STAR TREK
THE NEXT GENERATION
SLINGS AND ARROWS

BOOK III
THE INSOLENCE OF OFFICE

WILLIAM LITZNER
Dedicated to “the next generation”- my nieces Jordan Teresa, Taylor Stephanie, and Madison Sophia

The first time any man’s freedom is trodden on, we’re all damaged.
- Captain Jean-Luc Picard, “The Drumhead”

Rights! Rights! I’m sick to death of hearing about rights!
- Commander Bruce Maddox, “The Measure of a Man”
“I hate you, Counselor.”

Deanna Troi betrayed no outward reaction to this vitriolic outburst. It was, after all, part of her job, allowing herself to be the focus of her patients’ unguarded emotional releases, and then to help them recognize and redirect them in healthier ways.

She had to admit, though, it was still jarring to hear such blunt invective from this particular patient. “Data, I know you don’t really mean that,” she told him in a quiet, soothing tone.

Data’s expression almost instantly shifted from anger to regret. “You are correct; I do not.” He turned his head and looked up directly at her. “You are one of my dearest friends, Deanna. Please, forgive me.”

Troi smiled kindly down at him where he lay on her couch. Normally, she preferred to conduct her sessions sitting face-to-face, in a more conversational manner. But Data had discovered this anachronistic arrangement in a Sigmund Freud holoprogram he’d consulted some years back, shortly after discovering his dream program, and it was the one he tended to favor. “Of course I forgive you, Data,” she assured him. “You know you are allowed to say anything you want here. But obviously, there must be something bothering you, for you to express yourself in such a way.”

Data hesitated, and then slowly answered, “I do not wish to insult you, Counselor. However, I do believe these sessions are no longer of any help to me.”

Again, Troi withheld any reaction. She had been counseling Data semiregularly since shortly after he installed his emotion chip, and while she was very proud of how much progress he had made in the intervening year, it had not always been a particularly harmonious affair for either of them. They were both exploring new territory-Troi had no idea how best to counsel a patient who had lived an entire life without emotions, then suddenly had them granted him. This was not the first time Data had expressed the opinion that their sessions were unproductive. However, this was the first time it had seemed so unmotivated and surprising to her. “Why do you say that?” she asked.

“At the conclusion of our last session, you suggested that I recall some personal memories from prior to the installation of my emotion chip, in order to examine how those memories are now—metaphorically speaking—colored when viewed through the prism of my new emotions.”

Troi nodded. “And?”

“And…I feel this is unproductive. I am unlikely to travel backward in my own personal timeline, or to re-experience any of the events of my life. I see no merit in such exercises.”

“We all learn from experience, Data,” Troi said. “You know that. And we learn how to deal emotionally with new situations the same way. You have a life rich with experiences, and you also have the capability to recall them with greater clarity than any organic being. You should take advantage of that.”

“Why?” Data sat up then, turning to face the counselor as he posed the question. “Why should I? Is it not correct that, for most of your patients, your goal is to help them get past the emotions associated with past events?”

Troi shrugged slightly. “That’s somewhat simplistically put, but yes.”

Data nodded as if he had just scored an important point. “My past is already free of emotional injury. Why would you wish to create for me similar problems where none previously existed?”

Troi tilted her head. “What ‘problems’ have I created, Data?” she asked, looking him straight in the eye.

Data turned his gaze away from hers, looking instead down at his own lap. “It should not hurt,” he said in a strained whisper.

“What shouldn’t?” Troi prompted.

Data hesitated before saying, “I did as you asked, and chose as the subject of the exercise Lal’s life…” A sob wracked the android’s body. “…up to and inclusive of its end. This provoked a profound sense of misery within me, one which has been constant for the last fifty-two hours, forty-two minutes, zero seconds.”

Troi got up from her chair and moved to sit on the couch beside him, placing one hand on his back. “You’re grieving for her, Data. Even though Lal died six years ago, you haven’t had the capacity to mourn until now. It’s a perfectly natural reaction.”

“But it is not, Counselor,” Data said, a flash of irritation crossing his face. “It is not natural; it is technological. I did not experience emotional pain six years ago, thus bypassing the need to undergo the process of overcoming that pain. Why should I now grieve, so long after the fact?”
“Everyone grieves differently, Data, and elapsed time is irrelevant,” Troi said, remembering how her own mother had finally come to terms with the loss of her first child more than thirty years after her tragic death. “We mourn because we love. It’s all part of having emotions.” She paused, studying Data’s downturned expression. “Surely you must have discovered some more pleasant emotions while you were reflecting on your time with Lal?”

Data hesitated, and then, almost as if in spite of himself, smiled. “Yes. There was the first time she recognized me as her father. I am not referring to simple visual identification…”

“I understand,” Troi said, smiling to encourage him to continue.

“She was in our quarters, and when she saw me enter, there was a specific, unique reaction. I had noted it at the time, but had not fully recognized the meaning behind that look. She…loved me.” Data lifted his head then, beaming at Troi. “And I loved her.”

Troi matched Data’s smile, and continued to listen as he carried on, without any further prompting, in his fond reminiscence of his android daughter. As she listened, Troi reflected on how truly remarkable it was to witness the evolution Data had undergone. She had been there when he first decided to create Lal—or rather, to procreate—and had also been there when the young android felt her first emotion, which tragically had been interpreted by her positronic brain as a malfunction. She remembered worrying at the time that Data would abandon his own goal of becoming more human, and was grateful not only when he did not do so, but that the friendship between them had deepened from the experience—to the point now where he could freely say he hated her.

At the end of their hour, Troi extracted a promise from Data to continue the memory recall exercise with some different experiences. He was still clearly apprehensive about doing so, but agreed nonetheless.

Once Data was gone and Troi was alone in her office, she let loose a long, weary sigh. Data was the last appointment of a full day that had begun with an emergency visit from Reg Barclay, and she wanted nothing more now than to get out of her uniform, curl up with a bowl of chocolate ice cream, and just tune out the rest of the universe for a few hours. “Computer, end non-interrupt mode,” she said after retrieving her treat from the replicator. “Play any waiting messages.”

The computer acknowledged the request with a series of beeps as Troi fell into her chair and kicked the boots off her feet. Then the first message began: “Deanna.”

Troi nearly spilled her ice cream in her lap at the sound of that voice. Worf.

“I need to speak with you. Contact me on Deep Space 9 as soon as you are able.” The message ended before Troi could get up and check the image on the monitor, to convince herself her ears weren’t tricking her. She had not seen or spoken to Worf in over a year, since their visit to Betazed, during which they had ended what they’d both come to realize was an ill-conceived romantic relationship. He had decided to take an extended leave of absence from Starfleet then, and went to stay at the Klingon monastery on Boreth. He had returned several months earlier, following Chancellor Gowron’s invasion of Cardassia, when he was offered the position of strategic operations officer aboard DS9. Yet, even though the Enterprise had been at the station just months earlier, shortly after the bombing at the Antwerp Conference, Worf had made no effort to contact her. In fairness, she had contrived of her own reasons not to leave the ship while they were docked at DS9.

And now, from out of the blue, this cryptic message. What did it mean? What did he want?

Of course, she could have answered those questions by responding to the message and asking. She just wasn’t all that sure she wanted to do that. While their parting was civil enough, it had come in the midst of a whirlwind of chaos, both physical and emotional…

Troi roughly pushed those memories away, and then chuckled as she considered what Data might say if he were here to see her struggle with her own unpleasant recollections. Setting her jaw determinedly, Troi slid into her desk chair and tabbed the tabletop monitor to send a return message.

Moments later, the screen image switched from the Starfleet logo to the face of her former par’machkai. The first thing that struck Troi was the command-red accents of his jumpsuit uniform, and how well the color suited his dark, serious face. The second thing she noticed was that he seemed…well, happy was a bit too strong a term to apply to the taciturn Klingon, but he gave the impression of being satisfied with the latest turn his life had taken. “Deanna,” he said. “It is good to see you.”

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“It’s good to see you, too, Worf,” Troi said automatically, and mostly truthfully. She avoided mentioning the Enterprise’s last trip to the station. “How are you?”

“I am well. And yourself?”

“Fine, thank you.” There was an awkward pause. “I got your message.”

“I assumed as much.”

Troi grinned at that, being one of the few people who would have recognized this as a display of Worf’s sense of humor. Then his expression very subtly shifted.

“I have what may seem to be a strange question. Particularly considering all that occurred between us on
Betazed…”

Despite herself, Troi asked, “What is it, Worf?”

“Deanna…when is the last time you spoke with your mother?”

Troi blinked. That was, undeniably, a strange question for him to ask; Troi could not conceive of any reason Worf would have to ask it.

Then he explained.

And Troi found she still had trouble comprehending it.

Captain’s personal log, stardate 49710.1:

A final report has at last been issued by the Special Commission investigating the Leyton Affair, as Admiral James Leyton’s conspiracy against the Federation government has come to be known. Few have been spared criticism for their actions-or lack thereof-during the events of three months ago, from the leaders of the United Earth civil government to President Jaresh-Inyo himself.

But the harshest admonitions were leveled at those in the highest echelons of Starfleet Command, who allowed a single member of their ranks to nearly bring down the presidency and spark a civil war within the Federation. Eight more high-ranking admirals have tendered their resignations, in addition to those who had previously done so since the conspiratorial plot first came to light. I can only hope that those who now assume positions of leadership are able to restore the integrity of this institution, as well as the public’s trust in it. While Admiral Leyton manipulated the Federation’s fear of an attack, the threat of such an attack is still very real, and Starfleet must be able to answer it.

In that vein, I am heartened by the recent appointment of Admiral Jeremiah Hayes, a well-renowned and highly decorated veteran of the service, to a key position in Starfleet Strategic Command. Admiral Hayes has called a number of ship commanders, myself included, to a summit at Starbase 19 to discuss the many perils the Federation presently faces. I look forward to a frank and informative assessment of the challenges we need to be prepared to meet in the near future.

“Then, there are the Ferengi.”

Captain Picard looked up from the padd in his hand and arched one eyebrow at his security chief. “The Ferengi, Mr. Daniels?”

Lieutenant Padraig Daniels met the captain’s skeptical look with his own expression of utter seriousness. “Yes, sir. You know firsthand what the Ferengi are capable of.”

Picard cocked his head as he considered the younger man sitting across his ready room desk from him. Curious that he would play that card now, the captain thought to himself. “Yes, but the attack on the Stargazer was nearly twenty years ago,” he said, raising the padd on which he’d listed the catalogue of current defensive concerns already covered in this briefing. “As a current threat, I hardly think the Ferengi rise to the level of- “

“Sir,” Daniels said, unapologetically cutting the captain off, “Starfleet Intelligence has determined that Grand Nagus Zek’s health has been in serious decline, and predict that leadership of the Ferengi Alliance will change hands within the next five years. In recent years, yes, the Alliance has decided a nonaggressive stance toward the Federation was the most profitable one, and we’ve only seen occasional assaults by rogue independent operators. But if a new Nagus were to decide to put his full resources into a military offensive, they could cause considerable havoc for us, particularly along the Cardassian and Klingon borders.”

Picard resisted the urge to smile. “You present a compelling case, Lieutenant,” he said. Daniels was the only one of his senior staff who had not previously served with him on the EnterpriseD, and had only been in his position for a few months, replacing Linda Addison-who’d never had the chance to report for duty, as she was murdered and replaced by one of the shape-changing Founders of the Dominion. Yet he had made the post his own, with the same level of confidence Worf had shown when he also was forced to step into a role formerly held by a fallen colleague.

“Very well.” Picard tapped a stylus on the screen of his padd. “We go back to worrying about being eaten by the Ferengi,” he said, with just the hint of a sigh.

Daniels nodded, and glanced down at his own padd again. “Next: the Orion Syndicate.”

“Lieutenant, I do appreciate your thoroughness, and your willingness to consider all possible contingencies. However, you’ve briefed me on close to a dozen potential threats this afternoon,” Picard said, holding up his padd for emphasis, “presenting them, I presume, in what you consider the order of diminishing concern-starting off with the possibility of further Changeling infiltration, and working your way down.”

“Giving you the most vital information first, yes, sir.”

Picard nodded. “And we’ve covered the Klingons, Romulans, Cardassians, Maquis, Tzenkethi, Breen…yet I can’t help but notice that there’s a very glaring omission from your list of our most dangerous enemies.”

Daniels seemed to pale a bit, indicating that he knew full well which enemy he was referring to. “I…there was no new intelligence available. I didn’t want to…bother you with…” The security chief trailed off, realizing how
very patronizing he must have sounded.

Picard scowled. “Mr. Daniels, I know we have not served long together. But the one thing you need to know about me is, I am not a man who needs to be pussy-footed around. I know I was assimilated by the Borg; there is no point in your trying to avoid reminding me of the fact. Your job is to protect this ship, not my psyche. Am I understood?”

“Yes, sir. I apologize, sir.”

Picard nodded sharply, indicating the matter was thereby resolved. “Now, then. Let’s continue.”

Daniels’ answer was interrupted by the sound of the chime at his ready room door. Picard held up his index finger to the lieutenant and said, “Come.”

The door opened, and Troi entered. Picard automatically rose to his feet as he noted the look of deep concern on her face. Rarely did he ever see the normally poised counselor as agitated as she was at present. “Counselor?”

“Captain, forgive me for the interruption, but I need to talk with you.”

Picard turned to Daniels, who had already risen, and was in the process of gathering the several padds he’d brought in and spread across the captain’s desk. “We can continue at your convenience, Captain. Counselor,” he added with a nod to Troi, just before heading out the door.

Once the door slid closed, Picard asked, “What is it, Counselor?”

“It’s my mother.”

The muscles of Picard’s jaw and shoulders involuntarily tensed at the simple mention of Lwaxana Troi. The Betazoid ambassador-at-large had been a regular guest aboard the previous Enterprise, and each time she visited, she seemed to bring with her her very own unique brand of chaos. The initial thought in Picard’s mind was that the counselor’s mother had scheduled another visit to his ship, and that he needed to find a way to avoid her.

That selfish line of thought was cut short as Picard considered the look of haunted concern on Troi’s face. “Is something wrong? Has something happened to your mother?”

Troi answered that question with a loud, humorless laugh. “Something has happened, yes. More than a few somethings.” She started to pace the small office, pulling nervously at the fingers of one hand with the other. “Thank heaven Worf, being Worf, had to check the station’s comm traffic records. Otherwise I never would have known…”

Picard held up a hand to stop her disjointed narrative. “Counselor, known what?”

“Known anything!” Troi shouted. “I’m only her daughter; why should I know anything?!”

Picard moved to lay his hands on her shoulders as she dropped her head, embarrassed by her outburst. “It’s all right, Counselor,” he said as he guided her over to the couch across the room from his desk. Once he had her seated, he moved to the replicator and ordered Yridian tea, a beverage she had recommended to him in the past for its soothing properties. He placed the warm china cup in her hands and lowered himself beside her as she slowly sipped at the drink. “Take your time,” Picard said as he waited for the counselor to regain her usual calm. “Perhaps you should begin at the beginning.”

“The beginning, yes.” Troi took a deep breath, then exhaled, as if forcibly expelling the tension from her body. “I’ve never told you that my mother remarried last year, have I?”

“No, you haven’t,” Picard said with surprise, more at the fact that Troi had never mentioned such a thing than at the news itself. Lwaxana had been on the hunt for a new husband for almost as long as he had known her.

Deanna scowled as she nodded. “She met Jeyal at a diplomatic reception on Betazed, where he was negotiating some trade agreement for the Tavnian government. She knew him for two weeks, in which time he’d convinced her to give up her ambassadorship and move back with him to Tavny. By the time word got to me on Earth, they were already halfway to the Umani Sector!”

Picard tried to think of what he knew of the Tavnian people, and realized it was very little: they were an unaligned race the Federation had first made contact with fifteen or so years earlier. They were described as a very traditionalist culture with strictly defined behavioral codes, particularly in terms of gender roles, in which the Tavnian males held complete dominance. He would have been hard pressed to think of a less suitable match for the irrepressible Lwaxana Troi. “I take it the marriage has not been going well?”

“Well, I never heard a word of complaint. All of her letters were about her beautiful new house, the gorgeous weather, the wonderful food and music…and all the while, she was virtually a prisoner in her own home. Heaven only knows how she finally managed to get away from him.”

“But, she did get away?” Picard asked.

“She got off Tavny, yes, but Jeyal came after her. She ended up on Deep Space 9.” Troi’s scowl seemed to deepen. “The Changeling security chief there…”

“Odo.”

Troi nodded. “I guess they’d become friends when she made a diplomatic visit to the station three years ago. He…convincing Jeyal to annul their marriage, and then put her on a transport back to Betazed.”
“My,” Picard said, trying to make sense of Troi’s story. He understood now how Worf managed to play a role in it, and he could understand how learning all of what had befallen her mother after the fact would have upset the counselor. But it didn’t quite explain the degree to which she clearly was still agitated. “It all sounds very harrowing; however, it does seem as if your mother’s crisis has resolved itself.”

Troi shook her head. “There’s one part I haven’t mentioned.” Picard nodded, and waited patiently as the counselor brought herself to say whatever it was she hesitated to reveal. Finally, Troi said, “She’s pregnant.”

Picard blinked slowly. “‘She,’ who?” he asked, certain that he must have missed the mention of some other female in the counselor’s narrative.

“My mother is going to have a baby,” Troi said, enunciating each word carefully. “My mother may have already had her baby, en route to Betazed. And if Worf hadn’t checked and called me, I still wouldn’t have the slightest inkling that I was about to become a sister for the first time in my memory.”

Picard fought to stay focused on the counselor’s words, and not on the image of Lwaxana Troi that had appeared in his mind. “And Lwaxana still hasn’t contacted you?”

“No, she hasn’t, Captain. And I can’t help but worry…with the trauma she’s just been through, on top of the pregnancy, on top of her age, on top of everything…” Troi looked up from her half-emptied teacup into Picard’s eyes. “Captain, I need to be with her.”

The captain did not even hesitate. “Picard to bridge.”

“Hawk here, sir,” came the response from the ship’s conn officer.

“Lieutenant, prepare to change course, for Betazed. What would our ETA be at warp five?”

“Approximately three hours, twenty-one minutes, sir.”

Picard saw Troi’s reaction to that, and said, “Set course and engage at warp six. Picard out.” He then offered Troi a small smile as he took the empty teacup from her and they both stood. “The conference on Starbase 19 is scheduled to run three days. If you need more time than that, we’ll make accommodations.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Troi said, beaming gratefully as Picard saw her to the door.

Picard nodded, and at the threshold briefly debated whether or not to voice the sentiment that had naturally come to his mind. In the end, he decided to dismiss any concerns that Lwaxana might misconstrue his words.

“Deanna,” he said just before she stepped out of his ready room, “please give your mother my best.”
CHAPTER 2

An ages-old human aphorism claimed, “Seeing is believing.” On Vulcan, the saying was, “The evidence of the eyes is often immune to logic.” In Tellarite culture: “That which can make itself seen, must be.” There was no similar saying on Betazed—the Betazoids’ telepathic perceptions trumped all other physical senses, none of which were considered any more compelling than any of the others.

And yet, Deanna Troi could not deny that the reality of her mother’s pregnancy did not fully hit her until she reached the front steps of her childhood home and the door swung wide open, spilling light into the Betazed twilight, revealing Lwaxana Troi. “Little One!” she exclaimed, beaming radiantly. She wore her most elegant platinum wig and a low-cut, fluorescent-blue gown of the finest Tholian silk…which did absolutely nothing to disguise her swollen and distended abdomen.

The visual lasted for just a second, until Lwaxana reached across the threshold, pulling her daughter inside the house and into a tight embrace. The press of her mother’s pregnant belly against her own stomach brought yet another dimension to Deanna’s perception of reality. “Oh, Deanna, isn’t this the most wonderful surprise, you being here? Whatever would bring you- ” Lwaxana suddenly stopped, pushed her daughter back at arm’s length, and fixed her with a hard, concerned look. “You didn’t crash another starship, did you?”

“What? No!” Deanna said, sounding just a tad more defensive than she cared to.

Her mother shrugged, and doing so released her daughter’s shoulders. “Well, I’m sorry, dear, but that does seem to be what it takes to get you to come and visit lately. Not that this house is in any condition for visitors. Mr. Homn!” Lwaxana shouted as she turned back into the house, leaving Deanna to close the front door and follow behind her.

Her mother’s valet was in the front living room, on his hands and knees, running a small handheld electrostatic cleaning appliance over the antique Eridat rug that lay in the center of the room. “Are you still dawdling at that?” Lwaxana demanded, exhibiting more ire toward her long-time employee than Deanna sensed she actually felt.

Mother, Deanna thought at her, in an effort to calm her somewhat.

But she wasn’t distracted from her harangue. “Perhaps you could make yourself of some use, and bring Deanna here a cup of that Swiss cocoa we have in the pantry.”

“Yes, dear? What is it?” Lwaxana said, sounding just a tad more defensive than she cared to.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do about him,” Lwaxana sighed once the giant manservant had risen (surprisingly gracefully) to his feet and exited toward the kitchen. “Look at this place! Look at what I had to come home to!” She gestured with a grand sweep of her arms that apparently encompassed both the room they were in and the entire house around it. Other than the light, vaguely stale scent of a house that had not been lived in for an extended period, Deanna saw nothing amiss, but her mother gave her no opportunity to say so, rambling on without pause. “I swear, I’m going to have to watch that man like a Tarkalean hawk from now on. All those years, all that trust, and-”

“Yes, dear? What is it?”

And now that she had her mother’s leave to speak, Deanna found she didn’t know how to start. Finally, after a long, awkward pause, she said, “You’re pregnant.”

Lwaxana cocked an eyebrow at her. “You talk to whomever you like, about whatever you
like. I’m not one to stick my nose into other people’s affairs.

Deanna was about to respond to that particularly outrageous claim, but she admonished herself not to be
derailed. “About you and Jeyal, and what happened during your time on Tavny.”

“Mr. Homn!” Lwaxana suddenly said, very much aloud. “How long does it take to make a blessed cup of
cocoa? You see what I mean, about having to watch him?” she continued, addressing Deanna, though she was
making a point of not looking at her, instead circling the room and straightening already straight picture frames and
other objets d’art. “I don’t know why I keep him on, I truly don’t.”

Deanna crossed the room, putting a hand on Lwaxana’s arm to hold her still for a moment. “Mother, please,
could you stop for a moment and- “

Oh, I’m sorry, Little One, Lwaxana thought, closing her eyes and pressing a hand to her forehead. I was cooped
up in that cramped little transport for hours, now I’m just restless and overtired…I think I’m going to bed. Have Mr.
Homm make up your old room whenever you’re ready to turn in.

Lwaxana leaned in to kiss her daughter on the cheek, then turned and walked out of the room, heading for the
wide staircase that led to the second floor. Deanna started to follow, but then felt a giant hand fall on her shoulder.
She turned and looked up at Mr. Homn, who was looking down from his impressive height and slowly shaking his
head at her.

Deanna’s first instinct was to throw the valet’s hand off her shoulder and go after her mother. But she held
herself as she felt waves of strong emotion coming from the direction of the main foyer.

Her mother had been diagnosed with Zanthi fever almost two years ago, which caused her telepathic controls to
slip occasionally, indiscriminately loosing her emotional state onto those around her. Right now, Deanna felt a
powerful sense of frustration and weariness coming from her mother. She felt the unyielding wooden banister her
mother gripped with her right hand as she tilted her oversized body, swung her left foot up one step, then with
tremendous effort shifted her weight and lifted her right foot up onto the same step. A tiny spark of relief flashed
within her before she looked up again and saw how many more steps were still left to climb….

Deanna raised her own mental defenses then, blocking out her mother’s telepathic emanations. She realized Mr.
Homm was right; her mother was clearly not in a receptive state of mind, and pushing her before she was ready
would do more harm than good. The best thing she could do for her right now, she told herself, was to simply let her
be, get some rest, and wait until she was ready to talk to her.

Slowly, Deanna turned and moved back into the living room, where she lowered herself onto the couch. She
gratefully accepted the cup of cocoa from Mr. Homn, and as she sipped the hot drink carefully, she tried to tell
herself that things would look brighter in the morning.

Sitting ducks.

Daniels studied the long-range scans on his tactical board as the Enterprise neared Starbase 19. Over forty
starships, he noted, were already in orbit, out of sixty expected to be present by the time the summit started. Three
score of the Fleet’s best ships and top crews, all in one spot. One well-placed bomb, and they could all be wiped out
in a moment. Just like the Dominion did at Antwerp. Or Snowden and Nomine tried at Starbase 375. Someone could
be there right this minute, just lying in wait….

Daniels forced himself to take a breath. Oh, you’re just full of sunshine and good cheer today, aren’t you,
Padraig? he chided himself silently.

Ever since taking on the responsibilities of chief tactical and security officer three months earlier, Daniels had
been disturbed by his growing tendency toward pessimistic thoughts. Not that his experience as a munitions and
explosives specialist really lent itself to an optimistic worldview, but at least then he was in a reactive mode, dealing
with problems and threats after they came. Now, however, he needed to be proactive, to anticipate those threats
before they presented themselves, in order to protect the hundreds of lives aboard this ship, and by extension, those
billions of Federation citizens whose lives could well depend on the flagship. It was, he admitted to himself, difficult
to maintain his new mindset, and not give in to the urge to just throw up his hands and run home to his wife
Siobhan, forgetting everything but her and the family they’d talked about starting for so long.

“Approaching Starbase 19 now, sirs,” said Lieutenant Sean Hawk from the conn, breaking Daniels’s reverie.

“Bring us out of warp,” Commander William Riker said from his seat beside Captain Picard and directly in
front of Daniels. The long streaks of starlight on the forward viewscreen shrank back to dots, and the huge,
mushroom-shaped orbital station came into visual range. Daniels checked the chronometer on his console and noted
that, even with their detour to Betazed, they were only three hours past their original ETA, still well ahead of the
summit’s scheduled start time. That would give him almost seven hours, once the ship was secured at
stationkeeping, to go back to his quarters, finish his latest letter home, and grab some (hopefully dreamless) sleep.

Daniels was distracted from his planning by a flashing comm signal at his station. He tapped the blinking icon,
then lifted his head to address the captain. “Sir, Admiral Hayes is hailing from the starbase, asking to speak with
Picard turned in the command chair toward him, a curious expression on his face. Then he pulled himself to his feet and said, “On-screen.”

The image of the starbase disappeared, to be replaced by the face of Admiral Hayes, wearing an expression of dark annoyance. “Jean-Luc. What’s kept you?” the admiral demanded. “We were expecting you here three hours ago.”

Daniels found himself grateful he wasn’t the one on the receiving end of that look. Jeremiah Hayes was, of course, one of the Hayeses, a family whose involvement in Starfleet went all the way back to the pre-Federation days. He too had lived up to the expectations his famous lineage had given rise to, distinguishing himself over his decades-long career as a master tactician during the Tzenkethi and Cardassian conflicts. Daniels could think of no one better suited to help Starfleet recover from its recent scandals…and no one he would less want to cross.

From his vantage point at the rear of the bridge, Daniels noted the captain’s shoulders tense in reaction to the admiral’s tone. “We had to take a slight detour to Betazed; one of my senior officers had a personal matter to attend to there.”

A noise somewhere between a sigh and a growl escaped the admiral’s throat. “I wish you had informed me of the delay.”

“I apologize, sir,” the captain said. “I didn’t consider, seeing as the conference isn’t scheduled to begin until tomorrow.”

“I was hoping to take advantage of the time prior, before things got too hectic around here, to address a specific security concern with you.”

Daniels felt his own neck and back muscles tensing as well at the mention of a security concern specific to the Enterprise. “I’m available to join you at your convenience, of course,” Picard told the admiral.

“My convenience,” Hayes repeated, somewhat ruefully. He shuffled through a dozen padds scattered across his desk, looking extremely harried. “I have twenty minutes right now, before I have to take a conference call with Councillors T’Latrek and Zife. Beam over now, Jean-Luc.”

“Lieutenant Daniels and I will be there directly,” Picard said, giving Daniels a nod. The security chief nodded back sharply.

“Fine. And have Lieutenant Commander La Forge join you, as well.”

“Yes, sir,” Picard said just before the admiral terminated the transmission.

“A problem with the ship?” Riker asked.

“Perhaps,” Picard said as he crossed the bridge toward the turbolift. “Though I’m uncertain why an engineering issue should require a face-to-face meeting.”

The first officer’s surmise made sense to Daniels; the Sovereign class was barely a year old, and the Enterprise herself had been in service for only a few months. He was also somewhat relieved to think that the “security concern” was not something he’d failed to anticipate. Still, his mind started running through the kinds of potential problems a new starship class could face, and his possible reactions, as the turbolift doors closed and started to descend. I’m afraid that letter’s going to have to wait, honey, he thought in the direction of home.

The Enterprise transporter room dissolved away and was replaced by a nearly identical facility on board the starbase. Geordi La Forge started to step down from the transporter platform along with Picard and Daniels, but they were stopped by a young Payav security officer, holding one of her six-fingered hands up toward them. “Please remain on the platform,” she said, “until we’ve finished the scans-routine security procedure. It will only take a moment.”

In fact, La Forge noted, it had already begun: wide-dispersing beams of modulated nadion radiation appeared like rays of sunshine through La Forge’s VISOR, silently washing over the three Enterprise officers from an emitter in the ceiling of the transporter alcove. He could tell at a glance that the scan was similar to the kind of phased energy beams they used to detect and immobilize Changelings, except much less intense, and with its resonance signature significantly modified. It would be perfectly harmless to almost all humanoid life—so harmless, La Forge had to wonder if it actually served as a real screening procedure, or if station security was using it simply to feel that they were doing something.

La Forge’s skepticism was bolstered when the three of them were then led from the transporter room by the security officer to a second small room, where they were all asked to submit to blood tests. Picard grunted in irritation, but said nothing as he offered his arm to the med tech. The captain had been very vocally unhappy with the level of paranoia he’d seen on display throughout Starfleet of late, beginning with their stay at Starbase 375 in the wake of the global blackout on Earth three months ago—particularly since their problems on the starbase were caused not by the Dominion but by Starfleet personnel, against whom these security measures would be useless. Personally, La Forge couldn’t get too upset himself about a few minor inconveniences, not after being a firsthand
witness to the havoc a Changeling could raise once it had infiltrated a starship.

Once their blood was DNA crosschecked and judged to be, in fact, their blood, the Enterprise party was escorted to a turbolift by yet another pair of guards. They rode in silence to level eighteen, and then into a small wardroom, dominated by a long, drab metallic table and a wall-sized mural depicting the skyline of Tycho City at Earthrise. Admiral Hayes rose from his seat at the head of the table, where an array of padds and data chips were scattered before him. He extended his right hand to the captain and offered him an almost smile. “Jean-Luc. I apologize if I was a little snappish with you before.”

“It’s quite all right, Admiral. You’ve been under a great deal of pressure over the past several months.”

A haunted look crossed Hayes’s face, confirming the captain’s statement. “Still, it’s hardly your fault I didn’t tell you I wanted this meeting. Unfortunately, it’s going to have to be quick. And, I hope, mostly painless.”

Picard gestured to introduce his officers to the admiral. “My chief of security, Lieutenant Padraig Daniels, and my chief engineer, Lieutenant Commander Geordi La Forge.”

“Yes, Mr. La Forge. The reason we’re here today.”

Something in the admiral’s tone, or in his gaze, made La Forge’s insides twist. “Sir?”

“As I said, I have little time for beating around the bush,” the admiral said. “Your prosthetic, Commander. It needs to be replaced.”

The entire room went silent at that, and La Forge heard his own pulse beating hard and loud in his ears. “Beg your pardon, sir?”

“You will need to have ocular implant surgery,” the admiral said, already turning away from him and back to his padds. “Your Dr. Crusher, I’m told, should be fully qualified, but if you prefer to have another specialist perform the procedure, you will be granted medical leave, plus ample recovery time.”

Geordi turned to look at Captain Picard, who seemed just as stunned by the admiral’s sudden edict as he felt. “I…don’t understand. Why?”

The admiral actually sighed at that, and then picked up one of his padds from the table. “On Stardate 48649,” he said, referencing the device’s readout, “while at the Amargosa Observatory, you were taken captive and held aboard a Klingon Bird-of-Prey operated by renegades. While aboard, your VISOR was fitted with a microtransmitter, and when you were returned to your ship, that transmitter was used by the Klingons to determine the ship’s shield frequency, and to ultimately destroy the EnterpriseD.”

La Forge gaped, stunned. “Sir, with all respect, I was cleared of any culpability in the loss of the Enterprise.” In fact, no one had been able to guess how the obsolete old Bird-of-Prey had managed to penetrate the shields until the S.C.E. team aboard the U.S.S. Trosper, one of the three ships that had responded to the Enterprise’s distress call at Veridian III, detected an unknown signal coming from the Farragut after they left the Veridian system. Geordi had felt horrible when he learned he had been made an unwitting accomplice of Lursa and B’Etor. But the board of inquiry investigating the crash decided that nobody, including La Forge, could be faulted for not detecting the covert device earlier.

“I know what the board determined, Mr. La Forge,” Hayes said, giving him a look that warned that he would not tolerate being interrupted again. He then looked back down at his padd and resumed his recitation. “Stardate 44885: en route to an engineering conference on Risa, you were captured and held aboard a Klingon Bird-of-Prey operated by renegades. While aboard, your VISOR was fitted with a microtransmitter, and when you were returned to your ship, that transmitter was used by the Klingons to determine the ship’s shield frequency, and to ultimately destroy the EnterpriseD.”

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La Forge was gratified when Captain Picard spoke up for him in his stead. “Admiral, I assume your information also shows that, as soon as it was discovered what had been done to Mr. La Forge, immediate steps were taken to correct the flaw in the VISOR interface that allowed it to be misused in such a way, and, that Mr. La Forge has continued to serve on my crew with distinction in the five years since that incident.”

“I am aware of all of that, Captain.” The admiral dropped his padd back on the table. “I am in no way trying to besmirch Mr. La Forge’s record or reputation, both of which are exemplary. However, the fact remains that his VISOR has proved a liability in the past. And the Federation no longer has the luxury of turning a blind eye—if you’ll pardon the expression—to such liabilities.”

La Forge was tempted to tell the admiral that, no, he wouldn’t pardon the expression. But he restrained himself, and said instead, “Sir, I have had this VISOR for over thirty years. It’s a part of who I am. You can’t force me to give it up.”

“No, Mr. La Forge, I can’t force you,” Hayes said. “However, should you elect not to comply with Starfleet’s current security standards, you would not be able to continue to serve aboard the Enterprise.”
La Forge felt his heart climbing its way up his throat. “What?”

“You would have to accept a transfer to a less sensitive posting, where your VISOR would be a less significant vulnerability. I’ll need to know before the end of the summit which option you decide to take.”

Picard stepped forward then, placing himself physically between La Forge and Hayes. “Admiral, you cannot- “

“This is a matter of Starfleet security, Captain Picard,” Hayes said, glaring from under a deeply furrowed brow, making it abundantly clear that he was not about to entertain any further argument. “Now, if you will excuse me, gentlemen…”

La Forge looked to Picard, who looked from Hayes to La Forge, and then, jaw clenched, turned and moved for the wardroom door. Daniels followed, and La Forge did likewise, trying to avoid looking at the admiral. That was somewhat impossible, however, given the one hundred eighty-degree range of vision his VISOR provided him. As La Forge walked by, he couldn’t help but notice, beyond the edge of any other human’s peripheral vision, the tiny, self-satisfied smile starting to pull at the corner of the admiral’s mouth.

Behind the VISOR, he squeezed his eyelids tight as he tried to tamp down his growing anger and frustration. It didn’t help.

Once the Enterprise officers filed into a waiting turbolift and started back to the transporter room, La Forge turned to Picard. “He can’t really do this, can he, Captain?”

Picard tried to look anywhere in their confined space except into La Forge’s face. “I would like to be able to tell you ‘no,’ Geordi. However, the admiral did technically leave the choice to you.”

“Some choice,” La Forge grumbled angrily.

“Sir?” La Forge turned to Daniels, who had been completely silent since arriving on the station. “Pardon me for asking, but…it’s not really that difficult a choice, is it?”

La Forge glared directly at the lieutenant. “Whether I let Starfleet dictate that I alter my eyesight or not? You’d call that an easy choice?”

“Well, it being a security concern…”

“‘Security concern,’” La Forge repeated, snorting in derision. “The Founders have the ability to become anything, to impersonate anyone, to infiltrate any part of the Federation they want. My VISOR is not going to be the edge they need to take over the Alpha Quadrant.”

“No, sir,” the new security chief said, almost apologetically. “But, you must admit, your VISOR does leave you uniquely vulnerable to- “

“Everybody has their vulnerabilities,” La Forge snapped back. “Mine are no more ‘unique’ than yours or anyone else’s!”

“Commander,” the captain said, in a low yet sharp tone.

La Forge dropped his head and took a deep breath. “I’m sorry, Daniels. I shouldn’t be taking this out on you.”

After pausing a moment for the tension in the car to dissipate, Picard said, “We have three days before you have to give the admiral an answer. I will reach out to some acquaintances in the Judge Advocate General’s office, and try to determine what your legal options might be.”

“Thank you, Captain.” La Forge said, allowing himself a small glimmer of hope as the turbolift car stopped. Picard said nothing in reply, and turned his face away from him as the doors swooshed open. La Forge was still able, however, to read the darkly pessimistic expression on the older man’s face, and he felt his own feelings of hope dim.
Deanna was awakened the following morning, after a fitful night of sleep, by the scent of freshly baked cavat muffins and kimden rolls drifting upstairs into her bedroom. After quickly washing up and dressing, she made her way downstairs to find her mother already seated at the head of the table in the house’s informal dining room (“informal” because it was able to accommodate only twenty guests). Several bowls of whole and sliced fruit were spread out on the table before her, along with a steaming pot of tea and a chilled carafe of allira juice. “Well, good morning, sleepyhead!” Lwaxana sing-songed. “I was beginning to worry you’d sleep the whole morning away.”

“Good morning, Mother,” Deanna answered, walking along the length of the table and leaning over to kiss her mother on the cheek. “Are you feeling better this morning?”

“Oh, heavens, yes, much,” Lwaxana answered, as Deanna took a seat and started to fill her plate. “There’s nothing like being back in your own bed again after a long trip.”

Deanna’s hand froze in the middle of scooping uttaberries out of a large bowl onto her plate. “Yes,” she said, trying to keep her tone as light as she could. “It was a long trip, wasn’t it? Long and eventful.”

“Hmm,” was Lwaxana’s only reply, as she suddenly became intensely interested in the bowl of hilreps in front of her.

Deanna waited patiently, but Lwaxana added nothing more, either vocally or telepathically. As a counselor and a psychologist, she understood that allowing a long lull in conversation was often the most effective method of encouraging a patient to start talking. But from her mother, extended silences seemed unnatural and frightening. “Why don’t you tell me about your trip,” she prompted neutrally.

“Oh, I don’t want to bore you, dear,” Lwaxana said, still fascinated by the fruit bowl.

“No, tell me, please. I’m sure it was fascinating,” she said, trying to sound curious, but only casually so. “So few outsiders have ever visited Tavny.”

“Oh, would you look at this,” Lwaxana said, snatching a hilrep from the bowl and thrusting it at Deanna. “Look at the size of that bruise! It’s not bad enough this is all there was in the house for breakfast,” she said as she gestured to the abundance of food before them, without a hint of irony, “but this…I don’t understand what is wrong with Mr. Homn, how lax he’s been lately…”

“Mother,” Deanna said, quietly but forcefully, “you moved out. You haven’t lived in this house for a year.”

Her mother laughed as if that were the most preposterous thing she’d ever heard. “Moved out? This is my house. It’s been my home for over thirty years. Nothing or no one could make me move out of this house.”

She was so insistent in her denials that Deanna couldn’t help but think, again, about Kestra. Her mother had been devastated by the death of her first child, who drowned at age six, when Deanna herself was just a baby. And she dealt with that devastation by denying it had ever happened, repressing the entire period from the girl’s conception to her burial.

It pained Deanna to think that her mother had suffered another emotional trauma on the same level as the death of a daughter. Yet, it was becoming increasingly evident to her that her mother was not simply reluctant to talk about her year with Jeyal. And she was deeply worried about how her mother’s mental state would manifest itself once she’d delivered Jeyal’s son.

For a moment, Deanna considered probing telepathically into her mother’s thoughts, to get an idea of just how deep her denial was. It would be a tremendous breach of ethics—not to mention almost certainly futile, given Lwaxana’s exceptional telepathic talents versus her own lesser abilities. If it came down to it, though, she would have to try.

For now, though, she decided to try one last tack. She leaned across the corner of the table, took Lwaxana’s hand in both of hers, and looked deep into her wide, dark pupils. “Mother, I understand this has to be difficult for you. But you cannot do this.” Her mother’s eyes seemed to lose focus, but Deanna gave her hand a tight squeeze to pull her attention back. “You cannot…”

Suddenly, her mother was on her feet, her hand was free, and she was out of the dining room. “Mother!” Deanna jumped up and followed after her as she walked toward the main foyer, and she quickened her pace when she saw her mother headed for the front door, reaching for the knob. “This is too important to simply pretend it hasn’t happened! You cannot run away from-“

Deanna stopped short when she realized her mother was not, in fact, attempting to walk out on her, but rather
opening the door for a visitor she had sensed coming up the front walk. Now stepping into the house was a man Deanna did not recognize, though she did register his hairless head, pale complexion, and prominently ridged nasal septum, which clearly identified him as a Tavnian.

“Deycen! How nice to see you!” Lwaxana said brightly, before finally turning to acknowledge her daughter’s presence again. “Deanna, this is Ambassador Deycen, from the Tavnian Embassy to Betazed. Deycen, my beautiful daughter, Deanna. Deycen is the one who introduced me to Jeyal at a diplomatic reception at his embassy.”

Deanna’s jaw literally fell open on hearing her mother so casually drop Jeyal’s name. She thus found herself unable to say anything to Ambassador Deycen, though the Tavnian took no offense. He spared Deanna only the briefest of looks before turning his sour expression back to her mother. “I’ve come to bring you back, Lwaxana.”

“Isn’t that funny?” Lwaxana said, answering Deycen’s scowl with a light laugh. “Deanna and I were just talking about this very thing. No, I’m staying right here, in my own home.”

“Your home is with Jeyal,” he said, as if speaking to a small obstinate child. “He told me you had left without his knowledge, and I was to watch for you here. You’re going to come to the embassy with me, and I’ll arrange for your return to Tavny.”

“You haven’t heard, then. Jeyal and I are no longer married.”

“Oh?” Deycen replied, raising one skeptical eyebrow.

“I found a new husband,” Lwaxana said, beaming. “His name is Odo, and he’s the chief of security on a Federation-run starbase. Jeyal was a witness to the ceremony, and he let Odo’s beautiful profession of love go unchallenged. You can ask him yourself if you like.”

Deanna felt the beginnings of doubt starting to seep into the Tavnian’s mind. “Why wouldn’t he have let me know about this?”

“Well, if you had let a woman like me slip through your fingers, you’d hardly be eager to publicize it either, would you?” Lwaxana gestured with her arms to accentuate just how absolutely fabulous she truly was. “But I can see you still don’t quite believe me. Go, call Jeyal. Go on, you can be assured I will still be right here whenever you want to come back and apologize for mistrusting me.”

Deycen clearly didn’t know what to believe now—as a product of Tavnian upbringing, he wasn’t used to interacting with a strong and confident woman. But, even though his misgivings were plain to both Betazoids, he refused to betray them outwardly as he told Lwaxana, “You left your husband, who proclaimed his love for you, took you into his house, gave you a son. You dishonored him, and you dishonored all Tavny with your disrespect. I trust nothing you say. You’ll leave this house, and you’ll do so without me. And if you make me repeat myself, you’ll be leaving without some other things you arrived with.”

Just then, there was a thump and a clatter, causing Deycen to spin and look around behind him. There he saw Mr. Homn, just inside the front door, a half-dozen cloth mesh bags overstuffed with groceries dropped at his sides. Deycen, like most Tavnian males, was relatively tall—close to one hundred and nineteen centimeters, by Deanna’s visual estimate. As such, he was clearly unused to being towered over, as Mr. Homn was doing at that moment.

Deycen looked from Homn back to Lwaxana. “If I discover that you are misleading me, woman, you will regret it.” This threat lost much of its impact as he turned back toward the door and actually cowered as he rushed past Homn, nearly tripping over a loaf of kaseton bread in his haste to leave.

“Well, Lwaxana said as Homn closed the front door behind the departed ambassador, “now perhaps we can have a proper breakfast, hm? Come, Mr. Homn.”

Lwaxana turned and headed back toward the dining room, leaving Homn to gather up his bags, and leaving Deanna struck dumb by the conversation she’d just witnessed. After a moment’s hesitation, she started after Lwaxana, quickly falling even and matching her slow, weighted gait. “Mother…”

“Yes, Little One?”

Deanna shook her head in exasperation. “I’ve been trying since I got here to get you to open up and talk to me about Jeyal and Odo.”

“Yes, I know,” Lwaxana sighed. “It was so wearisome, dear.”

“Mother!” Outrage and relief warred in Deanna’s mind. “I thought…I was worried that you…”

“That I was repressing unpleasant memories again,” Lwaxana said, giving her a small, sad smile. “No, dear, I’m afraid the entire last year is crystal clear in my mind.” They reached the dining room, and Lwaxana sighed as she lowered her pregnant body back into her chair. “I’m sorry, dear, I just…I’m finally home, in my own house again, here with my wonderful, loving daughter, and…I just wanted to cherish the moment, and not think about
what’s past. You can understand that, can’t you, dear?”

Deanna felt a mild sense of deja vu. “Yes, I understand,” she said, as she lowered herself into her own chair. “But…what about the future?”

“Well, that’s a lot harder to avoid thinking about,” Lwaxana admitted, as her hands went to her belly. She seemed lost in thought as she slowly caressed her bulging midsection. “Your father had wanted us to have another child,” she finally said.

Deanna felt a jolt of surprise at that unexpected revelation. “You mean, after Kestra died?”

Lwaxana flinched at the mention of her first daughter, then nodded. “He thought it would help things if we… Well, I don’t know for certain just what he thought; I would tune him out immediately any time he broached the topic. Poor man—what he must have gone through, dealing with my denial on top of everything else.” Lwaxana paused, lifting the napkin from her lap to dab at the corners of her eyes. “But, I couldn’t even bear to think about it. I was so worried about you, protecting you. Even with all those memories locked away like they were, I knew that protecting two children at once wasn’t something I was capable of.”

“It’s hard to believe you ever questioned your capabilities,” Deanna told her.

“I do project a very convincing air of confidence, don’t I?” Lwaxana managed a tiny smile, then she sighed and dropped her head again. “Part of me wonders if I shouldn’t have stayed with Jeyal.”

Deanna was taken aback by that admission. “Why would you say that?”

Lwaxana took a deep breath, and then explained, “On Tavny, the male children are taken away from their mothers and raised exclusively by other men. When I realized I was pregnant, and Jeyal told me about that custom… I have to admit, Deanna, my first reaction was relief. I wouldn’t have to be responsible for raising another child at my age. I wouldn’t have to worry, if my attention wandered for half a second, that something terrible would happen.

“But then I thought about Kestra, and about the other children Ian and I never had and never would,…and I realized that this—” She lightly patted her stomach. “—was a gift. I had to get my son away from Jeyal.” The strength and determination now crept back into her voice. “I couldn’t let this last chance just slip away from me.”

The room fell silent then. Mr. Homn entered, carrying several more bowls and plates piled with market-fresh food. He and Lwaxana exchanged silent nods as he gathered up the over-ripened hilreps and headed back into the kitchen.

Once they were alone again, Deanna reached over the table and took her mother’s hand. “Mother…why did you never say anything? All your letters, they all painted rosy pictures of your new life on Tavny. If you were so unhappy, if you wanted to get away from Jeyal, why didn’t you turn to me for help?”

Lwaxana gave her an indulgent smile. “What could you have done, dear? Come riding to Tavny with phasers blazing, like one of your Eastern heroes?”

“Western,” Deanna corrected automatically. “And no, but—you should have at least come to me on the Enterprise once you did leave.”

“That would have been the second place, after here, Jeyal would have thought to come looking for me,” Lwaxana said. “Besides, could you imagine Jean-Luc’s reaction if he were to see me in this state? Oh, the rage of jealousy he would fly into!”

“Mother…”

Lwaxana raised a questioning eyebrow, as if challenging Deanna to deny Picard’s deep-seated and long-suppressed desire for her. Then she shrugged and said, “I went to Deep Space 9 because I know Odo has his own sense of justice. He believes it’s a universal constant, regardless of who makes the law or who has the power to enforce it. He understood Tavnian law was unjust, and he did all he could to ensure the wrongs done to me were set right. Jean-Luc, on the other hand, is a Starfleet officer.”

Deanna’s brow furrowed. “What does that mean?”

Lwaxana tilted her head and looked at her daughter askance. “Little One, remember, I left the Federation. Just like those Marquee people on the Cardassian border.”

“Oh, Mother,” Deanna said, shaking her head and not bothering to correct her mispronunciation of Maquis, “that is a different situation altogether.”

“Is it? I submitted myself to Tavnian custom and Tavnian rule. Leaving Jeyal was a violation of Tavnian marriage law. And Jean-Luc, bless his heart, would have felt an obligation to follow that Primary Direction of yours, and to give in to Tavnian authority.”

Deanna was about to deny that there was any possibility of such a scenario playing out that way. But the words died in her mouth as she realized her mother’s concerns were not entirely unfounded: in matters of marriage, Federation law did, in fact, always defer to local planetary law. Given that the United Federation of Planets included cultures and species that wedded in pairs, trios, and quartets of mixed genders, same genders, varying genders, and no genders, it would have been impossible to do otherwise.
But still…”You’re not giving Captain Picard enough credit. If you needed his help, he would have found a way to help you. We would have found a way.”

Lwaxana shrugged. “Perhaps,” she said, lowering her eyes and picking at the cavat muffin sitting on her plate.

Deanna just stared at her and said nothing, letting that one word hang in the air between them-along with its implied follow-up, perhaps not.

Lwaxana lifted her eyes to meet her daughter’s glare. “Deanna, please. I chose to turn to Odo for help. And Odo helped me. Try to be happy for that.”

“I am,” Deanna said. Though happy was about the last word she would have applied to her emotional state at that moment.
The first emotion Data ever experienced was anger.

His brother Lore had used the emotion chip that he had stolen years earlier to broadcast anger and other negative emotions into Data’s positronic brain, and then played upon that murderous rage to turn him against his friends, forcing him to violate his most basic, hardcoded sense of right and wrong. The incident had been so disturbing to him that, once he overcame Lore’s influence and reclaimed the emotion chip, Data had intended to vaporize the final gift his father ever gave him. He had been willing to forgo ever feeling any emotion ever again, in order to avoid re-experiencing that kind of dark anger ever again.

And even after a year of experiencing, developing, and refining the new emotional aspect of his being, anger still disturbed Data on a very deep level—not only in himself, but in others as well. Which created a deep conflict within him when he entered main engineering and witnessed the scene being created by his friend, Geordi La Forge.

“I am still the chief engineer here, aren’t I?” Geordi bellowed at his staff. The ship’s matter/antimatter reactor had fallen silent, and his uncharacteristically angry voice filled the ship’s cavernous, multi-leveled engineering section. Data counted eleven others present, all standing stock-still and mute, like a herd of grazing animals hoping to avoid drawing the attention of the predator who had suddenly appeared in their midst.

When Geordi didn’t get an answer to his seemingly rhetorical question, he fixed his gaze on the engineer standing closest to him—a young, red-haired human woman Data recognized as Ensign Inge Eiger—and stepped directly in front of her, pushing his face within centimeters of hers. “Aren’t I?” he repeated.

“Yes, of course, Commander,” Eiger answered, staring back at him in wide-eyed bewilderment. She, like all but one of the gathered engineers, had served under La Forge for only a few months, and clearly had no idea the normally genial chief engineer was capable of such wrath. For that matter, neither did Lieutenant Barclay, the one holdover from the EnterpriseD currently present. He had recognized La Forge’s behavior as being so atypical, he had felt it incumbent to alert the bridge. Barclay shot a sideways glance at Data from the far end of engineering, expecting him to step in and defuse the situation.

But Data found himself as frozen as the others, as La Forge continued to rage. “Then explain to me why the warp core was taken offline when I never signed off on doing so!” he demanded of the young officer. Eiger’s mouth opened, but no words came out of it.

“But you did, sir,” another voice answered. La Forge spun away from Eiger and toward Lieutenant Paul Porter. The deputy chief engineer pulled himself up to his full height and continued, “During the Algenib II mission. You said, the next time we were at a starbase, we should do a full physical inspection of the plasma inject—”

“An off-the-cuff comment I made a month ago is not authorization!” La Forge snapped.

“I’m sorry, sir,” Porter said, controlling a slight wavering in his voice. “I was just trying to show some initiative, sir.”

“There’s a difference between initiative and insubordination, Mister! Do you want to run this engine room, Porter?”

Before Porter had to answer, Data managed to screw up his courage and step forward from his spot by the corridor doors. “Excuse me, Geordi. Could I speak with you privately for a moment?”

La Forge spun and glowered at him. “Kinda in the middle of something here, Data,” he said, practically snarling.

Data nearly let himself be cowed, but held steady. “What I need to talk with you about does take precedence.”

For a moment, La Forge fumed silently. Then he turned back to Porter. “We are at a security summit. The last thing we need is for some flag officer to come aboard and find this ship is not at one hundred percent readiness.” He turned to address the entire section. “Get the core back online,” he barked, before turning and leading Data into the small enclosed alcove set aside as his office. Once the doors slid closed behind them, Geordi turned and said, “I wish you wouldn’t undermine my authority in front of my people like that, Data.”

Data noted his emotion chip generating a feeling of indignation in response to that. “Geordi, I am your friend, but I am also second officer of this ship. Your behavior just now was completely unprofessional and unacceptable. Had I not extricated you from that unnecessarily confrontational situation, you would have been the one to undermine your own standing with your staff.”

La Forge gaped at Data as if physically struck. Then, he dropped into one of the chairs in front of his desk, and
put his head in his hands. “You’re right,” he muttered. “Dammit. I can’t believe I’m letting him get under my skin like this.”

“You are referring to Admiral Hayes?” Data inquired, his own emotionalism ebbing along with La Forge’s.

“Yeah, I’m talking about Hayes. Look at this.” La Forge reached over to turn his desktop computer monitor around and tabbed a sequence of keys on its base. Data read what appeared to be a random list of Starfleet facilities off the screen: Deep Space 2, Starbase 86, Efros Station, Starfleet Engineering Academy-Triex Annex, and several others. “What is the significance of this list?” Data asked.

“Hayes sent it to me,” La Forge said. “These are my possible new postings if I refuse to cave in to him.”

Data considered that with a degree of incredulity. He looked at the list again. “These positions do not seem to be suitable to an officer of your experience and ability.”

“No kidding they don’t,” La Forge said, letting the anger return to his voice. “Every one of those positions was last held by someone with at least five fewer years of service than me. And all but one of those officers is leaving for better positions.”

“And the one exception?” Data asked.

“Died. Probably of boredom; nothing has happened at Efros since Ra-ghoratreii’s funeral. You’ll also notice there are no ships on that list,” La Forge continued, growing more and more animated. “Hayes wants to make sure he keeps me nice and secure in one spot. He might as well ‘assign’ me to Jaros II if he wants to punish me for defying him.”

“I do not believe it reasonable to ascribe personal motivations to Admiral Hayes’s actions,” Data said, in what he calculated would be a soothing tone.

“It’s personal to me, Data!” La Forge shouted, loud enough to make Data flinch. “I’ve been in Starfleet for fifteen years, and Hayes is using two incidents to make his case. How many times in those same fifteen years has my VISOR been used to save the ship or pull off a mission?”

Data attempted to determine an accurate quantification, though he quickly realized that every contribution La Forge had ever made to any mission could be construed in such a way, since the VISOR was integral to his performance of his duties. He then thought to include these instances in his calculations, with the caveat that such contributions would not have been significantly impacted if Geordi had ocular implants, as Hayes wished, rather than a VISOR. He dismissed that idea, understanding that answering the question in such a way would be counterproductive to his friend’s mood. After a humanly imperceptible pause, he said simply, “A number significantly greater than two.”

“Damned right! Hayes has no right to treat me like this. No right.”

Data hesitated before pointing out, “He is a superior officer…”

“I don’t care if he’s commander-in-chief! It’s wrong, Data. Don’t you see? It’s wrong!”

But Data did not see. He believed La Forge was now calling into question either Hayes’s morality or ethics in pressuring him to replace his VISOR with ocular implants. Data wanted to find merit in that argument, as it would provide his friend legitimate grounds to protest the admiral’s orders. But he could not. La Forge’s opposition to Hayes’s orders was not based on morality or legality, but on…

On emotion.

Data realized he could not fully understand Geordi’s emotions because he was not experiencing them himself. At the moment, he was primarily feeling sadness at the thought of his closest and most valued friend leaving the ship. He also felt sympathy for him in his unhappiness. But he didn’t share La Forge’s anger over his perceived victimization.

And so, recalling Troi’s advice, Data began to search his own memories for analogous situations. He felt fresh, uncomfortable emotions swelling within him as he recalled first being activated aboard the U.S.S. Tripoli, and the way the chief engineer laughed as he switched the newly discovered android off and on like a child’s toy.

…and his time in command of the Sutherland, dealing with the arrogant, distrustful, and insubordinate Lieutenant Commander Hobson as his executive officer…

…his first meeting with Will Riker, who’d automatically assumed a “machine” could not have legitimately earned a Starfleet commission…

…Admiral Haftel denying him his status as a parent and ordering him to relinquish custody of Lal…

…Dr. Pulaski openly sniggering at him and his efforts to become more human…

…Bruce Maddox sneeringly denying his sentience and his freedoms…

“You cannot let him do it,” Data heard himself blurt. “You cannot go along with it.”

“But what can I do?” La Forge asked.

Data answered La Forge with a smile. How he had missed the parallels, he did not know. But they were plain to him now, and seeing his friend’s face begin to brighten in reaction to his smile, Data knew he had the answer to La
Forge’s situation. “You must resign your commission.”

It was the perfect solution. It would save La Forge from giving in to Hayes’s dictates, while at the same time addressing the admiral’s concerns about the VISOR and the potential risk it posed. And, unlike the situation Data had faced seven years earlier, it could not be argued that Geordi La Forge was property and could be forced to submit against his will.

“Leave Starfleet? Data…I don’t know…” Geordi said, shaking his head slowly. “I’ve spent almost half my life in Starfleet. It’s all I’ve ever wanted to do.”

“So much so, you would be willing to give up your VISOR? Or to become chief of operations of Efros Station?” Data reached out to place his hands on La Forge’s shoulders and looked earnestly into his visual sensory prosthesis. “Geordi, you must stand up for your right to choose. This will allow you your choice, as well as serving as a strong statement about Starfleet Command’s affront to the rights of those who serve under them.”

Data was uncertain from where the passion behind his exhortations emanated, but he saw they were having an effect on La Forge. He was nodding slowly, and the muscles around his temples tightened as they normally did when he was giving a matter serious thought. “You may be right, Data.”

“You understand, Geordi,” Data said, as another unanticipated emotion sparked his thoughts, “in making this suggestion, I am not implying that I want you to leave.”

La Forge actually smiled at that, for the first time since the start of their conversation. “I get that, Data. I wouldn’t want to leave, either. But, like you say, it’s something I have to seriously consider.”

The engineer fell into deep thought, and Data excused himself to let his friend weigh his decision in private. As he walked out of engineering and headed for the turbolift, he considered that the feeling of pride and self-satisfaction he’d come to expect after providing help to another person was in this instance curiously absent.

“I haven’t had much chance to talk to him since Hayes handed down his dictate,” said the image of Will Riker on the small screen. “But he’s not taking it well.”

“I wouldn’t imagine he would,” Troi said, sitting at the desk in her childhood bedroom. After finishing their uncomfortable morning meal, her mother had ensconced herself in her small study downstairs to make some calls to her friends within the Betazed government, letting them know that she had returned home and was ready to resume the duties (and the perks) of ambassadorship. So, Deanna decided to make some calls of her own and check in with the Enterprise. Little had she expected there would be such an eventful report waiting for her.

“Well, rumor has it, during beta shift, he threatened to put Lieutenant Porter through a bulkhead.”

“I suspect that’s an exaggeration,” the counselor said. Geordi La Forge was arguably the most even-tempered officer aboard the Enterprise. Even through his darkest personal trials, such as in the days following the disappearance and presumed death of his mother, Troi had always been taken by how well La Forge was able to control his anger and grief.

“I’m sure it is,” Riker said. “But the fact that a story like that could gain any traction at all, there’s likely a kernel of truth in there.”

Troi nodded and thought, I should be there for him. She hadn’t been on Betazed twenty-four hours yet, and already she was looking for excuses to leave her mother on her own again. Never mind that she wasn’t being of any actual help here. Nor, as Lwaxana had made clear, did she even expect any help from her daughter. But Deanna had to ask herself if her impulse to get back to the Enterprise as soon as she could didn’t in fact prove her mother right….

“Deanna?”

Troi started, realizing that Riker must have been trying to get her wandering attention back for a while. “I’m sorry, what were you saying?”

“I asked how your mother was.”

Troi shrugged. “She’s Mother. Handling it all with her usual aplomb.”

“That bad, huh?”

“What?”

A sliver of a grin flashed from underneath Will’s mustache. “When all you can say about your mother is ‘she’s Mother,’ that means you’re upset with her, but don’t want to say anything.”

Troi raised an eyebrow at Riker. “Who’s the psychologist here?”

“Sorry.” Riker put up both hands in surrender. “You don’t want to say anything, you don’t have to.”

Damn him. She did want to talk about it. She did want to share these uncomfortable and conflicting feelings with this man who she had once called imzadi. But not now. Not while the person who had provoked those feelings was still in the same house, mere meters—As Deanna turned her thoughts toward her mother, she empathically felt an abrupt emotional shift. The aplomb was gone, as something had triggered near panic instead. “I have to go, Will,” she said, standing up from her seat and blanking her screen before Riker even had a chance to look surprised.
As Deanna hurried downstairs, her Betazoid senses picked up someone walking purposefully toward the front door. Before he even had the chance to knock, she understood the reason for her mother’s sudden concern: Deycen had returned, and from the degree of confident arrogance he projected, it was not to apologize for his earlier behavior.

In the foyer, her mother held up a hand to her valet, indicating that she wanted him to keep the Tavnian waiting on the front step for slightly longer than necessary while she collected herself. Deanna stopped on the last step of the staircase, maintaining a slight distance as Deycen knocked a second time, waited, debated how long to wait before knocking a third, hesitated, then raised his fist again before Homn finally pulled the door open.

Deycen flinched slightly as he found himself facing the giant servant again, but quickly steeled himself and called, “Lwaxana!” as he tried to peer into the house.

“Deycen!” Lwaxana burbled as if she hadn’t a care in the world. “I take it you’ve talked to Jeyal?”

“Yes, I did. And you misled me.”

“I did no such thing! Jeyal did tell you that I had remarried,” she said, a statement rather than a question.

“Yes, he did. But, you didn’t tell me that your so-called marriage was to a Changeling!”

“I didn’t say my new husband wasn’t a Changeling, either,” Lwaxana countered with a theatric shrug. “What has that to do with anything?”

“Changelings are deceivers by nature. They hide in plain sight, revealing themselves only to carry out their perfidy. A marriage to a Changeling cannot be accepted as legitimate.”

“Pfft,” Lwaxana answered. “Jeyal was at the wedding. He knew full well Odo was a Changeling, and he accepted the legitimacy of our marriage.”

“Jeyal’s judgment was impaired,” the Tavnian said, as if handing down a judicial decree. “There is no other way to explain how he could allow a Tavnian child to be raised by a dangerous alien.”

“Well, you needn’t worry about that,” Lwaxana told him. “Odo isn’t going to raise the boy; I am.”

Deycen gaped at her, appalled. “No…no, this will not stand!”

“Yes, well, I’m afraid you have no say in the matter one way or the other. So, while it was very nice seeing you again, Deycen…” Lwaxana said as she tried to lead the ambassador back out her door again.

Deycen, however, made no move to leave. “We are talking about an innocent child. Aren’t you the slightest bit concerned about his well-being? About what would become of him if he were left in your care?”

Even though Lwaxana managed to hold her tongue, Deanna nearly blacked out from her mother’s telepathic reaction: deep-seated feelings of self-doubt, self-hatred, misery, and pain, all of which pounded against Deanna’s mind like a tsunami against a clay levee. Deanna blinked away the tears that formed in her eyes and looked to her mother. To anyone else, Lwaxana’s dark eyes would have communicated only indignity at Deycen’s questioning, along with determination and pride. Deanna, though, saw the overwhelming pain that threatened to break the strongest woman she had ever known.

Deanna took that pain unto herself, combined it with her own sorrow for the sister she had never known, and the fear of never having the chance to know her baby brother. Then she redirected all that negative emotion back toward Ambassador Deycen. “Who do you think you are to suggest this woman is not concerned about the welfare of her child?” she demanded of him. “You’re not the father, you’re not the husband…”

“But I am the representative of the Tavnian government on this planet. This child is Tavnian-“

“Half Tavnian.”

“- as is his father. The child therefore must be raised as a Tavnian.”

Troi set her jaw as she stared hard into the taller man’s eyes. “You can’t pass an authoritarian judgment like that.”

“And you’re Starfleet,” Deycen answered. “You’re obligated by your oath to respect Tavnian culture and Tavnian law.”

Troi tried to think of an appropriate retort for that, but found she had none. Technically, yes, she was obligated to-

“UUUUNNRRRGGH!!!”

This time, Deanna was rocked not only by the primal, unformed emotions from Lwaxana, but by its vocal component, which sounded like the cry of a mortally wounded le-matya. When she was able to focus again, she saw her mother half-collapsed in Mr. Homn’s arms. “Mother!” Troi cried as she rushed to her side, helping her find her feet again. “What’s wrong?”

Lwaxana regained her balance and put both hands protectively over her stomach. “Nothing, Little One,” she panted, “Just—

Don’t say anything.

“…help me upstairs, will you? Mr. Homn, please entertain our guest.”
As asked, Deanna said nothing as she pulled her mother’s right arm over her shoulders, put her own left arm around her back, and guided her slowly up the stairs. Deycen fumed, but put up little resistance as Homn herded him into the living room. Though he was out of earshot, Deanna asked her mother telepathically, Is it the baby?
Yes. He’s coming now. Oh, gods…
It’s going to be all right, Mother. I’ll call Dr. Byxthar, and…
Promise me, Little One…
What?
Promise me it will be all right. This is your brother, Deanna. Once he’s born, it’ll be that much easier for Deycen to just scoop him up and whisk him away. Swear to me you’ll remember, above all else, that he’s your family, your blood.

They reached the landing just then, and both stopped as Lwaxana caught her breath. Deanna took that opportunity to release her hold and move around so that she could look directly into her mother’s wide black eyes. In a voice that, despite its whisper softness carried all the determination in her being, Deanna Troi told her mother, “I swear it.”
And, for what felt like the first time in her life, Deanna sensed from her mother her complete and unreserved trust and respect.

Strangely, Deanna realized, as she guided Lwaxana the rest of the way to the bedroom, the feeling was not as gratifying as she might have expected it to be.
“Geordi!” Edward La Forge’s face lit up like a small sun on the small desktop monitor. “This is a surprise.”

“Hi, Dad,” Geordi answered, forcing a smile of his own. “How are you?”

“Doing good, really good. Aralsee II has turned out to be the kind of biological treasure trove that butterfly catchers like me usually only dream about!”

“That’s great, Dad,” Geordi said, his smile growing more genuine. His father had been hit hard by the loss of his wife years earlier. Even though he’d seemed to accept the disappearance of her ship, the Hera, much better than Geordi had himself, he’d mourned for a much longer time. He spent a year’s extended leave on Earth after the memorial, before finally accepting a new shipboard assignment, as head of the xenobiology department of the U.S.S. Zee-Magnees. But now that he was back to exploring strange new worlds and indulging once again in his vocational passion, he seemed far happier than he had for a long while.

“So, how are you, Geordi?” his father asked.

Geordi watched his father’s smile fade as he hesitated, no doubt reacting to his own sobering expression.

“Dad…I’m thinking about leaving Starfleet.”

The elder La Forge stared at him for a moment, before a small grin tugged at the corner of his mouth. “This is some sort of prank. Your sister put you up to this, didn’t she?”

“No. Believe me, I wish I was joking.”

“Son, you can’t be serious,” Edward said as his smile faded away. “What would make you even consider something like that?”

Geordi drew a long deep breath, and then launched into a narrative of all that had happened since their arrival at Starbase 19. He was a bit surprised at how dispassionate he sounded as he explained the admiral’s orders, and his thought processes in coming to his decision.

His father listened dispassionately as well, holding his tongue until Geordi finished his monologue and then prompted him by asking, “What do you think, Dad?”

“I think,” his father said, fixing him with a knowing look, “that if you really thought leaving Starfleet was your best option, you wouldn’t have to ask me what I think.”

He was not far from wrong, of course, but Geordi said nothing. After a further moment’s silence, his father asked, “What would you do if you left Starfleet?”

“There are plenty of non-Starfleet ships out there-independent contractors, university research vessels—I’m sure they’d jump at the chance to have a chief engineer of my experience.”

“I’m sure they would…” the older man said, speaking in a slow, measured pace. “Except, your entire Starfleet record will be following you wherever you go—and that’ll include the reason you left. Even if you resigned of your own volition, anyone who looks will see the last thing in your file is that the admiralty considered you a potential security threat.”

Geordi felt his heart sink. It hadn’t occurred to him before now, but his father was absolutely right. Even the Maquis, with their disdain for Starfleet, would probably think twice before trusting someone with that kind of mark against them.

“Then, maybe I’ll do something else,” Geordi said. “Buy my own ship. Or maybe retire to Risa, finally start that novel I’ve been thinking about writing. I don’t know. But I can’t give in to Hayes on this, Dad. You know I can’t.”

Edward La Forge nodded. “I do know that, Geordi. Giving in isn’t in your nature. Do you remember Dr. Mubi?”

The name sounded familiar, but it took Geordi a moment to place it: “Altair IV.”

It had been right after his fourth birthday when he, his parents, and his baby sister took a “special trip” to the far-off planet and its prestigious Central Hospital. Dr. Ross Mubi, their leading researcher, had just won the Carrington and Bentman Prizes for his revolutionary work in nerve regeneration, and after exchanging a few letters with his parents, assured the La Forges he could help their young son where so many other doctors had failed.

Geordi remembered how gentle and pleasant the older man was as he’d examined him, explaining in a deep, rumbling voice every test he ran and every tool he used, although all the technobabble went way over his young head. And, he also remembered how hard and cold the doctor had become the following day, when he declared to Edward
and Silva that their son was a hopeless case—there was nothing he could do to repair Geordi’s faulty optic nerves, and thus, nothing anyone could do.

“And the whole way on the trip back home,” he heard his father say as he shook off his reminiscences, “you kept insisting Mubi was wrong. That you would get your sight, that you would join Starfleet just like Mommy and Daddy and visit every star in the galaxy.” Edward smiled at the memory. “Your mother and I were ready to give up. We’d seen you go through so many tests, so many failed operations. We tried to tell you that you would have to learn to live with your limitations. But you wouldn’t accept that.”

His father leaned in closer to the screen. “I think about that little blind boy, so determined not to let anything stand in his way…and I refuse to believe the man he grew into would do any less.”

The two stared silently across the light-years at one another. “I don’t know what else I can do, Dad,” Geordi finally said in an anguished voice.

“I know the feeling,” the older man said, nodding sadly. “But answers have a way of coming to us eventually. Just don’t make any decisions that you might end up regretting before you find yours.”

Geordi nodded. “Thanks, Dad.”

“You’re welcome, son. I love you.”

“Love you, too.”

The transmission ended, and Geordi considered the reflection of the little blind boy staring back at him from the blank screen, wondering what decision he was going to make now.

Deanna barreled down the stairs as she heard the aircar approaching, and flung the door open as it landed on the Troi mansion’s spacious front lawn.

“What’s going on?” Deycen demanded, jumping up from the living room sofa and trying to intercept Deanna, only to be blocked by a surprisingly agile Homn. Deanna spared them only the briefest of glances as she watched Dr. Eusho Byxthar emerge from the vehicle and march up the front walk. She moved with a slight stiffness that, taken in with her short-shorn gray hair, might have dimmed some people’s confidence in her abilities. However, Deanna could sense that Byxthar’s mind was still as sharp and as focused as it had been the first time she’d been introduced to the doctor as a child, over thirty years ago.

So, what in the name of the Four Deities is wrong with Lwaxana this time? she asked, clearly annoyed at being called away from her regular practice to tend to this one patient.

“She’s upstairs,” Deanna said, turning. “Come with me.”

You don’t have to vocalize to me, girl, Byxthar snapped back. Just because I’m ninety-one years old, you don’t have to treat me like some flatbrain.

Deycen was standing, peering out into the foyer from behind Homn. “Who is this?” he shouted again as the doctor walked past.

“And you be quiet, too,” Byxthar barked back, not bothering to look his way as she followed Deanna up to the master bedroom. This had better be an emergency, she thought now at Troi. Your mother hasn’t been to see me for a regular examination in over a year now.

Then, you don’t know?

Know what?

Instead of answering, Deanna opened the door to her mother’s bedroom and let Byxthar in ahead of her. And the doctor was stopped in her tracks at the sight of Lwaxana Troi lying on the oversized bed, propped up on a mountain of multihued pillows, breathing hard as both hands rubbed her huge swollen belly. “Great Fire, Lwaxana, you have got to be kidding me,” Byxthar blurted aloud.

I wish that was the prognosis I’d gotten ten months ago, Lwaxana answered.

Byxthar shook her head as she set the small medical bag she carried on the edge of the bed. She glanced at the readout on the device’s screen, and then fixed her patient with a hard look. You are a stupid woman, Lwaxana. You can’t talk to me like that—I’m pregnant.

Byxthar turned and fixed Lwaxana with a razor-sharp glare. And at your age, that’s stupid. Not that you were much smarter when you were young, what with the way you were with that human boy…

“‘Human boy’?” Deanna asked.

Byxthar scowled at Deanna for speaking aloud again, but underneath her annoyance, there was a bemused gleam in the older woman’s eye. You’ve never heard that story, eh? she asked. She turned and headed into the
master bathroom as she continued to telepathically regale Deanna. He and a group of his Starfleet friends were going up into the Loneel Mountains for some ridiculous Earth game where they strap plastic planks to their feet and see who can slide down the snow pack the fastest. He invited your mother to join them, and she said, “Oh, I’d love to play, it sounds like so much fun.” Byxthar briefly spoke aloud, in a rather accurate mimicry of Lwaxana Troi’s musically flirtatious voice. She emerged from the bathroom then, carrying a shallow basin of water and a pair of clean towels. Completely shattered her tibia and fibula, she continued telepathically. Spent three full days in the infirmary at the Federation Embassy compound.

Not so stupid, Lwaxana interrupted. Ian would come and sit at my bedside for hours on end during his off-duty time. If I had let myself be discharged after the first day the way I should have been, well, my Little One likely wouldn’t be here right now.

Byxthar looked up at Deanna. That’s not such a bad idea.

“Excuse me?” Troi said, not caring that she’d spoken aloud to the doctor once again.

You. Not being here now. The doctor made a flicking motion at her with the fingers of both hands. Shoo. I have to do my examination now. Let your mother keep at least some dignity, if possible.

After getting a weak smile and a nod from her mother, Deanna left her and the doctor in private, and made her way back to the main floor of the house. She found Deycen still camped in the living room, with Mr. Homn having positioned himself at the Tavnian’s side in a manner that equally suggested a servant awaiting a request and a security guard making certain his charge made no sudden moves. Deycen looked up as Deanna entered, and she felt a flare of anger and frustration roll off him. However, he kept his voice perfectly even and calm as he asked, “What is going on?”

Despite her mother’s earlier admonition, Deanna knew keeping Deycen in the dark was now pointless and futile. “My mother has gone into labor.”

“Good. That will simplify matters.”

Troi hardened her facial expression as she glared at the Tavnian. “Mr. Deycen, do you have any idea the kind of interplanetary incident you would spark by forcibly taking the newborn child of a Federation ambassador from his mother?”

“Lwaxana is no longer an ambassador, and even if she were reinstated as one, it still would be irrelevant. I will not stand idly by and allow a helpless infant to be damaged in any way.”

“Damaged.” Troi repeated. “By being raised by his mother.”

“Yes!” Deycen answered, with a vehemence that took the counselor by surprise. “Confusing a young child by forcing it to confront the concept of differing genders at too early an age can have grievous effects on its development. There are centuries of Tavnian sociological studies proving an increase in abhorrent behaviors and other psychological problems. And to allow a male child to be raised solely by a female? Unthinkable!”

Deanna was brought up short by the level of emotion behind Deycen’s argument. She had assumed before that this mid-ranking bureaucrat was simply playing politics with her mother’s baby, trying to assert his own personal authority or assuage his own ego. But now she understood that, as narrow and baseless as she knew his beliefs about childhood development to be, they were sincerely held. In his mind, by tearing a baby from its birth mother and putting him in some male-only orphanage, he was acting in the best interests of the child. And even if she were inclined to tell him how wrongheaded both he and the Tavnian culture were—an idea that ran counter to her own core values as a Federation citizen-his conviction clearly was not going to be swayed by any amount of logic or rhetoric.

And so, she simply sat in a chair opposite him, resolved to wait, as calmly as she could, until her new baby brother was born. There was nothing either she or Deycen could do until then.

But she resolved that, if Deycen did try to do anything, she would oppose him. And the consequences be damned.
More than once during her childhood, Deanna Troi had listened to her mother tell her how very difficult and painful it had been giving birth to her. Deanna had always assumed that, like so much that her mother said, this was exaggeration.

Now, as she sat mere meters away from where her mother lay in the upstairs bedroom, empathically perceiving her ongoing labor, Deanna understood that, if anything, she had understated the experience. The counselor strained to keep herself composed as her empathic senses were assailed by the silent wails of pain from the room upstairs.

“Why is it so quiet?”

Troi started, having almost forgotten Deycen sitting on the opposite side of the low coffee table in the center of the room. “Quiet?” she asked, and for the first time noticed that, indeed, the house’s unique architecture was keeping any sounds from carrying down from the upstairs.

Deycen narrowed his eyes, and Deanna felt a surge in his feelings of distrust. “Yes, quiet. There is something going on,” he said, starting to rise to his feet.

Somehow, Homn appeared right behind him, laying a large white hand on his shoulder and pressing him back down onto the amra-skin couch.

“BETAAZOIOD births are unusually easy compared to most other humanoids,” Deanna lied. “I suppose you were never taught that during your boys-only upbringing.”

“She’s not even in this house anymore, is she?” Deycen accused, a flood of frustration and paranoia bursting through his emotional dams. “She probably beamed out, and left you here to distract me!”

Deanna maintained an expression of utter calm. “If that’s what you believe, why don’t you go back to the embassy, and scan for ships in orbit from there?”

“Oh, no. I’m not leaving this house. No, you have to take me upstairs and prove to me Lwaxana is still here.”

“I will not. My mother is in the middle of a very-”

DEANNA!!

Troi was nearly staggered by her mother’s telepathic summons. Where are you, Little One? I want you with me, darlingpleasepleaseplease...\

Troi was on her feet in a heartbeat, rushing for the staircase. She hesitated only long enough to look over her shoulder at Deycen, who was demanding to know where she was going and what she was doing. Keep him here, she thought at Homn, forgetting for a moment that the valet was not himself a telepath. All the same, he gave her a small nod, and continued to keep Deycen securely in his seat.

She took the steps two at a time, ran down the short corridor at the top of the landing, and threw the door of her mother’s bedroom open. She saw her mother in profile, her face tight with pain and exertion. Her wig had fallen behind her pillows, and her own short-shorn hair was tousled and damp with sweat. A sheet was draped over her stomach and her up-bent knees, while Dr. Byxthar had stationed herself on the jul-wood chest at the foot of the bed and was focused on the business at hand. Deanna rushed to the side of the bed, knelt down with her chin on the mattress, and took Lwaxana’s hand. “Mother,” she said aloud. “I’m here. I’m right here.”

Oh, Little One, Lwaxana answered, squeezing her hand back. Oh, I’m so glad you’re here. And I’m so sorry...

Lwaxana managed to turn her head and give Deanna a soft chuckle. No? Showing up on my adult daughter’s doorstep ten months pregnant, fleeing a man I never should have even considered marrying in the first place? Sounds pretty embarrassing to me. Eusho was right; I am stupid.

Mother, Deanna thought at her sharply, stop this self-pity right now.

Lwaxana turned her gaze away again, shaking her head. I could read Jeyal from the moment I met him. I knew, even with all his sweet words and grand romantic gestures, that he was a bastardAAAAA!!

Lwaxana screamed aloud as another contraction hit, and her fingernails dug hard into the back of Deanna’s hand. But worse than the physical pain was the close-range emotional broadcast. Deanna steaded herself as best she
could against it, and projected thoughts of reassurance and affection back into her mother’s mind. This seemed to bring Lwaxana some tiny degree of relief, and once the contraction had passed, Deanna continued to think soothing thoughts for her.

I really shouldn’t say that about him, Lwaxana continued as she fell back onto her pillows. Jeyal is a decent man, for a domineering misogynist. He’s just a product of his upbringing and his culture. Just like Timicin was… and Campio…and me…

Deanna’s expression twisted in confusion. She wasn’t sure if her mother was just rambling…no, even now, her mind was too focused. But Dr. Timicin had sacrificed a relationship with Lwaxana—and his own life—in compliance with the requirements of Kaelon culture. Minister Campio was a prudish little bureaucrat who had put his adherence to Kostolain etiquette above his planned wedding to Lwaxana. Deanna couldn’t fathom how her mother could compare herself with either of these socially rigid men.

Because, my dear, Lwaxana answered the unasked question with a weak but knowing smile, I was taught as a girl that the most important thing I could do was get married and be a good wife to my husband. Even after raising a daughter all by myself, and then establishing a successful diplomatic career, part of me still believed that, as an unmarried woman, I was a failure.

Before Deanna could assure her she was in no way a failure, Lwaxana barreled on: And what’s worse, I’ve been trying all these years to make you feel just as bad as I did about being on your own, an unmarried, independent woman.

Less talking, more pushing, Dr. Byxthar interrupted gruffly, her head bent underneath the sheet covering the lower half of Lwaxana’s body. You’re almost there, come on.

Every muscle in Lwaxana’s face squeezed tight as she tried to do as the doctor said. Deanna put one hand in her mother’s powerful fist, and her other arm went behind her shoulders, supporting her as she strained and pushed.

I’m proud…of the woman…you are…. Lwaxana struggled to form the coherent thought as she rode through the pain of the contraction. As her exertions subsided, she released all the tension from her body, letting her daughter gently lower her back down flat. Because I know…with your strength…if the worst happens…you’ll be able to… Then Lwaxana’s eyelids fluttered shut, and her thoughts fell silent.

Mother? Deanna thought at her. Her mind was still present…just very far away, much farther than would be the case from simple fainting or sleep. “Mother!” Deanna repeated out loud, concern coloring her tone. Her mother, however, did not respond.

Not even as her son took his first breath and started to cry.

The hologram of the horribly deformed and scarred humanoid body faded away as the room lights came back up, though the image remained burned into Beverly Crusher’s retinas. “Thank you, doctors, for your attention,” said the Gnalish admiral who had been conducting the briefing for the assemblage of starship medical officers. “And I pray that you never have need of any of this information."

“Amen,” Crusher muttered under her breath. She heard more than a few others in the conference hall echoing similar sentiments. After being subjected to three hours on the newest generation of biogenic and metagenic weaponry, complete with holographic illustrations of their effects on living beings, even the most cynical atheist, she suspected, would welcome the idea of a benevolent deity—or at the least, a race of hyperevolved beings who might be inclined to step in and put a halt to any hostilities before such weapons were unleashed.

She stood and joined the queue of blue uniforms filing out of the room, exchanging nods with old friends and colleagues among the crowd of starship CMOs. Some managed to favor her with mild smiles, but no one seemed in the mood to socialize. After all, it was difficult for most doctors to accept the notion that, should the worst case scenario come about, there would be little they as mere mortals would be able to do but stand by and watch the suffering.

Crusher beamed back to the Enterprise and headed directly for sickbay. With the ship at stationkeeping, she anticipated an uneventful shift. She hoped so, at any rate; all she really wanted at the moment was to shutter herself in her office, not to think about the possibilities of war. She had been trying, for the last four months, to “relaunch” the theater troupe she’d headed on the EnterpriseD, and would welcome some quiet time to finish work on a Dickens adaptation she planned to stage as their premiere production. She tried not to reflect on the idea that Victorian London was looking more appealing to her at the moment than her own modern world.

Unfortunately, the modern world refused to leave her alone. It presented itself to her in the form of the Emergency Medical Hologram, which someone had activated in her absence. “Ah, Dr. Crusher,” the faux physician said as she entered sickbay, “Lieutenant Commander La Forge is here, waiting for you in your office.”

Crusher turned and saw that La Forge was, indeed, standing in the doorway to the small room in the corner of sickbay. He gave her a small smile, but Crusher thought he looked almost as haunted as the group she had just left on the starbase.
“He refused to allow me to examine him,” the hologram continued to prattle, sounding as if it had suffered some grievous insult, “or to answer any queries I put to him. I suspect he may have activated my program inadvertently, though he did not have the courtesy to- “

“Computer, deactivate EMH,” Crusher sighed, not even bothering to watch the image dissolve away into nothingness as she headed for her office. “Hello, Geordi,” she said, greeting him with her best bedside-manner smile.

“Hey, Beverly. Hope you don’t mind my waiting in here for you.”

“Of course not. Sit down.” Crusher took her own seat behind the desk while Geordi settled in the nearer of the two in front of it.

“So,” La Forge said, “I guess you know why I’m here.”

“If I had to guess,” Crusher answered, “I’d say it had to do with Admiral Hayes’s ultimatum.”

La Forge nodded, resigned. “So, I guess we need to schedule a time to do this?”

“Computer, deactivate EMH,” Crusher said, cutting him off. “I’m saying that, in this situation, no doctor with even a gram of ethics would do the surgery.”

La Forge’s head snapped up at that.

Crusher continued. “I cannot perform a nonemergency procedure like this without the patient’s consent. And I would not perform it if I thought he had been coerced into giving consent.”

Even with the VISOR covering his eyes, Crusher could see a glimmer of hope starting to illuminate Geordi’s face. “Are you saying…you won’t do the ocular implant surgery?”

Crusher leaned forward slightly. “I’m saying that, in this situation, no doctor with even a gram of ethics would do the surgery.”

And suddenly, the small glimmer erupted into a supernova flash, as a parsec-wide smile split La Forge’s face. “Oh, thank God!” he cried, looking as if he wanted to vault across the desk and wrap his arms around her. “Thank you, Doc, thank you! I can’t tell you what it means to hear that!” He fell backward against his chair, looking as if he’d literally had the weight of the world lifted off his shoulders. “For the past day and a half, it’s been like being trapped in some kind of Orwellian nightmare. I’m so relieved to find out that there’s still some justice in this universe.”

“You’re welcome,” Crusher said, as she considered the almost instantaneous one hundred eighty-degree shift in his mood. “This has really been hard on you, hasn’t it? You really didn’t want to have to go through with the implant surgery.”

“Hell, no, I didn’t,” La Forge said, still beaming.

“Why not?”

That question caused La Forge’s smile to dim somewhat. “What do you mean, ‘why not’?”

“Other than the coercion aspect, I mean,” Crusher said. “The current generation of ocular implants represents a marked improvement over- “

“Hey, Doc,” La Forge said, cutting her off. “I’m happy with my VISOR, that’s all. I don’t need the sales pitch.”

Crusher fixed him with a sharp look. “Part of my responsibility, in regard to my patients’ consent, is ensuring they’re able to give informed consent.”

La Forge sighed and gestured for the doctor to get on with it. Crusher resumed. “The old Aroeste interface has been replaced with bio-neural circuitry, giving the implants a faster rate of sensory input processing, as well as a closer approximation of standard human vision in the visible light spectrum. Plus, the iris coloration and patterning can be customized to give you a completely normal appearance.”

Chuckling without humor, La Forge said, “You know, Beverly, that’s almost exactly what Dr. Soran told me.”

Crusher recoiled as if slapped. “What?”

“Oh, yeah. Even as he was fitting that microtransmitter in my VISOR, he was telling me I should have implants so I’d be ‘normal’. If I’m getting the same advice from both you and him, it must be the thing to do, right?”

The doctor shook her head. “Geordi, you know I didn’t mean it like that.”

“No, but still, you use ‘normal’ like it’s this huge selling point. ‘Everybody wants to be normal, Geordi!’” he said in a high, mock-chipper voice, and then grunted. “We’ve got the Dominion scaring the hell out of us because they think there should be some kind of universal homogeneous order, but just scratch below the ‘infinite diversity’ veneer of the Federation, and you find out we don’t really like things too different or abnormal, either.”

“Geordi…”

As suddenly as La Forge’s anger had erupted, it appeared spent, and he slumped in his seat. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be dumping all this on you.”

“No, Geordi, don’t be sorry,” Crusher urged him. “This is something you’ve kept bottled up for a while, isn’t
He gave Crusher a sharp look, and then a halfhearted smile. “Don't make me have to tell Deanna you were trying to do her job while she was gone.”

Crusher ignored his warning. “It hurts to be treated like you’re different, I know.” She recalled all the times Wesley had come home from school on the verge of tears because of the abuse he’d been subjected to by the older students he so effortlessly out-paced academically. “I’m guessing you’ve been hurt like that a lot in your life.”

“Ancient history,” La Forge said dismissively.

“Except it still bothers you.”

“I wouldn’t be where I am today if I still let it bother me. I learned to deal with it.”

“And yet, you’ve resisted the idea of replacing your VISOR all these years…”

“Because that’s what they want!” La Forge said. “It would be admitting that I am a freak, and changing myself to fit their definition of normal!”

“Forget ‘them,’” Crusher shouted back, “what do you want?”

That stopped La Forge cold. He sat open-mouthed across from Crusher as an expression of epiphany bloomed on his face. “Oh, my God,” he finally said. “That’s exactly what I’ve been doing all my life, isn’t it? Worrying about ‘them.’”

La Forge paused as he removed his VISOR, and then put a hand over his face, rubbing at his closed eyes with thumb and forefingers. “A bunch of bullies and strangers from years ago…dammit. I must seem like a crazy man.”

Crusher waited patiently as he took a couple deep breaths, wiped the corners of his eyes, and then replaced the VISOR. “I guess I’ve got some new things to think about and reconsider,” he said as the appliance softly clicked onto its contacts at his temples. He stood up from his chair and headed for the door. Just before reaching it, though, he turned and asked, “When you say a faster processing rate, how much faster are we talking about?”

The doctor held back a smile as she started talking him through the specifics of the implants and of the procedure. La Forge listened and asked questions that brought all his concerns out to be addressed. And in the end, when La Forge made his decision, Beverly finally started to feel good again about being a doctor in the modern world.
Lwaxana’s newborn child wailed at the top of his lungs—an evolutionary holdover from a time before Betazoid parents could sense their offspring’s hunger and discomfort telepathically. “Oh, hush now,” Dr. Byxthar said to the child, managing to sound both soothing and gruff at the same time. “It’s over now, and that’s the last time you’ll ever have to go through it.”

Deanna slowly lifted her head from where it lay beside her mother’s and turned to look at the older woman, now holding a squirming, screaming bundle in a loosely wrapped blanket. “Come here; help me.”

Automatically, Deanna pushed herself to her feet, while keeping her telepathic attention on her unconscious mother. She was still breathing, but that was almost all she could tell. Dr. Byxthar stood up as well, and thrust the infant at Deanna’s chest. She gasped, but her left arm instinctively folded securely underneath the baby’s torso, while her right hand cradled his delicate soft skull. She pressed him close against her body as the doctor turned to grab her tricorder.

The boy had a slight raised crease along the bridge of his nose, and as his cries slowly subsided and his eyelids opened, he revealed a pair of characteristically dark Betazoid eyes. Those eyes were not quite able to focus, but all the same, they seemed to lock on the face above him. Deanna gazed back into them. “Hello, baby brother,” she whispered, and Deanna felt his very young and unformed mind shift, the trauma of his birth already a fading memory, replaced with a feeling of security and contentedness. She smiled softly, thinking that Kestra must have held her in much the same way, and realizing for the first time how much she looked forward to being the big sister Kestra never had the chance to be.

Deanna had no idea how long she stood there like that, silently bonding with her new sibling. What finally broke the spell was the shouting that, despite the house’s solid walls and floors, could be heard all the way from downstairs: “The child is being irreparably harmed! Don’t you understand? Every minute he’s held in that room full of women…”

Deanna shot a look at the door, as if expecting Deycen to come bursting through right at that moment, even though she trusted Mr. Homn would never let him get so far. She then turned to Byxthar, who had finished her examination of the baby and was now waving her tricorder over Lwaxana’s head and torso. Deanna extended her mind again and found her mother still distressingly deep in unconsciousness. “Will she be all right?” she asked Byxthar.

“What’s wrong, the doctor answered as she pressed a hypospray to her patient’s neck, is that she’s too damned old to be having babies. Childbirth is hard enough on a woman in her prime; for a woman who supposedly went into The Phase seven years ago…”

But she will be all right?

“You have no right to hold that child now that it’s been born!” the Tavnian’s bellowing voice sounded again.

Not if I can’t care for my patient in peace, Byxthar thought through clenched teeth.

Deanna looked at her mother, her face seeming to pale by the minute, and then at her mother’s son, his dark eyes closing again as he drifted into a serene sleep in her arms. Deanna shifted the baby carefully so that he was safely cradled in the crook of her left arm. Then she stepped over to the bureau where Byxthar had laid out her instruments and snatched up a laser scalpel with her right hand, before marching out of the bedroom to face down Deycen.

The Tavnian consul had somehow made his way out of the living room, though still attended by Homn. The big man stood at the bottom landing of the stairs, his arms held out to either side, blocking the full width of the staircase from banister to banister. “Finally,” he crowed as he saw Deanna and the baby, clearly under the delusion that she was bringing the child out for him.

“Leave this house now,” Troi said, activating Byxthar’s scalpel as she descended the stairs and pointing it in Deycen’s direction. “Leave, and do not ever, ever try to disturb my mother or her child again.”

At the sight of the thin red spike of energy arcing from the medical instrument, both Deycen and Homn stepped back. “What is this?” Deycen demanded.

“This is me, telling you to leave,” Troi said as she reached the bottom landing and stared up fiercely into the taller man’s eyes. “Do not make me repeat myself.”

“Commander Troi,” Deycen said, putting significant emphasis on her Starfleet rank, “this is not the way to
resolve this matter. Now, if you would please...” He held both hands up in a placating manner, and took one step toward Troi and the baby.

Troi answered by swinging her right hand at Deycen, and slashing the laser blade across both of his palms.

Deycen screamed and jumped backward, clasping both of his now-clutched fists protectively against his abdomen. “Gend roe!” he swore at Deanna in Tavnian. Apprehensively, he looked down at his hands and was surprised at the lack of blood. The scalpel had been set for dermal depth cutting only; the shallow incisions had been cauterized before they could bleed, leaving only a thin pink scar across either palm. “What is wrong with you?” he nearly screamed once his initial shock had faded.

“What makes you think anything is wrong with me?” Troi asked in a low growl. “Because I don’t meekly submit to you and let you tear my family apart?”

“Put that weapon down!” Deycen demanded. Troi responded by pressing her thumb on the control padd of the scalpel grip. The laser beam turned a brighter shade of red and grew several additional centimeters. “How dare you?” he huffed indignantly, trying without success to cover up his faltering courage. “I am a diplomatic envoy!”

“And I am a Daughter of the Fifth House, Heir to the Sacred Chalice of Rixx, and a chu’wI’Hey in the mok’bara.”

The boast of her prowess in the Klingon martial art had its intended intimidating effect on Deycen, even though “chu’wI’Hey” identified her as little more than an advanced novice. Deycen shook a warning finger at her as he backed away from her. “The Federation Council and Starfleet Command will hear of this, Commander! I will have your uniform!”

A quick glance down at the baby boy in her arms (remarkably, still asleep) drove all those concerns from her thoughts. “You can have it, but I doubt it’ll look half as good on you.” She looked up at him again and pointed the laser scalpel first between his eyes, and then at the front door. “Now, get out of my house!”

“This isn’t over,” Deycen said, reaching behind him for the door handle. “I will be back.” Without letting his eyes waver from Troi’s weapon, the Tavnian pulled the door open and backed out across the threshold.

And then he stopped suddenly, as if he’d bumped into a wall. Troi had no idea what barrier he might have bumped into in the middle of the front walk, until the large man turned to reveal a strange-looking humanoid wearing the beige uniform of the Bajoran Militia. “Ambassador Deycen, I presume,” the newcomer said. “I was told I would be able to find you here.”

“And who are you?” Deycen asked.

“My name is Odo.”

Deanna felt her breath catch. Even though she had been to DS9 several times, on both Enterprises, she had never before crossed paths with the Changeling security chief. She was more than a little surprised that she would encounter him for the first time in the foyer of her mother’s house.

Troi’s surprise, however, was nothing compared to Deycen’s. “Y-you’re the Ch- “

“You-you’re the Ch.- “

“The husband, yes.” Odo took a step into the house, nodding to Mr. Homn and Deanna before he noticed the infant sleeping in Deanna’s arms. Troi could not empathically read the Changeling, but despite the largely unformed appearance of his face, she thought he seemed to regard the child with awe and affection.

Then Odo seemed to notice Troi’s scrutiny and self-consciously hardened his mien once again. “Mr. Homn called me earlier this morning on Deep Space 9.” He pivoted back toward Deycen. “He said you’ve been making threats against my wife, Ambassador.”

“You cannot be married!” Deycen said, in an unexpected burst of bravado. “It will not be allowed to stand!”

“Oh, no?” Odo took a step toward Deycen, forcing the Tavnian to take one backward, into Mr. Homn’s chest. The Tavnian looked from one to the other in abject fear, any protest of his diplomatic immunity caught in his throat. Odo lifted a hand toward Deycen, which Troi now saw had been gripping a padd. “This is an official Certification of Marriage, signed and stamped by Shaakar Edon, First Minister of Bajor.” He placed it in Deycen’s hands. “I also have the First Minister’s assurance that, if you were to contest my marriage to Lwaxana Troi in the Tavnian courts, he will attest that any marriage performed in Bajoran territory, regardless of the type of ceremony or the participants’ species, is considered legal and binding under Bajoran law. Further, the Bajoran provisional government will challenge any effort of the Tavnian government to undermine Bajoran authority in the matter.”

Deycen’s face fell. Now that the legal question of Lwaxana’s marriage—and Odo’s claim on her child—was between two non-Federation worlds, matters had become much more complicated—far more so than a minor

“Of course I’m thinking of the child,” Odo said, offering him a peculiarly unnatural facial expression. “I’m his father.”

Deycen seemed to become physically ill hearing that. He gave one last, pitying look at the boy in Deanna’s arms and, once again, backed his way out of the Troi house.

Odo swung the door closed in Deycen’s face, and then turned to Deanna. “I don’t think he’ll be giving you any more trouble,” he said.

Troi nodded slightly. “Thank you, Mr. Odo.”

“Just Odo. And you must be Deanna.” Troi nodded. Of course, her mother would have mentioned her to this man, but she found it more than a bit disconcerting to hear such a familiar tone from the unreadable Changeling.

“And this must be her son,” Odo said, bending to more closely observe the baby in her arms. A strange expression pulled at the corners of the shape-shifter’s mouth, as if he wanted to smile but did not have much practice at it. “When did Lwaxana deliver?”

“Just now. Minutes ago.”

Odo nodded. “Good. I was concerned she might give birth on the transport from Bajor.” He looked up from the baby back to Deanna’s face. “And where is Lwaxana?”

“She’s upstairs, still with the doctor.”

Another unreadable emotion crossed the Changeling’s face. “Is she all right?”

Deanna extended her empathic senses out toward the second-floor bedroom. She felt the stress Dr. Byxthar was under and her deep concern for her patient. From her mother, Deanna still could feel nothing. “I don’t know,” Troi told Odo in a strained whisper. “The doctor is doing everything she can.”

Closing off her telepathic senses, Troi was able to again focus on Odo and his reaction. His face still looked like nothing so much as a plastic facsimile of concern, no less artificial than one Data would have worn prior to the installation of his emotion chip. But this time, Troi noticed Odo’s eyes. And in them, she saw the real concern and the true affection he felt. Though she still felt somewhat wary of this outcast Founder, she could no longer doubt his emotional sincerity.

“I…is there anything I can do?” he asked after a long pause, the low, gravelly sound of his voice matching the emotions in his eyes.

“You can sit and wait with me for the doctor. If you’d care to.”

Odo nodded. “Of course.”

Deanna gestured with the now-deactivated laser scalpel toward the living room. “Besides, it would seem you and I have quite a few things to talk about…Father.”

Odo started and whipped his head around, showing Deanna such a comical expression of shock that she couldn’t help but laugh. Realizing the joke, Odo untensed, turned up one corner of his mouth, and gave a single dry chuckle as they moved into the next room.
CHAPTER 8

Geordi La Forge’s hands kept going to his brow and temples, still finding it hard to believe he was seeing without his VISOR.

The operation had gone off without a hitch, and, as Crusher had said, the implants’ capabilities were equal or superior to those of the VISOR. Of course, it would still take a few days for his brain to get accustomed to processing stereoscopic information from his new dual inputs. Then there was blinking—after so many years of either a constant barrage of imagery, or fumbling in the dark for his VISOR, how strange to be able to turn either implant on or off with a simple muscle twitch.

Overall, though, he was quite pleased with the results. And as shallow as it sounded, what pleased him most was the reflection he now saw in the mirror. He’d seen photographs of himself sans VISOR before, and had always found the sight of his blank, milky white eyeballs to be more than slightly disturbing. He’d actually considered it fortunate that his VISOR had shielded those dead eyes from the view of others. Now, as he considered his unadorned face, he was entranced by how expressive his eyes could be, and he wondered again why he had opted to keep them hidden for so long.

“Geordi?”

La Forge turned away from the mirror, slightly embarrassed to have been caught in his narcissistic admiration. From the doorway into his sickbay recovery room, Nurse Alyssa Ogawa gave him an indulgent smile. “Do you feel up to having a visitor?” she asked.

“Yeah, sure,” La Forge said, tightening his robe around his loose medical gown. Ogawa withdrew, and seconds later, La Forge recognized Data as he entered the room.

“Hello, Geordi,” the android said. “How are you?”

“Functioning within normal parameters,” La Forge answered with a grin, and then held his hands up at the sides of his face. “So…what do you think?”

Data paused and tilted his head as he studied Geordi’s new appearance. “You look…good. I am curious, however, why you have not had the implants’ mechanical appearance altered.”

“Well…” Geordi said, stealing another quick glance at the mirror and the black-and-silver circuitry that circled his pupils, “I don’t think I could deal with looking too normal.”

Data seemed confused by that comment, but rather than pursuing the point, posed a different question. “But, you are pleased with the results?”

“Yeah. I am.”

“And you do not regret your decision?”

“No. It was the right choice,” La Forge said. “More importantly, it was my choice.”

Data’s entire body sagged in relief. “I am glad, then, that you opted not to take my advice. And I apologize for offering you such poor counsel.”

La Forge shook his head in bemusement. “Data, just because I went against your advice doesn’t necessarily mean it was bad advice. I mean, I did come pretty close to taking it.”

“And you would have come to regret that action if you had,” Data said, his voice full of remorse. “I should not have even proposed the option for your consideration.”

“Don’t beat yourself up, Data. You told me what you thought would be the best way—“

“No, Geordi,” Data interrupted sharply, “I did not. My suggestion on how to respond to Admiral Hayes’s orders was rooted primarily in emotion. I knew at the time it was not the best or most logical course of action. But I disregarded those considerations.”

La Forge was surprised to hear that admission, but he shrugged it off. “Well, neither of us was thinking logically, I guess.”

“This is true,” Data said. “And yet, you were able to put your emotions aside and arrive at what you determined was the best decision.” After a moment of silent hesitation, Data then said, “When you are ready to return to duty, Geordi, I would like to show you something.”

“Sure, Data. What?”

“I have designed a parallel bypass circuit. It would allow me, at my discretion, to reroute the algorithmic functions of my positronic net along a new pathway unaffected by my emotion chip. It would, in essence, give me
the option of temporarily turning my emotions off.”

“No.” La Forge shook his head slowly. “Data, come on, you’ve worked too long and hard to get to the point
where you are now. You can’t let things like this get to you.”

“But it does ‘get’ to me!” Data shouted. “That is the problem; I do not have that degree of control!” Data
paused as if to collect himself, and the frustration he had just displayed was quickly subsumed by embarrassment.
“Over the past year, I have learned to moderate my conscious responses to my emotions, with only occasional
lapses.” He gave a small self-effacing smile. “But the more subtle nuances of my emotions—their effect on my
thoughts and my decision-making processes—I have not been able to master. You were eventually able to put your
emotions aside and undergo your surgery. I could not. But this circuit will allow me to do so.”

“Yeah, but, Data…it’s not like I just threw a switch in my head. What kind of friend would I be if I were to let
you take the easy way out like that?”

Data fixed his mechanical eyes on the engineer’s. “Geordi, if not for my lack of emotional control, Dr. Soran
would not have been able to take you and manipulate your VISOR. During the Tamarian Project, I nearly struck
you, because I could not adequately control my anger. And now, I nearly ended your Starfleet career, again due to
my emotions. What kind of friend would I be, if I were not to do all I could to prevent further harming you, or
others?”

La Forge cocked an eyebrow at his friend. “Data, now you’re trying to play on my emotions.”

Data looked shocked by that charge. “I am merely…No. I was making…my only intention…Shit!” Data turned
away, exasperated and upset with himself. “Do you see? I cannot even perceive the emotional subtext of my thought
processes!”

“Hey, Data, take it easy…” La Forge said, moving to put a hand on his friend’s shoulder. He wished Troi were
aboard—she had been the one who’d done the most to help Data navigate the unexplored territory of his emotions.
She would be the one to convince him to continue to develop his mastery of his emotions.

But, he could hardly fault Data’s impatience with a process that had already gone on for over a year. He
considered his friend’s anguish, and after a moment’s hesitation, let his own emotions take the lead again. “Listen,
Data…I’ll take a look at your schematic. But you’ve got to promise me, if we do put an on/off switch on your
emotion chip, you’ll use the ‘off’ setting sparingly, all right?”

Data turned and looked back at La Forge, wearing a smile of gratitude. “All right,” he agreed, and suddenly
pulled the engineer into a sturdy embrace. “Thank you, Geordi. You are a true friend.”

Deanna couldn’t remember when she had ever been so happy to hear her mother call her by that nickname. I’m
here, Mother, she thought back.

Oh, Deanna…And the baby?

He’s right here, too, Troi answered, noticing that the boy’s eyes were now open, as if he had sensed the sudden
shift in her emotional state. He’s beautiful. And he’s safe.

Odo suddenly stopped his restless pacing of the living room, having noticed Deanna’s smile, and the tears of
relief welling up in her eyes. “What’s happened? Is it Lwaxana? Is she all right?”

Deanna nodded, even as Dr. Byxthar’s voice sounded in her head: Lwaxana is going to be fine. She can have
visitors now, so long as they don’t overtax her.

“Doctor Byxthar says she can have visitors now,” Troi repeated for Odo.

The shape-shifter shifted uncomfortably. “You should go, with the child. This is a family moment.”

Troi studied Odo. He had told her, after some rather insistent prodding, about how he had asked Lwaxana to
stay on Deep Space 9 until she had given birth. She had insisted on leaving, though, unwilling to further complicate
their already highly unorthodox relationship, and thus endanger their friendship. Odo was obviously uncertain not
only about how Lwaxana would react to his arrival here, so soon after they’d said their good-byes, but also about his
own feelings for his “wife” and “child.” In any other circumstance, Deanna would have arranged a full schedule of
sessions with this person to get to the root of his relationship issues. Right now, though, she simply nodded her
thanks as she stood up from the couch and headed up the stairs with the baby in her arms.

In the master bedroom, an air of serenity had replaced that of the earlier panic and pain. The color had come
back to Lwaxana’s placid face, and her dark wig was securely back on her head, which lay nestled on an overstuffed
pillow. She opened her eyes as she sensed her children enter the room, and Troi felt the love and happiness that
surged within her upon seeing them.

She struggled to lift herself up onto her elbows, and then Byxthar was at her side, propping her up and wedging
extra pillows behind her back. If the doctor had any sardonic comments, she kept them to herself as she briefly
stroked Lwaxana’s shoulder. Then she grabbed her bag and left to give the Trois their privacy.
Deanna sat on the edge of the bed and put the child in his mother’s waiting arms. “Well, hello, little boy,” Lwaxana cooed, and kissed his forehead. “After all that trouble, you’re finally here. And you were worth every bit of it.” Lwaxana tore her eyes away just long enough to share her smile with her daughter, and then reached over to pull her closer. Deanna curled her legs underneath herself and slid up beside her mother, putting one arm around her back and holding her close.

“I’m so glad you were here for this, darling,” Lwaxana thought to her. Well, maybe not for all of it; most of it I wouldn’t have wished on a Ferengi. But, thank you, Deanna, for being here.

Deanna kissed Lwaxana’s cheek in response. The two of them watched the baby, who watched them back with huge curious eyes that seemed to soak up everything around him. Have you thought about a name? Deanna asked.

“I have. I was thinking of naming him Barin.”

“Barin?” Deanna replied quizzically. “Is that a Tavnian name?”

“Yes. Well, a Tavnian word, anyhow. I want him to be equally aware of both sides of his heritage.”

And what does Barin mean?

Lwaxana hesitated. Well…it means “little one.” She lifted her head to look directly at her daughter. I called Kestra “Little One” from the time she was a baby, you know. By the time she was four, she’d grown to resent it almost as much as you have. Then, when she learned there was a little sister on the way, she insisted that you would have to be “Little One” from then on. I thought it appropriate to pass it down again, continue the tradition. I hope you don’t mind.

Not in the least, Deanna assured her. “Barin Troi, Son of the Fifth House of Betazed,” she pronounced aloud, looking down at her brother. “It has a nice ring to it.”

“Hmmm,” Lwaxana agreed, as she too admired her child. The Troi family sat there in a close, comfortable silence, and Deanna considered how much she would cherish this peaceful moment for the rest of her life.

It’s just such a shame he doesn’t have any little nieces or nephews close to his age to play with…

“Mother…”

* * *

“Captain,” Daniels paged from the bridge, “you have a hail coming in from Admiral Hayes, sir.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant,” Picard replied as he closed the book in his lap, the page marker in the same spot it had been in when he picked it up an hour and a half earlier. His eyes had scanned the same sentence over and over, as he went over in his mind what he would say to the admiral once he returned his hail. He still only had the vaguest idea now what that might be as he crossed the ready room and moved around behind his desk, where he activated the computer screen. “Admiral,” he said once Hayes’s face had appeared.

“Jean-Luc,” the admiral replied. “Is something wrong?”

Picard stopped himself before making a hasty response. After taking and releasing a deep breath, Picard finally did say, “Despite this outcome, Admiral, I have to inform you that Commander La Forge did decide to undergo the ocular implant surgery, and that Dr. Crusher performed the procedure earlier today.” Picard had been somewhat perturbed when he returned to the Enterprise following a full slate of briefings and conferences, to discover Mr. La Forge was at that very moment in the surgical suite of sickbay. Of course, he had reminded himself, the chief engineer did not owe it to the captain to consult him on his decision, and after talking to Crusher, Picard felt reasonably assured that La Forge had come to his decision of his own free will, in spite of the external pressures put upon him.

“Excellent!” Hayes smiled for the first time since the security summit had begun. “It would have been a shame to have lost a man like La Forge in that position.”

Picard again had to hold his tongue before making a hasty response. After taking and releasing a deep breath, Picard finally did say, “Despite this outcome, Admiral, I have to inform you that I intend to make a formal protest to Starfleet Command over the manner in which this matter was handled. Even though you ostensibly presented Mr. La Forge with a choice rather than an actual order, what it was in fact was an act of coercion, pressing him to submit himself to an elective medical procedure. And with respect, sir, what you did goes beyond the pale. It was a violation not only of one man’s most personal rights, but of the very standards of civilized society. And however real or however dire the threats against our security may be, if we sacrifice who we are as a people, we will lose far more than any enemy can ever hope to take from us.”

Hayes merely stared back silently from the monitor as Picard spoke, his expression unreadable. He continued to stare for several seconds after the captain finished. Then, he blew a long breath through his nose. “The week after the president put Starfleet troops in the streets of Earth, my granddaughter and her sons were stopped outside their home in Colon. Some overeager kid with a phaser rifle decided they didn’t ‘look right,’ and demanded all three of them submit to blood tests right there and then. A three-year-old and a two-year-old on their way to the playground down the street, forced at gunpoint to prove they weren’t enemies of the state. So let me assure you, Captain, that if you think I don’t share your concerns about preserving our liberties and our way of life in this time of heightened
security, you are very much mistaken.”

Hayes had kept his tone level as he told his story, but the anger behind his words was evident. “I apologize, Admiral. I didn’t mean to imply…”

“Of course you did, Jean-Luc,” Hayes interrupted, his ire already largely dissipated. “Of course you’re cynical. After what happened with Leyton, what he and his cabal very nearly brought us to, how could you not be?” The admiral sighed. “File your protest, Jean-Luc. The issue deserves a full, vigorous, open debate.”

Picard nodded, but before he could say anything, the admiral continued, “But let me just say, it’s easy to spout platitudes about preserving freedom against the demands of security. It’s a whole lot more difficult to be the person responsible for keeping a people secure, and having to find that balancing act.”

“I do not envy you your job, Admiral,” Picard said. “However, Mr. La Forge’s VISOR was certainly not such a threat to the Federation that you had to use such extreme strong-arm tactics.”

Hayes shrugged. “Perhaps, perhaps not. But it was an easy decision to make.”

“And is that what it comes down to in the end?” Picard asked. “How easy it is to take a man’s rights?”

Hayes shook his head wearily. “Mr. La Forge still has his sight. He still has his rank, his position, and his dignity as a person. So yes, it does in large part come down to how easy it is. It would be far more difficult to address the danger posed by a person’s more innate liabilities…such as a connection with the Borg.”

Picard felt a cold chill rise up from his chest and seep through every cell of his body. His mouth went dry, and he found himself unable to say a word as the admiral leaned in closer to his comscreen, his face set in an expression of complete conviction. “However, I do need to assure you that, should I be forced to address such issues, I will not hesitate in doing so.”

Hayes issued his farewell and ended the transmission, leaving Picard to ponder the admiral’s threat-no, not a threat; an issue of fair warning-in the lonely silence of his ready room.

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