felt secure in leaving that hope, knowing that she would fulfill it, when the time was right for all of them. If Matthieu hadn't been abducted, she was certain they would have been married when he took command of the *Enterprise* just before the mission on Farpoint Station. Would they have had more children? As a child and even as a young woman, she'd planned on having more than one or two. She'd missed having a brother or sister or two as she grew up. Watching her older son grow up, she saw the impact of being an only child had on him. She knew Wesley's temperament would have changed had Matthieu been around all the time, or if the boys had a younger sister or two.

One part of the dream had happened, the posting to a Galaxy-class vessel, but nothing else remained of the dream she'd once had. Then they had found Matthieu and for a brief moment, she had recalled that dream, thought that though it had been delayed, it could all still happen. Then he'd gone missing again, and with all the knowledge of their son and his life and his whereabouts spread before them, she socked that dream away again, unwilling to let it affect her again.

A hand was placed over hers, warm and comforting. "Hey," said the steady voice that belonged to the man whose hand was on hers. "I lost you there."

She met his look and gave him a tight smile, feeling the touch of tears at the corners of her eyes. His hand grasped hers more tightly, his other hand reached out and brushed the hair away from her forehead, caressed her cheek. "We'll find him," he said.

Beverly bit her lip. The words she'd needed to hear when Matthieu had first disappeared, the friend she'd needed to be there for her had finally appeared. The years had changed Jean-Luc. He was different, no longer was his ship his sole mistress.

The conference room's doors open and she withdrew her hand, not knowing who would walk into the room and unwilling to give just anyone a view of her private life. Deanna strode in, closely followed by Data. Beverly could tell her Betazoid friend had a mission in mind. "You haven't slept in almost two days," Deanna said.

Beverly sat back. "And?"

Troi crossed her arms. "You need to sleep."

Her friend was right, they did need to sleep. The first time this had happened, she'd neglected her work, her older son, had forgotten to eat, refused to sleep, completely wearing herself away. If she was going to find her son, she couldn't let that happen again. The doctor gave Troi a nod. "You're right."

Deanna looked taken aback.

Beverly gave her a quick smile. "What, expecting more of fight?"

Troi frowned. "Well...yes, to be honest."

The doctor stood, dropping the padd from her hand back to the table. "You forget, I've been through this before." With that, she slipped past her friend and out the door, leaving Data behind explaining that as he didn't require sleep, he would continue the work as they rested. And leaving Deanna with a deeper frown at the pain in her friend's reply.

As Beverly stepped onto the turbolift, she heard footsteps behind her. Jean-Luc followed her into the turbolift, not giving a separate destination from hers. *That's right*, she thought. *We switched quarters so Matthieu could stay with both of us.* Apprehension flickered through her, knowing what lay in wait, of all those photographs and holos of her younger son. The 'lift stopped on their deck and they made their way to their quarters. As they walked in, Beverly felt Jean-Luc's fingertips against hers and waited for them to evaporate like the support that was contained in them. But they didn't go away. Instead, the fingers laced through hers in a show of solidarity. He was telling her they would face things together.

But she wasn't so sure she could handle it all at once. They walked in and three steps through the doorway, she dropped her hand from his and went quickly to her

room, unwilling to look at any of the memories. As the doors to her room swished shut on Jean-Luc's confused and hurt expression, the gulf settled between them again, the fragile rope bridge left frayed and holding between them by only a few weakening strands.

The young human awoke in the night. An old man watched him from a shadowed corner, watched as the boy's gray eyes flickered open, wide and panicked. The old man knew the look. The small ones dreamed of being safe, of being where they were before, then remember that it had all been taken away, in that small instant before waking up. As their eyes opened, they would go through the entire separation again, fear multiplying fear, and unless the dreams could be stopped, the fear would stop them dead as it grew exponentially.

Once awake, the boy had moved next to one of the two viewports in the room, his cheek pressed against the transparent aluminum, his eyes on the stars passing by outside the hull. The old man rose from his chair, his bones creaking like a sentinel leaving a centuries old watch, and walked over to the boy. The other children, all Bajoran, had complained to the old man that the new boy didn't talk to them. So he had replied with a simple question. "Did *you* talk when you first arrived?"

None of them had, and as they each realized what the old man had pointed out, their complaints melted away. Even as they all slept, they gave the new boy space, physically distancing themselves from him as he curled up in a corner. Savas knew each of the children, had watched each of them acclimate to the work camp environment, watched each of them as they lost their dreams of who they were before. He knew them all except the small boy in the corner, the small boy that now watched him warily as he approached. The old man seated himself in front of the boy, propping his arms on his knees. "You dreamed," he said. It wasn't a question.

The boy glared at him, his eyes harder than any child's should ever be, then turned back to the streaking stars.

"My name is Savas," the old man said. "The others tell me that you don't talk."

The boy shrugged, his body shrinking back into the shadows below the window.

In that moment, Savas knew why Garak had sent him this boy. The anger burned through him again, revolting and familiar, an anger that had rolled through him when he first met each child in this group. All of the children had been bought by the Cardassians from Orion slave traders, by Garak in particular, or some officer under his command. The spy, it seemed, had his own ideas about what lines could be crossed when children were involved, even if the children were slaves, even if the children weren't Cardassian. Somehow, Garak had discovered Savas's ability to bring children back across that line, and had started sending the children he found to Savas.

The old man had only met Garak once, a meeting in a deserted corridor while waiting for a spy to drop off a newly found child.

“This work you do, were you a counselor before you were captured?” Garak asked.

“No,” Savas replied.

“Then what were you?”

“Mostly, I was a tailor. When you’re measuring, people talk. So I listened. Sometimes, I asked questions.” He shrugged. “It’s what my people do.”

Garak crossed his arms. “Humans aren’t exactly the most listening of species.”

“I’m not human.” Savas’s reply was tinged with boredom. It was an old argument. His species resembled the Terrans in nearly every aspect aside from lifespan. The people from the Sol system were remarkably short-lived compared to the centuries long lifespans of the El Aurians.

The Cardassian’s eyes narrowed, studying Savas closely. “Then what are you?”

“El Aurian.”

“I don’t know your people.”

“Not many do,” said Savas. “We’re scattered across the galaxy.” He didn’t feel like telling him why. Centuries had passed and he still heard the messages in his head, the messages sent from his dying homeworld, ones that had dwindled away to nothing, only the deep silence remaining of a doomed race. The Borg had caused their diaspora, but he knew the remnants of his people were so scattered that it only prolonged the moments before his people’s death.

Garak seemed poised to ask more questions, but the hatch had opened and the spy stumbled through with a child in tow. Savas hadn’t seen the Cardassian since, but children continued to trickle his way, each more haunted than the next. *More haunted than any living being assimilated by the Borg*, he thought. But his last conversation with Garak had been years ago, and the boy in front of him was more important than fading memories. The boy was young, Savas estimated around five Terran years, though he suspected the boy was small for his age.

But the boy’s eyes were old and full of pain that was masked by his silence. However, hate hadn’t settled into the gray of the human’s eyes, so in turn, Savas saw hope. The ones who had changed over to hate, they would carry that emotion with them always, a writhing ball of hardened pain, and eventually become predators themselves. Or the hate consumed them completely, they ended up hating themselves, and then they would wither away and die. Savas wasn’t sure what drove the Cardassian to help, but the El Aurian was repaying the woman that had helped him recover. He didn’t know

where she was now, if she were alive or dead, or a Borg. Her voice hadn't been in any of the messages. But she remained alive in his memories, the soft tones of her comforting voice, the warm brown eyes that had given him safety. When she found him, he had been only six, a little boy on the verge of hating himself.

"It happened to me, too," he said to the boy, his tone carefully gauged to carry only to the child cowering in front of him.

Impossibly, the boy grew smaller, and his eyes anchored back onto the space outside. "Nothing happened," he whispered.

It would be a long time for this boy to be okay again. Savas changed the subject. It was the way of the work, he would have to come around from an entirely different direction. To truly get at the boy's past would take years, all Savas could hope for in the near future was to learn the boy's name. "What did you dream about?" he asked.

"I think it was my mother."

"We have no mothers here." It was better the boy learned early to forget where he came from. The dreams would fade, the pain would fade, missing the life that came before wouldn't hurt so much. The lucky ones, they had everything fade away entirely and were left with nothing but the present. But there were times that Savas recalled it hadn't been lucky to forget, that something was lost when that happened, something inherent to a person, or a people. Soon, all that would be left of his own people would be the memories of others as they continued to die out, and all that would remain would be the ones stuck in the living nightmare of being a Borg.

"My mother had red hair," the boy said, turning from the window and looking directly at Savas, his small voice resolute, challenging. His hair was the color of the rust on the hull plates of the old slave transport ships, like the ship they were on now.

The boy would have a hard time forgetting. He wouldn't be one of the lucky ones. "You should forget about that," said Savas.

"I won't," said the boy. "And my father, he wore a red uniform." The conversation had made the boy more animated, his eyes lit up as he kept thinking of the parents that had lost him.

*Starfleet.* Savas felt the impulse to press the child for information, to find out if the boy knew his parents' names, to find out if the boy knew if he were the child of someone important to the Cardassians. The El Aurian was certain that Garak knew, but for once felt no ulterior motive from the Cardassian. They had an understanding, one that came from men who had suffered through the same hardship as children, something they would never speak of except through their actions in keeping it from happening again. They both understood that neither of them were who they wanted to be, that the course of their lives had been forged through the influences of others, and the end result was a useless piece of hammered iron. "You should forget about him," Savas said.

The boy stood up, hands balled into fists. "I won't forget," he said, the words echoing off the walls, the sharp tone causing the other children to stir.

This time it was the old man's turn to look out the window at the stars streaking by. He'd never forgotten Guinan, the woman who had helped him. Or forgotten how it felt to be a little boy missing his parents, knowing that he'd never see them again. And how it felt to think that because of what had been done to him, that if his parents found him again, they'd never love him.

"I couldn't forget, either," Savas said. Each time he looked at the stars, he asked the same thing: *Mom, Dad, can you forgive me? Can you love me again?*

Each time, the quiet of space answered him with no reply at all. So he kept trying, one child at a time, to fix what had been broken inside each of them.

\*\*\*

Matthieu

2370

*Confusion roiled around him, everything unfamiliar and chaotic. There was a familiar looking four year old girl in front of him, but he wasn't ten, he was five. They stood face to face, eyes on eyes, studying one another with a great intensity.*

*"It happened to me, too," she said.*

*"Nothing happened," his five year old self told her. It was him, he felt it, gone was the taller body of a boy in his mid-teens. Instead, he felt the small muscles, the confusion of where he'd been taken, wondering where all the familiar things had gone. He was five again. "Nothing happened," he repeated. She had died. He hadn't.*

*People were brushing by them, the short children lost in the crowd, ignored by all the adults rushing around. Occasionally, one person or another would bump into them, then continue on their way, leaving them off-balance and teetering on the edge of toppling to the floor. "I'm not dead, like you," he said to her.*

*"What's my name?" she asked.*

*"I don't know. I never knew your name. I didn't know you until later." This girl, he hadn't known her when he was five, he met her when he was ten. And when he was ten, he watched her die.*

*"But even then, you didn't know my name."*

*Shame flushed his face and pushed down on his shoulders at her correct assumption. When he looked up, she was gone, replaced by the old man. "Savas," Matthieu said.*

*"My name, you knew," Savas said, his eyes so different from the girl's, brown and warm and forgiving instead of the dark, cold, and unforgiving eyes of the girl.*

*"You died," the boy said, looking up at the old man.*

*"She did too."*

*The shame came back, pulling his shoulders into a slump, trying to hide him, take him over.*

*"But you haven't," the old man said at Matthieu's reaction.*

*The reply came out before he even knew the thought had settled into his mind. "I died a long time ago. I died when she died." His small hand motioned towards the moving crowd, where the Bajoran girl had been lost for good. Then he remembered. "No, I died before that."*

*Savas knelt to the boy's height, not letting Matt avoid his gaze. "You didn't die."*

*"I should have."*

*"It happened to me, too." A hand on his shoulder meant to comfort.*

*"Nothing happened!" he shouted, pushing away from Savas.*

*The crowd stopped, all their heads turned to the little boy at his outburst. Then they began to move again, this time away from each other, forming a hole in the mass of bodies. As they cleared off, an Orion stepped out.*

*Fear replaced the shame. Matthieu took a step backward, then another, but the crowd stopped him from retreating further, bodies pressed against his back. Hands fell on his shoulders again, holding him fast as the Orion kept moving forward. Quiet stilled the corridor, Matthieu heard each step.*

*"I'm sorry," he heard the girl say.*

*Matt glanced over. She was back, now standing next to Savas, her hand in his. Out of nowhere, he was jealous. She was safe.*

*"I'm the one who's sorry," Matthieu told her, meeting her eyes. They had changed when she grasped the old man's hand, they were forgiving now, too. But he knew the truth. He couldn't be forgiven. No one could forgive him, it was too much to ask.*

*"Matthieu, I'm sorry," Savas said.*

*"Some things are worse than death," the girl said.*

*The Orion took his hand, leading Matthieu away, and the crowd surged around them again, and Matthieu couldn't see the girl and the old man anymore.*

*And he began to cry.*

He woke up, and it was night. Yet in space, it was always night, always dark. And he was sixteen again, not ten, and not five. He didn't know why he bothered to try and sleep, because this was how he woke up each time. At some point, he'd broken into a sweat. Feeling his damp clothing, the damp sheets tangled around him, his hair plastered to his skull, he felt compelled to shower, get himself clean. Unwrapping himself from the sheets, he left the bed behind him and made his way to the lavatory, shedding his dirty clothes on the way.

Eyes met him in the mirror, a stranger's despite their likeness to his own. "*Help me,*" they said, hurt making him vulnerable, the sting of coming tears barely held at bay.

Then the face frowned, his own voice replying, "I don't need help." The eyes didn't change and he couldn't look at them anymore, couldn't stand to see them. So he studied the wound on his side, it had turned red and begun to pucker as he slept. Touching it, the gash felt hot. Infected. Of course a Nausicaan's blade would be unclean. The need to find a medical facility grew more desperate.

*Your mother could fix it for you. She was a doctor, you know.*

"Shut up," he said, then stepped into the shower, trying to drown out that inner voice, the voice of that lost little boy. As the water fell around him, the stinging returned. Even as he washed with as much soap as he could bear, trying to scrub everything away, he knew that even if he scrubbed all of his skin off entirely, the dirt buried far below his skin wouldn't be washed away. He tried to clean out the infected wound, but it was too painful to the touch. He blinked his eyes, fighting the tears of the little boy. There would be no crying, no one could see that, even himself.

Once he was as clean as he could get, he found himself in front of the mirror again, trying to figure out how to disguise himself. His hair was his weakness, the rusty color uncommon among humans, readily identifiable. Shaving it off would take care of that problem only to create another. Though he still doubted the veracity of the two Starfleet officers on the *Enterprise*, he couldn't deny that he resembled a child that a mix of their genes would produce. While someone could attribute his hair color to the woman who claimed to be his mother, shaving that hair away would emphasize the planes and angles of a face that much resembled the man who claimed to be his father. Because of his luck, most of the Federation knew who Jean-Luc Picard was and even knew what he looked like. If he dyed his hair, he'd look like a younger version of Picard—the one most likely associated with the Battle of Maxia. Growing a beard would draw more attention to his hair color.

Frustrated, he dressed quickly, ignoring the pain when the clothing brushed his injury. He bypassed checking the terminal for news, instead choosing the more up to

date and reliable source of the talk at the bar. Since space was eternally night, the bar never shut down, closed, or took a morning-mode. Travelers kept different night and day cycles and the bar always catered to those on the night schedule. When Matthieu entered, it was as he'd left it the night before, crowded, noisy, dirty—exactly the place to find the most wanted list for the Federation.

He was just inside the main doors when an image from his dream moved through his peripheral vision. Turning his head, he sought out what he thought he'd seen, trying to make sure he was imagining it, because the reality would be more disturbing than him seeing things. People, specifically. Then again, he saw it, in and out of his field of vision.

The old man.

Matthieu shook his head, ridding himself of what he must be imagining, left over bits of his dream drifting into his waking life. Apparently he'd spent too long on this base and needed to get himself to the Medical Transport facility and towards Deep Space Nine. With ships leaving constantly, he was able to get onto a flight and over to the transport facility within two hours. As he'd sat in his seat, he'd looked around for the Nausicaan, but found no sign of him. At the same time, he knew he was looking for the old man, even as he told himself he was imagining it. After all, the old man had died six years ago. He'd watched it happen, watched the old man die just after he'd made the promise to him that he wouldn't follow the plan they'd set up when the old man was well. When he'd made the promise with the full intention of breaking it as soon as the old man was gone.

Yet he couldn't shake the feeling that he was being followed, except he should be worried about the Fleet looking for him, not a relic from his past. The passengers pooled into the corridor, where every other person that passed them wore the blue of Starfleet Medical. A sense of familiarity rolled over him at seeing all the blue uniforms. When he was small, he thought the world was filled with blue and black uniforms, except for that red and black uniform his father had worn. *When you saw him, you could always find him in the crowd right away at the medical facilities where your mother worked, you'd run towards him and he'd pick you up, just like that. And you felt safe.*

Paranoia shoved the familiarity away as Matthieu became convinced he was being followed. He whipped around his body, not caring if he drew attention to himself, and met the eyes of the person that had trailed him. Warm, brown, forgiving eyes. Savas. Then Matthieu blinked and the old man was gone. He felt the impulse to bolt and did so, not thinking of the irrationality of running from the dead when it was the living he was trying to get away from. Rounding a corner, he ran straight into a tall Fleet officer. The impact sent them both to the ground and both having been trained, both immediately rose back to their feet, ready for a fight.

Matthieu found himself looking directly at Commander Riker. The disguise they'd used was a sorry one. Shaved the beard into a goatee, changed the uniform from command red to the medical blue, reduced his rank to Lieutenant Commander instead

of commander. But Matthieu wasn't an idiot, it was the traitor standing right in front of him.

"Who the hell are you?" Riker asked.

Matthieu thought that wouldn't be the first thing Riker would say when he caught him. But he hadn't been caught yet, the man was standing three feet away, and he knew he could run faster than Riker. "And who the hell are you?" Matthieu asked, tensing his muscles to jump away from the officer. "Oh, wait, that's right, you're Commander Riker, the traitor on the *Enterprise*."

"I'm not Will Riker, I'm Tom. His brother."

Matthieu studied the man. "I feel sorry for you, then."

Tom studied the boy. "And you're Matthieu Picard. They're looking for you."

Matt's eyes quickly checked around them to see if anyone else had heard, but no heads had turned. He could still get out of this, his legs were ready to run if need be. His attention back to Tom, he said, "Can you be bought?" Perhaps being a traitor ran in the family.

The glare that went across Tom's face was only momentary, then tall man smiled. "Depends on the price. They aren't exactly offering a reward for you anyway. Just the congratulations of finding the flagship captain's kid."

Matt stood up straight. The comment caught him off guard, and he briefly forgot his urge to run. "I'm not his kid."

Riker snorted. "Yeah, and I'm secretly an Andorian with an identity complex." He paused. "How much are you talking?"

Matthieu rummaged in his pockets and came up with a credit chit readout, then handed it to Riker.

Riker read the information and pocketed the chit. "Now I won't turn you in. Was there anything else you wanted while you're paying off Starfleet officers?"

"You wouldn't happen to be a pilot, would you?"

The commander gave him an incredulous look, then motioned him towards the docking bays. As they strode into the bay and walked over to the ship Riker was piloting, Matthieu felt relieved at his first stroke of real luck since he'd escaped from the *Enterprise*. Riker's ship was exactly what he was looking for—a medical transport ship, one that transported cargo and not people.

"I'm heading towards Deep Space Five," Riker said as he keyed the door open. "I'm leaving in an hour. Afterwards, I'm heading to Starbase Five One Two. You're welcome to tag along all the way there if you want."

Matthieu shrugged. "I haven't decided yet. How long will it take to get to each stop?"

"A day or so to each." He began tapping commands into the flight control panels.

"When are you leaving?"

"Give me half an hour and we can take off. I have to secure the cargo." The tall man stood and went into the back cargo hold.

Matt waited for a moment, feeling uneasy at what he was supposed to do. Riker came back out, a uniform in his hands. "Put this on before you go wandering the station anymore," he said. "And it'll keep you under cover when we leave."

He raised an eyebrow as he took the proffered uniform. It seemed odd to him to dress in the uniform of the people who were after him.

*No, it seems odd to you that you're going to dress in the uniform of the parents you claim not to remember.*

Riker was giving him an strange look. "You okay, kid?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." Matt went into the lavatory and changed, leaving his other clothing in a bag he'd purchased when he'd gotten the other set of clothes. Riker had replicated the insignia of a crewman for him, which would give him good cover without a lot of questions, as well as not raising a point of his youth.

He walked out of the transport ship and checked one of the terminals in the docking bay. A medical supply depot was close by, he could grab supplies as he waited for Riker, then patch himself up on the journey to DS5. Then he'd also have his medicine handy for whenever that Starfleet doctor's treatment wore off. He shut down the terminal and headed out the door, shifting uncomfortably in the heavy cloth of a Fleet uniform. Though the brilliance of the idea showed itself as he made his way through the corridors and encountered no questions and no strange looks. He was any other medical corpsman in a field of faceless Fleet enlisted crewmen. Compared to trying to break into the supply area, nonchalantly walking in and grabbing what he needed was a much easier task. Items in hand, he went back to the docking bay and boarded the transport ship. Riker was powering up the engines. "Nice timing," he said.

"I try," Matt replied, then settled into the copilot's seat.

The ship left the transport facility and kicked into warp. After nearly an hour, Matt noticed Riker kept studying him when he thought Matt wasn't looking. "What?" he asked.

“I bet your parents would love to see you in that uniform,” Riker said.

“They aren’t my parents.”

Riker shrugged. “Say what you want, but it’s hard to deny genetic evidence. Besides, I’ve met them. They’re good people.”

Matthieu crossed his arms and turned away from the officer, eyes on the stars outside. *They might be, whoever they are, but I’m not, whoever I am.*

Garak

2364

"You seem to have a soft spot for children," Gul Madred said from behind his desk.

Garak sighed. "It's the Cardassian way to be."

Madred fixed a look on him with his small eyes, ones that looked like glittering pebbles placed carefully into his face. Garak could see that Madred wasn't in the mood for his glib manner, but the Gul was never in the mood for it, and Garak always was. The more sarcasm he bandied about, the less people would catch on to any truths behind it. "These aren't Cardassian children," Madred said.

"They're still children." It wasn't like Madred hadn't known when Garak was posted here as the liaison for the Obsidian Order. Already Garak had been warned multiple times over setting children free. Not Cardassian children, they'd tell him. They aren't worth the trouble. But his own thoughts remained the same as he'd just told Madred. Children were children, no matter what their race.

"I'm not even talking about a Bajoran child right now."

"Oh, the human boy," Garak said, trying to sound lighthearted about the matter. Madred hadn't yet figured out just who the human boy was and Garak had done his best to keep it that way. If the Gul found out, the boy would be used as a pawn and would most likely die in a rather uncomfortable, long and drawn-out manner. It was, after all, Madred's specialty.

"I'm told the boy has a name. Matthew."

"Indeed," said Garak, wondering who had told. He'd known for quite some time, Savas had relayed that information. Rarely did the El Aurian try and contact him, so the message had been both a shock and a warning to him. The boy wasn't just any boy that needed some help to get over what the Orions had done to him. He was also the son of a prominent Federation captain, the one about the take command of the Federation's first Galaxy-class starship. Despite the boy being the child of his enemies, Garak still recognized him as a child, and still that small boy that needed Savas's help. He couldn't return him to his father, but the least he could do was to keep him from being hurt any more than he'd already been. And in order to do so, he had to keep Madred away from the boy.

"Were you aware that the boy has a surname as well?" Madred asked, leaned forward over his desk, a hawk circling his prey.

"A surname?" Garak asked.

Madred sat back, steepling his fingers. "Do you take me for a fool, Garak?"

*He knew.* Garak let loose a stream of Cardassian expletives in his head, with some Klingon and Terran choice expressions thrown in for good measure. If Madred knew, which it seemed he most certainly did, then not only was the boy Matthew in danger, but all the other children as well. All the work he and Savas had done would go to waste. Aloud, Garak said nothing.

The Gul swept his arm across his desktop and everyone on it flew off the side. "Picard!" he said.

Garak raised an eyebrow. "A bit dramatic, don't you think?" he asked.

Madred walked over and stood in front of him. "You do know who Picard is, don't you?"

"I'd have to be on a moon colony not to know. Oh, wait, that's right. I *am* on a moon colony. Tell me, who is this Picard fellow?"

As Madred launched into a tirade about the Starfleet captain and the Terran's current position in the Federation, and him having such a wonderful blackmail opportunity right under his nose all this time, and no one having told him, Garak had a thought: *the wise men choose to be tailors*. Then the thought left him and he became painfully aware of an acute silence.

"Are you even listening to me?" Madred asked.

"Honestly, no. I tuned out sometime when you mentioned Farpoint Station. You *do* realize how ridiculously backwater that outpost is, don't you? It has no strategic value whatsoever."

"The strategic advantage we have is in that workhouse, under the care of your man Savas."

Garak saw Madred waiting for some type of reaction from him, an acknowledgment of who Savas was, so he didn't give the other man anything.

So Madred gave him everything, each step of action he was going to take to get that human boy completely in their power. And one by one, Garak carried them out. He met with the old man and formed an escape plan that would smuggle the children off the moon's work camp.

"You've never tried anything like this before," Savas said. "You never even mentioned it."

"An opportunity has come my way," Garak replied. When they parted, they shook hands, and Savas was given a virus that would kill him within two days, exactly what Madred had commanded. Except Garak knew the virus wouldn't be fatal, only seem so

long enough to make the boy take leadership of the other children. Of all of them, Savas would be the only one saved, and then only because he had to die first. And perhaps one day, there would be more, but none of them would be the children in his care right now. So the old man died, and Garak set him free. Then he watched as Madred took the children back as they came out of the cave one by one, as that human boy stared at him in outrage, then outright rage as the events unfolded.

*I'm sorry.*

But he couldn't say it aloud. As much as this was a strategic move on Madred's part, it was also a punishment for Garak. One that told the spy that he wasn't wanted, that this soft spot he had for children had to be excised. Madred kept Garak outside the room as he tortured the boy by killing the other children in front of them. The screams crashed through the door and into Garak and the clinical side of him had to be amazed at the exquisite nature of Madred's talent. But the rest of him was disgusted and horrified. What Madred was doing you could do to grown men, but subject children to it was unspeakable. But they were human and Bajoran children, what did Madred care? They were no more than vermin to him.

One of the guards hauled him back into the room where he was faced with the remains of what hadn't made it through the door—the bodies of the children, stacked in a corner. Their souls had escaped already, screaming at him on their way out. One boy remained trapped within his corporeal body, his soul screaming to escape, his conscience flaying him even more.

Garak looked at the boy, willing his eyes to be vacant and unfeeling. As he looked, Madred explaining what would happen next, he saw that instead of helping that small five year old human, he'd made everything worse, so much worse. The boy was double the age he'd been, and while Savas had made great strides in getting the boy to accept that he was at least decent, what had just happened sealed shut any chance of the boy recovering. The boy's screams here would mix in with the screams he must have given before, with the Orions, then they would be compounded by the screams of the other children.

The spy's own scream writhed inside him. Madred revealed how talented he really was and handed the boy's custody over to Garak with some comment about the boy being sold to a mercenary ship. Of course, there was no mercenary ship, at least not yet. Garak saw the challenge Madred had given him: *go ahead, fix that mess I've just created in the human boy.* And it was all the strategic maneuvering Madred would do, all of this he'd carried out to bring Garak under his control. The fact that the boy was the son of a Starfleet captain meant nothing to Madred.

Garak took the boy by the shoulder and led him away. He spent the better part of a month trying to help the boy, wishing that he could ask Savas what he'd done to help children. But Garak was trained as a spy, trained in interrogation tactics, entirely untrained in talking to children. His job had been to deliver the children to Savas, that was his part in keeping things from happening all over again. And now he'd been given

a part he wasn't meant to play. He also thought that Madred would come to realize his mistake in giving the boy over to him, that he had indeed had quite a large bargaining chip in his possession.

The best thing he could do for the boy was exactly what Madred had said—sell him to a mercenary ship. The boy went along with it stolidly, in the same manner he'd had for the past month, not speaking at all. Garak recalled that Savas had said this was how the boy acted when he was first delivered to the work camp transport. He made the transaction with a mercenary ship that tended to operate in the Vulcan systems, knowing that maybe it would give a chance for the boy's parents to find him.

A slim, nearly nonexistent chance, but one filled with more hope than the boy had here. Garak knelt to the boy's level as Cadan, the ship's captain, made ready to finish the custody transaction. "It will be better this way," he said.

The boy glared at him, the same glare he'd given Garak for the past weeks, one that had started with the first capture of the children.

"Maybe you'll find your parents."

Garak saw it in the boy's eyes, the thought crawling across them, the same thought Garak had as a boy. *They wouldn't want me anyway.*

His unspoken reply made its way to his own dark eyes. *I know exactly how you feel.* After all, Tain, his own father, hadn't wanted him either, when he was brought home.

"I'll find you," the boy said. "When I'm older. And then I'll kill you for you did."

Of that, Garak had no doubt. But he felt strangely triumphant that the boy had finally spoken to him, even if it was to threaten his death. "I'm sorry, Matthew," Garak said, using the boy's name for the first time. Then Cadan took the boy onto the ship and Garak walked away into the deserted plain. *When I leave this life and begin a new one, I will be a tailor.* It would be the wisest choice he ever made.

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Picard

2370

Jean-Luc watched the door shut between them, the confusion forming in that chasm, but the hurt connecting them even through the closed doors. He turned away from the door, unwilling to follow her when she had so quickly and effectively closed him out. Then he saw what was around them, holos that had been put away for years, framed photographs that had gathered the dust of forgetfulness, reminders in everything they had gained and lost, twice over, through their missing son. His fingers traced the frame of one photograph, one that Beverly must have taken when she and the boys had

met him at a starbase. Matthieu had spotted him immediately and barreled his way through the crowd of adults to get to him. On his part, Jean-Luc had spotted his son just as quickly, that cap of rusty hair so easy to find, along with the small voice shouting, "Papa!" as he shoved aside adults in his way. The adults smiled at the little boy and his enthusiasm, remembering greetings from their own children when they had been away for a long period of time. All of them gathered at the base were Starfleet, they knew this scene as well as they knew their Fleet jobs.

The boy had reached him and Picard used his son's momentum to pull him into his arms, this small person he had made with Beverly, one who already had a personality all his own. The photograph he saw now was of that moment, when he'd scooped the boy into his arms and kissed his forehead, thrilled to see him. He let his fingers drop away from the frame. "Would you have still called me Papa?" he whispered to the picture. "Or would you have decided it was too childish and called me Dad? Or Father?"

The idea of being called Father brought images of his own childhood to mind, of how distant his own father could be, how both he and Robert had changed to calling him Father once they were old enough to realize that Maurice Picard wasn't what most boys called a papa. Unwilling to play the game of what might have been and what his own childhood was like, he went over to the terminal and called up the information Troi had gotten when she'd talked to the boy.

*Matthieu, his name is Matthieu, he's my son, and I miss him.*

Picard brought padds away from the terminal and spread them out over the dining table, the same setup he'd had in the conference room. He was too keyed up to sleep, he felt he needed to make some headway before he could rest. On the padds he separated the statements he felt were lies and what could contain some truth. As for the lies, he didn't think Matthieu had been on the mercenary ship for four years, it would've been longer. Nor did he think Matthieu had been just a servant on Cardassia, he was too unbalanced for that to be the case. From what he'd studied about Cardassian society, their servants, whether human, Bajoran, or otherwise, were treated decently. A boy treated decently wouldn't be as reticent and guarded as Matthieu was now. Picard's instincts told him that awful things had happened to his son, and he'd failed to protect him from those things. Anger bubbled up to the surface, like when magma began to flow before the major eruption of a volcano, and he channeled it into more investigation.

He was certain that Matthieu's memories were returning, that he hadn't run out of paranoia of being sent to a penal colony. Picard knew what vulnerability did to him, and to Beverly, and was sure Matthieu dealt with it the same way, in that he wouldn't deal with it at all. Instead, he would run away from it to keep it from finding him, to keep anyone from knowing about it. The same as he had done when his son had gone missing. Beverly had suffered through the sleepless nights and the days without food, her stomach too tied up with anxiety to be able to digest anything. All that she went through, and he'd done his level best to keep his regular schedule, to eat and sleep as needed, convincing himself that everything would return to normal if he willed it so.

But now he couldn't sleep, and his stomach was so wrapped up in itself that he couldn't even think about food. *Was this what she had felt all that time?* He glanced over at her door. Still closed. He wanted to go to her, ask her if what he felt now, she had felt then. To apologize for not understanding, for his actions making it seem as if he'd given up easily, for making her so angry with him because to her, he'd given up. If he'd just told her, *"Don't you see? Don't you see that I haven't given up, I just don't know what to do? And because of that, I do things that I know how to do."* But back then, he hadn't been able to acknowledge his own feelings, much less admit them to someone else, not when they left him that vulnerable.

Then seeing her on his ship years after all of that, feeling disconnected from reality at seeing her in his sickbay. He had questioned if their past together had all happened, or if it had all been some wonderful dream turned so horrible that they had forgotten it. So they allowed that large elephant to stomp around the room between them, because the tremors from admitting the truth would create more havoc within them than letting it be. Then Kesprytt had revealed the hopes that they had mirrored in one another, of what they wished had happened, of how they still felt about the other.

*I took command of the Enterprise because I had planned on it, when Matthieu was a toddler, to have you and the boys join me on the ship, as my family.*

*I know, she'd thought back. And I would have agreed to.*

So much more than their son had been lost when he disappeared. Then hours ago, in what felt like years ago, with their son laying safely in Sickbay, she'd kissed him and wishes they'd both long buried had come back, the future once again between them. When Matthieu left the ship and disappeared into the vast emptiness of the quadrant, the wishes had been packed away again, quickly and painfully, leaving raw edges behind. Except this time, Picard was determined to act correctly. Whether or not Beverly ever decided to accept him into her life as more than a friend, she still needed him. And he wasn't going anywhere.

He needed to find the truth in everything Matthieu had said. On the padd in front of him, two leapt out: that he'd never tried to escape the mercenary ship because of the need for his medicine, and that he remembered his mother had red hair. *How could you forget, my boy, when every morning you saw the hair on your own head that you inherited from your mother?* He'd never told Beverly that he'd hoped their child would, at the very least, have her hair color. When Matthieu's hair finally began to grow in—after many jokes that he'd instead inherited his father's hairline—it hadn't been Beverly's exact color, turned from a deep red to a rusty mix of her red and some of the fair hair Picards tended to have as children. But to Picard, it was red, no matter how light or dark it got. He'd been afraid that either of his Picard genes would dominate, the chestnut of adulthood or the towheads of youth, especially when Wesley had taken so much after his father, revealing none of Beverly's side in him.

Matthieu's personality had only begun to grow into its verbal attributes when he was abducted. Picard had looked forward to seeing some of Beverly's wit in him, a child

to give her a run for her own money. Wesley did that with her in his brilliance, but wasn't close to being a match for her wickedly dry humor. Wesley had also inherited the easygoing nature of Jack, giving Beverly no true opposition to her stubbornness.

Already, Matthieu had proven otherwise, like that day on Pacifica, when he refused to admit swimming in the ocean was making him cold, even with the presence of his blue lips and chattering teeth. Wesley had gone along with him, securely behind his younger brother's obstinacy. Had Wesley been alone, he would have come in from the water without complaint, not because he was meek or a pushover, but because it never really occurred to him to be contrary. Much like he and Robert had been as boys, Robert doing whatever he was told by their father, while Jean-Luc rebelled against him and did what he felt he needed to do.

A hand grasped his shoulder. "You need to sleep," Beverly said from behind him.

Anger flashed through him at her comment, how could she sleep so easily when he couldn't even imagine being able to get into bed and just lay there? How could she tell him to sleep when, dammit, their son was missing? Then he remembered again, he felt as she did then, and she had been so very angry with him for being able to eat and sleep. He turned and looked at her, saw the drawn look in her eyes, hair tousled from what must have been a restless sleep. "I can't," he said. "I don't know how to react, I don't know what to do, and the idea of sleeping is foreign to me."

Her hand slid away from his shoulder as she sat in the chair closest to him. "No one does," she said. "No parent can be prepared for it." She surveyed the mass of padds he had arrayed on the table. "What are you doing?"

He handed her the padd in his hand. "Trying to figure out which things Matthieu said were true and which things he said were false."

Pursing her lips in concentration, she tapped something into the padd. "He said something to me, when he woke up," she said as she wrote. "I don't know if you remember, because it isn't anywhere in here."

Picard thought back through the moments when Matthieu was on the ship and talking with them. "He didn't think you were real," he said. "That any of this was real."

Beverly nodded, reading the words directly from the padd she held, her tone quaking. " 'I must be dreaming, because whenever I was sick, I dreamed of you. I saw you and somehow I felt comforted. So you can't be real.' " Her voice broke near the end.

He reached over and took the padd from her hands, placed it back on the table. Then he took her hands in his, drew her up out of her chair, and held her close as she fought the emotions trying to get out of her. "Jean-Luc, he doesn't think love is real, that he can even be loved or feel safe, because that isn't his reality."

"It's real," he said. "We'll just have to show him when we find him."

“Maybe it was us,” she said. “Because when he was little, we were never really together, he never saw love between us. Maybe he thought his parents didn’t love each other, and because of that, he couldn’t be loved, either.”

He pulled her impossibly closer. “That would have to mean his parents didn’t love each other, and that’s not true. I never stopped loving you, even when you hated me.”

The doctor moved her head off his shoulder to look at him. “I never hated you.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Could’ve fooled me.”

She reached out to his face again, placed her fingers under his jaw, her thumb caressing his cheek. “I hated the way you were *acting*,” she said, clarifying her own actions from long ago. “How you were acting, that wasn’t the man I loved, and I hated that he had disappeared when I needed him most.”

The captain closed his eyes. “I’m sorry,” he said. Then he opened them, studying the expression in her eyes, the sadness tinged with love he hadn’t allowed himself to see in some time. Or perhaps she hadn’t allowed him to see, either. “This time, I’m not going anywhere.” Then he reached out and showed her by punctuating his words with a soft kiss. It was something that he hadn’t thought of when Matthieu had first disappeared when he was small, he’d been too wrapped up in his own pain to think of showing his son’s mother that she was still important to him, that he still loved her, even with their son gone. Even when their relationship had been put on hold and nearly gone. To his surprise, she returned the kiss, then deepened it, and the emotions between the two of them were as they’d been in their first months together. Words that had remained unspoken were expressed as they stumbled into her bedroom, then into her bed, comforting one another in their joining as they could have done long ago. Afterward, they both fell asleep, his arm holding her close, unwilling to let her go and try to deal with the situation alone. They all had too much to lose to let it happen all over again.

Matthieu

2364

He watched as the Cardassian made the transaction. It had been a month, a month since they had all died except him. He had also wanted to die, he'd been the oldest, and he'd had that wish the longest. Instead, the others got set free, but not before they all screamed at him. Then they'd given him to the liar and told the liar to sell him off. Except the liar hadn't done that right away, he spent a month trying to talk to him. So Matthieu didn't play along. It was like this before, with the green men. If he didn't talk, it wasn't entirely real. He wasn't really there. Savas had been the only person, other than the other children, that he'd allowed to be real by talking to him.

Eyes appeared in front of him, warmed with kindness. "Where did you get that scar?" the eyes' owner asked as he pointed to the short line next to Matthieu's left eyebrow. But the boy knew that no one could have eyes that contained kindness, only Savas had those eyes.

It was the liar, wanting to know more and more. But it was *his* scar and *his* memory and no one was going to know about it except him. No one could know that the scar came from when he was cold and lost and had run from the fingers of fear lacing through his feet, frantically shouting for his parents, then tripped into a tidepool and cut the side of his forehead on a rock.

Because then, the green man had found him. If he'd just listened to his parents and done what he promised, the green man wouldn't have taken him. But he took him, even with the cut next to his eyebrow bleeding into his eye. He shouted for them again, until the green man had covered his mouth with his hand. The green man was the only person Matthieu hated more than the liar.

"Well?" asked Garak.

Matthieu stared at him, wondering when the liar's eyes had started to look like the old man's. Garak looked back at the boy for a moment, then turned to the mercenary captain. "This is Captain Cadan," Garak said to the boy.

Matthieu studied the mercenary who claimed the title of captain, but he could tell something wasn't right, the man was no captain. *I know what a captain is like and you aren't one.* But he couldn't remember where he knew that from and had no inclination to say anything aloud in front of the liar. Cadan nodded curtly and went into the cargo hold to finish the details of the transaction. The Cardassian leaned over to his level again. "It's better this way," he said.

The boy glared before he even realized he was angry. He wanted to say *"It would be better if I were dead,"* but he wasn't going to give the liar the satisfaction. He wouldn't let the Cardassian win.

There was a pause between them, as if Garak expected Matthieu to say something, anything. When nothing came out, the Cardassian continued. "Maybe you'll find your parents."

The boy nearly burst into tears right then, the strength of the emotions sending him reeling inside. Savas had been right, he should have forgotten and let them cease to exist, but instead he'd insisted on remembering. Boxing them up hadn't done any good and now the memories made him weak in front of his enemies. He was ten and ten year olds didn't cry. And he knew, as sure as he knew he had that rusty colored hair that other species found fascinating, that even if they found his parents, they wouldn't want him anyway. They'd want a good kid, a kid who would've listened in the first place and kept his promise instead of running off and out of shouting distance. A kid who wouldn't be as dirty as he was, after what the green men had done to him, *that* was the memory he wanted to forget. He wanted to forget it so desperately that he insisted it never happened. Then times like this came along and the person in front of him warped into every one of those awful people, and the Cardassian's skin became a metallic green, his eyes filled with a dark light that made Matt's insides curl up inside themselves. And Matthieu hated him more than anyone. "I'll find you," he said, unaware of when he'd decided to speak. "When I'm older. And then I'll kill you for what you did." When he was older and stronger and smarter and didn't cry anymore. He would never find the green man, but he could find Garak because he knew the man's name. The old man had told him.

"I'm sorry, Matthew," Garak said, so softly that Matthieu thought at first that he hadn't said anything at all.

He was still looking at the liar in shock when the mercenary captain lead him onto his ship. *How do you react when you hear something you wanted to hear but thought you would never actually hear?* His brain told him that he'd heard it, but the rest of him rebelled, because if the liar was truly sorry, then he had no one else to blame for everything.

Except himself.

But something inside him knew that if he blamed himself entirely, there would be nothing left, he'd be totally consumed by the shame. And he was already very sorry, he'd apologized all that he could, looking out at those stars, thinking his parents were there somewhere. But in all that time, they hadn't heard him, and he hadn't shouted, because he wasn't sure if he wanted them to find him after all.

Cadan led him by the shoulder into the crew area. "This is where you'll sleep," he said, steering Matthieu into a tiny room with a small bunk. The boy stopped in the doorway. One bed, a bed that was only his size. He wouldn't be sharing it with anyone

and the captain would be well away from him. It wouldn't be so bad, not like it was with the green men.

"I'm not sure why I took this deal from that damn Cardassian," Cadan said, studying Matthieu. "You're small for your age, even for a human. I can't imagine what kind of skills you might have, other than the ability you have in speaking so many languages. Maybe some of my crew can teach you other skills, something in engineering or maybe you could help out in our little sickbay."

Matthieu said nothing, unsure of whether to feel that his stay with the mercenaries wouldn't be that bad. Maybe he could even escape.

"So you get your own little room," said the captain. "But don't even think about escaping." That said, he produced a small vial from a pocket inside his jacket, then popped it into a hypospray and pressed it to Matt's shoulder. "Garak told me about your condition. This medication will only work for twenty four hours, after that, your hearing problem will come back again. You can escape if you want, but the medicine will wear off after twenty four hours, and if you aren't here, you're on your own to find it somewhere else."

The boy couldn't control his eyes as they widened slightly in the shock of having to go through that pain again, of having every sound rain into his skull like a thousand tiny hammers.

Cadan put the hypospray away. "However, as long as you're on this ship, I won't hold back your medicine. Even if you piss me off, little man, it isn't fair to hold out on a medication. So your part of the bargain regarding your illness is to stay on the ship. Anything else related to ship's business will be handled according to ship's discipline. Understand?"

Matt nodded, staying in the doorway.

Cadan sighed. "Look, I know you were first held by the Orions and I know what those green skinned bastards do with kids. That doesn't happen here. That's a line that is never, ever crossed. Do you understand?"

He decided to speak. "Nothing happened," he said.

The captain shrugged. "Suit yourself. It isn't like I want to talk about it anyway, but it had to be said, that nothing like that will ever happen here, and I will kill anyone who tries it."

Matthieu felt strangely comforted, if briefly. Still, for some reason, this man didn't fit his image of what a captain should be. Then he remembered why. "My father was a captain," he said aloud.

"Really?" said Cadan. "And where is he now?"

He shrugged.

“So what was Garak to you?”

“A liar,” Matthieu said.

Cadan let out a sharp laugh. “He’s that to many people. It’s his trade, so to speak, and he’s very good at it.”

“One day, I’ll kill him.”

“And for that, many people will be grateful, Matthew.” The captain stepped past the boy and into the corridor. “Now get some rest. I’ll have someone from the crew come by in a few hours and show you around.”

Then the man walked away, leaving Matthieu alone in his small cabin. Because he had no window, he sat on the hard bunk and stared at the wall. The apologies ran through his head again, at first he tried to stop them, but then figured it didn’t matter. The wall reacted the same way the stars did, the same way anyone did—they didn’t hear him at all.

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Matthieu

2370

*He stood next to the little Bajoran girl in the shadow of the cliff. The opening to the mine shaft lay in front of them, but they’d never gone down there. That was for the adults, their work was outside, carrying food and water to the miners and Cardassian guards. The break hadn’t been called yet, and so he stood with the girl, waiting.*

*“Do you remember anything?” she asked him.*

*“I remember that we aren’t supposed to talk,” Matthieu replied.*

*“No one’s listening.”*

*“So why talk at all?” he asked.*

*The little brown haired girl glared up at him and he did his best not to smile. If he ever had a little sister, he figured she would be a lot like this girl, she never let any of the bigger kids bully her. “Do you remember your parents?”*

*Matthieu frowned and turned back to the gaping black hole of the mine shaft. “No one here has parents.”*

*“You just tell yourself that.”*

*He said nothing.*

*"I had parents," she said. "My mother and father. I remember them. They were both tall, my mother had long, long hair. My father was a painter, he used to paint me into his pictures. My mother—."*

*"Just shut up," Matt said. "I told you, we don't have parents here. They don't exist. They never did."*

*"You remember," the girl said. "I know you do. I've heard you talk about them with Savas. They were in Starfleet."*

*"Shut up!" The boy turned sharply to face the girl. "You'll get me killed, saying things like that. Don't you realize what they'd do to me if they knew?"*

*The girl grinned widely. "Then you do remember."*

*He looked away from her. "I promised I wouldn't let myself forget."*

*"And I bet you keep your promises," she said, and suddenly they weren't waiting in front of the mining entrance, they were in Madred's office, bodies stacked up against the wall, and the little girl was dying in front of him. This time, she didn't speak the words, but he heard them as loudly as if she'd shouted them into his ear. "You promised."*

*"Garak promised, too!" he said, but no one heard him, because the little girl was screaming again.*

Matthieu's eyes opened and he saw nothing but blackness in front of him. For a moment, he thought he was in front of the cave, standing with the little Bajoran girl. Then he realized he was older than ten, he was sitting down, and the blackness in front of him was space.

"So who's Garak?" came the question from the pilot's seat.

"No one." He shifted uncomfortably in his seat, the guilt crawling across his back, an itch that could never quite be satisfactorily scratched.

"If you call someone 'no one' but call out their name in your sleep, you're usually lying," said Tom Riker.

"I didn't do that," Matt said, glaring at the Starfleet officer. He didn't even know why he bothered to try and sleep, the guilt always woke him up, one dream after another, all eventually ending the same way: someone screaming near him, at him, or around him.

Riker raised an eyebrow at him. "Is it a lover?"

The blush was a fast moving wildfire coloring his face. “No! What the hell did you hear?”

The commander smirked. “I’ll never tell.”

Matt dropped the conversation entirely and went back to looking out the forward window. When they reached Deep Space Five, Riker told him to come back to the medical transport within two hours so they could depart for the next port of call, then headed towards the supply depot. He didn’t bother telling Riker that he wouldn’t be returning to the medical ship. After all, telling him would defeat the purpose of making sure no one could pin him down to an exact location. Riker might be a disillusioned Fleet officer, but he wasn’t so disillusioned not to realize that returning the flagship captain’s son to his parents could put his career back on track. At least, that’s what Riker believed, that those people really were Matthieu’s parents. Nothing he did or said would dissuade the commander from that opinion, not when Riker kept relying on what Matt looked like rather than what he said.

The uniform he wore started to get heavy. Matt shifted his weight and snatched up his bag from the back of the ship. The Fleet uniform would at least get him through the more secure places on the starbase and over to the free merchant area. As he walked down the corridor towards the other side of the base, felt like everyone’s eyes were on him, that everyone knew who he was and would be running to get Security. Except no one stopped him, no one said a word, so he knew it was his own paranoia.

He was alone for most of the turbolift ride, then the ‘lift stopped and a Security lieutenant stepped in. “Crewman,” the man said with a nod.

Matt nodded back, composing his face into what he hoped looked like an earnest young enlisted Starfleet member. “Sir.”

“Deck Sixty Three,” the lieutenant said.

They both kept silent as the ‘lift resumed its journey. When the Security officer spoke, it made Matt’s insides leap up into his chest cavity. “Haven’t seen you around here before. New?”

“Yeah,” the boy said, concentrating on staying calm.

“What’s your name?”

“Michaels, crewman third class.” Matthieu could feel the panic begin to trickle inside his control.

“Have you kept up to date on the latest briefings?”

“As much as I can, sir,” Matt replied.

The man nodded. "Good. We're a big hub here, I think we can find the kid the Fleet is looking for. They're pulling out all the stops to find him, the *Enterprise* is even on detached duty to try and find him."

"That so?" Matt asked. Detached duty. He assumed they'd look for him like last time, which was barely look at all, eventually giving up entirely. The last thing he thought was that they'd send the flagship out looking for him. The need to get himself lost grew more frantic, plain sight had become too close to being found.

"Sure is," said the lieutenant. "Must be nice to have that much influence, I think. Captain Picard, barely back from the declared dead, and he's already shifting the whole quadrant around. Of course, if it were my kid, I'd do the same. Anyone would, I think. Must be an instinctive thing. It must've been hard, having his kid missing for so long, then finding him, only to have him run off like that."

"Yeah." Matt studied the control panel intently, as if he could find an escape route from what had suddenly become an emotionally charged conversation.

"I just can't understand why the kid would run, you know? People would pay to have a parent in his position, or hell, have a mother like he does. One of the most brilliant doctors in Medical, not to mention one of the most stunning. You ever seen a photo of her?"

Matthieu looked up. "No, I haven't." He wanted to change the subject, but he couldn't figure out what a safe thing to say would be, he didn't want to delve into starbase matters, he could be easily tripped up and his identity given away.

The security officer sighed. "Too bad. She's got these legs that just go on forever, and there's just something special about redheads. And I've heard she's got a wicked sense of humor, and a quick one at that."

"*Shut up, you asshole, that's my mother you're talking about,*" kept running through Matthieu's head and he concentrated on keeping it from being said aloud, partly because it would give away his identity, and partly because he still didn't believe the doctor really was his mother. But it didn't stop him from feeling slightly weird and uncomfortable at having another guy talk about the doctor that way.

The man kept talking. Apparently he wasn't a telepath. "And those lucky sots posted on the *Enterprise*, they get the best captain in the fleet, and they get to see that doctor if they get sick. Of course, if they ever thought of making a pass at her, they'd have to deal with Captain Picard."

"I didn't realize they were together," Matt said. He'd done his share of reading on the terminals. He knew that the captain and the doctor had never been married, weren't currently involved, and hadn't been in quite some time. They seemed to be friends of some sort, but he wondered if they even loved each other at all.

“They aren’t. Wait, they are. Actually, no one really knows. But gossip gets around, and word in the Fleet is that if you try and date either of them, the other will make life quite unpleasant.” The lieutenant shrugged. “Word is that they’ll eventually get back together. I think they must have drifted apart when their kid went missing, you know? It happens to a lot of parents when they lose a kid, either through abduction or a death.” The lift stopped. “My deck,” he said. “Nice talking to you, crewman.” He disappeared through the open doors.

When they closed, Matt propped himself up against the wall and worked on clearing his head. He had to shove away everything the officer had just said, at least the bits that evoked some sort of emotional response. When the lift stopped on his deck, his mind was clear again. Quickly, he ducked into one of the public lavatories and changed out of the uniform, stowing it in the bag that held the clothes he’d just put back on. Outside the merchant bays, a terminal held the postings for ships needing various crewmen. Matthieu made his way over and pushed a few people aside to get a look at the list. He needed off this base fast. Not every Fleet officer was going to be as blind as that Security lieutenant, talking about the missing boy and not noticing that despite the Fleet uniform, the person he was talking to fit the description of said missing boy. He located a ship on the list looking for deckhands, noted the ship’s berth, and headed in that direction.

Twenty minutes later, he was signed to a contract as a member of the crew of the cargo ship *Abatan*. Not only was it the first ship heading out of Deep Space Five, but its first stop would be Deep Space Nine, right where Garak waited. Matthieu stood at an observation port as the ship broke away from the station’s docking ring, watching as faces watched the ship leave, as loved ones bid goodbye to the crew already falling away from them on the departing ship.

*He’d stood with his nose pressed against the transparent aluminum of the starbase window, the deep cold of space seeping through the aluminum and chilling his face. But he didn’t notice, all he saw were the nacelles of his father’s ship charging up, then the flash of light, and it was gone. His little body didn’t move, his breath condensing on the window as he kept his eyes on the spot where the ship had disappeared. Then his mother’s hand squeezed his shoulder and her soft voice spoke. “You’ll see him again,” she said.*

*“I know.” He took her hand and walked away with her, but keeping his head turned toward the window as long as he was able. “When can we go with him?”*

*“When they make ships that you can live on,” she said.*

*“They’re designing them!” his brother said. “Actually, I think they’re making them now. It’ll be great. They’ll carry families on them, we won’t have to be separated from anyone anymore.”*

*He stopped walking and looked up at his mother. “Really?”*

*She nodded. "Really."*

*He smiled. "So we won't have to say good bye anymore."*

*His mother smoothed the hair on the top of his head. "No, we won't."*

Matthieu blinked, then realized he'd gone into some sort of weird dream, standing there at the window, his face pressed against the glass like a little kid. He felt like he'd really lived what he'd just imagined, that the little boy was him, and the other boy really was his brother and the woman his mother. He wiped off the transparent aluminum with his sleeve. His memory was the last thing he could trust, because whenever he decided to trust himself, fate would toss him around like a ragdoll. He left the clean window behind and headed down to the cargo hold. There was work to be done.

Beverly

2370

*She held her youngest by the shoulders as they watched the Intrepid detach from the docking ring and move away under impulse speed, heading to the warp-safe distance from the starbase before it went into warp. Matthieu kept his face pressed to the window, his small hands next to it. Wesley had run to another window, pushed a chair in front of it, and climbed onto that to see from an adult's vantage point. At nine, he already had several inches on his three year old brother, but nothing less than an adult's height would be satisfactory to him, and he certainly wouldn't want to be lifted up by any adult. Beverly glanced over at him, she realized that even if she wanted to, she wasn't sure if she could hold up him long enough to let him see the ship. He was getting too big, her oldest was growing up, and each day looking more like his father.*

*The same as her younger son. Each day he looked less like her and more like his father. They walked away from the windows after the ship had gone into warp, leaving nothing but plain space behind. Wesley started chattering about Galaxy class ships again. Every time they watched as Jean-Luc left on his ship, Beverly felt the guilt grow even more at her refusal to marry him. But she wanted her little family to stay intact, even if it meant not marrying Matthieu's father until the Galaxy class ships came into existence, even if it meant not having any more children until Jean-Luc commanded one of those ships. Of course, she hadn't told Jean-Luc about any of this, she didn't want to hold him back if he made other choices. She'd studied Starfleet history like any other cadet at the Academy and had learned that the great ship captains tended to be single men, men without any immediate family.*

*Of course, seeing her son despondent at his father leaving time and time again made her curse Jean-Luc and his career. But she kept herself positive by thinking of when things would settle down, at all of them being on a ship, Wesley able to learn more about engineering and interact with engineering officers, Matthieu able to see his father as much as he wanted and learn how to be a good man, she would be married to Jean-Luc and call him husband, and she knew they would have more children. Perhaps a girl. She'd always wanted a daughter, and a little sister could drive these two boys up the wall. They needed that. The contentedness made her feel warm and safe and she smiled. Matthieu noticed and smiled back at her, then let go of her hand and ran off into the crowd.*

*At first she thought it amusing, her son playing another game of hide and seek. Then she couldn't see him through all the people, couldn't hear him shouting or saying anything. Wesley ran back. "I can't find him, Mom," he said.*

*She started shouting for him. People turned around in shock, one man told her to be quiet. "My son is missing!" she said. The man didn't look surprised, he didn't look anything. He just turned around and kept on walking.*

*All of them, they kept on walking, a mix of faces and bodies, she pushed them as she ran through the endless corridors, still not finding her son. Wesley ran behind her, then slowed and eventually stopped as she left him behind. Then she turned around and he was far away, the crowd had made a hole for him and despite her distance, she saw the panic in his young face.*

*She turned and looked forward and there was no hole, just the people milling about, hiding her younger son. Backward again, and Wesley's face, now sad. She had a responsibility to him. Beverly started the long walk back to him, and now people got out of her way without any pushing or shouting. They knew about this son. It was the other one they didn't care about. Then, for a second, she thought she caught a glimpse of Matthieu. Again, she shouted for him.*

*And again, he was gone.*

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“Hey, it’s okay.” The captain’s baritone voice soothed her, the same as his arms around her, holding her close.

She reached up and felt the tears on her cheeks—she’d been crying in her sleep, as she dreamed. He’d run from her in that dream, deliberately ran away, as he’d done this time. But he’d been small in the dream, and she’d needed her son’s father back then, and he’d gone away too.

And now he was here. Suddenly, she was angry with him for not being there. “Where were you?” she asked. “Why weren’t you here then?”

“What?” he asked, the surprise evident in his voice.

“I needed you *then*,” she said. “We both needed you and you were off on your ship and now you’re here, it’s been too long, and if you’d been there, we would’ve found him.” She punctuated each phrase with a soft punch to his chest as he continued to hold her, keeping her arms from getting any real leverage to do any actual physical damage.

“I’m sorry,” he said, his lips pressed into her hair.

Then the anger drained out of her, she stopped struggling, and found that the tears hadn’t stopped when she’d woken up. She hadn’t reacted like this to Matthieu’s abduction since it had first occurred. All of this she assumed was behind her and instead it’d snuck up on her while she slept and made her feel weak. “I need to go,” she said.

“No.”

She looked at him, eyebrow raised nearly to her hairline. “You can’t tell me what to do.”

“I’m only telling you that you aren’t going to deal with this alone. Not again and not anymore. Even if I have to fight you.”

“You wouldn’t fight me,” she said.

It was his turn to raise his eyebrow.

“Okay, maybe you would.” She rose from the bed, put on her robe and padded out of the room. She knew he would follow, just as she knew that he realized she wasn’t leaving anymore. Her feet took her to the window, where she placed her forehead on the cool transparent aluminum, like her son had in her dream.

Then Jean-Luc was behind her, similarly clad in a robe. “What did you dream about?” he asked.

“Matthieu,” she said, closing her eyes.

He waited.

“It was something that happened so many times, when we met you on a starbase for a few days, and then you would leave again on your ship. Matthieu would be glued to the window until he couldn’t see your ship anymore, and even then, he would stare at the space where it’d been.” She continued to explain her dream to him, the frantic search through the throngs of people, how no one would cooperate. “And just before that, we had all been talking about Galaxy class ships and living together on one as a family.”

“Is that why you would have joined me if I had asked?”

She turned away from the viewport and gave the captain a slight smile as she walked to the sofa, arms wrapped around her to ward off the chill she’d gotten from space. “Yes.” Beverly settled herself into a corner, feeling open and for once, not vulnerable. “Jean-Luc, I refused to marry you because we wouldn’t all be together, not because I didn’t love you. I didn’t want everything to repeat itself, like it had with Jack, not spending nearly enough time with him, waiting and waiting for that perfect moment, and then having him die before it could happen. I thought that somehow, if you weren’t my husband, it would feel different, and if you were killed, it wouldn’t hurt us as much.”

Now his gaze was on the stars outside, taking in her words. She watched him, saw his jaw working, saw his eyes take on that faraway look that told everyone he was in deep thought and trying to sort through emotions. Matthieu had been the same way. Even as a baby and a toddler, her little boy got that same look the gray eyes he’d inherited from his father. “And I found out,” she continued. “That it didn’t matter how much I denied it, it hurt all the same. In fact, it hurt more, because I hadn’t taken that final step with you, and then you were gone.”

Picard continued his study of the stars.

The momentum kept her going, she continued to confess to him the hopes she'd pushed away when their son had disappeared. "I'd planned on you getting the command of a Galaxy class ship." A rueful laugh escaped her lips. "I even thought we would have more children. And then Matthieu..." Then she found she couldn't talk anymore. Everything had been so alive in her mind, then and now, but when the reality of her son's two disappearances came about, everything died with him.

Jean-Luc tore his eyes away from the stars and his introspection, sitting next to the doctor, taking her hands in his. "We'll find him."

"What if it's too late?" she asked. "What if he's been hurt? Or assaulted? What if he's dead?"

"He isn't." Picard said the words as if he were giving an order, the resolution one that could not be broken. She heard none of the false bravado of when he gave orders but really had no idea what direction they were going in. What she heard in his voice was that he was absolutely certain they would find their son alive.

Beverly opened her mouth to speak again but the door chime rang instead. The captain shot her a questioning look, asking if she expected any guests. She shrugged, so he rose from the sofa and answered the door. "Guinan," he said as the doors parted to reveal the El Aurian bartender.

Her robes moving around her, making it look like she floated rather than walked, Guinan entered their quarters. "He's going to Deep Space Nine," she said.

Beverly stood. "What? How did you find out?" She didn't ask how Guinan knew, because Guinan always seemed to know things that other beings were never privy to.

The El Aurian looked from her to Picard and back to her. "You should get dressed. We have a lot to talk about."

They dressed quickly and in silence, the curiosity causing them to fall back into old habits, retreating into their minds as they tried to piece together a puzzle with only three pieces that were light-years away. Beverly sat at the dining table across from Guinan, Jean-Luc replicated tea for them all, his own measure of comfort. As he sat between the two women, he asked Guinan, "What's going on?"

For the first time in the years she'd known the bartender, Beverly observed Guinan looking distinctly...uncomfortable. The porcelain teacup shifted between her hands as her eyes contemplated the liquid inside. "A very old friend of mine contacted me an hour ago. He saw your son at a Starfleet Medical Transport Facility."

The captain stood immediately, his hand jarring tea out of his cup. "We'll set a course right now."

Guinan shifted her gaze from her tea over to the captain. “Picard, there’s more. We’ll have time to catch up with him, but there’s some things you need to know first.”

Slowly, the starship captain lowered himself back into his chair, casting a bewildered look at Guinan and then a concerned one at Beverly. “Guinan?” he asked, his voice suddenly cautious. Beverly recognized it—Jean-Luc was frightened. And because she realized he was frightened, she felt the fear spread through her own body.

“My friend’s name is Savas. The first time I met him, he was small boy who needed a friend, and I became that friend. You see, he’d been abused, and was brought to the place where I worked to get some help and make it so he wasn’t in so much pain anymore. After awhile, he became a normal little kid who grew into a normal adult. He was out Listening to other species, much as I had, when he was captured by the Cardassians. Many times I offered to help him escape and he declined, because he thought he could learn many things by listening to the interned Bajorans. And he did learn many, many things. He also found a Cardassian who had gone through what he had and together, they started helping some of the Bajoran children.” She paused, taking a breath, letting it go. Tension had become the air they all breathed in the room. “Savas helped your son when he was very small. From what he told me, he met Matthieu when he was only five, they were on a Cardassian transport ship. Garak had bought Matthieu from the Orions and sent him to Savas. It was a system they had.”

“A system?” Beverly asked. She was doing all she could to keep her mind only on exactly what the El Aurian across from her was actually saying, and not the things the doctor’s mind was coming up with on her own. They scared her.

Guinan nodded. “When Garak found any children with the Orions, he would immediately buy them, no matter what the price, and send them to Savas. Savas had learned to help children the same way I had.”

The doctor didn’t want to ask what sort of abuse the Orions had done to her son. If she didn’t ask, if she never got the answer, it wouldn’t have happened. She could continue in the ignorance she’d had for years, that while her son had suffered, he hadn’t suffered through things she found the most horrific. She kept her eyes on Guinan, wide and searching, hoping the other woman could say things that would make all of this untrue. Beverly heard the captain shift in his chair, the tiny thump of the porcelain cup placed on the glass table. Her attention switched to him. He would ask, it was the way he was.

The words crawled out of his mouth slowly. “Guinan, what kind of abuse?”

“Sexual.” The reply stung them all, tore away any ignorance that might have shrouded their eyes. Beverly froze, her thoughts and feelings, her hands on the mug in front of her, her eyes on the woman across from her. She didn’t move until she heard the sound of a teacup shattering on transparent aluminum, it made her jump. Guinan didn’t move, but the doctor turned to see Jean-Luc following the path of the cup he’d just thrown, the rest of his rage held back in the tense muscles of his arms and

shoulders, in the flush creeping up his neck towards his scalp. A similar rage held Beverly still, the cup clutched in her hands. She wanted to go to him but found she couldn't move.

*They hurt my son and I couldn't do a thing. I want to kill them.* Beverly had never thought it possible that she could want to tear a living thing apart with her bare hands, yet now she was confronted with that very emotion. Jean-Luc stood at the window, his forehead resting on the aluminum as hers had minutes earlier, but what now seemed a lifetime ago. They'd all lost an innocence they never realized they'd had until it was gone. Tremors moved up her arms and into her fingers.

A warm brown hand reached over and settled her own. "He'll be okay," Guinan said. "It's something that can be healed, it just takes time and patience. It's why he runs. He thinks you won't love him if you knew."

"That's not true." Jean-Luc's appraisal of the situation was said as surely as his statement earlier about their son being alive. He turned away from the window, carefully stepping over the shards of porcelain on the carpet.

At hearing him speak, Beverly felt her muscles begin to unclench. He was still there, he hadn't run, and he hadn't let his rage get the best of him, at least not yet.

"I apologize for my outburst," he said, returning to his seat.

Guinan looked at him steadily until he met her eyes. "It was warranted."

The captain opened his mouth to begin an argument on what Beverly knew would be the morality of his reaction of losing his temper over the situation, but it was interrupted by a chirp from his communicator, and Data's voice over the comm system. "Data to Captain Picard."

Annoyance flashed across the captain's face as he tapped his communicator. "Go ahead."

"Captain, I have located a significant trail on Matthieu and would like to report the results I have available. Would you like me to come to your quarters or would you meet me in the conference room?"

"Doctor Crusher and I will see you in the conference room in five minutes, Mr. Data," Picard said, and closed the channel.

Guinan had already gotten up from her chair. "You know where to find me," she said. "And I expect both of you to come and find me soon." Then she drifted out of the room.

The two of them weren't far behind, the ride in the turbolift tense, the news Guinan had given them still preying upon them. Beverly leaned against the wall, her mind racing with images of what could have happened to Matthieu, things he must be

feeling, how much her son most likely hated himself. It was as if the world had become unbearably heavy, and the grasp she had on reality, however tenuous it might've been, had been blown to pieces. A hand reach around hers and gave it a squeeze. Beverly looked over at Jean-Luc, saw his jaw still working, the heaviness she felt reflected in his eyes. He wouldn't be ready to talk about it, but he'd let her know that he was still with her. Knowing that left a small bit of her comforted, that of everything, at least one thing hadn't been chased away.

As soon as they walked into the conference room, they were greeted by a startled look from Deanna Troi. The counselor raised an eyebrow at the two of them, Beverly was certain her friend had picked up on the melancholy of their current emotions. "Later," she whispered to Troi.

The counselor nodded and took a seat while Data exchanged puzzled looks with the captain, then launched into his findings. "Starfleet's investigative unit has located the runabout that Matthieu took from our shuttlebay. The ship was found in the possession of a Ferengi black market dealer who is now currently being held pending trial for receipt of stolen property." Data tapped a button on the table's flat console and a quadrant map appeared on the display screen behind him. "The Ferengi had purchased the runabout at Laburnam Outpost. We lose the trail after that, but a Starfleet Medical Transport facility reported a theft of medical supplies a day later."

"He took his medicine," Beverly said.

Data nodded. "Precisely, Doctor." He tapped the console again and the quadrant map zoomed into detail. "The next report came from one of Medical's transport pilots that he had spotted the boy on an outbound transport as a stowaway and again caught a glimpse of him at Deep Space Five. From there, we don't have any more traces of him."

*Deep Space Five.* That space station had been in the dream she'd had, the one where she'd lost Matthieu again. "That's where we were," Beverly found herself saying.

Three heads turned towards her. "Beverly?" Deanna asked.

"Just a dream I had last night. I was with Matthieu and Wesley and we were all on Deep Space Five, and Matthieu ran off and I couldn't find him."

Data tilted his head a fraction to the side. "Is this a type of mother's intuition, Counselor?" he asked.

"No," Beverly answered for Troi. "It isn't. It was just a dream. A coincidence." She avoided the look Deanna was giving her, a look telling her that they'd be speaking at length later.

"Data," said Picard. "Guinan has informed me that she is certain Matthieu is heading to Deep Space Nine. How long will it take us to get there at maximum warp?"

“Twenty three hours, nine minutes.”

“Set a course at maximum warp,” Picard said.

“Yes, sir.” The second officer left the room without pause to question the source or veracity of the information the captain had just given him.

The questions would come from the counselor. “What’s going on?” she asked when the doors had barely closed on the room. The silence was overwhelming. But again, Beverly found that she couldn’t speak, that when the distractions were gone, she couldn’t face the new reality. Beside her, Picard sat absolutely motionless. Deanna’s dark eyes studied them both, growing wider as her empathic senses felt the emotions rocking over both of them. As the silence continued, Deanna’s face projected her own fear at what she was sensing. “Captain, Beverly, what’s happened?” she asked.

“It’s Matthieu,” Beverly said. In short sentences punctuated with hesitation and anger, she told her friend what Guinan had told them only moments ago.

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Matthieu

2370

It was ship’s night before Matt was able to break into Sickbay. The doctor worked only during the daytime and was the only doctor aboard, and the *Abatan* was lucky enough for that. Most cargo ships had no medical personnel at all. The room was dark, lit only by power indicators on readout panels. He turned on a tiny light, he could afford that, there were no windows to the corridor outside the small room, and no space under the door for light to escape into the hall. It took him a few minutes to locate a medical tricorder, pop it open, and scan himself. He needed to find out what medication that Starfleet doctor had given him so he could know when to administer the medication again. The results flashed on the screen and he frowned. “Figures I’d get the one broken tricorder around,” he said to himself, tossed it onto the lone biobed and fetched out another.

Same readout.

Frustrated, he pulled out a third tricorder and scanned himself yet again. Same thing. Three tricorders verified that he no longer suffered from his hearing condition. The medicine would be useless because for him, it no longer had a use at all. Three tricorders littered the biobed, each flashing the same thing. *She healed you.*

He heard his own words, as if he’d just spoken them aloud. *“I must be dreaming, because whenever I was sick, I dreamed of you. I saw you and somehow I felt comforted. So you can’t be real.”* The proof lay in front of him in the three tricorders, she was real, she’d healed him. And then he’d run away.

It had been so cold. He could taste the blood in his mouth, mixed with seawater, all from the cut on the side of his forehead. There was shouting, the shouting came from him, it was his voice straining to be heard over the wind. Then a hand came down, rough skinned and crusted with dirt. It smelled. A few times, the green man had removed his hand from the boy's mouth and immediately, Matt had resumed his shouting. After a few times, the green man had hit him and he didn't remember what happened after that.

*There were more of them, later. More green men.*

"No!" Matthieu jolted out of the memories and watched the tricorder he'd thrown sail into the bulkhead, break into two pieces and drop to the ground. His body followed suit, unable to hold himself up as everything came back. He hadn't forgotten. His father trying to get him near a horse on Earth, just to feed it a carrot. His brother teasing him. *"Little Matty's afraid!"* Him turning his back on the horse and hurling the carrot at his brother instead. His mother laughing at them both while attempting to scold them and being entirely unsuccessful in the endeavor.

He remembered missing them. And all over again, he missed them like he had when he was small and now he had no one else to blame but himself, he'd run away again, and this time there wasn't even a green man that kept him away. He'd done it himself.

The door to the sickbay opened. Matthieu jumped up, snatched up another tricorder and threw it in the direction of the intruder. The ship's doctor managed to duck in time, the instrument flying over his head and smacking into the bulkhead in the corridor behind him. "What the hell is going on?" the man shouted.

Matthieu stared at him.

The doctor took another step inside. "I asked you what's going on."

Trapped, he felt trapped, he knew there was a way out of this, but he couldn't remember how to talk.

The other man noticed the first broken tricorder on the floor. "What's the meaning of this?" he asked, picking up the remainder of it.

"Nothing," Matt said, remembering how to talk.

"You'll have to pay for this," the doctor said.

Matt rummaged in his pocket, pulled out a chit, and threw it at the doctor. "That should cover it," he said, heading right for the door.

"You'd better not come back into my sickbay unless you're dead, boy!" the doctor called out behind him.

Matthieu didn't answer, there wasn't one to give. His feet did the thinking for him, bringing him to an isolated observation port, his hands did some more thinking, locking the doors behind him. Then his feet gave out and he sat hard on the metal deck, his head leaning against the transparent aluminum.

It was cold. His eyes stung and he tasted the tears and there was nothing he could do to stop them. He was made of lies and broken promises. The lies had become such a part of him that they *were* him, the truth something so intangible that it was only a dream. All those times he insisted he wouldn't forget, he swore he wouldn't forget, and he'd forgotten anyway. Forgotten so well that when his parents finally found him, he'd run away just as quickly.

*That's the way it is, when the green men take you. No one wants to take you back.*

He hit his head on the window, trying to knock the thoughts out of his mind, but they refused to go away.

*"Some things are worse than death,"* the little Bajoran girl had said.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I can never keep promises." He had only one left, now. The one he'd made to the little girl after she'd died, that he would put right what Garak had done to make her die. It's all he had left of himself.

*No one loves the trash the green mean leave behind.*

Matthieu

2370

A shudder went through the hull and rattled Matthieu awake.

“All deckhands, please report to the main cargo bay to begin offloading cargo to Deep Space Nine. Repeat, all deckhands please report to the main cargo bay immediately.” The ship’s comm continued its announcements as Matt scrambled to his feet and tried to shake the sleep from his body. He didn’t remember falling asleep while sitting there on the floor of the observation port, but then again, no one actually remembers the moment of falling asleep. What he didn’t remember was feeling so very exhausted that he could manage to fall asleep on a metal deck and not wake up for several hours. Memory notwithstanding, that was exactly what’d happened, and what really got to him was that he couldn’t remember having a single dream.

He sprinted towards the cargo hold, his nap ruining any plans to switch from his current clothes to the Starfleet uniform, trying to think of another way to slide from one crew to another without anyone really noticing. Other longshoremen complained to him over his tardiness as soon as he rushed into the cargo hold. “It’s about time you showed up,” muttered Marten, the only Bolian on the crew.

“Sorry,” Matt said, bending over to move a container to the anti-grav pallet.

“Asshole,” the Bajoran supervisor said in his native language.

“I am not, I overslept,” came Matt’s reply, couched in the same language.

Tikhon shot him a curious look, frowned, then went back to checking the contents of the pallet on his padd. “I forgot how many languages you speak,” he said without looking up.

Matt shifted another container. “It happens.”

“You should be doing something other than working as a deckhand,” said Marten. “With knowledge like you’ve got, you should be working for the Federation or in Starfleet. Something with a future.”

“Plenty of future working in this field,” he said, then took the padd from the Bajoran to mark off another container.

Tikhon took the padd back. “He’s running from something, we all are, so stop reminding him of some future he can’t have.”

In any other situation, Matt would’ve felt the panic start to take him. But longshoremen had a certain solidarity. They were all running from something, some of

them from ex-spouses bent on revenge, some of them from governments they'd pissed off, and some of them from pasts that couldn't be reconciled with the present. None of them talked about their pasts, not doing so gave them all plausible deniability. And if they knew anything about anyone's real identity, they wouldn't tell another soul. So Matt kept working and let the others talk themselves out.

"Still a waste," said Marten, taking the padd for himself. "Besides, he's a still a kid. I know how humans age, and he's a young one." He handed the padd over to the Bajoran.

Tikhon glanced over at Matt as he got the padd. "I can't argue with that."

Matt dropped the next container on the Marten's foot, causing him to curse and shove the boy away from him. "The hell was that for?"

"Impetuous youth," he replied, then marked off the container. The cargo hold's door to the station opened to admit a security team. Matt frowned and cast a look over at Tikhon. "Who are they? One of them looks like a Changeling."

"He looks like a Changeling because he *is* one," replied Tikhon. "That's Odo, he's the constable on this station. He conducts all the security sweeps on cargo that comes through here."

Four Fleet officers had spread out from the door, weaving their way through the maze of boxes and containers. "Are there usually this many?" Matt asked, watching as Marten was briefly questioned by Odo. "And are they usually this thorough?"

The question made Tikhon finally look up, and then he promptly frowned. "No, actually. We're generally left alone as long as their aren't any problems."

Matt took a step backwards, bringing his body behind a taller stack of containers. The tall Bolian made his way over to them, careful not to walk a straight path and bring attention to himself or anyone else. "We've got a problem," he said.

Tikhon looked over at Matt, eyebrows raised, as if illustrating his point.

"What's the problem?" Matt asked, beginning to get slightly uncomfortable at the look Marten was giving him, as if he were committing his appearance to memory.

"I think they're looking for you," he said.

The boy took a chance to glance over in the direction of the constable again. He'd gotten closer, a padd now apparent in his hand, and he spoke to every crewman he came across in the cargo bay. Each one he showed a photograph on the padd. "What makes you say that?" Matt asked as panic pushed the hairs on his neck upwards and he resisted the shiver that tried to run through him. He really didn't have to ask, he could see in the Bolian's eyes that he knew exactly who Matt was.

“Odo kept asking if I’d seen any humans with red hair. So he might think that you’re the person he’s looking for,” Marten said, his words obviously chosen with great care. He knew, but he wasn’t going to communicate verbally that he did. Plausible deniability. They all took great stock in that ability.

“You need cover?” Tikhon asked him. “No one will talk, but we can make sure you aren’t seen, too.”

If only he hadn’t fallen asleep, then he could just walk straight out in a Fleet uniform. But going back into the ship would corner him, especially if Odo got any idea that Matt could be found, or that there was a slight possibility that his suspect could be located on the ship. Matt had heard about Odo, that the man could be relentless in his pursuit of justice on his station. But he could go back, if Odo wasn’t given probable cause by any of the ship’s crew. Matt knew that every deckhand was safe, no information would come from any of them. The captain had no idea, the doctor... “Shit,” he said, the curse carrying to the ears of the other deckhands.

“A simple yes or no would’ve done nicely,” said Tikhon.

“The doctor will talk,” Matt said.

“Why would he do that?” asked Marten.

“I broke his tricorder,” he said, peeking past the corner of a container stack to note Odo’s position in the cargo bay.

“I heard about that,” Tikhon said. “Went and made yourself memorable, did you?”

“It was an accident.”

“Accidents are dropping a tricorder on the floor, not launching a fastball at a doctor’s head,” came Marten’s observation.

Matt glared at the taller man. “Since when do Bolians play baseball?”

“Ever since this Bolian joined a ship that made monthly runs to this particular station, because this particular station’s commanding officer is a baseball fanatic,” was his reply.

Another look over to the constable, then towards where his officers were continuing their search. “Are you going to help me or not?” he asked. If they weren’t, he had to think of something, or he was going to be heading straight for the station’s brig. Before any of the others could answer, the ship’s bay door opened and the doctor came through, heading straight for the Changeling.

“*Shit*,” Matt said.

“Certainly a foul-mouthed boy, aren’t you?” said Tikhon, then he motioned to the Marten and another deckhand.

A slight bit of relief slipped into Matt’s limbs. They would help.

“Marten, you’re going to have to have a container dropped on your foot again. This time, it’ll be heavy,” Tikhon said.

“Why *my* foot?”

“You’re the loudest of us all.” Eyes narrowed, Marten studied the Bajoran supervisor for a moment. “Go ahead,” said Tikhon. “Argue with me about that.”

Marten sighed. “Let’s get this over with.” Matt felt a smile tug at the corners of his lips over the exchange. The large Bolian gave him another shove to the shoulder. “Not funny, boy, this is my foot we’re talking about.”

“I don’t think it’s funny,” he said, trying to hide his amusement.

“You’re an awful liar, that’s what’s funny,” said Marten. Then he turned towards the other crewman. “Come on, drop the damn thing on my toes.”

*If only he knew how good a liar I am,* Matt thought, the humor rushing away from his face, his expression becoming deadly serious. The others noticed the change and while Marten was distracted, Tikhon let go of the container and let it land solidly on the Bolian’s foot. The bellow from Marten’s mouth was well worth the extra effort. The security officers came running, as did the doctor, who was followed closely by Odo. Matt took the opportunity and slipped out the cargo bay doors into the station beyond.

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Picard

2370

He stood in front of the long window in his ready room, his eyes oriented towards the stars and systems outside, but his focus nowhere near any of that. Instead, he couldn’t get Guinan’s words from his head, and they played themselves over and over. Then came images that his mind invented to torture him, illustrating the words that were already harsh in of themselves. Three times he’d found himself in front of the replicator, nearly ready to ask for tea, then he’d remembered the teacup from earlier and its shards on his carpeted deck. Each time, he’d forgone getting the tea.

“Riker to Captain Picard.”

The intrusion of his first officer’s voice over the comm system startled him. But his years of experience as a captain kept his reaction on the inside, outwardly, he

showed nothing, even without anyone present to witness his true reactions. “Go ahead,” he said.

“Captain, we’ve docked with Deep Space Nine. Constable Odo has notified us of a possible lead on the cargo ship *Abatan*. He wants to know if you would like to meet with him to discuss the findings.”

They were close to him, he could feel it. “I certainly would, Number One. Does he want to meet us on the ship or the station?”

There was a slight pause from Riker, Picard assumed he was conferring with the constable. “Actually, sir, Odo says he’d like to speak with you in their cargo bay. The *Abatan*’s doctor is reporting a run-in with a boy matching Matthieu’s description.”

The captain nodded to himself. “Very well. Commander, notify Odo that Doctor Crusher and I will meet him shortly. Send the coordinates down to transporter room three.” He gave the orders as he strode out of his ready room, nodding at Riker on the way to the turbolift. On the ‘lift, it took him a moment to settle himself enough to contact Beverly. So much had happened between them in the past twenty-four hours, yet everything had become intense after Guinan had broken her news. “Picard to Crusher.”

The reply was nearly immediate, as if she’d been waiting. For all intents and purposes, she most likely had been. “Crusher here.”

“Doctor, we’ve arrived at Deep Space Nine. Constable Odo would like to meet with us right away in their cargo bay. Could you meet me in transporter room three?”

“I’ll be right there.” She closed the channel before he could say anything else. The ‘lift continued its journey and he took another slow breath, trying to slow down his racing pulse. He’d noticed it in her voice, breathless and harried, strained like it’d been years ago. He knew it was partially his fault, that she was afraid he would bolt like last time, even now after he’d repeatedly stayed his ground. Yet he knew he’d partly run away. The missing son, he’d been prepared for that, as well as any parent could be. But what Guinan had told them, he just couldn’t take. For the past day, he’d stayed in the confines of his ready room, letting his first officer conduct ship’s business in his stead, and also running interference with Beverly at the same time. He hadn’t planned that, hadn’t intended for Will to keep Beverly at arm’s length while he tried to sort himself out. He’d only sought to get control of his own emotions enough to ensure that he wouldn’t break something else in a temper tantrum.

It had been twenty three hours now, and he could still feel the rage seething just under the surface. He couldn’t keep away from Beverly like this, it wasn’t fair to her, and he knew she had to be struggling just as much as he was. *And I promised her I wouldn’t run away.*

The ‘lift stopped and the doors parted to admit a new passenger. Blue eyes met gray as Beverly stepped into the ‘lift. She didn’t bother giving a destination. “Resume,”

Picard said. They were, after all, going to the same place. She was still looking at him. "I'm sorry," he said, then paused, trying to put his thoughts into words, yet coming up against that wall of rage over and over again. "I was trying to..I needed to..." He closed his eyes on the words, trying to describe what he thought of what the Orions had done. "They're animals," he said. "And I don't want to be one, and so I'm trying to hold my temper, get control of it so I don't lash out."

She reached out with her hand, ran her fingers along his jaw. "You aren't an animal," she said. "Not you."

He brought his hands up behind her neck, rested his forehead on hers, his eyes closing, trying to squeeze out reality again. "But in the end, aren't we all?"

Beverly kissed him softly, then took a step back. "Some things can't even be called animals, Jean-Luc," she said. The captain watched her closely, watched as her anger reached up beyond her control, flashing to the surface. "Animals implies something that's natural, and what those men did, it isn't natural. They're just destructive forces now, bridled by that shit we call skin."

The captain realized that Beverly's rage was at least equal to his own, if not more. Data's words came to him, the question about mother's intuition. The anger in Beverly, that was a mother's fierce protectiveness of her child, like any she-bear guarding her cub, a force of nature to be reckoned with.

The turbolift stopped, this time on the same deck as the transporter room. They headed there, the intensity of the words spoken in the turbolift melting away as they focused themselves on their task. This time, it was she to reached out briefly, brushing her fingertips against his as they walked. She knew, she understood, and she wasn't angry with him. *Thank god*, he thought, especially after catching a glimpse of her anger in the 'lift.

The coordinates brought them straight into the large main cargo bay of Deep Space Nine. Picard recognized Odo, standing next to a sizable stack of containers, looking slightly pained as he listened to the complaints of a civilian human in front of him. "Constable," the captain said.

Odo looked up. "Captain Picard," he said, then motioned to the man in front of him. "This is Doctor Vitu, he's the doctor from the *Abatan* who claims he's seen your son."

Vitu glared at Odo, his dark brows furrowing. "I didn't claim to see the boy, I saw the boy, I'm certain of it. And he broke two of my damned tricorders! Two! I don't know about Starfleet, but for cargo ships, tricorders aren't exactly cheap."

"He did pay for them to be replaced," Odo said, his voice weary, as if he'd been listening to Vitu complain for hours.

"The issue still remains that he broke them in the first place," said the doctor.

Beverly offered her hand. "Good to meet you, Dr. Vitu," she said. "I'm Dr. Beverly Crusher."

The other doctor took her hand and shook it vigorously, then added both his hands in his enthusiasm. "Doctor Crusher! It's so good to meet you, I've heard and read so much about you and your work. Although, I do wish I could have met you under better circumstances."

"As do I," she said, carefully retrieving her hand from Vitu's grasp. "When did you see my son?"

"In my sickbay," said Vitu, indignant. "The boy had gotten into all of my equipment and when I went to investigate, he threw a tricorder at me."

"As you said before," said Odo.

"How long was Matthieu on your ship?" Picard asked.

"Only a couple days, he joined the crew at Deep Space Five," said the doctor.

It sounded correct, their son's trail had been lost at DS5. If Matthieu had boarded this cargo ship, that could explain how the trail was lost. Ships like the *Abatan*, they didn't really check into records of the crew that signed on. "Have you searched the station?" Picard asked Odo, ignoring Vitu.

"I've currently got security teams sweeping the entire station. I've also placed two guards with Garak in case your son manages to slip through the net."

"What can we do?" Beverly asked.

The Changeling shrugged slightly. "Honestly, Doctor, there isn't much you can do right now aside from wait."

Crusher frowned. "Constable, this is my son we're talking about. I don't think I can just stand around and wait for him to appear."

"I realize that," Odo said. "But there's nothing I can give you to do in the meantime."

A moment passed. "Would you object if we went and spoke with Garak?" the doctor asked. Picard gave her a startled look, he'd had no idea she wanted to meet Garak. Then again, she was exactly right. Garak had known their son during those years when he was in the Cardassian work camp. Garak had been the man to retrieve their son from the Orions.

*Those green bastards.*

Realizing his anger seeping to the surface, he mentally shook himself, trying to get out of it.

Odo seemed to consider Beverly's question. "No, I don't object to it. He's on the Promenade, at his tailoring shop."

Picard nodded. "We'll be there. Constable, you'll let us know if you hear anything?"

"Of course," Odo said with a short nod.

They left the cargo bay, taking the short walk to the Promenade. When they stepped through the main entrance, elevated voices sounded over the din. Not quite shouts, but the projection of a voices right before it turned into a yelling match. The crowd of people walking parted long enough for Picard to see Chief O'Brien, a former member of his crew, questioning a human boy. Beverly had been walking just in front of him and she came to a dead stop, nearly causing Picard to knock her over.

"Matthieu," she said.

And she was right. The boy O'Brien had by the shoulder was their son, he could place that rusty hair anywhere. Picard felt any trace of control he might have had over the situation slip away from him. As O'Brien continued trying to get Matthieu to admit who he was, to come with him, a Cardassian walked out of one of the Promenade shops.

"Garak!" Matthieu shouted.

The Cardassian turned, facing O'Brien and the boy. Security teams had also heard and were running in from the other end of the Promenade.

"No," whispered Beverly.

The captain sprinted towards his son.

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Matthieu watched as Garak turned towards him, he looked the Cardassian in his dark eyes for the first time since he was a small, frightened ten-year-old boy. The heavy hand of the Starfleet officer on his shoulder faded away to nothing. Vaguely, he was aware that his parents had walked into the Promenade. They had found him. Even now, he could see, if he'd chosen to really look, his father running towards him. He knew that to be true now, that the doctor and the captain were his parents. But it was too late. Opposite them, Security officers ran towards him, phasers drawn. Matt's hands were in his pockets, his right hand closing around the hilt of the disruptor he'd gotten during the sale of the runabout.

Now all he saw was Garak, everything around him disappearing, he was in a tunnel, he and Garak, studying one another. Sounds surrounded him, voices.

*“Are we going to be okay?”*

*“Yes. I promise.”*

*“You promised!”*

*“I’m sorry.”*

*“You remember, I know you do.”*

*“Shut up!”*

*“Some things are worse than death.”*

*“I’ll find you, when I’m older. And then I’ll kill you for what you did.”*

And now he was older, he had found him, he was looking right at him, and he didn’t have the slightest idea what to do. His fingers fell away from the worn grip of the disruptor. In Garak’s eyes he saw the last thing he’d seen in them—the similarity to Savas’s eyes, warm and forgiving, something he’d never associated with a Cardassian. Then the distance closed between them, and Matthieu found himself speaking the words he’d wanted to when he was small. “The old man said you could be trusted.”

The voice that answered was the one Matt had heard as he left with Cadan, the same one that had given its apologies. “I was never a good judge of character, either.”

Then Matthieu remembered, remembered what Garak’s face had looked like when Madred had him brought inside the room. The man standing in front of him had been betrayed as well, he wasn’t the man who should die, not this time. And then he had nothing left of himself, that was it, that last thing had gone. Matt twisted out of the officer’s grasp, then bolted towards the entrance Promenade, not knowing where he would go, but it had to be anywhere but where he was. Except as he spun and started to take off, he landed himself right in the path of another runner, and ran right into Jean-Luc Picard.

The impact knocked them both to the ground, and before either could get to his feet, Security officers were swarming above them. Two helped Picard stand up, more officers trained their drawn phasers on the boy. Another officer rolled Matthieu onto his stomach, securing his arms behind his back, cuffing them together. He closed his eyes, wishing his parents away. They were right there, watching all of this, and he couldn’t figure out why they stayed. Two large officers hauled him to his feet and he couldn’t look at his parents, so he stared at the floor. “Bring him to the brig,” he heard the Changeling say.

“Matthieu.”

His mother, she was talking to him. He didn't turn.

"Matthieu, please."

His father had spoken that time and he looked up, only because the tone of voice had been the one you never questioned, no matter how old you were, or how long it'd been since you had seen your father. It was *that* voice. Matt looked up and saw them both studying him, their eyes wide with fear and pain, and something else that he couldn't place.

"It's okay," his father said.

"No it isn't," he whispered, watching as the faces of his father and mother crumpled into pain and sadness, as the other emotion he couldn't place remained. "You don't have to do this. You don't have to pretend..." He didn't finish with the last phrase that echoed in his head: *...that you love me*. He looked away, then the officers brought him to the station's brig.

Beverly

2370

“His mother *has* red hair.”

Beverly’s head snapped up at the comment from the man who walked through the conference room door. Somehow, she’d expected the old man to be taller, but the El Aurian stood at about Guinan’s height, his skin a lighter shade of her warm brown. His eyes were as deep and caring as the bartender’s, and he also looked ageless. But El Aurians lived for centuries, so measured in age and compared to humans, Savas was old. Except he looked in his mid-thirties, as did Guinan. Then the doctor realized she was looking right in Savas’s eyes, she’d been staring and he’d picked up on it. Her manners came back and she stood from her chair. “Savas,” she said, proffering her hand.

The man nodded. “Yes. And you must be Matthieu’s mother.” He took her hand in his, then clasped her hand in both of his, his grip strong and reassuring. It was a grip meant to give some degree of comfort and it did before he dropped his hands back to his side.

“Yes. Beverly,” she said. “And I’ve always had red hair. Why did you say that when you came in?”

He contemplated his answer, his eyes holding hers. “Your son, he said that to me, when he refused to forget you or his father. That’s when I knew he wouldn’t be able to forget like the other small ones could, because his hair color was a version of yours, so he would be reminded whenever he saw a reflection of himself, or whenever someone commented on it, which was often. There aren’t many, if any at all, Bajorans or Cardassians with that rust color.” His eyes flicked over to where Picard had come to his feet, measured strides taking him to Beverly’s side. “And his father wears a red uniform,” Savas said, inclining his head. “Captain.”

A handshake passed between the two men. “It’s good to meet you,” Picard said. “You...” he paused, the reality of his statement hitting him as he went to say it. “You spent far more time with our son than we ever did. You know him better than we do.”

Savas shook his head. “No, I don’t. Yes, I may have spent more years with him than either of you, but you are his parents. You love him and you *do* know him, better than any of you even suspect.”

Beverly frowned. They hadn’t had a chance to visit him yet, Odo still processing all the information, she and Jean-Luc meeting unsuccessfully with Sisko, the station’s commander, and she feared that she wouldn’t be able to reach him physically, much less reach out to him emotionally. “We can’t reach him,” she said aloud. “I can see it in

him, he doesn't think any of this is real, that it can't possibly be true that anyone could actually love him. Like he's dead inside." She gave herself a moment, trying to find the words to explain her thoughts on her son, while the others absorbed her statements wordlessly. "But I can see that, too, he isn't dead inside. He's just...hopeless. He doesn't think it's possible to change anything about his reality, how he's lived for all those years." She looked at Savas again. "Maybe you could reach him."

"No," Savas said, his voice impossibly soft. He caught her eyes with his, showing in them that he wasn't refusing her out of any malicious intent. "The healing he has to do, that's to be done with his parents. Seeing me would only disrupt that healing."

"But you've met with Guinan since you came aboard," the captain said.

Savas smiled, acknowledging the discrepancy. "My parents are dead and his parents are not."

Beverly took this in, she understood what the man was saying, yet didn't believe that she and Jean-Luc alone could help their son. "But you know you're alive and he thinks he's not."

The El Aurian's mouth opened to answer but he was interrupted by the conference room door opening to admit Garak, who they'd also been waiting for. Counselor Troi had arranged the meeting between them in order to coordinate what they know about Matthieu and his past and to lay out a plan of action to help him. Beverly watched as Savas and Garak greeted one another as old friends, with a warm handshake and pats on the back. Then the Cardassian turned to her, regarded her seriously, with a certain sadness drifting into the edges of his face. The doctor recognized it, that sadness, her son had the same look about him, as did Savas, a mark of what they had each gone through in their childhood. Only, Matthieu was still a child, not yet an adult, unlike these two men.

Garak nodded. "Doctor," he said. "Captain. I am pleased to meet both of you. I do wish it could be under better circumstances, but I do think they could be worse. Your son is alive and eventually will be well."

"How would you know?" Picard asked.

Beverly quickly looked at him, hearing the hard edge to his voice. He didn't return her look, instead keeping his eyes trained on the Cardassian.

Garak held up his hands. "Captain, I've seen enough fallout from these situations to know who has the ability to get better and who doesn't. Your son, he is too—"

"Stubborn," broke in Savas.

“Right,” said Garak, glancing over at the El Aurian. “Stubborn. He is too stubborn to let himself get so completely lost that he’ll never find himself again. However, he may be too—”

“Hard headed,” came Savas’s interruption.

The look from Garak was annoyed now. “Hard headed,” he said slowly, then looked back at Picard and Crusher. “To allow others to help him. He will be a...project, so to speak.” He produced a padd from one of his pockets. “I cannot stay, I have things to attend to at my shop. Here are the details from where I found your son, the name of the ship, the Orions involved, all of that. Do with it what you will, but I assume it will help you in some way.”

Beverly stared at the padd held in Garak’s outstretched hand as if it were alive and snarling, and it was the right way to view it, because the information contained inside could shred them all as easily as any rabid dog. If she or Jean-Luc took that padd, they would go after those Orions, she was sure of it. But that wasn’t what they needed, some sort of retribution, because it wouldn’t solve anything. Right now, they needed to help their son and their own anger at the Orions could be set aside. It would be hard to do so, but it had to be done. It was part of being truly human, to use love to leverage anger out of the way so they could do what was good. “Deanna,” she said, still studying the padd, “I need you to take that.” Then she corrected herself. “We need you to take that and keep it. I don’t know, do something with it.”

“I think we should look at...” Picard trailed off, his eyes falling away from the padd now in Troi’s hands and over to Beverly. “You’re right, we shouldn’t.” The frown on his face grew deeper as Beverly watched, hoping it wouldn’t become a permanent fixture. She missed his smile, she missed Matthieu’s smile, it’d been so long since she’d seen either of them do so.

“Why don’t we sit down?” Troi suggested, leading the way by taking a seat herself.

They spent the next couple hours listening to Savas talk about Matthieu’s years with him, what he’d been like, the things that had happened. Then he told them about the last time Matthieu had seen him alive.

“Alive?” Beverly asked.

Savas nodded. “When he was ten, he thought I died.”

Picard leaned forward, resting his forearms on the table in front of him. Over the past hour, he had gone from abject anger to weariness, the emotional toil written on his time etched face. A few times, the doctor had reached over and grasped his arm under the table, just to make sure he was still there because he’d been so quiet. But now the quietness had disappeared and Jean-Luc was intent on getting answers. “Why would he think that?” he asked.

The El Aurian sighed and sat back, putting as much distance between himself and the intense captain sitting across from him. "Captain, the Cardassians had figured out who your son was."

"What do you mean?"

"They found out he was a Picard. That he was the son of one of Starfleet's most honored captains. Then the gul in charge of the work camp decided he wanted to put Garak in his place and he used Matthieu and the other children to do so, because his blackmail opportunity had passed him already." Savas paused, his eyes closing against the words he had to speak aloud. "The gul, he ordered Garak to create an escape plan with me and have the oldest child, who was your son at the time, in on it. Garak was then ordered to poison me and have me die. That was the only part of the gul's plan that Garak could defeat and he chose a poison that would only make it appear that I was dead. So when I died, as the children saw it, Matthieu took over and lead the others in the plan we had put together. The gul, of course, found them." Another pause, another long drawn out breath. "He tortured them, then he killed them, all of them except Matthieu. Him, they made him watch."

"Then let him live," Beverly whispered. She knew her son as well as she knew his father. She knew that Matthieu blamed himself for how the other children had died, just as Jean-Luc would now be blaming himself for what had happened to Matthieu, because Matthieu was his son, and that's why he'd gotten the attention from the gul in the first place. She also knew that living while feeling responsible for such a loss of life was one of the hardest things to do and most of the time, people weren't successful at it. Instead, it ate away at them, taking bits of their soul as they tried to pretend to live afterwards and failed miserably. The doctor reached out, grasping Jean-Luc's white knuckled hand with her own. "It isn't your fault," she told him.

He didn't look at her, instead he stayed trained on Savas. "Who was the gul in charge at the time?" he asked.

"Why do you want to know?" Savas asked, opening his eyes. "The information would be as useless as knowing who the specific Orions were who originally took your son."

"Who was it?" Picard asked again, ignoring the logic set before him.

Savas crossed his arms. "His name was Madred."

Beverly felt Jean-Luc's hand go cold underneath her own, felt the guilt grab hold of him and pull him away from the reality around him. It hadn't even been a year since he had been tortured by the same man, since he'd come back broken in ways she never thought possible. Picard stood up, extricating his hand from the doctor's, feet taking him swiftly to the door as the other watched. "Jean-Luc," she said, but he was out the door before the last syllable of his name fell from her lips.

She hadn't moved from her seat. Suddenly her hand felt empty and she wanted to throw something, anything to let the frustration fly. But all her fingers could find was air, nothing solid, nothing real. She'd seen it coming, saw the bully of a bear that took Jean-Luc down every time, the man's deep seated guilt. Yet she hadn't been able to stop it and now it pissed her off, that he could just walk out like that. Then the guilt took her as well, for not being more sympathetic to him and what he'd gone through. And underneath all of that was Matthieu, waiting in the brig of the station below, not knowing what would happen to him. Slowly, she rose from her seat and faced the window, pressing her forehead against the transparent aluminum as her son and his father tended to do. Trying, in some way, to connect with them even as they closed themselves off to the outside world. She hugged herself tightly, eyes shut, while everything threatened to overwhelm her control. When she felt her friend's arm around her shoulder, bringing her close and telling her everything would turn out all right in the end, she knew control had long since run away.

The doctor opened her eyes, blinking away the tears that tried to form, and looked over at Savas, the man who had helped her son to the best of his ability. "Thank you," she told him.

His face showed his intent to protest the thank you, but Beverly warded him off with a slight shake of her head. Savas nodded just as slightly and left the conference room, Crusher staring after him.

"Beverly?"

She turned to her friend. "I think I need to speak with my son," she said.

Troi's eyebrow lifted slightly.

Beverly gave her a small, tight smile. "There are some things he needs to understand, and I think I'm the only one who can help to understand them right now. Jean-Luc..." she paused, thinking of how to explain her conclusion. "He's..."

"Too deep in his own difficulties right now to be able to help anyone, even himself," Troi said.

"And that's why you're the counselor," said the doctor, the lightness in her tone not coming close to her eyes.

So that was how Beverly found herself being let into the brig on Deep Space Nine by its Changeling constable. "I'll be outside if you need anything," Odo said, then disappeared from view, leaving the doctor alone in the corridor between the two cells. She saw Matthieu right away, lying on the bed and facing the ceiling, hands folded across his stomach, eyes closed.

"We aren't pretending," she said.

“There aren’t any windows here,” her son said. “There were always windows, wherever I went, unless I was already outside. On the cargo ship, on the medical transport, at the starport, on the mercenary ship, on the space stations. I used to look through them all the time, I remember. I was looking for Papa. Even...” and his voice dropped, barely audible. “After.”

It was the first time Matthieu had referred to Jean-Luc as “papa” since he’d been abducted thirteen years ago. Even through the sadness in her son’s voice, she felt hope move forward, starting to take hold in places where only despair had tread before. “He loves you,” she said, studying her son, resisting the urge to try and rush through the forcefield and place her hands on him to reassure that he was real, that he was really *there* and not some dream where he would slip right through her fingers again and again.

“No,” he said.

“I think your father gets to be the judge of that,” she said.

“Then why isn’t he here?”

“Because I am.” Then she watched as Matthieu sat up, opened his eyes, and looked at her. She remembered that look, the one he got when she refused to engage him in an argument, he’d certainly gotten it enough when he was a toddler for her to be able to recognize it now. She took in the lines of his face, how they were far removed from the little boy she’d known and much closer to a man’s. Took in the gray eyes that she’d seen when he first opened them, just after he was born. She’d hoped he’d have his father’s eyes, as they were enigmatic, gray, then green, then gray again, sometimes a hint of brown. So much more interesting than her own blue ones. Of course, now those eyes that regarded her had lost so much of that innocence, they fought with that shadow of sadness she’d caught glimpses of in Savas and Garak.

“And why are you here?” he asked.

“To talk to my son,” she said, pulling a chair in front of the cell and sitting down. “About why he seems to think that he can’t stay home, why he can’t accept that he has a home, why he thinks his parents only pretend to love him.”

“It’s just not possible.”

He sounded so much like his father with that statement that it shocked her into a momentary silence. Then she decided she could influence him enough that he wouldn’t grow into his fifties and still submerge himself in guilt, have to deal with being so sensitive to the deeper emotions of life that he walled himself up from everything. So she used her mother voice, a tone much like Jean-Luc’s earlier, one that got the attention of a child no matter how angry or how old. “It is and it’s already happened,” she said.

Her son hid his eyes from himself and from her and when he spoke, his tone was impossibly more quiet than before. "It isn't possible because I've done things that made me die inside."

The frustration threatened to overwhelm her, hearing her son talk like that, repeating thoughts she'd had as a child after she'd survived Arvada III. "Matthieu Calum Picard," she said, each part of his name given a strong measure, an attempt to ground him in who he was. "You're a part of me, a part of your father, and so I know you aren't bad."

The use of his name got a tiny smile from him, a slight tug at the corners of his mouth. "I haven't heard or even remembered my middle name in years," he said, choosing to address the first statement instead of the second, heavier one.

"You were named after someone very important to me," she said.

"Was I?"

She nodded, the coldness rolling over her, the memories from her own childhood returning. It had been a long time since she'd told anyone about what had happened, she'd come to an uneasy acceptance of it, enough that she knew she wasn't dead inside and never had been. As resistant as she was to bring it up again, it was something her son needed to hear. Wesley never had, but his childhood had been easy only compared to his brother's. While his father's death had hit him as hard as any child, it hadn't passed beyond the realm of normal human experience, like the events of his brother's life had. Wesley also wasn't as sensitive as Matthieu, able to play rough and tumble with emotional upheavals while Matthieu had to hide and gather himself to face it. "When I was ten, I thought I had died inside, like you thought when you were ten, like you think now."

Matthieu's eyes widened. "Garak told you."

"We know what happened," she said, sidestepping the issue of lying to her son about the source of their knowledge. "And that's part of why I needed to talk to you, because I do understand."

He raised his eyebrow but held his comment. He didn't need to say it anyway, she saw it in his expression. *You don't understand.*

So she told him about Arvada III.

\*\*\*

Beverly

2334

The ten year old girl ran from the school towards her home—they'd gotten out early due to her teacher going into early labor. Her teacher already knew it was a girl, DNA testing had told her so. Beverly had been absolutely fascinated with the entire process, the biology of the human body exponentially more interesting than the frogs and snakes she caught in the pond behind the house. She'd seen little of her parents lately, they'd been in their lab almost constantly, there when she woke up, there when she came home, and most nights, there when she went to bed. Occasionally, they checked in with her at the house, making sure she ate her meals and did her homework. She missed them.

She hoped that getting released from school early would allow her to catch them when they weren't working, she figured they had to take a break at *some* point. But the house was empty when she went inside. She went over to the lab her parents had close to their house. Her mother had wanted the lab attached to the house, but her father had objected, saying it wouldn't be safe to have the two structures connected. Beverly never questioned that decision, never wondering why a biology lab would be unsafe to have attached to a home, because normally nothing dangerous occurred in typical biology labs. Labs like the one her parents had, working as contracted research scientists.

The little girl crept through the back door, wanting to watch her parents as they worked. One day, she wanted to do what they did, study human biology and help design and create new cures for the illnesses science had yet to figure out. Both of her parents were manipulating some sort of experiment inside an isolation booth, using gloves from the outside to access the inside without the air being breached. Eagerly, she peeked above the observation window's sill, realizing they must have a virus in that booth and were trying to figure out how to neutralize it. As she watched, her father let a drop from a pipet land on a square of a gel made to act like living tissue would. Within seconds, the gel began to dissolve, falling apart and landing in clumps on the bottom of the booth.

"It works," her father said. "It disintegrates the flesh on contact now instead of over a week's exposure."

"Remember, the method of delivery is different as well," her mother said.

Paul nodded, removing his hands from the gloves. "Let's clean up and secure the sample."

Beverly dropped down below the window, hiding underneath. *They aren't making the cure, they're making the virus. A biological weapon.* A coldness scabbled across her skin, a caress of fear she'd never felt before in her short life. *My parents are the bad guys.* Her feet took her quickly from the lab and out into the woods, trying to escape the reality she'd just discovered, but it chased her, clinging to her as intimately as a shadow. She sat next to the pond, watching a couple of the frogs hop around on the muddy shore, trying to decide what to do. She couldn't do nothing, she wanted to be the one to find the cures and fix things, if she didn't start now, she'd never start at all.

It didn't occur to her that a ten-year-old wouldn't be expected to carry such a heavy responsibility.

Once the sun began to set, she slowly trudged home, for once finding her parents setting the dinner table to sit down and eat as a family. Except to Beverly, they didn't look the same anymore, she didn't even want to think of them as her parents. But as her father and mother talked and passed around the different dishes, she had trouble denying they were her parents. She looked like both of them, she knew it. She'd gotten the red Howard hair from her father, long legs from her mother. Already, she was taller than most of the other girls in her grade.

"You're awfully quiet," Paul said, his green eyes curious.

Beverly shrugged.

"I heard your teacher went into labor," Isabel said. "You've been so excited about that for weeks and you haven't said a word about it." She reached out towards her daughter, feeling her forehead for a fever, something that had been proven scientifically inaccurate in determining body temperature, but an action that parents refused to give up, nevertheless. "Do you feel sick?"

Beverly shrugged again, then said, "I think so." She did feel sick, but not for the reasons her parents thought.

"You haven't touched your dinner," Paul said, motioning with his fork. "That's not like you at all. Usually you eat so quickly we aren't sure if you even taste it."

Despite her disillusionment, her father's comment still made her smile, just a little. "Not hungry," she said.

"Now I know you're coming down with something," said her mother.

"Can I go lay down?" Beverly asked.

"Go ahead," said Isabel. "We'll check in on you later."

Once upstairs, the little girl lay down on her bed and stared at the ceiling, trying to figure out what she should do. To her surprise, she fell asleep, waking up sometime in the middle of the night, the Arvada moon casting light into her bedroom. Normally she closed her blinds to block out the impossibly bright moon so it wouldn't wake her up, but she'd forgotten, and now she was awake. But she was okay with that, she could get into the lab and look at her parents' reports on their project, making sure her conjecture was correct.

She slipped on a light jacket and silently left the house. Outside, the moon brushed against a few clouds in the sky, a high elevation wind sending the clouds moving quickly across that same sky. Beverly entered the lab and found a computer

terminal, logging in as her father. She'd seen him log in enough times to recall the codes and logins and passwords.

The reports were listed by date, latest to earliest. The first was filed today and transmitted at the same time. Beverly called it up and read it, the coldness coming back, causing her breath to hitch in her throat, causing her fingers to tingle.

*From: Howard, Paul MD*

*Howard, Isabel MD*

*Terran Date: 3.15.2334*

*The Berthold radiation has successfully been converted to a liquid form able to impact tissue immediately upon contact. The Berthold biological agent may be deployed as a vapor, and will affect the subjects through mucous membranes, lungs, and skin. Delivery of this synthesized substance will conclude our contract with your organization.*

Beverly hit the commands required to exit the file, erase her access attempt, then wiped at the console to remove fingerprints. She had to do something, had to stop them from sending the biological weapon to the shadow organization not named anywhere in the system. Her eyes set upon one of the many tools around, this one made to cut up the synthesized gel with a phaser-like beam.

*Fire.*

Fire would kill the biological agent and vaporize any of the agent left over so no one would become sick, and that's what she needed to do, keep people from getting sick. She took up the tool and scraped together as much flammable material as she could and held the beam to the pile. Smoke rose from the pile in tiny tendrils wafting up as she felt sweat break out on her forehead. She couldn't wait to see if it caught fire, because if something went wrong, it would be her fault. So she dropped the tool and then ran out of the lab and back into the quiet house. Once she got into bed, sleep took her quickly, a blanket over what she might have done. Tomorrow, she could figure out what she could really do.

She awoke to a world filled with harsh light. Beside her, she heard the soft voice of her Nana, she was talking with someone. Slowly, Beverly opened her eyes, the light painful at first, then she grew used to it and was able to see Nana.

"Nana?" Beverly said.

Felisa grasped her granddaughter's hand. "Beverly, you're awake."

"What happened?"

"There was an accident. Your parents...the colony..."

The coldness returned, gripping her by the neck, pulling the little girl upward in horror. "What happened, Nana?"

Her grandmother reached out and gently pushed on her shoulder to get her to lie back down. "Don't try to sit up yet," he said. "You're lucky to even be awake. You're one stubborn young lady. Somehow you held on ever after the smoke from the fire had knocked you unconscious. You've been out for nearly two days."

"What happened?" she asked again.

"There was an accident," Felisa repeated. "Your parents' lab caught on fire and one of the viruses they were trying to make a cure for mixed with the clouds and became a vapor. It's making everyone sick, our medical supplies are nearly gone, and the Federation is weeks away from help arriving. Many people have died already and I'm not sure how many will survive. The winds blew most of it away from this part of the colony, but then it rained and brought the rest of the virus to the rest of the colony."

"Mom and Dad?"

"They tried to stop it and were caught in the fire. The doctors, they aren't sure if the fire killed them or if the virus killed them."

Beverly closed her eyes, her hands cold and numb, not feeling the warmth from her grandmother's hands that held her own. *I killed them all, it's my fault.*

\*\*\*

Beverly

2370

"Was it your fault?" Matthieu asked.

"I still don't know the answer to that," she replied. "I don't think I ever will. But I do know how I feel about it and how I felt about it when I was a girl. After the Federation showed up a few weeks later, Nana moved us to Caldos. I had a hard time because I thought I should've died, too."

"But you were ten," her son said, standing up, pacing the length of his cell. "I mean, you can't even know for certain that what you did caused the accident or if it was something else entirely."

"I know that know," she said, studying her son, watching as his mind came back on and starting participating in life again. "Someone had to help me understand that and help me talk to Nana about it. He was a teacher of mine on Caldos, his name was Calum. You see, I thought Nana would hate me because of what I'd done, and I was so afraid that she'd reject me if she found out that I was dying inside as my guilt ate me alive. Calum noticed that, got the story out of me, then met with Nana and me."

Matthieu stopped pacing, turned and looked at her. "And she didn't hate you," he said.

"If she hated me, I wouldn't have told you the story," Beverly replied.

A door opened at the end of the corridor and Odo strode in. "Visiting hours are over," he said. "You've been here over two hours, Doctor."

"That long?" asked Matthieu.

Odo nodded solemnly. "Yes. And there are regulations to be adhered to, so I'm going to have to ask your mother to leave now."

Matthieu made eye contact with Beverly. "Sorry," he said.

"It's not your fault," she replied, hoping he would catch the subtext.

He gave her a rueful smile in return. He'd caught it. "Not yours, either," he said.

And she understood everything he meant in his reply.

10

Picard

2370

Jean-Luc stood in an empty Ten Forward, insomnia keeping him awake deep into the ship's night.

"You're a little late, Picard," Guinan said.

"I was delayed," he said.

"You met Savas." She moved and stood next to him, arms draped behind her back as his were.

"Yes." He didn't look at her, kept looking out the window instead. A few docking arms of the space station were in the just within the window's field of vision, but it was the lush curve of Bajor that was the main sight. It was times like this that made him wish he'd stayed at home on the vineyards, never stepping foot onto the deck of a starship. But then he would be reminded that if he'd done so, he never would've met Beverly and Matthieu wouldn't exist. Yet at least then, the boy would've been spared all that had happened to him. Except he wouldn't have had those moments, all of them, of being with his son and seeing him happy, grinning ear to ear just because he existed.

2356

He stood in the doorway of the third bedroom, staring at the occupied crib. When he'd knocked on the door to Beverly's San Francisco home, she'd been the one to answer, greeting him with a tight embrace.

"I missed you," he said.

Her answer was to take a step back and look at him with a genuine smile. "Yes," she said. "I did too." Her hands went to his scalp. "You've lost more hair. There isn't much left, you know." She gave him a smirk with her comment.

"I'm well aware of that," he said, drawing her hands in hers, then leaning forward, kissing her softly.

She returned the kiss, then pointed him in the direction of the bedroom. "He's in there."

And now he stood in that doorway, suddenly afraid to step inside, to see his son for the first time. Doubt plagued him, afraid that he would act like his own father, somehow become as estranged from his son as he was with his father. He chuckled in spite of himself, a starship captain afraid of a human being who weighed less than seven pounds. But that was the thing, it was easier to face someone bigger than you,

someone who could break *you*, rather than facing someone smaller than yourself, someone whom you could end up breaking.

Finally, he moved forward and over to the crib, peering in and seeing him for the first time. They'd yet to fully decide on a name, they were supposed to finish discussing it that day. It was something they'd decided needed to be done face to face. The boy was so tiny, the blanket wrapped around him tightly, his face peeking out over the top. He'd seen infants before, but never so soon after birth, and he hadn't realized how small they really were. A wispy fuzz of light red hair grew on the boy's head, but you could only see it up close. From far away, the poor boy looked bald, like his father. Picard reached out and touched that tiny head, the sparse hair impossibly soft under his fingers. Right now, he didn't much look like anyone, aside from hair obviously from Beverly. Then the boy's eyes opened and he was shocked to his eyes just like his own, gray and clear.

Father and son regarded each other for the first time. Jean-Luc hadn't realized how quickly love could form, because it was instant when he looked at his son. He'd do anything for him, absolutely anything to protect him, and he'd barely met him. The boy shifted underneath his hand.

"You can pick him up, you know," Beverly said. She'd come up to stand just behind him, her head perched on his shoulder. "Do you know how?"

He frowned. "No, I don't."

She laughed at him, nothing mean in her tone, only amusement at finding out something the starship captain didn't know how to do. Then she stepped beside him and lifted the boy from the crib. "Hold out your arms," she said.

He raised an eyebrow.

She raised one back. "You know, form a cradle with them. I'm sure you've either seen it or done it at least once in your life."

He did as he was told.

"Now, you have to make sure you support his head in your arms, or with one of your hands, because his neck can't support his head yet."

"Right," he said. And then she'd put the boy in his arms and he was holding his son. The responsibility settled on him fully as the boy settled in his arms. This little life would be his priority from then on, not his ship, that was the right thing to do.

Beverly reached out and smoothed the fuzz on the boy's head, caressing his cheek. "He's got your eyes," she said, then smirked again. "And your hairline."

Jean-Luc smiled at her, letting the jibe go.

“His brother is awfully impatient about him not having a name yet,” she said.

“Have we narrowed it down at all?”

The doctor crossed her arms as she furrowed her brow. “While I like the idea of naming him after Calum, at the same time, a first name that Scottish sounds funny with a last name as French as yours.”

Picard returned her furrowed brow look. “But he meant a lot to you.” Calum had so much to do with Beverly’s ability to eventually bond with her grandmother and accept herself again that honoring that man was something he wanted to do as well.

“He did,” she said, nodding. “But it can be his middle name. Why don’t we name him after your great uncle.”

The captain glanced down at his infant son, the boy’s head now resting against his father’s forearm and completely asleep again. “*Gaspard?*” he asked, incredulously looking back at the doctor. “Beverly, you can’t expect me to agree to do that to a child.”

“I meant Matthieu,” she said, sounding a bit exasperated, as if he’d been that dense on purpose, just to irritate her. “The astronomer.”

“Oh.” He looked back down at the boy. “That’s not so bad.”

2370

“You’d miss him,” Guinan said, pulling him from his memories.

“I know.”

“It isn’t your fault, Picard.”

Finally, he turned and glared at the El Aurian. “Guinan, I wasn’t able to protect him. I wasn’t able to keep him from being abducted, keep him away from the Orions or the Cardassians afterward. If he didn’t share my last name, then Madred would’ve left him alone. It *is* my fault. For you or anyone else to tell me otherwise is just a platitude.”

“You can’t say whether or not Matthieu would’ve suffered the same fate if he weren’t your child, either through the abduction or in the work camp. Yes, he got the attention of Madred because of his last name, but Madred was intent on hurting Garak. Your son being hurt was only incidental to that. You have to get past what you think you did wrong, because it doesn’t matter in this situation. What matters is that he’s here now.”

He considered her words, comparing them to the guilt he felt over being so useless in protecting his son, especially when he was his father, he’d promised to do anything to protect him. And in the end, he’d done nothing.

“There was nothing you could do,” Guinan said.

“Are you telepathic?” he asked.

The corners of her lips curled up slightly. “I’ve just lived a long time, Picard.”

“Close enough.” He unclasped his hands and ran one over his smooth scalp. “So what do I do now? I don’t know how I can help him, I’m not trained in anything like this.”

“You protect him,” she said, eyes on the planet hanging below.

“From?”

The El Aurian turned and studied him, her brown eyes serious, then letting in a sparkle of mischief. “Genetics,” she said, then walked away.

She didn’t have to say anymore because he understood what she meant. His son was like him, he would hold himself responsible for what’d happened to him with Madred and the other children, even for his own abduction, he’d blame himself. He saw it, saw how he’d have to protect him this time. Then there was Beverly, having gone through the same issue as the same age, of blaming herself for something a ten year old couldn’t carry true responsibility for. He also knew that it hadn’t been her fault at all, she’d been caught in a chain of events that would’ve occurred whether she fell into them or not. The door opened and he didn’t bother to turn—he already knew it would be Beverly.

“Your son is entirely too much like you,” she said, walking up behind him and perching her head on his shoulder, like she had when he’d first met their son.

“What makes you say that this time?”

“I told him that he needed to accept that he has a home and that his parents love him, and this is what he replies: ‘It’s just not possible.’ Now tell me, Jean-Luc, who does that sound like?” Her impression was perfect.

He smiled in answer. She brought her arms around him, hugging him from behind, kissed his neck. Then she took one of his hands and lead him over to a table to sit. Her hand remained in his. “Hey,” he said.

It was her turn to smile. “And how about you?” she asked. “You walked out.”

Guilt stung at him again. The walking out was becoming a habit. “I’m sorry.”

She squeezed his hand. “I understand. I spoke with him, I told him about Arvada and what happened with me, about Calum and Nana. He’ll be okay, I think. I saw it in his eyes, he’s starting to understand.” Crusher frowned. “What about the charges?”

The captain sighed. "I spoke with Counselor Troi a few hours ago, she's going to be visiting Matthieu and giving him a psychological evaluation. We already know the outcome, the things that happened to him have affected him psychologically, which means once the official evaluation is written and sent, the charges will be dropped. Of course, once that's done and he's home, he'll have to see Deanna a lot...to help his recovery."

"It worked for you, for the most part," said Beverly. "Except when things get thrown in your face. But that's entirely normal for anyone, you react when you get blindsided."

"It doesn't excuse my behavior. I can't just walk out on you or Matthieu." He couldn't abdicate his responsibility to them any more than he could his ship and crew. In fact, they should be placed above his ship and crew and certainly his career, and before now.

"You stuck around. You didn't run off the ship or anything else drastic. You needed time to deal with yourself and you did, and you eventually talked to Deanna and most likely Guinan's been through here."

"Yes."

"When is Deanna going to be speaking with him?" the doctor asked.

"Tomorrow morning. He should be able to come home by the end of the day, from what she understands." The tiredness he'd been keeping at bay began to creep through his body. His eyes started losing focus, drifting off.

Beverly's thumb caressed the inside of his palm. "Jean-Luc?"

"Hm?" He blinked and focused on the woman sitting across from him.

"Let's go to bed."

He followed her out of Ten Forward and to their quarters.

\*

Early the next morning they found themselves walking on the Promenade, intending to visit their son before Deanna came down from the ship to see him. Beverly spoke with him in hushed tones, going over what she'd discussed with Matthieu, what she'd revealed about her own experiences, saying that Picard should do the same. He found himself trying to decide if he should tell Beverly the full extent of what he knew about Arvada III, information he'd come across in recent years that he'd been reluctant to share, only because he didn't want to upset her when she'd come already to terms with what happened. But now, they were even closer than before, and the memories were already teeming on the surface. "You had nothing to do with it, you know," he said.

A pause disrupted her steps. "What?"

"On Arvada, how the biological agent got vaporized into the atmosphere. The fact that you tried to light the lab on fire was only coincidence. The accident was set off by Section 31."

"Section 31." She repeated the shadow organization's name a few times. "My parents were working for them."

He shook his head. "They were coerced. Didn't have a choice. That's usually how they work, you know. They make everyone a victim of circumstance."

She threaded her fingers through his. "Thank you," she said.

Picard looked at her, quizzical. "For?"

"Telling me." Beverly smiled.

He smiled back. Then his eyes caught sight of a tall non-Terran walking opposite them, most likely shopping on the Promenade like many of the people there. But the captain recognized the alien as an Orion and his smile went straight into his captain's mask of control, desperately trying to wrestle his baser instincts into submission. This Orion most likely wouldn't have anything to do with what happened to his son, but he could, and he was there, walking there, so close to them.

*Those green bastards.*

Then everything happened in slow motion. The Orion approached him and Picard was still grappling with his control, then he saw a look of recognition in the Orion's eyes.

*He knows who I am. He knows I'm Matthieu's father.*

Then he saw fear race through those same eyes locked with his.

*He's one of the ones that hurt my son. And he's afraid.*

*He should be.*

The Orion's arms came forward and Picard reacted, moving past the arms and hitting him, sending him to the ground. The Orion immediately sprang back up and tackled the captain to the floor where they wrestled with each other, trading blows as shouts went up around them. Somewhere in the outer reaches of his senses, Picard heard Beverly shouting his name. Hands pulled on his shoulders, more voices sounded, then he and the Orion were forced apart, Security officers having made it down to the lower Promenade deck, Odo amongst them.

Odo, on his part, already looked entirely exasperated with the situation. His recessed eyes glanced from Picard to the Orion and back, then at Beverly. The captain took a chance to look at her and realized he saw something worse than what he'd seen in the Orion's. She was furious. Reason came back to him and he knew why and she had every right to be. He'd acted like any base being would have instead of a Starfleet captain.

"Bring them to the brig," Odo said. He inclined his head towards the doctor. "You may accompany me," he said to her.

"Oh, I certainly will," she said.

Picard found himself being escorted away, the crowd dissipating, some people still craning their necks to see what the commotion was.

\*\*\*

Matthieu

2370

Hearing footsteps in the brig's corridor, Matt rose from his seat on the bed and went to find out what was going on. His sleep had been restless the past night, his own memories combining with those of his mother's. When he'd woken up for the last time, for the first time since he was very small, he wanted to go home. Not only that, but he needed to go home. And instead of being there, he was stuck in this cell because he'd run away again, running in the wrong direction, away from where he needed to be instead of towards.

Bodies came into view as he craned his neck and tried to see what was going on without touching the forcefield. He saw his father and mother, then Odo, and then saw the other figure being led behind them...an Orion. Matthieu backed up, backed right up into a corner, shrinking into it as if he were a small boy. Only now he wasn't and now it wasn't so easy to hide himself from anything or anyone. He brought his knees up to his chest and dropped his head onto the arms that were hugging his legs. He heard the footsteps come closer, glanced upward to see the Orion being put in the cell across from him, the Orion staring at him, staring.

And all over again, he wanted to die.

He wanted to do everything at once, cry and scream, throw things and kick things, wither away into nothing, run as far away as he could get, anything to make the green man stop looking at him. Just when everything was going okay, when his parents really would take him back and maybe even love him, just a little, the green men show up again. Showed up right in front of his parents, showing them the trash that he really was. Tremors raced through his body, he felt like he was four and five again, so small and vulnerable. The dirt crawling over him, covering his body, everything.

“Look at me.”

He heard her voice, his mother’s, like he’d tried to hear when he was little. Like he’d hoped to hear but never did. So he couldn’t look up, he knew the Orion was still there, staring, he could feel him, feel the dirt from the green man’s eyes dig into his skin. He wanted to tear it off, tear off all his dirty skin.

“Look at me,” she said again, emphatic.

But he couldn’t, nor could he tell her so. He heard his father asking what was going on. He was in the cell next to him and he hadn’t the slightest idea why.

Or maybe he was imagining it. Maybe he was imagining all of this and he’d wake up on the mercenary ship with Baran laughing at him and withholding his medicine. Or even worse, he’d wake up and be with Madred and they’d all played a huge joke on him, he was actually still ten and had many more years of psychological torture to go.

“Stop staring at him,” he heard her say, but now her voice traveled in the other direction.

*She was speaking to the green man.*

The green man spoke, the gravelly tones of his voice raking across his skin, peeling it off and replacing it with nothing at all, just letting the dirt pour in. “He has hair like yours,” he said. “Is he your son?”

“Why do you want to know?” his mother asked.

“What’s his name?”

The shout ripped from his throat, out before he realized he was going to speak. “Don’t tell him!” Then he shot forward and out of the corner. “He doesn’t deserve to know, none of them do.” His momentum carried him into the forcefield and he was thrown back. But as quickly as he was thrown, he came right back up. “None of them ever knew and none of them will. Don’t tell him anything!”

And he looked at the Orion, met his eyes, the dark beady eyes so different from any others, it was those eyes that had given the Orions the other names they used for them.

*Here come the rock spiders. They’ll spin their web and you’ll be caught and they’ll drain you of your life before you die.*

There was a rock spider right across from him, staring at him, and Matt stared right back at him, even as he felt the black hole inside of him grow.

“My name is Vukasin,” the green man said.

Then the green man was all Matt could see. So he switched to the green man's language, telling him everything he wanted to say when he was a boy, everything that a rock spider deserved. Even as he felt the touches of the tiny spider feet across his skin, sliding along the dirt they spread, he told the green man everything he deserved to hear. Then he wanted to do something, to get to him, to do to that green man what he wanted to do to the other green men, to the rock spiders. Now that he was bigger, he could crush them, grind them into the floor with his foot, stomp them away into nothing.

He had to. This was his chance. It was all that mattered, because the black hole had become him. He was nothing, they had made him so by taking away everything that mattered, leaving him empty. And it was the emptiness that poured out of him now, unchecked.

His legs pushed him into the forcefield, over and over. The invectives spewed forth from his mouth, words that would appall even the most seasoned black market pirate. But they were the words that had been locked away inside him since he was that tiny boy caught in that horrific web.

*I'll get to him. I'm tall enough and strong enough, I can make him pay for what he's done, him and all the others.*

Matt heard other shouts in the periphery of his hearing, the bright flares of energy in the corners of his vision whenever he hit the forcefield. But all he really saw was the green man, staring back at him, standing still, right in front of him. The boy moved forward again and this time instead of being thrown back, the field dropped and he was through and he nearly fell onto his face at the shock of it. And he was that much closer to getting at the Orion. Eyes never moving from his target, Matthieu got to his feet and went straight for the green man, ignoring the forcefield, entirely forgetting that it existed. Except that one hadn't dropped and the boy fell backwards, watching with some satisfaction as the Orion got thrown back by the cascading energy.

His voice had given out but his rage had only just begun to bubble out of the dark spot of his mind, and his tirade continued in a smoothly fluent Orion, a language that neither of his parents would understand, so they wouldn't know quite how dirty their son had become. His words lost no power even as his voice became hoarse, the green man continuing to stumble back in his cell, Matt getting up off the corridor floor again, willing his protesting muscles and synapses to keep to the task. Chances like this only happened once in a lifetime and they couldn't be wasted by a body willing to check out so quickly.

Before he reached the forcefield again, hands were on him, pulling him by the arms and shoulders, away from the green man, away from his chance to put right what'd happened to him.

*But it never happened. Nothing happened. Nothing.*

*Later, there were more green men.*

The hands on him, they were the legs of the other rock spiders, weaving that web around him, trapping him for them all to share. He felt like he was going to be sick. It wasn't going to happen again, he wasn't going to be taken again. This time when he spoke, it was in Standard, one last shout before his voice gave way entirely. "No!"

Then there were more hands, more, forcing him from the corridor as he struggled to go back, taking him away from that green man he was meant to destroy. But his voice had abandoned him, left him with only a whisper, and no one paid any attention to it. The hands on him, they would destroy *him* instead, only how could you destroy nothing?

"Matthieu."

He knew that voice. The hands on him fell away and he shook his head, trying to orient himself, seeking an escape route once all the hands were gone and he wasn't being held. The green man, he could come back and find him, he was certain. But all the hands didn't go away, a pair of them remained, firmly holding his head forward, so he'd look at their owner.

"Matthieu, look at me."

And he did. His eyes opened and he saw his mother standing in front of him, holding his face in her hands, her blue eyes drawing him out. What he saw there scared him and he shut his eyes against it.

"Look at me," she said again. Somehow her tone was at once compelling and gentle.

But he couldn't face it, what he saw in her eyes was real, so real that it frightened him. "I can't." Yet even as he said it, he opened his eyes. He felt drained, his arms limp, trembling, the trembling skittering across his entire body. He saw that her focus hadn't moved, her eyes still on him, telling him how she felt without a single word.

Then she said them. "I love you."

No. "You can't."

She took a breath, he saw her chin tremble, similar to his own. "I get to decide that. You're my son and I love you."

He couldn't do this. He couldn't. "I'm the trash they left behind," he said. "No one loves that. No one."

Her eyes were glistening now, he knew why, he'd done that. "Well, I do," she said.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry I can’t be...” and then he felt his face betray him, his eyes betray him and his own tears fell before his mother’s. Her arms went around him as he clung to her and cried like he’d wanted to when the green men came.

Beverly

2370

“Don’t forget to breathe,” she whispered to Matthieu, then kissed the top of his head.

The tumult around them had lessened, Odo had gone back down the corridor to the cells to straighten out Jean-Luc and that Orion. The rest of the security officers had distracted themselves with other tasks instead of witnessing Matthieu’s breakdown. She had stayed and watched him, picked up him when he fell apart. She’d also been part of the cause, making him face his current reality instead of letting him run away from it again. It hurt hear nearly as much, watching her son go through that much pain, but the incident just before had scared the hell out of her. Over and over again, crashing into that forcefield until she got Odo to drop it so her son wouldn’t hurt himself. The image re-playing itself in her head made her hug her son more tightly.

“I will if you stop squeezing me,” he said. Then he let go and stepped away from her, finding a seat on one of the benches in the empty main security office. “I feel like an idiot.”

Beverly sat next to him and slung her arm around his shoulder. “That’s not to bad. You come from a fine tradition of emotional idiots. Me, your father, his father, my father, my mother...it’s only natural that you end up one yourself. But that doesn’t make how you feel any less valid and what just happened, that isn’t idiocy. It was holding it all in and running away from it all that was.” She paused, briefly pulling him closer, enjoying the feel of her son against her shoulders, knowing that he was alive, safe. “Your father and I, we’ve done the same, many times over.”

Her comment caused Matthieu to glance over at the corridor. “So, um, what’s he in for?”

She sighed. “He assaulted that Orion.”

The boy’s eyebrows shot right up his forehead. “Really?”

“Yes, really. And when Odo releases him, I’ll kill him myself.”

“I heard that, Doctor,” the constable said, striding into the outer office, entering information into a padd carried in his left hand. “If you’re being honest in your threat, I’ll have to hold the captain in protective custody.”

“I think that might be a good idea,” Counselor Troi said as she walked through the door. Beverly shot her friend a look, wondering if she’d already heard. “Will told me,” Deanna said, answering her questioning look.

The doctor sighed again, glared down the corridor, then glanced at her son. He'd gone quiet.

Matthieu was looking over at Odo. "Am I going back in there?" he asked.

Odo exchanged looks with Troi. She gave him a nod. "After speaking with Counselor Troi, it's to your benefit that the psychological examination she's going to be conducting with you should take place on the *Enterprise*, as anything done here would be detrimental to your own well-being, after what happened." The constable didn't have to explain which event. Any of them would do, and none of them needed any reminder about what had just occurred.

"Do I have to come back?"

Deanna shook her head. "Most likely not."

Matthieu gave a small, lopsided grin as he stood up. "You missed the show, Counselor."

She returned the smile. "Then I certainly look forward to you telling me about it."

Matthieu scowled and Beverly found herself smiling as her son left with Troi. He would be okay. Then she turned to Odo. "May I speak with Captain Picard?"

He looked up from the padd. "Actually, I need to speak with both of you. If you would follow me." The constable inclined his head towards the corridor. With the questioning look back on her face, Beverly followed him. They found Picard and the Orion glaring at one another, still. "Stop," Odo said.

Both men looked over at him.

"There's been a misunderstanding," he continued to explain. "Vukasin is a part of the Orion Syndicate. He's also working for me and the Syndicate is aware of it."

"How is that possible?" Picard asked.

Beverly fixed the same look on Odo. "Yes, how?"

"May I?" asked Vukasin.

Odo nodded.

"You see, the Syndicate is well aware of the activity of the *kineo asterios*. We've been trying to catch them for years and yet they've kept eluding us, continuing to kidnap children from anywhere—"

"*Kineo asterios*?" the doctor asked, sounding the words out slowly.

It was Jean-Luc who answered from his position just behind the forcefield. "Rock spiders," he said.

Vukasin looked at him. "You speak Orion." It wasn't a question.

Picard nodded, the dismay evident on his face.

Beverly realized that Jean-Luc had understood each word their son had said. She had been horrified herself and she had only understood the emotion and tone that rolled off them and none of the words themselves. No matter what the language, swearing as vehement and filled with disdain and disgust as Matthieu's words had been, didn't need any translation. "I didn't know that," she said.

"It never came up," the captain replied, then looked at Vukasin. "Why are they called rock spiders?"

Vukasin frowned, cast his eyes around the walls of his cell, the walls of the corridor. Like them, he hated to speak about what happened aloud, because if it remained unspoken, there was the slim chance it wouldn't be real. "It is the name the children gave them, we've heard it whenever we recovered any of them. We've taken the calling them the same. It makes it...easier...to speak of them." He sighed, hands reaching out flat just short of the forcefield.

"A moment," Odo said, then walked down the corridor. True to his word, he was back after only a moment and during that time had released the forcefields. "I think it is more appropriate that you sit and talk without physical barriers." Then he took a seat on a bench along the wall and busied himself with another padd.

Beverly glanced between the tall Orion and Jean-Luc. The men had obviously drawn away from their anger, discomfort replacing it readily. But the discomfort wouldn't lead to violence, not from either of them. Mimicking Odo's movements, she took a stool and settled on it, propping her head on her hands.

Vukasin continued his explanation as he took his own seat. "We've managed to slow their activity, but we want it stopped, slowing it isn't good enough. They're exploiting children." He raised his hand again as if to stop the protest they could all see Picard begin to speak. "I realize, Captain, that we do a great deal of exploitation of our own, being the equivalent of what you Terrans call the mafia or pirates. I acknowledge those actions because it is true. However, the line is drawn in regards to children. Always, always, the Syndicate has taken care of children and looked out for them, whether it be a member's child or a child on the street. Societies crumble when children are left to die or even worse." He stopped talking and looked steadily at Beverly and then Picard. "If you are going to blame me for what happened to your son, blame me for the part I had in his being turned over to the Cardassians. If I had known what would happen..." his words fell away as he stood and paced the length of his cell.

"How were you responsible for that?" Picard asked.

Beverly watched Vukasin, wanting the answer as well.

The Orion ran his hands his smooth green scalp as he paced. "I've been working this assignment for years and have recovered many children. Always, it was too late, damage had been done. I was the one who found your son. Only then, I didn't know he was *your* son. Back then, Garak was my contact, my way of getting the children far enough away from the *kineo asterios* to keep them from being retaken. I knew that the life I was sending them to wasn't much better, but it was better than staying where they were."

"So you sent Matthieu to Garak," she said, her voice soft, but enough to catch the immediate attention of the Orion.

Vukasin halted, turning to her. The sadness crawled through his dark eyes. "Yes. I'm sorry, Doctor. If I had known what Madred would eventually do to him...I would have..I don't know what I would have done." Frustration took over. "But I couldn't have left him there, it would have been just as bad. But I should have done something. Anything to keep him away from the torture Madred meted out." He held her eyes with his. "I am truly sorry."

Before she knew what she was doing, she had gotten to her feet, reached out and taken Vukasin's hand. "Don't be," she said.

The Orion couldn't keep the shock out of his eyes.

Beverly acknowledged the man's reaction with a small smile. "Don't be sorry that you got him away from those people in the first place. That was the most important thing, that he got away from them. What happened afterward, that was the work of one man, a man so enthralled by his power that he did anything to keep himself in power over everyone around him, from grown men to little children. No one could've predicted what he ended up doing. You rescued my son from those men and I thank you for that." She let go of his hand.

"As do I," Picard said, rising from his own chair. "And I apologize for striking you."

"Nothing I didn't feel like I deserved," said Vukasin. "In fact, I'd walked towards you in the hopes that you would assault me. I think I needed it."

"Occasionally, men need to have sense knocked into them," Beverly said, the quip tumbling from her lips and stinging the men present. It worked to lighten the mood, as she'd intended.

"How close are you to cracking the ring?" Picard asked the Orion after giving the doctor a quick glare.

“Unfortunately, not much closer than we’ve been in all our years. We’ve started to cooperate with the constable here, since this station is a hub for all sorts of activity. But even the Syndicate has its limits and we can’t seem to get enough people on this assignment to break it open.”

“How do you think the Syndicate would feel about help from the Federation?” The captain had crossed his arms as he spoke, his face drawing into the thoughtfulness Beverly was familiar with when Jean-Luc had found a problem he wanted to solve.

Vukasin slid a look over at Odo. “It depends on the Federation’s ability to overlook what their operatives in this investigation see in regards to the rest of the Syndicate.”

“My eyesight seems to have been failing me as of late,” the constable replied, not bothering to raise his eyes from his padd.

The doctor watched the captain’s face change again, from thoughtfulness into action, his plans ready to be made. But they both had other obligations at the moment, as much as both of them wanted to get even with those rock spiders. That planning would come, in time, perhaps even within the next few days. However, their son waited on the *Enterprise*, and they all had a lot of information to process. Not only that, but they had a lot of life to catch up on, to learn again who their son was. She also knew Jean-Luc, that he was trying to plunge himself into planning and then immediate action, distancing himself from the emotional onslaught of earlier, of watching their son nearly kill himself in an effort to reach Vukasin. Whether he was aware of it or not, Jean-Luc was trying to do exactly what their son had tried to do—run away, hold in his reaction, shove it deep down where it couldn’t be found. They had reached an instance where they had to continue to face everything, even though each of them were desperately fighting the instinct to bolt and escape the fallout from the storm before.

“Perhaps I can contact Starfleet Command and speak with a few people, find out if they would be willing to lend a hand—”

“Jean-Luc,” Beverly said, her concern about Matthieu making her voice soft.

He stopped and turned to her, eyebrows raised.

“We should talk about other things first.”

Briefly, it looked as if he might object, but then he only nodded at her. He’d come to the same conclusion she had, that the ring wasn’t going anywhere, but that this chance they had to finally really connect with their son could disappear at any moment, and they’d all be chasing the ghost of his past again. The captain broke the gaze he shared with Beverly and looked at Odo. “Am I free to go?”

“Yes,” Odo replied, finally looking up from his padd. “Vukasin never filed any charges and I don’t plan on making any either. Just stop fighting on my station.” Then

he addressed the Orion. "As for you, we have the standard arrangement. However, I'm intrigued by the captain's idea of involving the Federation in this and I want to run it by Garak to see if he could get anything from the Cardassians. Just a...thought. I'll be contacting both of you when I've gotten some more information." Then the constable walked back down the corridor and into his office, leaving the other three standing and looking at each other uncomfortably.

Somehow, Beverly knew Odo had done that on purpose.

"I'm sure you need to get back to your ship," Vukasin said, disrupting her thoughts. "You have a lot of work ahead of you. I know."

Her head snapped up and she studied the Orion again and there it was. The sadness. Except his was different from what she saw in her son's eyes, in Garak's and Savas's eyes, yet it was familiar all the same. Then she knew. *I see it in my own eyes, I see it in Jean-Luc's eyes.* "They took your child, too," she said.

Vukasin closed his eyes. "We never found him. My *aulax* and I, we couldn't handle it. She's now with another man and I am alone as I look for men who took my son."

Beverly looked over at Jean-Luc, asking for confirmation of what she thought *aulax* meant for an Orion.

"Wife," Picard said, understanding her question and giving her the answer.

"Yes," said Vukasin. "You, however, have found your son. There is much that you have lost that you can find now. I hope you do, for the memory of all those children." The muscular man turned and started down the hallway, then stopped and looked back at them once more. "Matthieu," he said, a smile touching his lips. "A good name."

Then he was gone.

It was just the two of them.

Her temper came roaring back, her anger at Jean-Luc over getting into a childish fistfight pushing its way back up to the front of her mind. She turned on him and fixed him with a glare, crossing her arms as she did so.

"You're angry," he said.

"You're damn right," she said. But she couldn't tell him the real source of her anger. It wasn't that he'd acted like a child, like she was sure he assumed, it was that he took that swing at the Orion and didn't give her a chance to do so herself. She'd felt the impulse, the same as him. He'd just been quicker to act on it.

He looked back at her, meeting her glare full-on. Then her outrage grew as she watched the edges of his lips curl into a smile and he began to chuckle softly.

“What are you laughing at?”

“I know why you’re angry,” he said.

He had her and he knew it. She knew it. All she could do was glare at him and his self-satisfied smile, refusing to acknowledge that he’d figured her out so easily. Then again, only he knew her well enough to figure it out so quickly. They’d been best friends for a long time. They’d been apart for a long time. “Let’s go see our son,” she said, reaching out with her hand.

The captain took it as he stepped out of his cell, lacing his fingers through hers. “Did you change your mind?” he asked, the hope again in his eyes.

Beverly liked that, seeing that hope, so much better than the sadness. She wanted it to stay. “I have,” she said, then turned and walked down the corridor, Jean-Luc with her, where he should have been all that time. And from then on, where he would be.

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Matthieu

2370

He’d felt a strange sense of *deja vu* when he’d followed the Betazoid counselor into her office again. He even sat in the chair closest to the door before he realized what was going on, then gave the counselor a self deprecating smile. “I guess it *is* habit,” he said, resisting the urge he felt to rub his eyes. They felt swollen, gritty. A flush suffused the skin on his face as he remembered how he’d cried right there in that security office, holding onto his mother as if his life had depended on it. Yet maybe, in some way, it had. For the first time since he was small, he’d felt safe.

“You felt safe,” Troi said in that lilting voice of hers. “When did you feel safe?”

Matt frowned, shifting in his chair. He didn’t want to talk yet, everything that’d happened on the station was enough for him, for now. Besides that, he owed Troi an apology and he was having trouble finding the words for it. “Getting right down to it, aren’t you?”

“Would you rather go back to the station?”

Fear raced through him and he saw the green man in front of him again, staring at him. The counselor’s office disappeared entirely and suddenly the green man was all he saw.

“Matthieu?”

He blinked and focused again, he was back in Troi’s office. “Yeah?”

“Where did you go, just then?”

Again, he shifted in his seat, his eyes wandering away from the counselor and to the windows behind her, to the planet hanging below the ship and the station. “I can’t talk about that yet,” he said, still looking out the window.

“That’s okay,” she said.

He looked at her in surprise. “I thought you were going to make me talk.”

“You’ll do that on your own, in time. I’ll see you a lot, but everything goes at your pace. What you’re ready to talk about, we’ll talk about, and we’ll go from there.” She crossed her legs and studied him.

Matt considered her words, then found himself answering her other question. “I felt safe with my mother,” he said quietly.

“When?”

He shrugged. “Then. Just now. I mean, when I was little, she and Papa always made me feel safe. Whenever I was with either of them, I knew everything would be okay, you know?” He frowned, realizing what he’d done. “But I kept running away from it, I ran away from here, away from home and safety.” The boy looked the counselor in the eyes. “I’m, um, sorry about that. About lying and then taking off on you.”

To his surprise, she smiled. “Apology accepted. It turned out all right, in the end, and that’s what matters right now. Just don’t lie to me again.” She paused, smiling more. “At least, next time don’t lie so *well*. Takes some talent to fool an empath, you know.”

“I practiced,” he said, preferring the banter to the more serious matters at hand, recognizing one of the traits he’d inherited from his parents, yet not wanting to do anything to change it.

“No you didn’t,” she said.

He blinked. She’d turned the statement right around on him, taking his flippant comment and making it very serious, indicating that she knew how he’d fooled her. After all, he’d been fooling himself, thinking that his truth was made entirely of lies and that’s how he got his emotions to project truth. The woman across from him was sharp. She’d have to be, to deal with his parents on a daily basis. She must practice herself, to be able to turn banter into serious conversation with just three words. Their meetings would be hard on him, he realized. He still wanted to run away, even the idea of talking about anything that had happened made him want to squirm. But he had to, he knew. But it did nothing to change his emotions about it. Intellect could think all it wanted, but the heart felt what it felt regardless. He’d just have to get them to cooperate. He sighed. “I felt safe down in the security office, too.” Finally, he gave in to the impulse and he squirmed. “When I cried.”

“And she held you.”

He looked up at the ceiling. “Yeah. That.” The flush came back. God, he’d cried like a three year old.

“Nothing to be ashamed of,” the counselor said.

Matthieu brought his gaze back down and looked at Troi. “I’m sixteen and I was crying in front of her like I was three.”

She shrugged. “You needed it.”

He scowled and said nothing, his willingness to cooperate disappearing entirely. Silence came between them again, the seconds sliding away on the back of a tortoise, tortuously slow. How easy would it be, to just start talking and not stop, everything he remembered spilling out in front of him for this woman to pick apart and analyze. Yet he knew that wasn’t what would happen if he did talk, she wouldn’t be all cold and analytic and take apart his memories piece by piece. She’d be understanding and sympathetic and maybe somehow, make him feel better. But even as he thought about it, just talking, the idea stopped up in his throat, cutting off any words he might have spoken. It was that easily decided, that he wasn’t ready yet, even as the words herded themselves to the edge of the cliff and made ready to jump, to let go.

He wasn’t ready, he still needed to cling to what he knew, even if it was a pack of lies waiting to be dashed apart at the bottom of a steep cliff. Like he’d clung to his mother as he’d cried. Already, he missed her. And he missed his father, wanted the chance to really talk to him, remembering him as his father again, and not some irritating archeologist. He missed home.

An hour passed before either of them spoke. This time, it was Troi who broke the silence. “Where’d you get that scar?”

Just like that, the fear returned, its cold fingers caressing him from his head to his toes. His body shivered and he heard the ocean, tasted the iron and salt in his mouth. “It was there when he pulled me from the tidepool.” Then he couldn’t say anything more. Unconsciously, his fingers traced over the scar. *That makes everything real. If it hadn’t happened, I wouldn’t have this scar. And there are so many scars no one can see except me, yet they make it just as real.*

“It’s okay,” Troi said. “You’ve come a long way today. Done a lot of work. You need your rest.” She smirked. “Do you want to see your parents?”

She was *good*. She really must give his parents a good run. “I think so,” he said, participating in the banter again.

The counselor stood and walked to the door. “Well, come on,” she said as he looked at her in puzzlement. “I’ll take you to your quarters.”

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Picard

2370

Standing on the boardwalk next to the San Francisco beach, Jean-Luc Picard felt a moment of trepidation. It had only been a month since Matthieu had truly come home and in that month, it seemed that everything had changed. That first night, Matthieu had fallen asleep on the couch within minutes of sitting down to read. He and Beverly both knew that their son would always be a reader.

At first, he'd wanted to wake the boy up, get him to his bed so he didn't awaken in the morning with a crick in his neck. But Beverly had stopped him. "He needs his sleep, he's had a hard day." Then she went and retrieved a quilt from her room and placed it over him, smoothing his rusty colored hair before stepping back and looking at Picard. "Come to bed," she said, nearly whispering to keep from waking Matthieu. "He'll still be here tomorrow."

Realization hit him that his son would be there tomorrow, and for the days afterward as well. And so would his son's mother. He smiled at her.

She smiled back. "I love that."

"Love what?"

"When you smile like that. Matthieu has the same smile. It touches your eyes, on both of you. It's a wonderful smile."

As he followed her to their bedroom, the smile became even more broad.

The days that came after were hard on all of them, Matthieu meeting with the counselor, coming back to them in unpredictable moods. Sometimes black moods, sometimes tearful, sometimes with a awful writhing anger, but they got through it. After all, it would be worth it, in the end.

Now, the *Enterprise* had gone back to Earth for briefings and shore leave and they notified Wesley that his brother had been found. He'd meet him all over again. They wanted to meet off Academy grounds, some place neutral and away from Starfleet. When Wesley had suggested one of the local beaches and finally teaching Matthieu how to surf, Beverly had been reticent at first. "I don't think he's ready," she'd told her older son.

Matthieu had listened to the entire exchange and spoke from the doorway. "I'll be okay, Mom."

So she had agreed. And now they waited for Wesley to show up, shivering a bit in the cool breeze caused by the cloudy, misty day. They were all thinking about that

day, back on Pacifica. They would've been anyway, but the weather assured it. Matthieu tried to break the tension with a wry grin and comment. "Figures, doesn't it? We've got the worst luck."

The captain reached out and put a firm hand on his son's shoulder. "Not the worst." He didn't have to explain anything more, the look in Matt's eyes told him that he understood what his father meant. They couldn't have the worst luck, because they'd found him.

Then the boy surprised him by putting an arm around his father's shoulders and briefly pulled him closer, almost a hug. "I know, Papa," he said, then let him go.

Picard found himself smiling, as he did every time Matthieu addressed him like that. He'd missed it. They all had. A hovercar pulled up alongside them, surfboards mounted on top. Wesley jumped out, opening another door to take out wetsuits. "Sorry I'm late," he said. "When I saw the weather, I realized I needed to track some of these down, too." Finally, he turned and faced his brother. "I wasn't sure what size you were and decided to just get something around my size."

Comparing the two boys, Wesley had been correct. They were about the same height, Matthieu with broader shoulders, Wesley with almost narrow ones, like his own father's had been. The boy looked very much like Jack.

The brothers studied each other uncomfortably, unsure of what to say. It had been a long time. Then Wesley flashed a grin, the same easygoing, natural grin he shared with his father, one that was completely disarming. Immediately, the tension drifted away. "Want to learn how to surf?"

"I didn't think you were the surfing type," Matthieu said.

The cadet shrugged. "Yeah, well. California grows on you. With these waves, eventually you just have to learn. Come on."

Jean-Luc and Beverly helped the boys unload the boards from the hovercar, then watched after they changed into the wetsuits and headed out into the breakers. Wesley taught his younger brother carefully with what seemed an infinite amount of patience, as Matt had inherited his mother's redheaded temper.

After an hour, they'd come in from the water, lips blue, teeth chattering.

"Stay and warm up," Beverly said.

For a moment, the boys looked at one another as if they were going to protest and run back into the water, heedless of their mother's words. Instead, they looked back at her, at Picard, then sat down across from them. Beverly reached out and touched Matthieu briefly on the arm.

He looked at her and smiled.