

STAR TREK

—

THE NEXT GENERATION

Kris Rogen – Episode 2

By

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CHAPTER ONE

Tiburon had been Kris's favorite—when she could only visit it on the holodeck of the Enterprise D. The planet supported over a billion people, but the northern hemisphere was unpopulated. The Tiburon people kept this part of their large planet in its state of natural beauty, untouched by technology.

The view of the dozen waterfalls that cascaded from high peaks were a contrast against aqua blue, dark green, yellow, and orange vegetation—the view was stunning.

Tiburon had two seasons, summer and winter. This time of year, all of the vegetation looked fabulously colorful for eight months out of the sixteen months of their calendar.

Kris could stare at this vista all day. She often did on the Enterprise, but this time she was really on Tiburon. She was looking at the real thing.

With her Ramos abilities activated, all she had to do was think of a place and she could go there. Tiburon had been the eighth planet she had visited since leaving the Enterprise.

For three weeks, Kris visited planets in the Omega sector, Gourami sector, Romulan system, and the Bennalin system. It was in the Bennalin system where she laid eyes on the real Altara. She did not believe the Altara in Q's game was the

real thing. She knew it may well have been the real Altara, but now she was on Altara of her own free will. She joined a dar and tree-climbed for days.

After she left, her Altaran should have been strong, having refueled in the open air of lush vegetation and on Altara itself.

Something deep inside of Kris wasn't right, though.

She loved her new freedom. No longer would anyone ever lock her up as a prisoner. She moved often in the last three weeks—continuing to prove to herself that she could.

Her new freedom felt tainted, however. By a feeling. A nagging emptiness. An exhaustion. Most importantly, by a strange connection.

She thought the connection was Troi. She had only been in Betazoid once since she had left, and being in Betazoid did not go well.

Troi's thoughts had engulfed her thoughts. They were brutal. Troi was mentally beating herself up, and all of those feelings immediately plastered onto Kris.

She wanted nothing to do with them.

It had not been her fault that she and Troi had both been made into Betatal—the strongest possible Betazoid mind. Betatals were so strong, they could live the lives of others, if they chose.

Troi and Kris had not made the choice to become Betatal. Q had made it for them by forcing them into the Betatal process on Q's Betazed. Or, perhaps it was the real Betazed. All Kris knew was she was now Betatal.

Soon after vowing to stay out of Betazoid for a while, Kris had figured out how to block Troi, since the residual feelings from being Betazoid had remained with her.

Avoiding Betazoid and being able to freely visit other galaxies allowed Kris to experiment with something that she rarely did, being Muztarif.

Muztarif had been the first planet she had visited. She had disguised herself as a Commoner and dove into experiencing the pleasures and people of the ultra-relaxed, game-loving society. This experience had been quite different than the one she had had with Riker. That time, in Q's challenge, she had to be fun-loving and happy and child-like, or else others on the Enterprise would have been harmed.

She had to fake it. She had succeeded in making Q believe that she and Riker were truly experiencing life as a Muztarifan. Yet, it hadn't been an authentic Muztarif experience for her.

She had been enormously happy for the two days she visited Muztarif. Happier than she had ever been.

Then, curiosity had gotten the better of her.

Human.

What was it about humans that had always fascinated her? She suddenly had to find out.

She used her Ramos to jump to the planet Earth in the Milky Way galaxy. She went into her human form and examined this mysterious place.

Her mother was human. So was Picard, her father. And, most of the others on the Enterprise. Many of the beings on Star Base 325 were human. Peterson was.

Her two days on Earth had been...relatively uneventful. The planet had its beauty. The people ranged from charming to intelligent to serious, and everything in between.

The visit had been satisfying, just not extraordinary.

Earth simply did not grab her, make her want to stay longer.

Her visit to Earth made her feel like she wanted a completely different experience—Vulcan.

Kris had always loved being Vulcan. She had been Vulcan when Peterson...

This time she had not gone into Vulcan to avoid demons like Peterson. She had gone there as a reaction to visiting Earth. Vulcan was order and routine and calmness. It was quiet and introspective. She wanted to disengage from feelings, and wanted to shake off Troi's lingering mind tortures. It hasn't worked, Vulcan could not help her get rid of that tiny pull of Troi.

Having witnessed Re ‘Ugan, an ancient form of Vulcan suicide, when she was on Q’s Vulcan with Mr. Data, she now felt Re ‘Ugan within her Vulcan body. Once she visited the real Vulcan, she could feel the ancient feeling around her. Not that Vulcans practiced it anymore, yet Re ‘Ugan still existed buried deep within every Vulcan. Like the Human appendix, they could not extract it. The Vulcan government knew it, yet rarely discussed Re ‘Ugan.

She left Vulcan similarly disappointed.

But, where to go?

Back to Muztarif? She had been happy there.

Then, another plan surfaced. Kris decided to go exploring.

And running. From what, Kris didn’t know. She just had to go from here to there and onward and onward. She bounced from planet to planet almost exclusively Ramos. Why Ramos, she didn’t know, but that’s what she did.

With each passing day, that strange something still existed deep within her. It was getting worse.

The few times she had been in her other species—Muztarif, Betazoid, Altaran, Human, and Vulcan—had been short-lived or not entirely satisfying.

Even Muztarif no longer pleased her. She was happy, but now there was something haunting her underneath it all.

On Tiburon, she stared at the luscious views trying to figure out what was bothering her. What was this pull? She had freedom and with it peace. Finally. A peace she had been seeking for a long time.

Yet, it wasn't peaceful. Kris was tired. Not restless, not stressed, but physically tired. Her humanoid forms began to have trouble sleeping. REM sleep was getting harder and harder with each passing day.

And, Kris was beginning to wonder why.

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Jean Luc Picard wanted nothing more than normalcy. He wanted a typical mission, maybe an escort of a Kohath-Seredi shipment or some diplomatic entanglement involving Romulans. Something familiar he could dig his teeth in, have to lock himself in his ready room in order to study both sides of an issue, find Common ground, and examine ways to bring both parties together during a negotiation.

More than a boring mission, Picard wanted to forget. Forget Q, forget Admiral James Peterson, and forget Lieutenant Kris Anderson. Rogan. Whatever her name was.

Forget...his daughter.

Q had revealed during his game (yet another Q game with the Enterprise crew) that Picard was the father of Kris.

The uncanny resemblance to Picard's mother had not been coincidence. Kris looked like his mother because Kris was his flesh and blood. His daughter.

Part of the pain that Picard suffered these days did not come from this revelation, however. Not entirely. Picard's pain came from the fact that Kris's mother, Elizabeth Rogan, a former science officer in Star Fleet and creator of a six-species, genetically-engineered being (her daughter, Kris Rogan) had stolen his DNA to use in the creation of the human version of Kris.

Stealing one's DNA was abominable to Picard. Beyond abominable. How dare she? Picard had had a flicker of interest in Elizabeth Rogan for one fleeting moment years ago. But, nothing came of it. He did not want anything to come of it. They were not meant to be.

Did she do it to get back at him for not reciprocating her feelings? Why would anyone do that to another being? DNA theft would not be tolerated by Star Fleet Command.

If he had told Star Fleet Command. He had yet to even mention anything about Kris Rogan or some of the other truths Q had revealed—fatherhood, rape, or even that Kris had been used as a pawn by Peterson to spy on Picard.

Peterson had long ago wanted to ruin Picard—or more, if he could. Ever since Peterson had blamed Picard for the death

of his wife, he has perhaps hatched plans to take Picard down. At some point, Peterson had manipulated Star Fleet officials into “giving” him a unique new species to be trained as a Star Fleet Officer. Peterson personally saw to Kris’s accelerated training on Star Base 325.

He then quickly assigned Kris—under the alias of Kris Anderson—to the Enterprise D. She had been given a secret mission by Peterson, help gather evidence that would help Peterson to court martial Picard, and ruin him permanently.

He also had yet to report Peterson to Star Fleet Command.

It was not that simple.

Yes, Peterson had planted Kris as a spy on his ship, but Picard has other reasons to delay some of the details in his report.

Picard could not tell Star Fleet that Q had played a game with him and his senior officers with the end goal of proving that the genetically-engineered Kris did not belong anywhere in a humanoid universe. He insisted she belong only in the Ramos universe.

Additionally, Q wanted to challenge his long-time rival, Guinan. Q’s species was a “cousin” to Guinan’s people, and the two had had a long-standing hatred of each other—a millennium or two of hatred.

Q’s game had been powerful, with lofty goals. It was also incredibly harmful.

Within in this game, Q was able to reveal to Kris her sixth, previous-unknown species, Ramos.

Q's main premise had been his apparent disgust that humanoids had been allowed to cross-species. Ramos were close enough to Q's own peoples that he could not fathom the mixture. He tried to prove that each of Kris's humanoid species were inferior to her Ramos.

Kris did not agree. At the end of the trial, she decided to stick up for her humanoid parts, and the crew of the Enterprise.

It took the Continuum, the elders and high officials of Q's people, to end the masquerade. They intervened and put an end to Q's tinkering with beings throughout the universes. Finally.

Or, at least, Picard hoped that Q's special badgering of him had ended.

The end, however, was not pretty. Q had been "contained" by a high tier official in the Continuum. They were told he would no longer bother humanoids. Picard had heard that before.

The harmful reveals had been Picard learning about Kris's parentage, and that Admiral Peterson had raped Kris while she was on Star Base 325.

How could Picard report that Peterson raped Kris? He had no proof. And, Kris was gone.

Of course, Picard had already filed a report about the Q incident. He had been purposely vague several times in the report. Q had “appeared on the Enterprise as he had done many times in the past—to play a Q-themed ‘game’ with the crew of the Enterprise and specifically with me (Picard.)”

Star Fleet knew that Q had had an obsession with Picard for many years. Picard reported that “during this game, Q had ‘frozen’ his entire crew with the exception of his senior staff and one lieutenant. Q had ‘matched’ officers, sending them off the ship in pairs. The officers reported that they were sent to ‘suspect’ planets that were made to appear as if they were the real thing.”

Picard reported an injury. “Counselor Deanna Troi had been sent to a planet that had appeared to be similar to her home planet of Betazed. She was sent into a ‘trial’ which was similar to one taken by Betazoids of very high abilities. The results on Betazoids of this trial was a designation called, ‘Betatal,’ the highest form of being a Betazoid. Troi had been unprepared for this event, and had suffered a mental breakdown. She was currently under the care of Senior Medical Officer Doctor Beverly Crusher.”

Other pairings had been more innocuous, according to Picard’s report. He did include that Lieutenant Kris Anderson had been involved, he skipped over that part. He reported what Riker, Mr. Data, Dr. Crusher, and Mr. Worf reported to him. He had yet to talk in-depth to Troi. And, he did not discuss any of it with Kris. She took off almost immediately after the demise of Q.

Picard's report concluded that he had been unclear as to Q's motivation, with the exception that Q typically got "bored" and found his way to visit Picard and his crew for some "entertainment."

Picard did not report the presence of Guinan. He did put in that Q's Continuum had showed up to (again) clean up Q's mess.

Picard had left out a lot.

Immediately following the departure of the Continuum, Kris, and Guinan—and the assurances that the rest of the crew had been restored unharmed and the ship was undamaged and back in their own universe—Picard had called a senior staff meeting.

Picard sat in his usual chair. Around him were Riker, Data, Chief Engineer Geordi La Forge, Security Officer Worf, and Dr. Crusher, who insisted on keeping Troi under sedation.

Troi could only tolerate being awake for a few minutes a day. Those minutes had been harrowing, she often screamed and clutched her head. She could communicate, but only for short periods.

Picard was considering calling the High Kallel, the highest official on Betazed. His family seat was one of the oldest Great Houses known on Betazed. But, what would he say? How would he explain Troi being Betatal? Yet another thing that would have to wait.

Picard looked at his senior staff one by one. “I have several details to reveal to all of you. However, if any of you feel uncomfortable being exposed to extremely sensitive information, information that has...morally damaging consequences, I will dismiss you from this meeting with no malice. I will give Counselor Troi the same option. What I need to discuss are...details that were revealed when Q sent Lieutenant...Anderson and myself off to...wherever it was.”

“These details are highly sensitive. And, you do not need to hear them. You are under no orders to hear them. Of course, at other times, I would insist. You are my senior staff. For the most part, what I know, you know. This time, however, is quite different.”

Picard looked directly at Dr. Crusher. “Dr. Crusher was brought into the loop early on, with some of this information. Still, she does not know all of it. I would need her assurance as well.”

Riker asked, “What kind of assurance?”

Picard took a deep breath. “That what I’m about to tell you does not leave this room. It cannot leave this room. Doctor?”

“I’ve told no one what I know.”

“I understand. All I’m asking is if any of you feel uncomfortable with knowledge that could be...very damaging to parties that I will reveal, parties that...there is a bit of history involved. There is a bit of...awfulness. I will need to act on this

information at some point, however, I do not know how or when. I do not know who to trust...outside of this room. Still, you may leave, if you so desire. If you choose to stay, what is said here, must remain here.”

The room was silent. Not a muscle moved. No one stood. No one left.

Finally, Riker leaned back in his chair. “You have our answer.”

“Captain,” said the rigid Mr. Data, “during our recent experience with Q, we had learned a great deal about Lieutenant Kris Anderson.”

“Yes, Mr. Data. Kris...Anderson is what was revealed. Q had his reasons for ‘testing’ her. In typical Q fashion, they were distorted reasons. And, Q paid the price. For now, keeping what Kris Anderson really is must also remain in this room.”

“But, she’s gone,” Geordi pointed out.

“As far as Star Fleet is concerned, she is still a Star Fleet Officer. That is important with what I’m about to tell you.”

Picard hesitated. *How to begin?* he thought. *Just talk. These people know you. They trust you. You trust them with your life.*

Picard told his senior officers about Kris. He told them what he had discovered about why Kris was sent to the Enterprise. He quickly reminded them of a story they had

already heard—that Admiral Peterson blamed Picard for the death of his wife.

He then moved on to what had happened to him and Kris after Q had whisked them away. He described everything, the re-enactments of important events from Kris's past, and his. When he got to the part about Peterson raping Kris, La Forge leaned back in his seat, Riker scowled and put his hands on the table, and Worf snarled and puffed up his chest. Mr. Worf was always battle ready. He had to quash the urge to tear Peterson apart right then and there. Strange since Worf had never even met Peterson.

Telling his senior officers about an admiral who had raped another being was awful for Picard. The next part wasn't any easier.

“Lastly,” Picard continued as if he hadn't taken a breath for the last twenty minutes. “Q had arranged a reveal of sorts. But, this one...He enjoyed it. It was important to him because it was about me.” He stopped. He looked around, shook his head.

Picard stood and paced around the room. *How could someone do this to another being? Rape? Stealing DNA?* These things made no sense to Picard.

His senior officers remained quiet and patient. They watched Picard return to his seat.

“Lieutenant Kris Anderson's real name is Kris Rogan. Her creator, for lack of a better term, mother I suppose, was Elizabeth Rogan. I met Elizabeth Rogan years ago at a

conference. She was, back then, a science officer with Star Fleet. We had a brief, very brief, tryst. It ended abruptly because I was not interested. A short time after that, I had heard that Officer Rogan had left Star Fleet. I had not heard about her until Kris Rogan stepped onto the Enterprise.

The last reveal by Q was a recreation of my mother's funeral. We had had a large portrait of my mother. It was in this moment that I realized Kris Rogan is my daughter. I had quickly noted a slight resemblance when I had first seen Kris, but I ignored it as coincidence."

He looked at the faces staring to him.

"Elizabeth Rogan stole my DNA. Our tryst could not have produced a child. It did not. It is the only explanation. I am fairly certain Kris did not know."

Riker shook his head. "This lieutenant didn't know anything about you and her...mother?"

"She did admit that her mother held a fascination about me. According to Kris, she talked about me often on the moon where she was raised."

"How did Admiral Peterson find out about Kris?" asked Dr. Crusher.

"I'm not sure."

"Was it Elizabeth Rogan?" said Geordi.

Picard shook his head. His eyes were like lasers as he glared at each of his officers. "I do not have all of the answers, yet that information cannot leave this room. None of the information I have given you can leave this room. Do you all understand?"

Heads shook.

"Jean Luc," said Dr. Crusher. "Captain," she corrected. Dr. Crusher often replaced formality for the familiar, however, this time she quickly realized her mistake. Now was not the time. "You need to inform Star Fleet about Admiral Peterson."

"How can I? What proof do I have? And, Kris is gone."

"Where would she go?" asked Mr. Worf.

Picard shrugged. "She's a newly released prisoner, more or less."

"With a lot of power," added Riker.

"Captain," said Mr. Data, "Star Fleet should be aware of a being who is now equivalent to Guinan and Q."

"They've known. For a long time, Data," said Crusher. "They imprisoned her because of what she is, because of some fear of her. They stole her rights."

"I was an unknown entity when I was discovered," said Data.

“Data,” Geordi said softly, “You had to fight Star Fleet for the right to leave, if you ever wanted to. They don’t own you. It seems to me they got away with it with Kris.”

“They failed to enact the Prime Directive. And, as Mr. Data proved, they danced around it when it came to him as well.”

“Is there a difference because Kris is biological?” asked Crusher.

“Should there be?” said Picard.

Silence.

Riker nodded. “No. Data has a desire to be human, biological, but the cases are similar. Kris was a new being. She had rights under the Prime Directive. They locked her up instead.”

“Who knew about her?” said Crusher.

“Peterson did. At some point,” responded Picard.

“We’re dancing around the big question,” said Riker. “Who do we trust?”

Picard frowned. “That’s my problem.”

More silence.

Picard took a deep breath. “For now, we trust each other. I left a lot of what I just revealed to you out of my report. I don’t know how to report these things, or to whom. I cannot

claim Admiral Peterson did anything. And, I cannot even say that Star Fleet was out of their rights to lock up Kris. Just because they didn't do it to Mr. Data and did it Kris, remember they almost won their case against Data.”

“You helped Data,” said Dr. Crusher. “If Kris is your daughter-“

“Doctor,” interrupted Picard. “Do not go there.” He looked at his officers once more. “I have your words. That’s good enough for me. For now, say or do nothing. I have to think about this.”

That was two days ago. Picard had not spoken to his senior staff about any of it since that meeting.

All he could do was reflect on the meeting and consider the report he had filed with Star Fleet. Luckily, since he had filed his report with Commander Roger Ewell, his friend and ally, no one from Star Fleet had contacted him about the “holes” in his report. Picard understand Ewell knew something. He had been ordered to “ask” Picard to back off regarding Kris before Q had shown up.

Picard couldn't even trust Ewell. All of this saddened him enormously.

With silence from Star Fleet, all Picard could do is assume everyone was acting like things were back to normal.

For now, this was Picard's only choice.

“I understood a lot of it. I think.”

Deanna Troi held her head with both hands. She was leaning forward in her chair. Her legs were pressed together. Her hair disheveled. She had looked like this often in the last three weeks, when she was awake.

“I’m not sure, though. There’s still so many conversations going on in my head.” She shook her head, as if that would help with her struggles being a newly-anointed Betazoid Betatal, the highest form of telepathy and mind-reading empathy possibly in all the universes.

Troi had struggled ever since she had returned with Kris from the Betazoid portion of the Q test. More than struggled. For the first week, Troi could barely stand being awake. The influx of voices and emotions and feelings from the entire crew of the Enterprise bombarded her. She could do nothing to shut it off. She had no control.

By the second week, she could stand being awake for short periods. With a fierce determination, Deanna Troi decided that she had to accept what had happened to her. She knew it could not be undone. And, she definitely knew that what Q had forced on her and Kris was real. The planet may or may not have been the real Betazed, but the process of becoming Betatal was. And, there was no going back.

For those few hours, Troi forced her mind to concentrate. She decided to try to focus on groups of emotions and feelings by dividing them into men, women, and other (in the case of the two unisex Bynars currently on board the Enterprise). She then tried to divide her experiences (referring to them as “the voices in my head”) into officers and crew members. Then, she tried it by crew deck quarters. She did these things as exercises to see if she could gain some control over her mind.

To aide her recovery, Dr. Crusher was now trying to keep her awake for longer periods. She tried to do it at night when fewer people were conscious. It helped a little bit, even though Troi did sometimes pick up the dreams of others.

However, Troi was doing better by the third week. She was still far from being okay, though. She could only sleep with the help of Crusher, and she had no appetite. She had refused visitors until just a few days ago. Even Riker.

Dr. Crusher sat opposite Troi. Her medical kit was on a nearby chair. It was always nearby these days when she was around Deanna. It hurt her deeply that her best friend was suffering so much. As a doctor, all she ever wanted was to heal and help others. Other people, species, animals, it didn't matter. Deanna, Geordi, Worf, Data, Will, Jean Luc, they were her family, with the lone exception of her son, Lieutenant Wesley Crusher, who was currently assigned to the Tabor, a science vessel working in the Gourami system. She had heard from Wesley only two weeks ago. She loved it when he checked in with her, just to reassure her that he was okay.

Crusher had memorized the results of every conceivable test she could take on Deanna's brain. It never seemed to matter. She was clueless how to help her.

She hated being clueless about medical matters. She was determined to help her friend. But how?

With Picard's approval, she had contacted a high official on Betazed, Deanna's mother.

Typically, Luuaxana Troi was a handful. Crusher had to be patient—or rather beg Mrs. Troi for patience—while explaining what had happened to Deanna. She asked Mrs. Troi to discreetly—this being the big challenge for Deanna's demonstrative mother—try to find out what happened to Betazeds who underwent this transformation without approval. The first thing Dr. Crusher had discovered about the history of the Betazed Betatal was that the training process was rigorous, and no one, not one single Betazoid was allowed to even attempt it without many layers of official indigenous approvals.

Betatal was a big deal on Betazed. In their centuries old existence, very few Betazoids had ever crossed into being a Betatal. It was very rare. So rare that it wasn't often mentioned anymore except in history books. The three still-living Betatals lived in isolation in remote corners of Betazed.

Luuaxana explained to Crusher that they had lived amongst the population at one time. After several decades, however, the Betatals had to move as far away from sentient beings as possible. They had lost their control and feared their minds would be lost if they did not live alone.

This thought did not fill Crusher with a warm and fuzzy feeling. By the end of the conversation, Mrs. Troi soberly promised to help her daughter any way she could. She would find out what she could as quietly as possible. She promised she could control herself. For her daughter.

This was all Crusher had been able to do, stare at test results that weren't helping and put her faith in Deanna's fickle mother.

She looked at Deanna. "I can give you the details, if you want."

"I felt them," Deanna said quietly.

She took a deep breath and looked up at her best friend. "I'm sorry. The captain's ready room felt somber, serious, and there was even rage. I know it's all bad."

Dr. Crusher nodded. "Kris is Jean Luc's daughter."

Deanna wasn't expecting that. "What? How? Besides, the usual way."

"It wasn't that way. It looks like Kris's mother stole his DNA. It's a long story."

Deanna was quiet, trying to absorb this new information. Crusher said, "Kris's mother was in Star Fleet. She left to make Kris, a six species, genetically-engineered being. One of Kris's species is human. But, why Picard? I don't know. Kris's mother and Jean Luc apparently knew each other for a

short time. Q was apparently not the only one with a Picard infatuation.”

Deanna allowed herself to go into her mind for a moment. She could do this in small bursts now, without feeling like her head would explode. “What caused the rage? I felt rage.”

Dr. Crusher took a deep breath.

Deanna’s door rang. Deanna and Crusher looked at each other. “Come,” said Deanna.

Riker walked in, slowly, with a hesitation that was still new to him. When it came to Deanna, he would die for her. This Deanna was unpredictable. He had been screamed at several times for attempting to visit. Crusher had even asked him to stop trying for a few days. It was hard, but Riker followed the request. He dearly wanted Deanna, his Deanna, back to normal. With every visit, he feared she would never be the same again. He tried to hide his fear, but knew it was pointless. This was the new Deanna.

Still, Riker did what Will Riker was good at, he smiled. “Hi. How are you?” He looked at Crusher. “Beverly.”

Dr. Crusher motioned to a free chair. Riker sat down. “I was updating Deanna on our meeting with Captain Picard. He approved it.”

“She was about to explain the rage. I felt rage in the room.”

“Well, Worf was there,” Riker said. His eyes twinkled. Deanna was grateful for the attempt to lighten things. That was Will, after all. Serious, determined, faithful, yet with a sense of humor that was unmatched. Deanna loved Will, if only she could one day tell him.

Dr. Crusher looked at Troi. “The captain revealed another important...detail from his time with Kris during Q’s trial. One of the re-enactments had been Kris’s time spent confined to Star Base 325. After Admiral Peterson showed up to train Kris to be a Star Fleet officer, he...it’s not pleasant.”

Troi looked at Riker. Nope, he didn’t have the courage to say it out loud. She looked back at Crusher. “What was it that could cause rage in the captain’s ready room?”

“Admiral Peterson had raped Kris. More than once.”

The silence in the room was heavy. For a brief moment, Troi had experienced a respite in her head. She bolted her thoughts from all of the “noise” to congregate on one word, rape. Rape had been so rarely said let alone experienced by most of the beings she had known throughout her life. She knew Humans from Earth had had experience with rape in their history. Betazed and Vulcan did not. Many worlds didn’t have the word in their lexicons.

“Was it true?” Troi asked quietly.

“Kris admitted it to Picard.” Dr. Crusher said.

The silence that followed was even heavier, if it were possible. Troi’s mind returned to its Betatal struggle to try to

find order—calmness, quiet, organization, peace—any of it would do. A nugget here and there that didn't frighten her every moment of each day since she had become Betatal.

“Rage.” Deanna put her hands back on her head.

“Not just Worf. It's hard not to feel that way when you hear that,” Riker said while staring at his hands.

“I'm not blaming you, Will. You weren't the only one. The feelings came from several people. One in particular was very strong.”

“Maybe that was Worf.”

“Or Picard.”

Deanna removed her hands, looked at her friends.

“What now?”

Riker took a breath. “The senior staff knows about Kris and about Admiral Peterson, all of it. The captain doesn't know how to proceed. There's no proof. And, I think he doesn't quite know who to trust at Star Fleet. He's indecisive. More than I've ever seen him.”

“It scares me,” added Crusher.

Riker continued, “He said he had contacted Star Fleet when he first found out about Kris. His friend, Roger Ewell, ended up warning Picard. He apparently asked him to steer clear of the topic.”

“Jean Luc didn’t do it. Nor would he,” said Crusher.
“An admiral put someone on board the Enterprise to spy on him. He couldn’t walk away from that.”

“Then, Q showed up,” said Riker.

Troi looked down at her hands. They shook, but only a little. That was getting better, too. Slowly. Ever since Q... *Q ruined my life*, she thought.

Riker took a deep breath. “We want you in the loop, Deanna. This whole situation is unprecedented. Like I said, I’ve never seen the captain quite like this.”

Deanna Troi stood, hugged herself. *I’d like to go play Treb-Cha-Tre tonight with the gals, but I don’t want him to feel jealous. Again...I wish I could find that point two deviation in the microplastma tube...I need to report that chip...If my mother would only listen to reason...I have to have a doctor look at that...Corellians make the best qualiithe...fourteen points from the sync...warp two...seal that damper...*

“Ah...” Troi screamed, grabbed her head.

Calmly but quickly, Dr. Crusher stood up. She gently put a hand on her friend’s shoulder. “You need a break?”

Troi nodded. Crusher glanced at Riker, then escorted Troi into her bedroom to administer a sleeping draught that would ease the onslaught of thoughts in Troi’s head.

Once they were gone, Riker leaned back in his seat and took a deep breath. *Where is my Deanna?*

* * *

Kris went back to Mustarif. She had liked it there. Once in the city center, she again adopted the Muztarif persona she created on her first visit. She had named herself “Hoopalaaomph.” Since Kris was male when she was Muztarif, Hoopalaaomph was also male. Besides, Kris had learned that the zanier the name on the Muztarif, the more popular and interesting you were.

This visit, however, was short. Even though Muztarifans were fun-loving, relaxed, game-playing, jokesters, Kris’s Muztarif quickly got out of control.

For starters, she couldn’t stop laughing. After an hour of laughing in front of quite-amused Muztarifans, even they began to get concerned, something that didn’t happen too often on Muztarif. This strange Muztarifan was too strange for the ordinary Muztarifan.

Especially when she laughed outrageously while spinning her body in all sorts of wild and crazy ways, some ways Muztarifans thought to be a bit too much. This lasted for two hours.

Then, came the insatiable hunger. Muztarifans were known to gorge on their delicious cuisine and even tastier drink. Many Muztarif bodies were quite large since their metabolism could sustain heavy weight. A few really overdid it with the

food indulgence. Yet, an even smaller number of Muztarifans had to be “poo poo-ed” (That’s what they called it when the doctor said, “Back off on the sweets and the drink, you need to lose a few.” And, the Muztarifan in question would respond with a pouty face and a “Poo to you” to the doctor.)

Muztarians could be large people, eat enormous amounts, and not harm their health.

Kris ate, and couldn’t stop. She would vomit, then return to eating.

After five hours, she had to do something.

She pulled herself away from the now-large crowd who had gathered to watch this “most unusual and stunning spectacle.” She found an empty hallway and went into Vulcan.

Once in Vulcan, her mind cleared. But, only for a few moments. Then, she was...falling. Falling? Do Vulcans fall? She landed hard on the ground.

What is happening? she thought.

She went back into Muztarif and got up.

She avoided Muztarifans as she made her way to the little-used infirmary. Once there, she approached a doctor. It took her ten minutes to ask the doctor a question because the laughing had returned.

The doctor, a chubby, jolly-looking fellow with tuffs of hair and flabby arms whose name was Poo-pan-pin-ya waited

patiently. Apparently excessive laughter wasn't that uncommon after all on Muztarif. After Kris got out the words, "Do you have something for sleep?" between chuckles, Poo-pan-pin-ya nodded and guided Kris to a nearby table.

Kris's stomach clenched, partly from the laughing, but more so because she loathed being in any type of sick bay. Yet, she finally understood her problem, she desperately needed to sleep.

The Muztarif doctor "took a listen" to Kris through his scanner. A Muztarif doctor's scanner was an oversized machine with a lot of colorful lights. Some of them meant nothing at all. It was just another Muztarif thing—always find a way to make something, anything an amusement of sorts.

Poo-pan-pin-ya examined the results of the scan. He smiled, but not because he had had a revelation. Instead, it was the opposite. He said, "What kind of Muztarif are you, mister?"

Kris took a few breaths. Luckily the laughing had subsided. She said, "I'm from the outskirts. I may have an unusual biological chemistry."

"Yes, I see," he said. He twirled his moustache, even though Poo-pan-pin-ya didn't have a moustache. It was another Muztarif thing.

"Something for sleep," Kris croaked. "Please."

He smiled. "This element here is the thing." He pointed to a silver button on his panel. He pushed it. The machine worked for a moment. He looked back at the screen. "Yep, that's

the strange one. Did you eat the branch of a Giant Kresberry tree?”

“No.”

“A Piddle fish?”

“No.”

“Hmmm. Neither the tree or the fish have this element. But, they’re very tasty.”

That brought Kris’s laughter back. “What...does...?”
Nope, she couldn’t stop it.

The doctor grabbed a hypospray. He injected Kris.
Nothing.

Kris continued to laugh. Ten minutes later, the doctor said, “I’d have to find the source of the laughter, I believe. Combined with the element, which I have never seen before and does not exist on Muztarif. That’s your problem, young man. It’s a doozy of a problem.”

Kris controlled her laughter long enough to say, “You can’t help me?”

“My sleeping potion didn’t work. You’re too unusual, and I’m too puzzled. So, nope.” He put away his equipment. “I’ll study it, I think. I did become a doctor for a reason.”

Kris headed to the door. “Don’t bother,” she said as she walked out.

She immediately disappeared, she had to get off of Muztarif.

She ended up on Regulus. Back in Vulcan, she sat on a beach on a remote southern island of the planet. She remained still for over an hour, yet her Vulcan could not resolve her current problem.

Then, a thought occurred to her.

She went into Altaran. Whenever she was her Altara species, her physical strength was double that of a Vulcan, and Vulcans were known to be much stronger than Humans. More importantly, her Altara body had to be maintained by vegetation. Her Altaran bloodstream was chlorophyll-based, plant-based. An Altaran could not survive more than six weeks without exposure to plants. Their skin absorbed the chlorophyll from plants.

If a large amount of chlorophyll was missing from their bodies, an Altaran who stood next to a large, leafy plant could suck out almost all of the chlorophyll, killing the plant.

As a result of the chlorophyll-based structure of an Altaran, their skin was a greenish color.

Kris looked down at her arm. It was pale green.

She hustled next to a Sytrup bush. She stood next to it for an hour. Her dark green hue did not return. Something was wrong.

Lack of sleep.

Could her lack of REM sleep have caused a chlorophyll depletion? Kris had been near natural vegetation a lot lately, as well as adhering to plenty of exercise.

Why was her Altaran skin so light in color?

What caused her lack of sleep? She often went long periods with little sleep because of her Vulcan and Altaran species. They didn't require as much sleep as Human and Betazoid. Muztarif landed somewhere in the middle. Her Human and Betazoid would eventually have to get their needed hours of REM sleep, as would the others. But, these days it was difficult for Kris to sustain REM sleep. She tried often these days, but simply could not do it.

Besides her lack of sleep, there was something else. It had been there since Q, since Guinan, since the discovery of her sixth species.

Ramos.

What did her Ramos feel like when she was humanoid? What was it doing to her? Begging? Pushing? Insisting? Hunger?

Her Ramos didn't like it when she wasn't Ramos.

When she was Ramos, she felt strength, grounded, invincible. She loved being in Ramos, and Ramos loved being her. So much so that Kris was beginning to struggle to get *out* of Ramos.

When Kris was in one of her humanoid species, she felt Ramos lingering. Standing right behind her. Waiting. Suggesting. Insisting Kris return to Ramos.

Ramos was so powerful. Kris took to it immediately, once she had caught up with the immense Ramos-related information that Guinan sent to her. She absorbed it all, the details, the history, and what it meant to be Ramos.

She understood now.

Her mind and body were craving Ramos more and more with each passing hour.

That was her biggest problem. The more times she stayed away from her sleep-deprived humanoid parts, the stronger her Ramos felt. Ramos got stronger, when the rest of her was...dying.

Ramos now existed at the expense of her humanoid species'. They were suffering. The time Kris spent in a humanoid species these days was different than before. They were not only sleep deprived but less than. They felt less than Ramos. And, Kris's Ramos knew it.

Kris's Ramos was becoming a monster.

It was taking her over.

Worse, it was pushing her somewhere. But where?

Kris had to find out. Where did her Ramos need to go? Why was it consuming her? What should she do about her five humanoid species?

Before it was too late.

* * *

Picard sat in his ready room. He hit a button on his Comm.

“Computer, record message. Admiral Roger Ewell. Star Fleet Headquarters. Roger, regarding the last time we spoke. I understood your strong suggestion. I understand you were putting our friendship in the forefront of a rather delicate issue. I understand the issue at hand. Perhaps more than you do. Perhaps we need to revisit it. Roger...”

Picard stopped.

“Stop recording.”

Picard shook his head. *I don't know what to say. Roger is my friend. He'd be an ally. But, he was told to warn me off. By whom? And why? It had to be how Star Fleet locked up Kris. Did Star Fleet know about Peterson and what he did?*

That would be the problem. If they did, if someone high up in Star Fleet, someone even on the High Council knew what

Peterson had done, and wanted it not known. That was the tricky part.

Was Roger somehow in on it?

More of the problem. That unknown. Who to trust?

Picard took a deep breath, closed his eyes.

My biological daughter. Her human species is Picard. How can I accept that? A genetically-designed being is part Picard. Without my permission. If I ever come face to face with Elizabeth Rogan again...

I'd do what? I don't like to go backwards. Kris exists. Wherever she is. It's hardly her fault.

And, she deserves justice. Peterson has to pay for what he did. It disgusts me. Poor Carol. He blames me for your death, and yet look at what he's become.

How do I find justice?

Picard did not finish his message.

* * *

Chief Engineer Geordi La Forge was frustrated. The Enterprise D was broken. He knew it. He could feel when the Enterprise was not right.

Many things were wrong with his ship. Two doors of the holodeck were slow to close. The food processors were making all soups with a blueish tint. For some reason, upper grade children were having trouble accessing one of their textbooks. The lights in Turbolift Three spent two hours blinking in an unusual pattern. (Mr. Data reported that the blinking was in time with an old, popular Earth show tune, *Hamilton*.)

Two of his officers had an argument while on duty in Engineering. The argument began when the two engineers couldn't agree on why kremmian fluid in a plasma base was separating. Once Geordi stopped the argument, it took all three of them an hour to correct the problem. Geordi still didn't know why the fluid separated.

Also, two varieties of plants in the atrium had a sudden issue with black tee-flies. Geordi didn't really have anything to do with the last issue, except that the black tee fly was indigenous to Altaran, and the affected plants were native to Earth.

Curious.

All "little" things. With the exception of the point six one variation in the nanotubes expander rates and a slight variation in the impulse reaction chamber, the engine and all of its systems were functioning smoothly, as far as functionality and speed were concerned. The warp drive was stable. The phaser arrays at ready. Navigation and Comms checked out. The transporter was properly aligned. Mr. Worf reported all was well with security. Geordi was confident that if the Enterprise was

needed to engage an enemy or the pilot had to engage in evasive maneuvers, the ship would respond normally.

But, still. She wasn't right.

It was the little things, delays in food processors, a stuck door on the holodeck, etc. The little things bothered Geordi. These annoying little things were too numerous during this period of non-combat. The ship hadn't even been assigned its next mission yet. The captain had informed his senior officers that Star Fleet was allowing the crew "recovery time" from the incident with Q. An unusually long recovery time. Picard had said their next mission was upcoming, yet it was still unassigned.

Geordi had checked and double-checked every inch of the ship when they return from Ramos space. At first, he thought that perhaps a few things had to be tweaked due to Kris's "transforming" the ship to Ramos-ready status.

That wasn't it, though. The ship checked out. Geordi trusted his instincts. Something was wrong.

He left his office, a workspace he didn't often visit since he considered Engineering his real office. He walked into Engineering and immediately ran a "Functions" test. It said, "Normal."

He glanced at his crew, they all appeared to be working as per normal.

Maybe I'll climb up into the tubes and have a look, he thought.

He headed to the nearest hatch. Something caught his eye, he froze.

He stared and cocked his head.

In the past, he might have questioned what he saw... who he saw. This visitor. Was he really seeing who he thought he was seeing?

Kris Rogan.

CHAPTER TWO

Crew members joined Geordi as they stopped what they were doing and stared at Kris, who had just appeared out of nowhere and now stood in Engineering. Most of them weren't used to Kris popping in and out. Most either didn't know Kris. Her tenure on the Enterprise had been short. Yet there she stood, and no one moved a muscle.

Kris was in Ramos. Of course she was. Ramos and the Enterprise was the reason she had come. Being here had solved one of her problems, she needed to be on the Enterprise.

If only she knew why.

Still, it was the only thing that mattered to her now. In this moment, her craving had finally been resolved. She had been craving this ship. Why? And, how?

She hardly cared right now. She just needed to feel it inside her. A part of her craving had to do with this ship—the Enterprise. It wasn't possible, yet it was. She knew it.

She instantly felt better here. Mostly. Her Ramos was still a strong itch, and her REM sleeping problems were still plaguing her, but one thing at a time. *I want to climb inside the core. That would be the closest I could be to this ship. The place that would help the most. I know it. But, why? How?*

She reached out her hand. If only she could touch the core. Her arm in Ramos could penetrate the invisible protective

layer that kept everyone safe from its deadly rays. She was sure of it.

But, doing that would severely damage her humanoid forms.

Still, she wanted to do it.

“Kris?” said Geordi.

Kris lowered her arm. She faced Geordi.

Why would my Ramos crave a ship from Star Fleet? It makes no sense.

“Geordi, is Mr. Data available?” she asked.

“Um, sure. I think so.” Geordi moved to a Comm. “Mr. Data to Engineering.”

Mr. Data’s voice chimed over the speaker.

“Acknowledged.”

Geordi returned his attention to Kris. “Are you okay?”

“I’m... confused.”

“You’re back.”

“Which is why I’m confused. I didn’t want to...ever.”

Kris took a breath and looked back at the core. She analyzed how she felt in this moment. It was sweet, this...desire.

She dared not leave her Ramos form. She knew her other forms were suffering the harmful effects of lack of REM

sleep. Ten days, more or less. She knew if she went into Human or Betazoid, she would probably collapse. Altaran and Vulcan would hold up by sheer will, but not for too much longer. She wasn't sure about Muztarif. Probably the laughing.

Her Ramos was strong, though. Not as pushy, the insisting had gone away now that she was back on the Enterprise. The craving was momentarily satisfied. *How is that possible?*

Engineer Wilkins appeared behind Geordi. He held out a PADD. "Sir, I have a report on—"

"Not now, Wilkins," said Geordi.

Wilkins nodded, but did not back away. "Sir, if I may, I just wanted to report that the phaser array was point one out of balance, but it suddenly corrected itself moments ago. And, the subprocessors on deck forty are aligned. Again, it just happened."

Geordi pulled his gaze away from Kris, he looked at the PADD, then at Wilkins. "It all just happened?"

Wilkins shrugged. "All at once, a minute ago, maybe."

Geordi looked back at the PADD. The numbers were perfect—again.

He looked at Kris. *Now that Kris is back?*

Mr. Data strode into Engineering.

He did not immediately notice Kris until he followed the stares of his crewmates. “You have returned to the Enterprise.”

Kris nodded. “Mr. Data, why did I return?”

Mr. Data cocked his head, a gesture that with Mr. Data typically meant “calculating,” as Mr. Data was a fully functioning android, the most advanced artificial intelligence in the known universes. He often gestured in this manner when his computer brain processed information.

“Do you not know?”

“What I know, Mr. Data, is I *had* to return.”

The door to Engineering opened, and Captain Picard walked in. He quickly established his Commanding presence, striding in front of Geordi, facing Kris. “Lieutenant, do you understand your return to Enterprise should be properly reported? Have you reported to Commander Riker?”

“I came straight here.”

“To Engineering? Why?”

Kris looked longingly at the core. She knew a tube ran underneath the core to the lower engine systems and that repairs on the core were sometimes conducted in and around this vital tube. Kris ached to crawl into that tube, get close to the core, to touch it.

Or the antimatter generator which is attached to the core.

Or, any coil that leads to or from the core.

Why was the core making her feel like this? *Like I'm a part of it.*

Kris thought about it some more. The answer really wasn't just the engine core. It was the Enterprise itself. Anyplace on the Enterprise. She felt so connected to the Enterprise. Connected how?

"I was drawn here," she said after a long delay.

"Drawn?"

"To the Enterprise," said Kris. "I was about to ask Mr. Data if he had an idea why I felt the strong urge to return to the Enterprise. I'm beginning to consider that when my Ramos was activated so was a... connection."

"A connection between your Ramos and the Enterprise?" asked Mr. Data.

"It's not just my Ramos, it's all of my species. It began after I left and progressed to the point where I felt compelled to return."

"How is that possible?" asked Geordi.

"I don't know. I came here to seek...answers," said Kris. "More accurately, I came here because I had to."

"You're drawn to Engineering?" said Geordi.

“I feel better now that I’m here. I’m not sure about the rest of the ship since this is the only location I have visited,” said Kris.

“Fine,” said Picard. “Follow me.”

Captain Picard headed to the exit. Kris hesitated. *I don’t want to leave Engineering. I don’t want to go with Picard. I need answers.*

Picard walked slowly back to Kris. “I would like to speak to you in private,” he said. “We have things to discuss.”

“About my connection to the Enterprise?”

Picard looked at Geordi and Mr. Data. “Is there anything that could have caused this connection? Can you look into it?”

Mr. Data nodded. “I would begin by looking at the specs we have on file regarding the Ramos activation of the Enterprise when the ship went into Ramos space.”

“That’s good, Data. We can match those specs with the engine fluids and the core base. Then, we can take it from there.”

Picard looked at Kris. “Would that be sufficient?”

Kris headed to the exit. He looked back at Geordi and Mr. Data. “Thank you.”

She walked out. Picard followed her.

They strode side by side to the nearest turbolift. They entered together. There was no conversation, just Picard saying, “Deck One.”

Kris and Picard exited the turbolift on Deck One. At his Ready Room door, Picard stepped to the side and allowed Kris to enter ahead of him.

Once inside, Kris waited near the door. She watched Picard sit down. “Sit,” he said.

Kris remained on her feet. “What is expected of me?”

“Right now? We need to talk.” Picard leaned back in his chair. “Are you still a member of Star Fleet?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. How could I be?”

Picard nodded. “Star Fleet wasn’t exactly very welcoming.”

“I explained why I had to return, Captain. However, I don’t understand what is happening to me. I need to find out.”

“What is it like in my ready room as opposed to Engineering?”

Kris looked around. She said quietly, “The same. Perhaps it’s not just Engineering after all. Perhaps it’s just the Enterprise.”

“You feel you’re now connected to my entire ship?”

“I know it sounds...I don't know what it means. Or how. Or why.”

“Would you please sit?” asked Picard.

Kris slowly made her way to the chair across from Picard. Her energy level was high, she didn't really want to sit. But, she realized it was the polite thing to do in this situation.

“Kris, even if you choose to not return to Star Fleet, I still have to pursue a way to bring Admiral Peterson to justice. I cannot let it go.”

“Let what go?”

“To be straight-forward, Admiral Peterson raped you.”

“Captain, I would have done anything to get off of Star Base 325.”

“You're not quite understanding. Rape is an abomination. He has to be brought to justice.”

“Even if I was willing?”

Picard had to quickly hide his shock. *She doesn't understand.* “You weren't.”

“Captain, as I have stated-“

“You could not have been willing, Kris,” Picard interrupted. “Peterson took advantage of a situation. You were vulnerable and exposed. You were a prisoner. You were not given a choice.”

“Yet I didn’t say ‘no’. I didn’t try to stop it.”

“Because you couldn’t. Not in your position.”

“Captain, you were not there.”

Silence filled the room. A thought occurred to Picard.

“What species were you in?”

“When Admiral Peterson...” she stopped.

“Raped you.”

Kris thought about it. “Vulcan.”

“You were in Vulcan? Each time?”

Kris nodded, but said nothing. *He wants to equate my choice of species at that time to what happened to me. I was Vulcan because I was often Vulcan.*

“Vulcans are not bound by emotion.”

Was I Vulcan to keep the emotion out of the experience? That’s what he’s trying to say.

“It might have been easier for you in Vulcan.”

Is he right?

“Kris, this is not an easy topic to discuss. I would need your testimony, however, if I’m going to pursue justice against Admiral Peterson.”

He wants me to say Peterson raped me. Did he? I never thought of it as...I hadn’t thought about those...events...since I

left Star Base 325. Not until now. Why now? What does it mean to me now?

Kris dropped her gaze. She wanted to be alone, quiet, away from the hundreds of people aboard the Enterprise, yet remain on the ship. She wanted to go to the holodeck, her sanctuary.

She stood. “Do I have your permission to remain on board the Enterprise?”

“Yes.”

Kris headed to the door, she glanced back at Picard, then walked out.

* * *

Kris’s refuge the first time she was on the Enterprise was the holodeck. She didn’t know about her Ramos back then. In many ways, she was still trapped. A prisoner. She needed somewhere to escape and she also needed the holodeck for some densely vegetative planet where she could give her Altaran some relief. It wasn’t quite like the real thing. When Kris needed real vegetation, she’d visit the Atrium. But, she could be alone on the holodeck. She preferred it that way.

Her Star Fleet designation was still listed in Star Fleet Records as FA12, a dangerous alien. She had checked when she first walked onto Holodeck Twelve.

She programmed Wylinn Cress into the holodeck, a planet in the Delta System. She hadn't yet visited the real Wylinn Cress. She sat on a flat rock looking out at three waterfalls. Her legs were tucked underneath her body, her hands rested on her knees. The setting was peaceful.

Kris was not.

She had been left alone for several hours.

She was in Vulcan and spent most of the time lost in Vulcan meditation. Kris was hoping that this deep meditation while on the Enterprise would finally put her to sleep.

It did not.

Kris didn't dare go into any of her other species. She knew Human, Betazoid, Altaran, and Muztarif were in bad shape.

There was always Ramos, which was beckoning to be "her" yet again. Not quite as strongly as before she had returned, yet the insistence was still there.

She still hadn't figured out why her body felt better on the Enterprise, but it apparently didn't have anything to do with REM sleep. She had hoped that returning to the Enterprise would solve that problem. It didn't.

The door chimed.

Kris ignored it. She had heard it in her meditative state, but she didn't want to talk to Picard.

She heard the sound again. She returned her thoughts to the present, yet remained quiet.

The door opened, and Dr. Crusher walked in.

“Am I disturbing you?” she asked.

“Yes.”

Crusher frowned, she did not leave. “I need to talk to you about Deanna.”

Kris had avoided thinking about Counselor Troi. The one time she had gone into Betazoid had been a disaster. She had felt Troi and all of her conflict, her directionless emotions, her pain, and her enormous struggle to control all of it. Kris guessed that she and Troi must now have some kind of bond that had been established from the Betatal transference. She did not know how or why.

For the most part, Kris had ignored dealing with it. *I can't help Troi*, she thought. *I can't even help myself.*

“Kris,” said Crusher. “Do you know anything that could help Deanna?”

“I have not been in Betazoid, doctor. Only one time. I understand her struggles. I have kept myself somewhat isolated for the last three weeks. I have ordered my mind to deal with the

Betatal mind accordingly. I feel the crew of the Enterprise on my mind, yet I have already organized it.”

“Without going into Betazoid?”

“Perhaps my Ramos has played a part in it. I do not know.”

“How exactly?”

“How do I organize my mind? I believe you would use the word, ‘compartment’.” Additionally, I have blocked Counselor Troi.”

“Blocked her?”

“Even though I have not been in Betazoid, I can still feel what she is going through. At a great distance or here on the Enterprise. I learned how to put up a block to keep her from my mind. Again, this may be possible because of techniques known to Ramos, or perhaps because I am a stronger Betazoid than Troi. I do not know the exact answer.”

Dr. Crusher walked closer to Kris. *Kris wants to keep distance from me. Is she afraid of all of us now? Is she afraid to help Troi?*

“Can you do anything to help her? Can you speak to her?”

“I am not sure that is a good idea.” Kris stood, yet she kept the rock between her and Crusher. She struggled to keep

her Vulcan posture upright. Imagine if a Vulcan slouched? Her body was so exhausted, even her Vulcan was about to fail her.

“I am very different than Troi,” Kris continued. “I am fully Betazoid and she is half Betazoid, half Human. Have you considered contacting Betazed to seek their assistance?”

“Turns out, doing that is a bit tricky. She’s better than she was. Maybe it’s just going to take time. I just thought maybe the two of you...” She stopped, walked closer. *She’s hiding something.*

Crusher studied Kris’s face, the face she was desperate to hide. “Kris, are you all right?”

Kris hugged her body. Vulcans did not do this. “I am merely-“

The holodeck door opened without a chime. Deanna stood in the doorway. She walked onto the holodeck and headed straight for Kris.

“What’s going on?” she asked in a voice stronger than Crusher had heard in weeks. Deanna looked better, too, even if this newfound strength was temporary.

“Deanna,” said Crusher. “Why are you here?”

“Kris,” she replied. She looked at Kris. “I can feel you. Your body is...I don’t quite understand what I feel but I know you’re not right.”

Crusher turned to face Kris. “I was just about to address that.”

Kris took a deep breath. “Like you, Counselor,” she said in a whisper, “I am having to deal with a transition. There are new experiences for me that...”

She stopped.

“You’re in Vulcan. Your eyebrows,” said Crusher. When Kris was in Vulcan, her eyebrows curved, yet her ears did not change. “You’re in Vulcan and you’re struggling with your thoughts? And, you’re slouching. What’s going on, Kris?”

Kris allowed her body to fully slouch, she could not straighten it. She had very little strength.

Crusher walked close to Kris, looked into her eyes. “I’ve never seen a Vulcan with bloodshot eyes,” she said.

“Kris can’t sleep.” Troi joined Crusher, stood next to her, in front of Kris. “Kris, why can’t your humanoid species sleep?”

Kris squinted her eyes, her sight was blurry. “I thought it had to do with the Enterprise. Or, that the Enterprise was a portion of my problem. Now that I’m here, I feel differently. Better. But, not enough. Being here had not solved the problem created by my Ramos.”

“Ramos?” said Crusher.

“It’s dominant,” said Troi. “It’s taking over.”

“It wants to. All the time. It certainly has interfered with the functions of my humanoid bodies.”

“Like sleep?” asked Crusher.

Kris nodded.

“I can take care of that, Kris. I can put you to sleep.”

“No, doctor, I do not believe you can. Your potions would not be adaptable to me.”

Crusher shook her head. “This you just being afraid to let a doctor help you.” Crusher walked to the door, turned back to Kris and Troi. “Let’s go to sick bay.”

Kris didn’t move.

“She won’t go,” said Troi quietly.

“This again?” Crusher shook her head. “I’ll be back.”

She walked out.

Troi looked at Kris. “Beverly isn’t one of the doctors from Star Base 325. You can trust her.”

“My decision-making process is a bit compromised at the moment. However, I do know that being in Sick Bay makes me uncomfortable.”

“Please sit down,” said Troi.

Kris sat on the flat rock, her feet on the ground. Troi sat next to her.

“You are not well,” said Kris.

“I’m focusing...on you.” She took a deep breath. “I don’t think I can last much longer. I’m still trying to figure out this Betatal.” She hugged herself, an attempt to keep her emotions—and those of everyone else around her—pinned against her body, lest she lose control and they yet again get unleashed.

“What would happen if you went into Betazoid right now?” Troi asked.

“Two things, you would be harmed, and I would...Dr. Crusher may not be able to help me. I am beginning to consider that my Human and Betazoid are passing beyond help.”

“What would happen to if...That can’t happen, can it?”

“I do not know. I did not come with an instruction manual.”

Troi rested her hand on top of Kris’s hand. The gesture was normally soothing in nature for most species. It was soothing this time for Kris, yet did it something else. Was it calming? No, that wasn’t it.

She and Troi had a Betatal connection now, but neither of them really knew what that meant. Neither knew the boundaries, or the advantages. Her humanoid bodies felt better with Troi’s touch. Her Vulcan still felt exhausted, but she did feel a spit of energy.

“May I try something?”

“Of course.”

Kris stared into Troi’s eyes. “I want to go into Betazoid. It may harm you.”

Troi nodded. She steeled herself. *I’ve been to hell already. What could it hurt?*

Kris went into Betazoid. Troi felt it immediately. She retracted her hand. The flood of Kris upon her brain instantly bombarded her mind. She had to run, leap, hide, anything to get away from...

No, it was better. *How is it better?*

Kris was touching Troi’s hand.

The physical connection helped the two of them.

“What’s going on in your mind?”

Troi struggled to get the words out. “Your presence in Betazoid was crushing me, but only for a few moments. Now, it’s better. It’s...still there, though.”

“Do you feel the others on the ship?”

“Yes, they’re there. But, your mind is overpowering.”

“And, your control improved after I touched you?”

“Yes.” Troi looked down at Kris’s hand that rested on top of hers. “We are connected through our Betatal. Physically. It’s the only answer.”

“Your mind is not ordered. I can tell. Your thoughts and the input of the crew and myself are still difficult for you. You are hardly there, yet you are there.”

“It’s been getting better.”

“I do not believe my touch can help in that regard, yet the two of us seem calmer. Stable.”

“Your sleep issues?”

“Are still a problem. However, I am better at the moment. I do not believe it will last long.”

Kris’s body slumped, Troi caught her before she fell to the ground.

Crusher, hypospray in hand, walked in. She rushed to help Troi lay Kris on the ground. “What happened?” said Crusher.

“Kris went in Betazoid, and we discovered a reprieve of sorts when we touch. It only lasted a few moments.”

“Kris, I’m going to put you to sleep now.”

Exhaustion had overtaken Kris. She lifted her head. It was difficult to speak. “Again, doctor, I do not believe it will work.”

Crusher smirked and injected Kris. She waited, expecting Kris to be fall asleep.

Kris was not asleep. Nothing had changed. She still looked exhausted, her eyes red, dark circles were painted underneath her dark Betazoid eyes. Her breathing was slow. Yet, she was awake.

“Damn it,” said Crusher. Crusher took readings on her medical tricorder.

“Muztarif,” said Kris.

Crusher thought about it, then nodded. She looked at Troi. “I know nothing about Muztarif. They must have a chemical or enzyme or something in their biological structure that I need to put her to sleep. That’s the only way this didn’t work.”

“Get it from Kris. Have her go into Muztarif.”

“I am a manufactured Muztarif. Not pure,” Kris barely got the words out.

“She’s right.” Crusher took a deep breath. “We need to get to Muztarif. Now.”

* * *

Troi stayed with Kris on the holodeck.

Dr. Crusher left and went straight to the captain. She had to get Kris to Muztarif. She had to convince them to let her

take a look at some real Muztarif medical data. She was sure finding the missing Muztarif ingredient was the key to putting Kris to sleep.

Kris managed to go back into Vulcan, which helped Troi. It was much more stressful on Troi when Kris was in Betazoid. Only twice did Troi have to leave to return to her quarters to regroup. Crusher offered to put her to sleep, but Troi refused. Kris needed her help. The focus on Kris helped Troi, even if her mind still struggled.

It would take the Enterprise two days to reach Muztarif. In the meantime, Captain Picard summoned his senior staff to discuss a plan.

“They’ve turned down two previous overtures by Star Fleet vessels to formerly establish First Contact,” said Picard.

“They weren’t interested,” said Riker.

“Which is their right,” added Mr. Data.

“They have to help us. Help Kris,” said Crusher.

“Are you sure you can find what’s missing in the sleeping tonic in Muztarif?” asked Picard.

“No, I’m not sure. With Kris, I’ve never been sure. But, I double checked.” Crusher looked down at her medical PADD. “Everything else in the formula has the correct balance to put Human, Vulcan, Betazoid, and Altaran into REM sleep. I assumed that I could make it according to Kris’s exact specs, but

I think Deanna is correct. I have to be able to study the chemical composition of actual Muztarif.”

“I hate to play devil’s advocate,” said Riker, “but what if Kris wasn’t quite made like a Muztarif? She’s stated she’s ‘more than’ each of her humanoid species. More Human than Human, more Vulcan than Vulcan. We may not find what we’re looking for on Muztarif.”

“That’s if we make onto Muztarif,” said Picard.

Geordi said, “Couldn’t they just send us the information? That way we’re not physically visiting their planet. We’re not intruding on their privacy.”

Picard looked at Data. “Mr. Data, what were the reasons Muztarif refused First Contact.”

“They stated that they believed their way of life was so unique, and so unusual, they feared it would not only be grossly misunderstood, but would establish them as...,” Mr. Data cocked his head. He continued, “...’the funny little planet that could not be taken seriously’.”

“From a planet that values fun, humor, and entertainment above all else? Ironic,” said Picard.

“When do we tell them that Kris and I experienced their way of life? Thanks to Q,” said Riker.

“I don’t think we share that, at this time,” said Picard. “Kris, however, has been there since our misfortunes with Q. She said she spent several days there. She gave herself a

fictitious name and blended into the culture. Her last visit did not go well.”

“What happened?” asked Riker.

“Her lack of sleep affected her Muztarif in such a way that even a Muztarif couldn’t stand the joke,” said Picard. He took a deep breath. “We have to ask. What else can we do? We try to convince, negotiate. I can show them our records where it states we are visiting because of a medical emergency.”

“Then, we have to explain Kris,” said Crusher.

Picard nodded. “We may have to.”

“They may think we’re trying to play a joke on them,” said Geordi.

“I wonder why Muztarif,” said Riker. “Why was Kris made into a species that has had almost no contact with Star Fleet, or any other known organization, as far as we know? And, one that is so radically different than so many other species.”

“Balance,” said Crusher. “Who knows?”

“Commander,” Picard looked at Riker, “did you interact with other Muztarifans when you were there?”

Riker shook his head. “We just...played. Our fun had to be authentic. That was the only criteria Q gave us.”

The door to Captain Picard’s Ready Room chimed. “Come,” said Picard.

Deanna Troi strode in. She looked exhausted and felt nervous. This was the first time since she had become Betatal that she was facing a senior staff meeting. *Why am I nervous? I should be able to sit in on a staff meeting. I've done it so many times. These people care about me. This shouldn't be hard.*

Troi stood in front of the group. She knew her negative feelings were the result of over three weeks of being sequestered in her own hell. Seguing back into her normal routine was going to take time, just like her regaining control of her mind. "May I speak?" she asked.

"Of course, Counselor. Sit, please," said Picard.

Troi sat in her usual seat. Dr. Crusher glanced at her, but suppressed the knee-jerk reaction to ask her if she was all right and/or suggest she go to sleep. She didn't look well.

"Counselor?" said Picard.

Troi nodded. *Focus, Deanna.* "I'm here at Kris's suggestion. She couldn't come herself." She looked at her hands, trying to buy time for her to recall Kris's suggestion. "Muztarif."

"We're heading there now," said Picard gently.

"Yes," said Troi. "Kris said she may need to be in Muztarif."

The room was silent.

Troi leaned forward. "When we arrive at Muztarif."

"Why does Kris think this?" asked Crusher.

“To communicate with them, she said. The way they would understand.”

Picard nodded. “Under normal circumstances, I’d agree. However, what state will Kris be in when she attempts to communicate with them? She can only be in Vulcan at this point.”

“And Ramos. She believes, however, that she can go into Muztarif immediately following Ramos, after organizing what she would need to say to them. Ramos is the only species now that can communicate with some degree of reason.”

Riker said, “If she can only communicate in Ramos, why would she even attempt to go into Muztarif?”

“Besides, it might kill her,” added Crusher.

“She’s been in Vulcan for the last two days and she’s still alive,” said Troi.

“I’m told it’s because of you. Your connection as Betatals has given her some kind of strength. Apparently when you touch one another,” said Picard.

“How does that work?” asked Geordi.

“I don’t know,” said Troi. Troi was feeling better, even a touch of returning to her former self. *Why was I afraid to come to this meeting? I belong here.* “I think we should trust her. When we touch, I can sense her characteristics.”

“She went into Muztarif?”

“Oh, yes, sorry I forgot that part,” said Troi, she smiled bashfully. *Maybe I’m not one hundred percent quite yet.* “She could only do it for a few minutes. She laughed.”

“Laughed?” said Geordi.

“Yes. She got out a few words, but mostly laughed. I got the sense, though, that she was saving herself. With my added energy, I think she can speak with the Muztarif leader. The words and the reasoning are still there. She’s preparing herself for when we’re actually there.”

“Deanna, has she considered going there herself?” asked Geordi. “She could have been there two days ago and already know what was missing in the sleeping tonic.”

“She tried right before she came here. That was the last visit that didn’t go well. Their doctor was not helpful. Our physical connection is stabilizing. I believe she can construct a line of reasoning that she can communicate. She won’t have this ability for too much longer, though.”

“We’ll be there tomorrow,” said Picard.

“Or,” said Troi. “We can be there in two hours.”

The room was silent. All eyes were on Troi. *Oh, right, I have to explain myself.* “Kris’s Ramos is still mostly intact. And, Geordi and Data still have the specs to put the ship into Ramos-mode.”

“Ramos-mode?” said Picard.

“Sorry,” said Riker. “It’s the short-hand we’ve used to refer to when the Enterprise was—“

“In Ramos space. I understood the reference,” Picard interrupted. He looked from Crusher to Troi. “Can she do it without harming herself?”

“I think so,” said Crusher.

“She wants to,” added Troi.

Picard nodded. To Troi, he said, “Bring her to Engineering.” To Mr. Data, he said, “How long until she can activate it?”

“Now that the specs are recorded in our database, the process should take fifteen minutes,” said Mr. Data.

“Good,” said Picard. “Make it so.”

* * *

As Mr. Data predicted, it took the Enterprise two hours, thirty-four minutes, and seventeen seconds to arrive at Muztarif.

Data sat at his usual station on the bridge of the Enterprise, OPS. Lieutenant Wilson sat at the Comm station next to him. Mr. Worf stood at his security station. Geordi hovered at the science station behind him.

Riker sat in his First Officer chair.

Kris sat next to Troi, who sat in the chair to the left of the Captain's chair. Crusher stood behind Kris's left shoulder. She wanted to be near both Kris and Troi.

Captain Picard stood in front of his chair. He glanced back at Mr. Worf. "Mr. Worf?"

"No response, sir," barked Worf.

"Hail them again," ordered Picard.

Kris stood. Her body slumped slightly, her hands interlocked in front of her. Her Ramos was her only functional species at this point. She stared at the floor. "Captain, May I?"

"Go ahead," said Picard.

"Mr. Worf," Kris said, but did not look up at Worf. She turned her body slightly in his direction. "Hail them with a few bars of 'Rock Around the Clock'?"

"What?" said a perplexed Worf.

Data swiveled in his chair, facing the rest of the crew. "'Rock Around the Clock' is a rock and roll song from Earth, circa 1952. It was written in a 12-bar blues format--"

"Mr. Data," growled Captain Picard. "Access the music and send two bars as a...musical hail."

Mr. Data nodded, "Yes, sir." He pulled up the music and sent it to Mr. Worf.

Mr. Worf did as ordered with a scowl on his face.

Data swiveled to face the captain. "The musical hail has been sent."

"Why would we..." He stopped when he noticed a response coming through on his panel. "They have responded, sir." He didn't look any happier.

"Put them on screen," said Picard.

The screen was activated.

The entire crew waited, all staring at the screen. It remained black.

"Mr. Worf?" said Picard.

"They are on screen," said Mr. Worf, his annoyance at the whole affair ticking upward.

"Who is it?" squeaked a high-pitched voice. A hand waved across the screen. "I know who I am, but not who you are. Interruptuous big-time."

Picard inhaled, a frown spread across his face, he looked at Riker, who shrugged. He looked back at the screen. "I am Captain Jean Luc Picard from the starship, Enterprise. We are representatives from the United Federation of Planets. May I speak with the leader of Muztarif?"

"A leader means we are led. We just exist," said the voice.

"We are here on urgent business," said Picard.

“Urgent to you, but noooo, you cannot come to play in my playhouse. No, no, no, no, no.”

Captain Picard’s patience was wearing thin. *I could be missing Q about now*, he thought.

“Captain,” said Kris, who stood next to Picard.

Picard looked at Kris, he nodded and took half a step back.

Kris looked at the screen. She said nothing, just stood there.

Two minutes passed. No one moved.

The hand waved across the screen, but the voice said nothing.

Three minutes passed.

Riker looked at Troi, Troi up at Crusher, Crusher at Worf, no one knew what to do or say.

Another minute passed.

“Okay, you win,” said the voice, and then a male appeared on the screen. The male’s hair spiked in various directions, his face supported two moustaches, one above his lip, one below. A small smiley face was drawn on his left cheek. His eyes were different color, one blue, one purple. He was big in statue. The hand he used to wave rested on his ear, he only had the one.

The Muztarifan stared at Kris. He examined the others on the bridge. He tried hard to hide his fascination. He really, really wanted to know more about these strange-looking people, but being a Muztarif meant keeping to yourself—keeping the people of Muztarif as much of a secret as possible. The people of Muztarif promised each other, via pinkie swears, to not let “outsiders” inside. It’s what they all said. It’s more fun that way.

Kris calmly said, “Take it off.”

The Muztarifan frowned. “I don’t want to.”

“We have a secret. We won’t share it with you until you take it off.”

More staring. The Muztarifan’s face slide into a pouty-face. “Oh, okay.” He removed his mask. His face was rather typical of an Earth humanoid, with the exception of the one ear and the different colored eyes. Kris knew about the eyes.

“Colored contact lenses?” she asked.

“Nope, I’m a Shooton. They have different colored eyes.”

“Truth?”

“Truth.”

Kris smiled. Her face brightened. Suddenly, she looked healthy, or healthier. She clenched her fists, raised them up. “You’re giving me truth?”

“I am.” The Muztarifan smiled broadly. His eyes twinkled. He completely forgot that he was talking to aliens.

“I have a name,” said Kris.

“So do I.”

“I do.”

“Nope, I do.”

This went on for two minutes.

Captain Picard was annoyed, and bored. He sat down. He looked at Riker, Troi, and Crusher. None of them responded. They couldn't.

Kris laughed. She controlled her laugh long enough to say, “I'm Hoopalaaomph.”

“The eater!” said the Muztarifan with glee. “You ate and you ate.”

“It was so good.”

“Ohhh, yes, yes, yes. Ttiononne knows it's good.”

“Ttiononne, the speaker for the people of the planet that plays?”

“Yes!”

Kris laughed. Ttiononne laughed.

The rest of the crew waited, soberly. Only Geordi cracked a smile.

Kris contained herself. “Secret. Can I share one? It’s about Hoopalaaomph.”

“That’s you.”

Kris winked. “Yes, yes, yes.” She wrapped her arms around her body, she was running out of energy to sustain Muztarif. Crusher quickly moved close behind her, ready to help.

Kris rallied, she laughed. “The secret is me, and I’m the secret. And, you get to hear it. Can we come and play and hear the secret?”

“Tell the secret, or hear the secret?” asked Ttiononne.

“You can tell and I can hear. Or whatever.”

“Ohhhh, the people voted. They voted. The vote was the vote. And, the vote was no, no, no.”

“But, yes, yes, yes, because Hoopalaaomph has a secret that hurts. It hurts. And, your people don’t like ouches.”

“No ouches. No, no, no.”

Picard’s body language slumped. *What have I gotten myself into?* he thought but dared not say out loud.

“Can we come down and play?”

“You, just you? Hoopalaaomph and Hoopalaaomph?”

“And her and him,” said Kris as she pointed first to Crusher, then to Picard.

Ttiononne took a close look at Crusher. She smiled at him. “Her seems okay. I likey very much the color of the hair.”

“Thank you,” replied Crusher.

The Muztarif looked at Picard. He stood. “Too grumpy. Cannot come.”

Picard scowled. “I am not...” He stopped. He glanced at Data, Riker, and the now-smiling Beverly Crusher, who was thoroughly enjoying this. *I am, about all else, a master diplomat.* He pasted a smile onto his face.

“Fake,” said Ttiononne.

Riker stood, leaned close to Picard. “It needs to be genuine.”

“Thank you very much for the advice, Commander,” barked Picard. Riker smiled brightly, and sat back down, very pleased with himself.

How the bloody hell am I going to do this? thought Picard. He took a deep breath. He looked at Kris. She wore a smile, but beneath it was something else—Picard saw what was beneath it. Kris didn’t have much time left.

Kris stepped closer to Picard, and laughed. She put her hand on his shoulder.

Picard understood and joined in. He laughed. It took a few moments, but his laugh got deeper, more from his belly, more truthful.

Ttiononne watched with suspicion at first, then he softened. He laughed.

Pretty soon, everyone except Data and Worf were giggling.

“Come, come, come,” said Ttiononne. He pointed at Kris, Crusher, and Picard. “You, You, and Mr. I’m-still-grumpy-but-I’m-Trying.”

The screen turned off.

The laughter died away. Kris was the last to stop laughing.

She collected herself, she was back in Ramos.

Crusher took her elbow, led her up the ramp to the bridge turbolift.

Picard looked at Riker. “You’re in charge, Commander. I’m going down to the planet where I...certainly do not belong.”

He trudged up the ramp, Kris and Crusher waited for him in the turbolift. He looked at Mr. Worf, “No need for security down there, Mr. Worf. You get to remain.”

“Good,” said Worf. He watched Picard enter the turbolift, and the doors closed.

* * *

Kris showed Ttiononne her Dulraff. She caught a blue ball of light, which was more ball than light. The ball dissipated in the palm of her hand.

Ttiononne laughed and clapped his hands.

Kris sat down on a wide chair, wide enough for her to spread out and sleep, if it came to that. She was totally drained. Her Muztarif could no longer laugh, yet she remained in it. Crusher had convinced her that she had to be in one of her humanoid forms when she got her sleeping tonic.

Ttiononne expressed disappointment. “Done?”

Kris nodded.

Picard stepped closer to Ttiononne. “Remember what we told you?” He spoke as if speaking to a toddler. He was doing his best to remain within a Muztarif rhythm and tone, and sense of playfulness. He couldn’t wait to get back on the Enterprise.

“Kris, who is also known as Hoopalaaomph, has an ouch.”

“A very bad...ouch.”

“Will the records of our blood help Kris, who is called Kris, not Hoopalaaomph?”

“I can be called Hoopalaaomph by Ttiononne,” whispered Kris. She winked at Ttiononne.

Ttiononne grinned broadly. “After Hoopalaaomph has her big sleep, can she play with us?”

Kris nodded. She couldn’t get out the words.

“Doctor Crusher is hoping to find something in your blood records to help Kris sleep,” said Picard. “It’s good that you keep them.”

He glanced at Crusher, who frowned back at Picard. *Don’t say it out loud, Beverly.* Picard understood that the records the Muztarif doctors kept were anything but organized. It was taking her longer than she expected to sift through the components of Muztarif blood and matching them against Kris’s blood to (hopefully) find the missing components for her sleep tonic. *Kris can’t hold out much longer,* he thought.

Ttiononne headed to the door. He said, “I have to go for some minutes. Not sure how many, but when I return, you’ll know how many minutes.”

“Ttiononne,” said Picard. He looked sternly at Ttiononne, with a smile on his face. The contrast was bizarre. “Can you keep our secret?”

“Kris is a Muztarif, but not really a real one, but sort of real, but not real. Real enough that Kris, or Hoopalaaomph needs a bit of study of our blood because of a need of sleep. One that I don’t need to know all about, but enough to help?”

“That’s close enough, Ttiononne. Thank you very, very, very, very much.” He smiled brightly.

Ttiononne left.

Picard immediately lost his smile. He looked at Crusher. “Anything? Please say ‘yes,’ I don’t know how much longer I can do this.”

“Kris has an element in her blood that the Muztarifs don’t have. It’s not natural to them, but is to Kris, for some reason that I don’t know. I can reproduce it with the element that Muztarifs have that seems to mix well with it. The compound may just do the trick.”

“What’s holding you up?”

“Nailing down the properties of their natural element.” Crusher showed Picard the six tablets that Ttiononne had given her “straight from our top healer, a good Muztarif man who kisses our boo-boos and helps us when our tummies feel funny.”

She held up one tablet. “This one is a toy,” she said, then tossed the tablet on a table. She held up a second tablet. “This one is historical, but nothing in here is medical.” She held up two more, “These are not helpful. The last two have a bunch of...false buttons, I’m assuming to make things ‘playful,’ but I did find the element breakdown in the last one. I’m hoping the record is complete. I’m nervous that it’s not.”

Picard looked at Kris, he leaned down. “You still with us?”

Kris nodded.

Crusher sat next to her. She held a hypospray. “Lie down, Kris.” She helped Kris lie down. She glanced at Picard before injecting Kris.

Kris’s eyes closed.

Crusher quickly grabbed her medical tricorder, she took readings.

Picard waited, it felt like hours, even if it was only a few moments.

“She’s out,” said Crusher. “REM sleep.”

Picard’s relief left in a long breath. “What happens with her other humanoid species when one sleeps? Do they all get REM sleep?”

“Yes. Just like they all get nourishment when she eats. Don’t ask me how it all happens, because I don’t know. She’ll hopefully be out for hours.”

Ttiononne returned. “I’m back,” he shouted.

Picard put a finger to his lips.

Ttiononne caught on quickly. “Shhh, Kris, Hoopalaaomph, sleeps?”

“Yes, she does. Thank you very much for your assistance. We can have her transported to the Enterprise and be on our way. The doctor can now successfully manufacture more tonic for the future. You have been very generous to help us.”

“Kris and Crusher and Mr. Grumpy-Who-Fakes-Smiles doesn’t stay?” he asked.

“Ttiononne, we understand you prefer your privacy.”

Ttiononne’s smile was huge. “Unless, Crusher with the bright hair and a few others would like to...try us out?”

Picard looked at Beverly. *I know what she’s going to say.*

“We would love to,” said Crusher with a tinkle in her eye and a wink at Picard.

Ttiononne jumped up and down several times. “A trial. Can the people on the ship in the sky have a trial with the people who have fun all the time?”

“That is a fine idea,” said Picard. “Star Fleet has expressed a desire to...”

“Poo, Mr. Grumpy,” said Ttiononne.

Picard steeled himself. *I cannot wait to be back on the Enterprise.* He smiled. “We want to play with you on a trial basis. A small ‘we’ perhaps? A few. Only a bit. Not too many. To come down and play and entertain and laugh and eat. Would eight work? Eighteen? Twenty-eight?”

“Seven,” Ttiononne said. “No, wait, nine. Ten including pretty red haired lady, Crusher.”

He held out his arm to Crusher, who immediately took Ttiononne’s elbow.

“I will choose nine others to beam down and have fun, fun, fun. Okie dokie?” said Picard.

Ttiononne beamed at Crusher. “Skip with me?”

“I would love to,” said Crusher. She grinned at Picard. *I can't wait to tease Jean Luc about this. I'm so going to enjoy it.*

They skipped out of the room.

Picard glanced at the sleeping Kris. “You’ve got the right idea.”

He stopped at the door, looked back at Kris.

CHAPTER THREE

Kris woke twenty-eight hours later. She did not expect to see Mr. Data standing nearby.

She sat up. “Mr. Data,” she said, her voice cracked. “Why are you here?”

Mr. Data hit the button on his Communicator. “Doctor, Kris is awake.”

“Thank you, Mr. Data,” said Dr. Crusher’s voice.

“Are you my babysitter?” asked Kris.

“I do not believe so. Dr. Crusher asked me to remain here and contact her when you awoke.”

“Why?”

“I would assume the reasoning is that you were asleep for a very long period of time. And, Dr. Crusher would like to examine you when you returned to a state of consciousness.”

Kris inhaled. She looked around. Oddly, she was in Vulcan. *Didn't I fall asleep in Muztarif? Or, did I change right before Dr. Crusher injected me? I don't remember.*

Kris stood. She stretched her back.

She did not feel a stiff back or sore muscles. Instead, she sensed her Altaran form in desperate need of the outside. Some dense vegetation would do the trick. Kris knew she needed more than just being near vegetation, she needed to run. Altarans ran. They climbed trees and they ran. Altarans didn't like to be indoors for long.

The door opened and Dr. Crusher strode in. She looked at Mr. Data. "Thank you, Data."

Mr. Data nodded and walked out.

"Why was Mr. Data here?" she asked Crusher.

"I'm sure he told you."

"Why am I still on Muztarif?"

"I thought you didn't like my sick bay." Crusher began to unpack items from her medical kit. "Sit, please."

"Doctor, an exam is unnecessary. I am much improved. All I needed was sleep."

"Twenty-eight hours of it. Which is why Data was here. I couldn't last that long. Of course, I checked on you a few times--"

"Doctor," Kris interrupted. "My Altaran is in need of vegetation and physical activity."

"I would hope so. So, sit down and let's get this over with."

They stared at each other. Kris didn't move. "Kris, when are you going to realize I'm not trying to study you as a specimen? I wouldn't. Please, let me check on your humanoid forms."

Kris sat down, her back rigid.

Crusher checked Kris's vitals in Vulcan first. She did not need to give Kris any Vulcan immune boosts. Next, Crusher confirmed that Kris's Altaran was in need of vegetation. Some of her green hue was back, but it wasn't dark. And, her readings were low on key Altaran numbers.

Crusher had to immediately give Kris a hydration boost, a mineral boost, and a food supplement once she went into Human. She also insisted she eat real food soon. Those boosts helped Kris once she went into Betazoid, however, Kris had to take a moment to gather her mind from the onslaught of the three million or so Muztarifs on the planet—plus, some Federation crew in change.

Lastly, Kris went into Muztarif. Crusher gave her a boost of what the resident Muztarif doctor referred to as "Muztarif goodies."

Kris chattered away in Muztarif. She was jovial and way-too-peppy. Her Muztarif was no longer out of control, now it was just regular Muztarif.

Crusher finally let Kris leave. She remained in Muztarif and skipped her way out the door. Any Muztarifans in the

hallways would understand. Kris was happy to be out of the clutches of the mean-red-haired-doctor.

She grabbed some food from a buffet table and thanked the man who had handed her the plate seven times, this was standard Muztarif procedure of any food server to hand someone an empty plate and lead them to a buffet full of food. The plates on Muztarif were quite large, so Kris filled it up.

She ate as she headed to a nearby exit.

She didn't finish her meal, however. She instead she went it Ramos—the insistence of her Ramos had not gone away—and disappeared.

She reappeared in the mountainous region of Muztarif.

The people of Muztarif didn't have any religion.

Additionally, they didn't have many things they were afraid of. They could be temporarily scared as part of a joke or a trick, but Human-like fears of the dark, certain animals, or the “boogie man” were unheard of in Muztarif.

They did, however, fear their mountains. Not so much feared them, as had a great respect or reverence for them, so much so that they were nervous to really get too close to any of them. The planet had two large mountain ranges, one near the southern hemisphere, and one near the northern hemisphere. The Muztarifans respected their “hugeness” and their “wildness,” and the fact that “they were really, really big and we're really, really small”-ness.

They loved to look at their mountains, mostly in pictures. They loved that they were there. They protected their mountains and its wildlife. They just chose not to go near them.

Which meant that Kris had the mountains of Muztarif all to herself. She needed them. The steep grades and the thick vegetation made running a challenge—which made running more pleasurable. The trees weren't as easy to leap as the ones on Altara, but tree jumping was possible. The grassy areas, the rivers, and lakes in this region provided water-borne greenery which was packed with chlorophyll.

She turned into Altaran and took off.

She ran and jumped trees for five hours, nonstop.

By the time she was finished, her green Altaran skin was its natural solid green color. Her Altaran was back to full strength.

It was a different story when she changed into her Human form. Her Human needed a rest. She guessed that her Betazoid probably also needed rest as well, yet with Troi nearby and probably still struggling to control her mind, she chose to avoid Betazoid.

She realized her Vulcan could use some meditation, which would allow her entire body to rest. She ignored the pleading from her Ramos—it was always there yet getting easier to ignore—and went into Vulcan.

She meditated in Vulcan for two hours.

When she was finished, she decided some Muztarif would be appropriate. She needed to be Hoopalaaomph, and repair her reputation.

Ttiononne promised to keep “Kris” a secret, he pinky-swore that whenever she was seen again on Muztarif, she would forever be Hoopalaaomph. It was time to test out his promise.

Hoopalaaomph had a grand time. She played ShuRunk, she rode the Ket Let machine, and she danced the High Ride Bing-Thing. She laughed, but not her previous out-of-control version. She was a regular Muztarif having a Muztarif-like fun time.

She noticed a few Enterprise crew members. Two of them approached her, Crusher and Riker.

“How are you?” asked Crusher.

“I am Muztarif, doctor. Try not to put a damper on it,” she responded, then winked. “Oh, and to answer your question, the real answer that you’re seeking, the rest of me, all of the other parts that make up me, are hunky dory. Fit, fiddle, and A-okay.”

Riker beamed. “I prefer Muztarif Kris.”

“Commander,” said Kris. “On Muztarif, I am Hoopalaaomph. If you don’t mind.”

“My apologies.”

“How many have they allowed to come?” asked Kris.

“Enterprise crew? There’s now fifty. Ttiononne adds one every seventeen minutes,” said Riker.

“That’s a fun way to do it,” said Kris. “Sorry, but I must walk away now.”

Kris hustled away from Crusher and Riker. They were killing her fun. The sudden thought of Kris “exposing” herself in Muztarif in front of them didn’t feel right. They knew her darkness. Crusher and Riker knew all about her. It was that thought that made her change into Vulcan as she exited a door.

Once outside, Kris sat down. *What do I do now?* The Enterprise was in orbit around Muztarif, Kris knew the exact coordinates, without even seeing them on the OPS panel. She could feel the location of the Enterprise.

Finding a solution to sleeping was one of my problems. What do I do about the others?

She looked up. Picard stood over her.

* * *

“May I sit?” he asked.

Kris did not respond. *I don’t feel like talking to the captain. But, what do I feel like doing? Where do I feel like going? Where do I belong?*

“Kris?” Picard said. “There’s something we need to discuss.”

“Haven’t we already?”

“Not this.”

Picard sat. “Mr. Data and Mr. La Forge may have found something. They analyzed all of the basic foundations of the engine. They began with the materials used to construct it. They examined all engine components, the core, everything. Mr. Data examined the microscopic details. They didn’t come up with anything...Until they matched everything against you.”

“What does that mean?”

“The engine, the plasma base, the elements that make up the core, the micro-materials of the bases, it’s all nonbiological. With one exception.”

They stared at each other.

Picard said, “Your DNA is in the plasma of the core of the Enterprise.”

“How is that possible?”

“I was going to ask you that.”

Kris was quiet. She went into Ramos. She thought about the anatomy of a Ramos being. *Could a Ramos be melded with the chemicals that were contained the plasma base? Was it even possible?*

Kris shook her head. “There’s nothing, captain. I am in Ramos now and there’s nothing there. No being in Ramos could have their DNA be melded in such a way.”

“Why did you go into Ramos?”

“Logic. The DNA of my humanoid species could not be imprinted in the core plasma. It’s not scientifically possible, outside of Ramos.”

“Which is what Data and Geordi told me.”

“So, if it were even possible, something like this would have to be accomplished using my Ramos. Yet, I don’t know how.”

“You had no prior knowledge that your DNA is a part of my ship?”

Kris shook her head. “No. Why? Why is it there?”

“Do Ramos have DNA?”

“Not like yours, no. But, a version of it.”

“Is that what we’re seeing imprinted in the core plasma?”

“My DNA presents as Humanoid. Or, it used to. I haven’t analyzed it since....” She stopped. “I would like to take a look.”

Picard nodded.

They stood. Picard touched his Communicator. “Two to beam up.”

Kris disappeared.

Picard frowned. He hit his Communicator again.
“Amend that. One to beam up.”

Picard disappeared a moment later.

He materialized inside Transporter Room Three.

Kris waited for him.

“You could have beamed up,” said Picard.

“I’m in Ramos. Why would I?” said Kris. “Where is Mr. Data and Geordi?”

Picard touched his Communicator. “Mr. Data, Mr. La Forge to Engineering.”

Kris disappeared once again.

This time, Picard scowled.

He headed out.

In Engineering, Picard found Kris standing next to Mr. Data and Geordi. They were studying the data of Kris’s DNA and the plasma core of the ship.

Picard refrained from mentioning Kris’s mode of transportation. *As rude as it was, I refuse to scold her in front of the others.*

Kris said, “My DNA has changed slightly since my Ramos was activated.”

“If your Ramos was dormant,” said Data, “it should have presented in your DNA.”

“If Ramos was Humanoid. Clearly, the sample we took and the sample Doctor Crusher took before I my Ramos was activated do not entirely match. There are two slight variations,” said Kris.

“Which one is in the core plasma?” asked Picard.

“The second one,” said Geordi. “The one with Ramos. Yet we can’t identify the two variations.”

“Kris?” said Picard.

“I don’t know, captain. I had analyzed my DNA once or twice when I was on the moon. Crusher’s sample matched it. Exactly. This version could only have occurred once my Ramos was activated.” Kris glanced at the engine. “And, now it’s imprinted in the plasma core.”

“And, you didn’t put it there?”

“As I stated on Muztarif, Captain, I do not know how or why it is there. I only know that when I was away from the Enterprise, I felt an attachment to it. One I had not felt before I knew I was Ramos. I could not explain it then and I cannot fully explain it now, except that my DNA is apparently a part of the core of this ship. My need to be near the ship is satisfied now that I’m standing on the Enterprise. It was also satisfied when I was physically near the ship, on Muztarif. Either way, this ship and I are linked.”

Geordi looked at Data, neither said anything.

“Can you come with me to my ready room?” Picard said to Kris. “Walk with me. Do not pop over there your Ramos way and wait for me.”

Kris nodded.

They left together.

Two minutes later, they walked into Captain Picard’s Ready Room.

Picard sat in his chair. “Kris,” he said in a calm tone, “what do you want? Do you want to remain here? Do you want to leave? Where do you want to be?”

Kris did not immediately respond.

To stall, she sat down and went into Betazoid. *I need to confront those questions and I need to do it as a Betatal, with all of my emotions and feelings and...needs. What do I want?*

One thing.

She changed into Human, she wasn’t sure why, but she wanted to present Picard with her idea while on his level. “I want to fly to ship,” she said.

Picard was quiet. He leaned back in his chair.

“I’ve always wanted to fly a starship. It was the reason why I left the moon. I thought I could show up at Star Fleet and, after a short period, be assigned as a pilot.”

“Without the years of training required?”

“I am the multiple-species version of Mr. Data. I don’t need the years of training. You know this.”

Picard tapped his finger on his desk. *Yes, I do. I feel it. Yet, how would that work?*

“I still need to deal with Admiral Peterson. Has he contacted you?”

Kris shook her head. “I have not heard from him. I did check.”

“How would it work, you coming back? Will you be Lieutenant Anderson?”

“I don’t know. No.”

“Lieutenant Rogan? Where did she come from?”

“I don’t know.”

“Where and when did Lieutenant Rogan train as a pilot? Do we create a ruse?”

“I don’t know.”

“One ruse on top of another. If Peterson contacts you, what do we do? Continue that ruse? Feed him false information? Real information? What do we tell the crew if you’re Kris Rogan? What do we tell them if another pilot is bypassed because you’re the next Mr. Data? There are Engineers who have trained for years for a chance to pilot this ship. What proof

do I have that you can pilot this ship? And, how do I explain it to Star Fleet? To whom do I explain to?"

"I don't know," Kris shouted and banged her hand on the table. "You're asking things of me that I don't know about. I don't know why my DNA is imprinted on the Enterprise's core, I don't know what to call myself, I don't know if the entire crew should know about me, I don't know how to handle Peterson or if it even needs to be handled. I don't know, Captain. I just want...something. Anything. Maybe I was meant to fly this ship, because I'm a part of it."

Quiet filled the room.

A few moments later, Kris leaned forward in her chair. She said, "I want to go into Vulcan to calm myself, it centers me the most. I want to go into Altaran because I would have an excuse to go run in the Muztarif forests. I want to be Betazoid so I can feel you and read what you're thinking. I really want to be Muztarif so I can laugh all of this away and just be happy. But, I'm Human right now. I've never liked being Human. It's very unordered, compared to my other species. It's unpredictable and can be frustrating for me. But, I'm in it now because...I need something."

I know you do, thought Picard. He could not voice his thought. He was afraid to do so. He could not for one second come off as sounding "fatherly." He just couldn't do it. Not yet, anyway. But, his heart did ache to give this person something to cling to.

She can pilot my ship. I know it. “When we leave Muztarif, you’ll be at the helm,” he said. “You understand I’ll have to monitor your skills. For a bit. For some reason, I don’t think that trail period will last very long.”

Kris nodded. She stood, and headed to the door.

“Kris,” said Picard. Kris stopped and looked at Picard. “No bouncing around the ship in Ramos. You walk or use the turbolift.”

Kris nodded. “Lieutenant Anderson. For now. As soon as it’s possible, I would like my real name returned to me.”

Picard nodded. “Understood.”

“And,” said Kris, “if we are ever in orbit around a planet that has a remote area or two, especially a planet with vegetation, it is healthier for my Altaran to be exposed to the real thing. The holodeck satisfies my needs, as does the Atrium, but running on real planets is a physical need.”

“Thank you for explaining it to me. We will make arrangements, in private, I think. Let’s not go around announcing it to the crew.”

“Yes, sir. Of course, in Ramos, I could just go somewhere on my own time.”

“Let’s hold off on that for now. If the need arises, don’t just disappear. Check with me. Please.”

Kris turned and walked out.

* * *

Kris still wasn't sure she had made the correct decision to stay.

Picard decided to change the designation for this mission from “medical emergency” to “Solidifying a new Federation-Muztarif relationship.”

Riker had finalized the terms with Ttiononne after two days of talks. The Muztarifs would only allow the Enterprise to visit—for now. Another ship would be allowed if they promised (pinky swore) to adhere to the “New Visitor Rules.” Riker hammered these out with Ttiononne and they pinkie swore to cement the deal.

Visitors had to begin their visitations in small groups of twelve, fifteen, or fifty-six, depending on how Ttiononne felt about the newcomers. Visitors had to contact them on a newly established channel (which Geordi installed) at least one week before visiting. And, visitors had to come with the mindset of play. No politics, no seriousness, and no sadness, those things were no allowed on Muztarif.

In reality, the two days of talks only amounted to less than three hours discussing the terms of the new policy. It had been Ttiononne's longest and perhaps the most serious conversation ever.

Picard had been involved in the negotiations, of course. After patiently listening to Ttiononne's serious concerns, he ended up congratulating Ttiononne on being a true leader of the Muztarif people.

They listened to him. There had been times when he just had to be serious, had taken charge of a serious-like matter, and had reasoned out ways to solve those serious problems.

In their centuries of existence, those serious times and decisive moments had been few and far between. Picard and Riker eventually agreed that Ttiononne secretly had been a shrewd negotiator. He was always looking out for his people and always wanted to protect their way of life, even if it meant continuing their isolationist ways.

Ttiononne liked the Enterprise visitors and was pleased with how cordial—and playful—they had been. More importantly, he felt that the strangers *did not* damage the Muztarif way.

The Enterprise left the day after the treaty was finalized—with the understanding that if any visitors came to Muztarif that gave Ttiononne the “hi-be-geebees” vibe, then the Federation would respond quickly to come to their aid.

Kris spent two more days on Muztarif as Hoopalaaoomph. It was during these two fun-filled days in her Muztarif body that Kris began to question her decision to return to the Enterprise. *I can be happy here on Muztarif*, she thought numerous times. Her Muztarif had never felt this good. Even when she slipped away from the city center and went into

Vulcan, Betazoid or one of the others, it was here she finally felt her newfound freedom—the one that lack of sleep and being pulled back to the Enterprise had not allowed.

Crusher supplied her with the needed tonic to help her sleep, and the Enterprise was nearby.

I may not be able to remain on Muztarif, was another thought that often crept into her mind during those two days. I am attached, by DNA, to the Enterprise. I don't know how long I'll need the sleeping tonic. And, there's Troi. I need to find a way to break free of this connection with her.

More worrisome thoughts occurred to Kris: *The Federation knew about me, someone in the High Council approved me being locked up...for over four years. How could I return to serving the Federation after the way I was treated? Even though...that will never happen again. My Ramos is now my protection against ever being imprisoned again. Yet still...*

There's Peterson. I don't care about him. I did what I did for my own reasons. Picard can care about it, but I don't need to. Peterson is a part of Picard's history. He may have used me, but I don't care. I don't think I care.

These thoughts were dark. Kris was not in Muztarif or they would have ended up a chuckle and a “gottcha!” She wanted to feel the Muztarif happiness, though. Even if she knew it would be short-lived.

Which is when the Enterprise left, and with it was Kris Rogan.

For the first few days back on the Enterprise, her doubts had returned. *Do I belong here? Why do I have to restrict myself like Picard asked? He doesn't ask the other Vulcan on board to not be Vulcan, or Troi to not be Betazoid, or all of the other non-Human species on board. I am part Ramos, why can't I be in Ramos when I want to?*

The cravings to always be Ramos were under better control now. Kris figured it was a combination of being on the Enterprise and finding a way to rest her humanoid species'.

But, like all of her species, she needed to be in Ramos from time to time. If she were to stay on board the Enterprise permanently, Kris decided she would have to find a more fair solution with Picard regarding her Ramos.

Besides the issue of Ramos, Kris had a fearful suspicion that Picard wanted her help when it came to Peterson—even as Kris continued to resist.

Kris decided to tackle one thing at a time. First, she wanted to pilot the Enterprise. The thought of sitting at the Comm station next to next to Mr. Data pleased her enormously. It was her dream.

The deal was that Kris could not simply sit at the helm and start piloting. Kris was assigned to take a two day pilot instruction course with Geordi and Mr. Data. It was called “refresher training.” Kris knew she didn't need it, but she compromised.

The experience was not unpleasant. She had no trouble understanding how one would go about piloting the Enterprise—she had memorized all of it years earlier. Plus, she found Geordi and Mr. Data cooperative and easy to work with. She liked them.

Curiously, Kris noticed that it had taken her his long to allow herself to like them. It had not really happened before. Turns out, Kris was allowed to like other people.

Part of this new feeling made her feel uncomfortable, since she didn't trust easily.

Another part of her, though, well, it wasn't half bad to have...friends?

After the two days, Geordi reported to Captain Picard that Kris was ready to take the helm.

Kris headed to the bridge for her first shift as pilot of the Enterprise. She was excited, and a bit nervous. To handle her nerves, she walked onto the bridge in Vulcan. Vulcan would hide her nerves, no way was she going to allow any of them to see her nervous.

Except, of course, Troi. Kris felt her on the bridge. It was Troi's first day back on duty. She was working a short shift, to ease herself back. She looked like she did before, even though Kris knew she was still working hard to keep her mind in some semblance of order.

Troi and Kris acknowledged each other as Kris headed to the helm position. *She knows I am uneasy*, she thought. *Is this*

connection always going to exist between the two of us? she pondered.

She relieved the current pilot and sat down. Mr. Data sat at OPS. Picard sat in his Command chair, with Riker next to him. Behind them stood Mr. Worf. Geordi hovered near Worf.

Kris activated her controls on the helm board—all pilots had a unique, personalized board that fit their exact physical and strategic specifications. She had built her board the night before, one for each of her species (She even made one for Muztarif, even though she doubted she would ever pilot the Enterprise while in Muztarif—she figured Picard would not approve of that combination).

Kris tested the controls, her fingers dancing around.

She lifted them. Something wasn't right.

Ramos? Why is my Ramos...?

She looked the fingertip of her right index finger. A tiny puff of blue rested there. A blue glow. Her fingertip was in Ramos.

The blue glow extended to her ring finger, her pinky.

The fingertips on her entire right had a small, blue glow to them.

Picard glanced at Riker, curiosity mixed with worry. "Mr. Data, lay in the course to Garron Three. Helmsman, warp seven. Engage."

Kris stared at her right hand.

Ramos is here, but my body doesn't want to be in Ramos. It wants to go through me.

She looked to her left. Mr. Data was watching her. “Is everything all right?” he asked.

Then, Data saw it. Saw the blue glow on Kris's right hand.

He also saw the glow on her left hand. All ten fingers now glowed blue—Ramos.

Data looked at Picard, who stood and stepped toward his Command center.

“What is it?” asked Picard.

Kris swiveled in her chair, faced Picard. “I am in Vulcan, yet Ramos wants to be present. It is present, through my Vulcan.” She turned back to face the board, she looked down.

She placed her hands on the board, the blue light grew darker. It wasn't expanding, exactly. The blue glow touched the board through Kris's fingertips. It was part of her touch, as if there would be no other way for Kris to pilot the Enterprise.

Kris programmed the warp speed and set the levels on other controls. She engaged the Enterprise, the ship smoothly accelerated.

And, Kris felt it.

Troi stood up. "I can...feel them together," she said.

Picard turned back to her. "Them? Who?"

"Kris and the ship."

Picard looked at Mr. Data. "Run a scan, Mr. Data. What is the status of the Enterprise?"

Mr. Data went to work, twenty seconds later, he swiveled to face Picard. "Status normal."

Picard stared at Kris's back, yet he knew Geordi was already checking the ship from his station. "Mr. La Forge, report."

Geordi worked for another ten seconds, then walked forward to stand next to Worf. "The Enterprise is functioning at maximum efficiency, sir."

They don't trust me, thought Kris. She swiveled to face Picard.

"Explain," he said.

"I can't," she responded. "This is unexpected. It didn't happen while I was with Mr. Data and Mr. La Forge. The moment I sat at the helm, Ramos came through my Vulcan...to help me pilot the ship."

Picard glanced at his senior officers. Riker now stood behind him. "If everything appears to be normal, maybe this is normal for her. Since her DNA is a part of the ship?"

Picard inhaled, then exhaled. *The irregular is becoming regular? On my ship?*

He looked at Troi. “May I ask her to go into Betazoid?” Troi hesitated. *Kris’s mind is so strong, but I have to keep trying it. And, the captain needs it.* She nodded.

“Lieutenant?” Kris nodded. She went into Betazoid. Troi clasped her hands, for self-preservation. Having Kris in Betazoid was still jarring, yet it was improving. Their connection helped.

Troi stood up. “Captain, Kris’s Ramos is flowing through her Betazoid. I can feel it.”

Kris turned back to the controls. She switched to her Betazoid controls and her blue fingertips made a few quick adjustments. The ship was steady and on course. All was good.

“Is there a point to trying the other three?” said Picard.

“If you want me to, Captain, I will. However, I believe the results will be the same. This is the first time I have felt the Ramos come through my other species. Before this, my Ramos wanted to just be Ramos. This is...in a strange way...more cooperative.”

Picard nodded. “Mr. Data, Mr. La Forge, continue to monitor the Enterprise. Lieutenant, can you disengage from the helm if you think your Ramos is....harming the ship?”

“I do not believe harm is being done. However, I understand your concern. I will immediately disengage, sir. I would like to continue, however.”

Picard returned to his seat. Troi sat down. “She’s back in Vulcan.”

He glanced at Troi, then at Riker. “The new normal,” he said.

* * *

Picard met with his senior officers immediately following the end of Kris’s shift. She had piloted the ship for six hours and they were now twelve hours away from Garron Three.

They should have been fourteen hours out. From Muztarif to Garron Three at warp seven was, according to Mr. Data, supposed to take twenty hours. Two hours of Ramos-laced travel time had been shaved off due to Kris Rogan piloting the Enterprise.

“Is that all it is?” asked Picard. “Kris pilots this ship and we go faster? Did the ship actually go warp eight?”

“It was more along the lines of an accelerated warp seven,” said Geordi.

“Warp seven point four, to be more precise,” added Mr. Data. “But, not warp eight.”

“Is that because the ship was piloted using Ramos, or because of Kris?” said Picard.

“Unknown,” said Mr. Data.

More unknowns, thought Picard.

A chime was heard at the door. “Come,” said Picard.

Kris walked in. “Sir, may I speak with you privately?”

Peterson, thought Picard.

He dismissed his senior officers. They knew everything, but Picard wanted to maintain some confidence about the delicate matter. He would pull his senior officers into the fold as he saw fit.

“Admiral Peterson left me a message. He will be contacting me in one hour,” said Kris.

“One hour? Has he ever given you such a short time to be prepared?”

“No, sir. The longest previous wait time was eight hours.”

Does he suspect something? thought Picard. “I will be in your quarters in one hour.”

Kris walked out.

She headed to the holodeck, her sanctuary. During her tenure on the Enterprise, Kris had spent very little time in her quarters. She spent almost every off-duty minute on the

holodeck, or in the atrium, if her Altaran needed exposure to real vegetation. She was simply not comfortable in her own quarters. It felt confining. And, she had spent enough time in quarters to last a lifetime.

Kris left Holodeck Eight fifty-five minutes later. She arrived in her quarters one minute before Picard. A few seconds after Picard walked in, a call came through.

Picard nodded. Kris answered the call.

Admiral Peterson's face appeared on the screen. Peterson was balding, his face stern, like he very rarely smiled. His brown eyes bore into Kris's eyes. There was no humor left in them.

"Report," he barked.

"Nothing to report, sir."

"Nothing at all? You've been on the Enterprise for, what, three months?"

"Two months, twenty-four days." Kris decided to include the time when she wasn't physically on board the Enterprise, since Peterson didn't know about it.

"Long enough to give me a report, Lieutenant."

Silence. They stared at each other.

"Well?" he said.

“Sir, it is unfortunate for my mission, the one you personally assigned to me. However, the Enterprise had a situation with a being from a highly advanced universe.”

“The Federation knows about this Q. The report I read stated that only the senior officers dealt with him this time. Too bad you didn’t have access while all of that business was going on.”

Kris focused her eyes on Peterson, she did not want to look at Picard, even though that was her exact instinct. *Does he know? Is he being vague on purpose? Is it a test?* Picard knew Peterson better than Kris, yet she did not want to give away Picard’s presence in the room.

Picard, too, was struggling not to react. With the revelations of how Peterson had treated Kris, Picard wanted to reach into the screen and choke the man. Picard winced at the thought that he had once considered him a close friend. That was before Carol died. Then, it all changed. *The change in Peterson is so dramatic, yet he’s fooled a lot of people. This cannot continue for much longer.*

“I might be rethinking my approach,” said Peterson. “My mission has not changed, however, there may be a better way to utilize your skills.”

Again, Kris wanted to look at Picard. She forced herself not to.

“I will be in contact again,” he continued, “However, it may be some time before I reach out. When I do, I hope you’re

prepared to fully invest in this mission. The Federation needs you, Lieutenant. I need you. If this mission fails, I believe there's still room for you to return to Star Base 325."

"Yes, sir."

The screen went blank.

Picard paced. "He's changing tactics? Because he's onto us? Or, he knows the truth about you?"

"Truth?"

"Your sixth species. In Peterson's position, he would find your Ramos quite useful."

Kris watched Picard pace, she knew he was in deep thought. "May I leave?" she asked.

"These are your quarters."

"I don't spend a lot of time here. I believe our business is complete."

"I need to know what he's planning next."

"Because you're obsessing?"

"Excuse me?"

Kris was in Betazoid, having switched to "read" Picard. She was curious about his reaction to Peterson. "I am in Betazoid. You are displaying strong negative feelings toward Peterson. They are dominant in your mind."

“Shouldn’t they be dominant in yours?”

“You are being highly emotional.”

Picard took a deep breath. “And, you’re not. I don’t understand it. Your disconnection.”

“I have explained myself to you. Now, if you’ll excuse me-“

“I’ll need you to choose at some point,” interrupted Picard. “I cannot bring Peterson down without your involvement. He needs to be court martialled. His actions are unexcusable.” Picard hesitated, then added, “Do you think he’s committed the act of rape only against you?”

“Admiral Peterson’s past, prior to his being on Star Base 325, is unknown to me.” Kris was back in Vulcan, her answers came from a place of logic and reason.

“Speculate.”

“I am in Vulcan.”

“I don’t care what you’re in. What if he’s done it before, Kris? Don’t you think it would be punishable...and immoral?”

“You have no evidence.”

“I have your evidence. I know what I saw, and you admitted it. Why do you resist helping me?”

“Because as I previously stated, I would have done anything to get off of Star Base 325. If I had to-”

“You had to?” interrupted Picard.

Kris headed for the door. “I am leaving now.” She walked out.

And, headed straight for the holodeck. She did not have to report for duty for another two hours. She wanted to run in Altaran, she had excess...energy. *No, she thought, it's not energy, it's my need.*

But, did her Altaran need it? She ran yesterday, and had spent an hour in the atrium the day before. Her Altaran skin was a dark green color, she felt strong.

Energy? Yes, that's all it is. And, boredom, I don't want to be dealing with Peterson anymore.

Kris ran for an hour. When she finished, her “energy” was still there.

* * *

One week later, Kris was piloting the Enterprise. She was again in Vulcan, but not fully. The wisp of Ramos was back, mostly felt in her fingers. She had been studying the affect, but had not really come to any conclusion. Her Ramos appeared through her humanoid when she piloted the Enterprise. Was it there to assist her? Why did it only appear in this manner

when she was piloting? She often had shifts in Engineering and her Ramos did not appear at those times.

She would continue to study the situation, and report to Picard, Data, or Riker, as instructed. She did not intend to deceive them when she reported that her Ramos was there within her humanoid and she did not know how or why. That was the only report she could give based on the evidence she had.

The only concrete evidence she had was a conundrum, the presence of her DNA within the core of the Enterprise's engine should not exist, yet it did.

She did her best to pilot the Enterprise, while attempting to ignore the unanswered questions.

Beside her, Lieutenant Beatrice was at OPS. The Enterprise had concluded with a diplomatic visit to Aurelia. Picard described the visit as less a need for a diplomate, but more a need for the Aurelians to receive a visit from a Federation starship. He hadn't been pleased.

Kris has loved Aurelia. She had been allowed to go to the surface for her Altaran and run in the high peaks of the numerous mountain ranges. The Aurelians lived in the mountains in deep, interconnected caverns. They were a graceful, birdlike species who adored anything Federation. They housed one of the most comprehensive libraries of Federation history in any galaxy.

For that reason, they had a knack for creating a “need” for a visit from a Federation vessel. Anything to interact with the Federation.

Kris loved the planet and devoured the information in the library. It was planets like Aurelia that made Kris feel better about being back with the Federation.

In the middle of her shift, Picard, Riker, and Mr. Data charged out of Picard’s Ready Room. Data immediately replaced Beatrice at OPS as Picard barked, “Change course at one, one, five, six, mark nine. Warp eight. Engage.”

Data and Kris initiated the new course.

Kris heard Riker say, “Estimates are they have about ten minutes.”

“Warp nine,” Picard ordered sternly.

Kris quickly changed into Betazoid. She registered extreme worry in Picard and Riker. Mr. Data, of course, was unreadable. Troi’s presence was immediately felt in Betazoid.

Moments later, Troi and Crusher appeared on the bridge. They took their places next to Picard. Crusher said, “I’m ready in Sick Bay.”

Kris read Troi, or rather, Kris heard Troi? *They need our help.*

Kris looked at Troi, they locked eyes, but said nothing. Apparently, they didn’t need to speak. Kris had heard Troi.

Heard her. Not sensed or felt. Her thought was a voice inside Kris's head.

How was that possible?

"Lieutenant," barked Picard. He stood and got closer to Kris. "Can you improve our speed? Without damage to the Enterprise?"

"There appears to be an emergency?"

"There is. Time is imperative."

Kris's fingers flew across the board. She looked at her green fingertips. Without announcing it, she changed into Ramos. She worked on the board for another few seconds.

Mr. Data announced, "We are exceeding warp twelve, sir."

Picard hit his Communicator. "Mr. La Forge, report."

"Warp nine holding and steady, Captain."

Mr. Data looked at Picard. "Acknowledged," said Picard.

The Enterprise sped to the trinary system near M 43-Alpha.

"Mr. Worf, anything?"

Mr. Worf stood at his station. "Communications have been difficult. I will boost my signal."

Picard restlessly waited.

Riker sat in his chair, his posture rigid and his hands on his knees.

“Sir, I have located the Trundle,” said Mr. Worf.

Crackling, broken sounds came over the loud speaker.

“Captain...Not hear....Engine offline...Warp core damaged....can't break free of comet tail...Need...Enterprise, you...?”

“Captain of the Trundle. Are your emergency protocols in place?”

“Can't....”

The voice disappeared as the Communication was lost.

“Mr. Worf, re-establish.”

“Yes, sir.”

Troi looked to be in pain, she grabbed her head. Crusher held her shoulders. “Deanna?”

“The heat from the comet tail is...No, not the heat... something else...”

She shook her head.

“The ionization of mercury and other gases in the tail of the comet, along with the Trundle's engine failure is increasing the pressure on the warp core,” explained Data.

“They need to expel it,” said Riker, jumping up from his chair.

“For some reason, they are unable to do precisely that, sir,” said Mr. Data.

“On screen,” said Picard. “Magnify.”

The screen showed a small freighter, the ship was tilted as it was caught in the tail of a comet.

“How far are we?”

“Not close enough to beam up the crew, sir,” said Mr. Data.

“When?”

“Three minutes, eighteen seconds.”

Picard again hit his Communicator. “Mr. La Forge, why can’t the Trundle eject their core?”

“My best guess is lack of experience,” said Geordi.

“Their engineer has only been in space for a few months. This is her first mission on the Trundle. But, I’m thinking she’s not that familiar with the locking mechanism of this class of freighter. I’m not surprised because it’s a very complicated system. There were very few of these built because those controls were difficult to use.”

“And, this is the exact scenario where that ship needs to unlock their core before it blows them up,” said Riker.

“Except they either don’t know exactly how to do it or they don’t have enough time,” said Picard.

Kris stood, she faced Picard.

“I can unlock it,” she said.

Picard hesitated, but only for a moment. “Return to your station,” he said.

“Sir, I can go to the ship in Ramos and unlock the core to expel it before the ship explodes.”

“Sit down, Lieutenant,” he ordered.

“Sir, I can-“

“Sit down!” yelled Picard.

Kris froze. *Why won't he let me go and save those people? I can do it,* she thought.

Reluctantly, Kris sat down. She increased warp speed through her Ramos.

I need to ask him again. Or, just go. I see the locking mechanism. It's easy for me. They only have a few more minutes at most...

Kris’s thoughts were interrupted.

She joined the Captain, and the rest of the bridge crew as they watched the Trundle explode. The ship burst into a ball of flame and disappeared.

Troi screamed.

Kris felt it, too. The pain, the agony, the deaths. Loss. Unnecessary loss.

Crusher helped Troi to her feet, she assisted her to the turbolift.

Kris went back into Betazoid. *All of them, gone. So fast. It hurts. So bad.*”

She shared this pain with Troi. They both felt the same thing. Pain and loss and death. Even if their Betatal existences were different.

Kris went into Vulcan. That was a mistake. Vulcans experienced mass death on a personal level as well. Kris blocked those feelings quickly, she had to disconnect, become a “cold” Vulcan.

Troi could not escape it.

Kris glared at Picard. “Why wouldn’t you let me save them?”

“My ready room,” Picard said, then hustled to his Ready Room.

Kris followed.

Once the door to Picard’s Ready Room shut behind Kris, Picard said, “When I give an order, Lieutenant, I expect it to be obeyed without question.”

“Even if you made a poor decision? I could have gone there in Ramos and expelled the core of that ship. Those people did not have to die.”

“I am responsible for putting my crew into danger. I have to judge whether the situation is safe enough to not endanger the lives of my crew.”

“In Ramos-“

“I don’t care about what you can or cannot do in Ramos. I gave you an order.”

They stared at each other.

“You do not know, for sure, that if you’re in Ramos your life still wouldn’t have been in danger.”

“But, I do know.”

“Do you? You’ve been Ramos for, what, a month? The conditions in that ship, locked in the tail of that comet, you are one hundred percent certain?”

“I believe so.”

“Not good enough. I wasn’t. It’s my judgment. It’s your job to obey me.”

“Black and white? Is that what you’re saying?”

“You have a lot to learn about being a Star Fleet officer.”

Kris nodded. She headed to the door. She turned back. “I know enough to understand that deaths are always the ultimate responsibility of the captain. You say it’s black and white, obey me or else? To me it means you don’t quite understand what you have here. Me. These deaths are not just on the captain of the ship, they’re because of you, Picard.”

She walked out.

In the hallway, she turned into Ramos, and disappeared.

She ended up in Holodeck Three. It was unoccupied. She went into Vulcan, but Vulcan did not calm her this time. She avoided Betazoid and went into Altaran. She wanted to run, but she held off. She felt a rage inside her. Rage against what? The inexplicable loss of life? The helplessness? Picard?

Yes, Picard. Why couldn’t he accept that she was now six species, not five? Her sixth species was alien to most humanoids because it had powers that most couldn’t fathom.

What was he afraid of?

She went into Human to try to relate to Picard. Her emotions in human were dire—sadness, disappointment, and a sense of failure. The Enterprise failed to get to the Trundle on time, the Trundle failed to have a competent engineer onboard, and they failed to successfully steer the ship away from potential danger. The Trundle was a mineral-collection ship. Kris’s best guess was they were attempting to harvest minerals from this G-class comet. (Comets had been classified centuries ago when the Federation discovered that comets varied in degree,

composition, and especially radiation omission. No longer were comets just harmless. Dealing with any G-class comet had to be accomplished carefully.)

The Trundle made a mistake at some point, and the engine was damaged by the tail. Then, things quickly got out of control. It was a series of failures.

Failures that Kris could put a halt to, if only she had been allowed.

Kris thought about her desire to go into Ramos to help the crew of the Trundle. She had never experienced that “savior” feeling before. *Where did that come from?*

She went into Muztarif to try to laugh it all away. *They would have died no matter what, she thought during bouts of mirth. The game they were playing wasn't safe. You should only play safe games, if not, you could get an ouch.*

She got out of Muztarif. She went into Betazoid, and immediately sensed Troi. She was still suffering from the sudden loss of many lives. *Twenty-nine lives*, she was repeating over and over.

Kris left the holodeck.

Forty-five seconds later, she rang Troi's door. “Come,” said a voice.

The door opened, and Kris walked in.

Troi took a deep breath.

Crusher said, “Maybe you shouldn’t be...”

Kris ignored her. She sat next to Troi, and gently touched her arm.

Troi waited. She closed her eyes and breathed. Her breaths slowed, her face slowly melted into visible relief. It was working.

Kris and Troi could calm each other with a physical touch. Kris wasn’t sure it worked both ways, but she suddenly had to try. Troi had assisted her when she couldn’t sleep. Kris needed to return the favor.

Crusher sat and watched the pair.

After three minutes, Kris removed her hand. “Better?” she asked.

Troi nodded. “How?” she whispered.

Kris shook her head. “I am not sure. Our connection has a physical element to it.”

“And, a verbal one. I could hear your thoughts when you were in Betazoid?”

Kris stared at Troi. That was unsettling. Kris didn’t mind being able to hear Troi, but she wasn’t crazy about Troi being able to hear her.

“Only when I’m in Betazoid?”

“Definitely. You went into it briefly on the bridge. Before... You were thinking about what you had just heard me say.”

“I heard you say, ‘They need our help.’ It was the first time I had been able to hear your words.”

“For me as well. I don’t know why it’s happening now.”

Crusher stood. “Are you okay?” she asked Troi. “Do you need a sedative?”

Troi shook her head. “I don’t want one. Not now.”

Crusher glanced at Kris. “I’ll leave you two alone for a bit.”

She walked out.

“Please go back into Betazoid.”

Kris had gone into Vulcan as Crusher was leaving. “I would rather not.”

“I want to be able to feel what you’re going through.”

“Why?”

“Because of what you wanted to do.”

“I wanted to go into Ramos. I could have gone to the Trundle and saved those people. That is self-explanatory. Picard stopped me.”

“You didn’t agree with him.”

Kris was quiet. Finally, she said, “I have never had an impulse to do something like that. But, I did want to do it. I felt confident I could succeed.”

“And, the captain refused to send you. He didn’t believe in you?”

Kris looked away. She suddenly wanted to leave. She stood.

“Don’t leave,” asked Troi.

“I am uncomfortable with this conversation. He is the captain. However, he was wrong. The decision did not have to be emotionally based or even based on the safety of a member of his crew. The decision should have been based on what I can do in Ramos. He simply does not understand or believe in my Ramos abilities.”

“I think he does. I think he captains this ship according keeping people safe. That’s his first and foremost responsibility.”

“I am the exception.”

“You can’t be. He can’t do that. Kris, there is no right answer here.”

“Except for one thing...twenty-nine beings died. They didn’t need to.”

She walked out.

Picard found Kris back on Holodeck Three. She was tree jumping on Altara while in Altaran. Picard watched her leap with impressive physicality. *It's almost like a dance*, he thought. *More than graceful. Strength plus grace plus...she's a part of the trees. She's one with them.*

He patiently waited until she leapt to the ground.

He walked slowly toward her, not getting too close. He wanted the distance.

“As Captain, I am responsible for all the lives on my ship. Including yours. I was not sure you would be safe. For example, if you showed up there as the Trundle exploded, what then?”

Kris remained quiet. *In Ramos, I would be fine*, she thought, but did not verbalize. She wasn't completely sure of that statement.

“Good,” he said. “You have doubts.”

“Is that why you came? To say that?”

“That, and we need to come to an understanding, Kris. You are not like my other crew members. You are not even like Mr. Data. You are completely different than all of them. I do not know all of your talents, in each of your species. Neither do you. Counselor Troi now tells me you can hear her thoughts, and that

physical touch has a calming effect. It was, apparently, not like this until recently. Additionally, you did not know your DNA was a part of this ship, and you did not know that your Ramos comes through your Humanoids when you are piloting the Enterprise. You are learning as you go along, evolving, changing, whatever it is. Which means there is a gray area.”

Kris could not hide her confusion. Her eyes crinkled, her mouth opened slightly.

“I do believe in a gray area. I also understand you can do things that no one else under my Command can. Kris, those deaths are on me whether Star Fleet assigns me the blame or not. I will put it on myself because I failed to save them. I was there, but we weren’t quick enough. The saving grace is I didn’t lose any of my own crew. I have to be okay with that. I have no other choice.”

“I don’t know what to do now,” said Kris. “If you spoke to Troi, you know exactly what’s going through my Betazoid species. It is worse than if I were in Vulcan and had to absorb the deaths of millions of Vulcans. Vulcans have that link, and this feeling was stronger. It will take Troi and I time to recover from it.”

“Will you? Will Troi?”

Kris thought about it. “I believe so.” She allowed herself a small smile. “I am not one hundred percent sure, however.”

“I am. I think you’ll both be fine.” Picard walked closer to Kris. “Protocol.”

Kris was again confused. “Sir?”

“We need to establish a Kris-to-Captain-protocol. My ship often encounters emergency situations. If you have another opportunity, and my guess is you may, can we establish a short-handed dialogue of some sort? One that communicates to me not only your desire but your confidence, and by that I mean you are confident that you will be safe, when inserting yourself into an emergency situation via one of your species? I need you to evaluate a situation fully. Not just hop on the horse and go.”

“The horse?”

“An expression. Before you jump into something, convince me you’ll be safe.”

“With a dialogue between you and me? Like our own language?”

“I’ll need it. Because I almost let you go.”

Kris stared at Picard. “But, you couldn’t?”

“No. Not that time. And, no promises that I’ll ever feel you’ll be safe. No promises that I will ever let you go. Even if you use our future dialogue. I cannot make that promise.”

“Can you promise to try to accept what I am?”

Picard nodded. “I have recently learned about Muztarif, but I am still in the dark about Ramos. For all the years I’ve known Guinan, she very cleverly kept most of the details of her people to herself.”

Kris thought for a moment. “A cheat sheet.”

“A Ramos cheat sheet?”

“I can’t give you all of it, Captain. A history, some of the details. My abilities, some of which you already know about.”

“Between you and me. That I can promise.”

Kris nodded.

Picard left. As he walked to his quarters, he was still uneasy. *She’s still just learning. I think I just gave her permission to jump into almost anything without fully knowing how to handle a situation. Or, perhaps she does. Perhaps, I’m just being...What? Over-protective.*

Picard stopped. *I am not her parent.*

A crewman passed Picard, he continued to his quarters.

Once inside, he poured himself a drink, a tall glass of Saurian brandy. He needed the real stuff.

He sat and sipped the drink.

He closed his eyes. He saw the Trundle explode. He opened his eyes. *It’s not the first time, and it won’t be the last.*

He sipped more of his drink. He rubbed his face. He wanted to sleep, but knew it wouldn’t come. He could take something. He should take something, but decided against it.

Picard's problems were mounting by the day. Ewell and the Federation. Peterson. The Trundle. Kris. *Was Kris a problem? She's new to my life. New how? What should I do about her?*

For a moment, he considered contacting Star Fleet. This happened to him nightly. Each night for the last few weeks, Picard had the strong urge to contact Star Fleet and report Peterson. To tell the entire story about Kris, and to ask why. What happened? And, why did it happen? How could it happen? What happened to the Star Fleet that he knew, that he loved? Where did it go? How could the Federation fail this one being so badly?

Why Kris? His daughter.

He'd have to tell them that, too. His daughter.

He'd have to tell them all of it.

Picard didn't contact Star Fleet.

He knew he couldn't.

Except, he knew he'd have to. And soon.

* * *

They hadn't gotten together to play cards in weeks. The senior officers and card playing friends—Riker, Worf, Geordi,

Data, Crusher, and Troi—had long ago accepted that sometimes their plans had to be delayed. That was the life of Star Fleet officers. Especially senior officers.

This time around, they hadn't gotten together because of Deanna. Her transformation to Betatal had been all-consuming.

The group wanted her there. So, they put it off. Until tonight.

Luckily, Troi had finally gotten a good night's sleep after the destruction of the Trundle two days earlier. That's when Riker called the game for that night.

The players sat in their usual seats. Mr. Data donned his card-playing cap, he decided that he fit in with other card players if he wore the hat to take on the persona of an actual card player.

As usual, the others accepted Data for just being Data, the android that wanted to be human.

Three hands in, it was Riker's deal. He held the cards instead. "Look, it's an understatement to say that things have changed. I don't just mean with Deanna. Things don't feel normal anymore."

"Did normal for us ever feel normal?" said Geordi, always the one to add a sobering perspective. Geordi was far from morose, yet when Geordi gave his opinions, they were more often than not from a place of truth, simplicity, and most definitely human.

Mr. Data was monotone and factual, but he often lacked subtlety, and had a difficult time understanding empathy. Geordi provided the perfect balance to Mr. Data.

Riker smiled. Everyone relaxed a little bit, something that had been missing during the first three rounds of Texas Hold 'Em. Geordi had a knack for doing that.

“This is just us right now,” continued Riker. “I can accept change. But, I do have this feeling that things aren't done changing yet.”

“It's like we're just waiting,” said Crusher.

“I feel like that, too,” added Geordi.

“As do I,” said Troi. Everyone looked her. She smiled. It was good to see Deanna smile. Riker was definitely relieved to see it. “I can't tell you what is coming. I'm not a prophet. I sense all of you, you're all uneasy, restless. Captain Picard the most. I don't know what to tell all of you.”

“Perhaps you would say that we will get through whatever it is together,” said Mr. Data.

Now, that made everyone smile. Riker and Geordi even chuckled. Mr. Data also had the ability to be surprisingly intuitive.”

“Yes, Data,” said Troi. “Now, can we play some cards?”

Riker nodded. “I'm in.”

They all proceeded to toss in a chip. Their game was back.

CHAPTER FOUR

Kris had piloted the Enterprise six times since the destruction of the Trundle three weeks ago. Each time had been quite routine. Almost boring.

They had gone to the Delta system for a geological survey which took less than a day.

After that, they went to Zapplan-R to discuss how to help that planet with their water crisis. That mission took three days, and they left after the arrival of an Engineering ship which would remain on the planet for a month. The goal was to help the Zapplans build new water re-generating system and install better distribution tunnels.

The catch was the Zapplan people didn't have a lot of an advanced technology, nor did they want it. They appreciated the assistance of the Federation, but asked for help only reluctantly and with certain restrictions. The technology had to be simplistic. The Zapplans preferred to work the soil and repair things with their bare hands. They preferred catch basins to store water. They wanted filtration systems that used only planet-based minerals and materials. They liked the idea of "old style" water systems as well farming. For the most part, their planet could handle the minimal technology, they had only two million people. They were forced to contact the Federation after the drought worsened.

The Enterprise was now moving at warp seven heading for Star Base Sixteen.

Kris's shift began in two minutes. She entered a turbolift. "Bridge," she said.

She felt it.

A star. It was about to burst.

Near the Enterprise. Too near.

When the turbolift doors opened, Kris burst onto the bridge. "Captain," she screamed.

Captain Picard was standing face to face with Troi, who looked distraught.

The Enterprise suddenly jerked hard to the right.

Picard, Troi, and others were thrown to the ground.

By instinct, Picard screamed, "Red Alert! Mr. Data? Report?"

Mr. Data, by android nature always calm and in control, worked his controls. "A star, Captain. It went supernova the moment we passed."

"Why weren't we alerted?" Picard struggled to stand, the Enterprise was still tilted to the right. He helped Troi to her feet. Riker held onto her.

"Unknown," said Mr. Data.

Kris hustled to the helm. She grabbed the current pilot—she didn't know his name—and pushed him out of the chair. She sat and checked the systems.

The Enterprise was in trouble.

The warp field had been compromised when the star burst into its supernova phase just as the Enterprise was passing it. The blast shoved the Enterprise into a tailspin. It was a projectile.

And, it was heading straight for an uninhabited planet.

Picard hit his Communicator. Nothing happened. The red lights of the Red Alert flashed, but Picard could not communicate with Engineering.

“Mr. Worf?”

“Communications out,” said Worf who had a trail of blood along his left cheek. He had been thrown and his head had hit the edge of his console.

“Mr. Data, options,” shouted Picard.

Data worked on his console. The silence put fear into the entire Enterprise crew. They were diving for the planet in an out-of-control nose dive. “Systems are out. Engineering is unresponsive. I have no control here.”

“Evasive maneuvers. Gain control of the ship, Mr. Data. Now!” ordered Picard.

It didn't happen often, but fear shown in Picard's eyes.

Kris had to act, and quickly.

She went into Ramos. She looked at her hands. She commanded them to expand beyond her fingers. She ordered them to...encompass the Enterprise.

In actuality, Kris had no idea what she was doing. Yet, she was doing it. She was extending the blue field, the one she knew was Ramos, around the Enterprise...the entire ship.

It took a few moments to accomplish this.

When she felt the entire Enterprise in her Ramos hold, like a baby being swaddled, it was now or never. She had to divert the ship. They were moments from crashing. Not landing, the Enterprise was about to crash head first into the planet.

She hovered her hands over the controls.

Everyone was watching Kris. Data, Riker, Worf, Troi, the rest of the bridge crew. Picard watched her as well. He wanted to say something, an order? But, he knew it would be pointless.

They were all hoping. Their hopes were with Kris.

Nothing happened. Not for a few long, agonizing moments, then the front of the Enterprise tipped upwards. It tilted more, then more.

Their speed did not decrease, but they were leveling out.

It wasn't quite enough, however, as the lower outer hull scraped the top of a hill. The thruster quad was hit. The warp core or the antimatter systems had not been breached. Yet.

Most importantly, they didn't crash.

And, the Enterprise was climbing. Higher and higher.

Finally, the bow of the Enterprise faced away from the planet. It flew into the atmosphere. The Enterprise shook hard as it broke through into orbit.

It didn't stop there.

The Enterprise sprinted away from the planet and into space.

Carefully and slowly, Picard made his way to Kris. Her eyes were closed, her body was still, yet he noticed her legs shook. The blue form that emitted from her hands was in the shape of a ball. Picard hit a button on her console, the screen came to life. Picard could see space through a blueish tint.

She's flying the ship in Ramos? The entire ship?

"Kris?" he said quietly.

Kris did not move.

A minute later, the Enterprise slowed. It took another two minutes to stop the ship.

Kris still had not moved.

Picard looked at his bridge officers, then back at Kris.
“Kris?”

“Captain,” she said quietly. “The ship is out of danger. I engulfed it in Ramos because, well, there was no other choice.”

“Agreed,” said Picard. “You certainly did not need my permission this time to act.”

The Enterprise shook slightly, Picard grabbed the back of Kris’s chair.

“I am relieved to hear...Captain, there is a lot of damage. The worse is the thruster quad. Most of it scraped the terrain and is now exposed to space. Force fields are in effect, but the lag is dangerous. It needs repair immediately. I fear I cannot release the Enterprise until those repairs have been made. If I did, stability will be very compromised, we will drift, and that will create other problems as the engine is damaged as well.”

Picard glanced at Mr. Data. “She is correct, sir. We are vulnerable if we drift in this condition. Our damaged systems will be further stressed. We can be exposed to damage from asteroids. The orbit from another planet could pull us in. Additionally, other passing ships may put us in danger if they are unable to read that we are here or if they pass too closely. Anything that passes us too closely while we are in this distress, will cause us further damage.”

Picard often did not like Data's long-winded explanations. This time it was welcome. He needed all of the facts before making a decision.

The turbolift doors were pried open by Geordi and two other officers. Geordi rushed to Picard and Riker. "Captain, we had no warning. I've never experienced a star going supernova that fast."

"Approximately, one in every fifteen million stars that transform into their supernova phase will do it spontaneously--"

"Later, Mr. Data," said Picard. *And, then there are times when I have to shut Mr. Data up.* He looked at Kris, then to Geordi. "Kris is holding us. She needs the thruster quad repaired before she can release the ship. How long?"

"Two days."

To Kris, he said, "How long can you hold it?"

"If I were only Ramos, I believe I could hold the ship for that amount of time. However, my humanoid species...they have been compromised. Do not ask me how, because I am not entirely sure. I just know they are not in good shape at the moment."

"I can feel it, too," said Troi. "Her Betazoid feels very weak."

"Mr. La Forge," continued Kris, "if you could put some kind of fix there within the force field. Anything that will hold

until a proper fix can be accomplished. I believe that can be done in a matter of hours, is that correct?"

Picard looked at Geordi. "Mr. La Forge?"

Geordi nodded. "We'll get right to it," he said. "We climbed here through the tubes." He looked at Data. "Any chance we don't have to climb back?"

"All turbolifts are currently inoperable," he said.

"All Communications remain out, sir," said Mr. Worf. "It will take a few hours."

Picard looked at Riker. "Distribute emergency Communicators between Engineering, sick bay, and the bridge. All available emergency personnel are to report below decks to assist in the thruster quad repair. Pull everyone from non-essential departments, I want as many hands down there as possible. I want a report on injuries from sick bay. And, Mr. Worf, I want Communications back in two hours."

"Yes, sir," grunted Mr. Worf.

Geordi gestured to his engineers. "Let's get climbing, guys." They slid back into the turbolift.

Picard looked at Kris. "Is there anything I can do?"

"You have issued the proper orders," said Kris. "I will eventually need Doctor Crusher to be here, when I go out of Ramos. I will need medical attention at that time."

“Kris, what happens if one of your humanoid species...” he stopped, not knowing how to get out of the question gracefully, a question he probably shouldn’t have asked, at least not now.

“Are you asking if one of them can die, while I still live?” said Kris.

“I... think I tried to, yet realized it’s an inappropriate question.”

“The answer is...I don’t know. That is not a very satisfying answer. However, I believe I do not wish to find out.”

Picard took a deep breath. *Nor do I*, he thought.

* * *

It took Geordi’s team of tens of engineers and non-engineers four hours to repair the thruster quad to the point where Kris could release the Enterprise.

During the wait, Kris struggled to maintain stability of ship while the health of her humanoid species got worse by the hour.

She knew each of her humanoid species had some kind of specific injury. She wasn't quite sure what species had what, yet she had time to make some guesses.

She thought her Human might have had a stroke. Her Betazoid, however, might be dealing with a nerve issue called "Ven-Tralan." This condition affected the nerve connections to the brain when the body was afflicted with a jarring injury of some sort. One that usually involved only the mind. She felt strongly that her muscles in Altaran were extremely cramped, like most of them were now pushing into her bones. She expected extreme pain in Altaran. And, Muztarif had one condition that was the result of extreme shock. They didn't have a name for this condition. Muztarifans did this on purpose since naming this scary condition would make it even scarier. The result of this extreme state of shock caused a shutdown, and possibly even death.

Kris wasn't sure what to expect with her Vulcan. She knew Vulcans could handle extreme trauma. Their ability to disconnect allowed them to function well under most circumstances. However, could a Vulcan handle a situation where a Ramos residing within the same body took over control of an entire starship and steered it into space and held onto it for hours? Without any damage to said Vulcan?

Kris simply wasn't sure.

When Geordi reported that the thruster quad was repaired enough to allow Kris to safely release the Enterprise—he communicated this over the now-repaired Communication

system—Kris was more than ready. In several ways, this experience had been worse for her than when she couldn't sleep. She was worried about permanent damage to some or all of her humanoid species.

She was afraid Picard would find out what happened if one of them were to die.

Crusher had been hovering over Kris for the last hour. She had spent three hours dealing with the twenty-six badly injured crew members as well as the one hundred and forty-two minor injuries. Her team had expertly handled all the injuries. There had been no deaths.

Crusher and Kris had agreed to a plan.

Kris had been strongly reluctant at first, then finally agreed with Crusher that a plan was the best way to help her. Kris would release the Enterprise yet remain in Ramos. She would then go to sick bay while still in Ramos. She would go “her way.” Disappear and reappear.

Crusher and her team would be waiting.

Kris would leave Ramos.

Crusher and her team would go to work. They had worked out a system for the medical staff to quickly treat the worse issues first. Kris would go into a pre-arranged species, one that the team was waiting for. She would stay in that species for two minutes, then proceed to the next one on the list.

Doctor Crusher had been shocked when she finally got Kris to agree to go to sick bay. She knew Kris hated to be there. After Kris gave in, Crusher got nervous. *Kris has to be in real trouble this time*, she thought.

Once Kris was ready to release the Enterprise, Crusher left to go to Sick Bay. She reported when she had arrived in sick bay. “We’re ready.”

Picard nodded to Kris.

Kris closed her eyes, she visualized the release of her Ramos, the blue light returning to her body, the release of the ship. It began slowly, even though the entire process only took forty-five seconds.

Then, Kris disappeared.

She re-appeared in Sick Bay.

She laid down on a bed, Crusher had insisted that the beds in Sick Bay would analyze her symptoms quicker and more efficiently than a hand-held scanner. Crusher had to reserve as many seconds as possible in their process.

Kris went into Vulcan.

The bed quickly analyzed Kris’s health. Her face was a dark red. Her head shook.

“Mort-M-Tregs,” Crusher announced as she looked at the readings. “Her blood is too hot. Hypo.” An assistant handed

Crusher a hypo, she injected Kris. Kris's face did not change color.

“Again,” said Crusher. Another hypo, another injection.

Finally, the red hue faded on Kris's face and her head stopped shaking.

“Check for blood shock,” said Crusher.

“Her BP is 240 over 200.”

“Good, for a Vulcan.”

She looked at Kris. “Two minutes are up. Let's go.”

Kris nodded.

She went into Altaran next, followed by Muztarif, Human, and finally Betazoid. Kris screamed in pain while in Altaran. The extreme cramps in her arms and legs were eased soon after Crusher gave her an Altaran muscle relaxer.

It was trickier for Crusher to deal with Kris's Muztarif affliction, an extreme case of hives with a very high fever. It was not the unnamed extreme shock affliction. It was bad enough that Crusher needed an extra minute to control the fever and stop the hives from blistering.

The Human stroke affected the right side of Kris's body. Crusher knew exactly how to treat this ailment. She had Kris's right arm and leg moving with one dose of the potent medication used to treat the early stages of Human stroke, and Kris's speech had not been affected.

Finally, in Betazoid, Kris did have Ven-Tralan. Crusher had planned for Kris to go into Betazoid last so she could bring in Troi, who had been standing by. After Kris turned, Troi snuck an arm in between two medical assistants and grabbed Kris's shoulder. Crusher administered the needed medicine while being aided by Troi's physical contact.

After this first round of treating the most dangerous stages of each of Kris's ailments, Crusher asked Kris to go through the list of species once more. Kris started at the top once again.

The doctor took more time on each of Kris's species during this second round of treatments. She did a more in-depth analysis of Kris's health and ordered extensive tests. She worked on each of Kris's species for approximately an hour per species.

Kris, of course, wanted this visit to Sick Bay over as soon as possible. Yet, she knew that her humanoid species' all needed a little R & R. She had to tolerate it.

Unknown to Kris, or to Crusher, Picard had slipped into Sick Bay at the beginning of Round Two of Kris's treatment. He remained near the door, well out of the way of Crusher's hustling staff.

Main Sick Bay was packed with patients and staff. He also knew the other sick bays on the ship were also busy. He felt pride for his medical staff, they had done an exemplary job during this crisis. He would have to remember to tell Crusher, she would be pleased.

Picard stayed for five minutes, while watching Crusher and her team work on Kris. When it was clear that Kris was no longer in any danger, Picard left.

Now what? he thought as he made his way back to the bridge. *Kris instinctively went into Ramos and saved this ship. She physically gained control of it, keeping it from slamming into that planet, then she held it together while we put a bandage on it.*

Which reminded Picard. He hit his Communicator. “Mr. La Forge, report.”

Geordi’s voice was clear. “The thruster quad on the port side has been replaced. It’s all secure. We’re working on the aft. My crew is two hours away from getting the engine up and running. I’m on my way there now to make it one hour.”

“What about the core?”

“Minimal damage, and it’s...well, it kinda repaired itself.”

“Did it?”

“That’s the best to describe it. Data and I both assessed the damage, and then twenty minutes after Kris released the Enterprise, the core was fine.”

“Continue with your work. Let me know when we can get going to Star Base Sixteen.”

“Will do.”

Picard entered a turbolift. "Bridge," he said. *The core is a part of the structure of the engine, yet it can self-heal? Or, did it get healed because Crusher healed Kris?*

The turbolift doors opened, and Picard walked onto the bridge. "Report," he said.

Mr. Data swiveled in his chair. "The engines will be back online in fifty-five minutes."

Picard looked at Riker. "Star Base Sixteen is ready for us," said Riker. "Sick Bay reports all patients are either back to post or recovering. Communications are completely restored. Mr. Worf has reported no issues with security. And, repair shifts have Commenced rotations."

"In four hour blocks. Star Fleet Sixteen is seventeen hours from this point at...Mr. Data?"

Data again swiveled in his chair to face Picard. "I believe we may be able to reach Warp Four, but I would recommend Warp Three."

"Make that nineteen hours at warp three. I want repair crews at the ready," said Picard.

"Yes, sir," said Riker.

Picard headed to his Ready Room, yet he stopped and looked back at Riker. "I want all senior officers in the conference room at oh eight hundred. I want to know exactly why this happened."

Riker nodded. “Yes, sir.”

* * *

“Okay, you’re all done,” said Crusher to Kris.

Kris sat up in the medical bed. She had had enough of Crusher and her potions after two hours. She knew Crusher had taken her time. Kris suspected she had done it on purpose. She finally had Kris in Sick Bay, it was what she had wanted, right? To study Kris.

Kris hopped out of the bed. She went into Vulcan, and headed for the exit.

Crusher did not stop her. She didn’t say anything.

At the exit, Kris stopped. *Maybe this time was different*, she thought. She looked back at Crusher, who was checking another patient. “How’s the pain?” she asked the thin ensign. “Much better,” he replied. She moved his shoulder. “Any pain here?” she asked. He shook his head and smiled.

Kris looked around Sick Bay. It was less busy now, the crisis was over. Only a few patients remained and Kris had overheard that the other Sick Bays were clear of patients.

Other doctors, all part of Crusher’s staff, were busy with equipment or logs. One was working on a patient whose back had been broken.

Crusher glanced at the door, her head tilted when she noticed Kris. “I thought you left,” she said, then she smiled. “Can’t get enough of me?”

Kris remained. She honestly didn’t know what to do. *Crusher is being nice. Why? Does she want me back to conduct more tests? Is this a ploy?*

Crusher patted the ensign’s leg. “You’re good to go. Take a shift off to recover.” The ensign climbed off the bed and exited, he was smiling as he slipped past Kris.

Crusher wandered over to Kris. “Really, Kris, why are you still here?”

“Are you different?” she asked.

Crusher hesitated. She gestured for Kris to follow her, and headed to her office.

Kris didn’t move right away, but then her feet took a few steps. The next thing Kris knew, she was standing in Crusher’s office. Crusher sat behind her desk looking up at her. She looked tired.

“Kris, I understand you’ve had very bad experiences. With medical personnel and...other experiences. I don’t want to harm you. Or...study you. With the exception of finding out how you tick so that I can help. I believe you once told me that you didn’t come with a manual.”

Kris nodded. “I know it. Doctor, I want to believe you. I...think I do.”

“It takes time. You got through it this time. You had some bad injuries. I’m curious how they came about, of course. What caused the injuries while you were in Ramos saving this ship?”

“I don’t know.”

“Either do I. And, if I’m curious it’s because of the needed information for the future. If something like this were to happen again. The plan to heal you worked well, I thought.”

“It did. I was reluctant.”

“I know you were. You did great.”

Kris headed for the door, just to prove to herself that she could, that Crusher wasn’t trying to trick her. But, she turned back.

“I...should say thank you. Would that be the appropriate thing to say in this situation?”

Crusher smiled and nodded. “It would be.”

“Doctor, I’m assuming by now it is obvious...that I lack...certain appropriate social skills.”

“It’s been noted. Yet, we don’t dwell on it. Small steps, Kris.”

Kris took a breath, then turned and left.

Oh eight hundred hours came seven hours later. Picard looked around the conference room at his senior staff. “How could we not know a star was about to go supernova?”

“I have refined my data,” said Mr. Data. “Exactly one in every fifteen point six five seven million stars that go into their supernova phase do so spontaneously. If we were not in warp, we might have had a seven point two minute warning. However, under the conditions of this type of supernova transition, the ship’s scanners might mis-identify it as metallic space debris or possibly-“

“Were we unlucky,” interrupted Picard. He knew Mr. Data could go on and on indefinitely. This time, he didn’t need all of the facts. Mr. Data never took Picard’s interruptions personally.

“We were almost unlucky,” corrected Crusher.

“How is Kris?” asked Picard.

“Back in one of the holodecks. Hopefully, sleeping by now. She’s fine. Better than I would have guessed, considering she really hates being in Sick Bay,” said Crusher.

“I spoke with her,” said Troi. “She said she knew how to grab hold of Enterprise to keep it from falling. She knew she could do it in Ramos. It was a reaction.”

“And, a good one. We didn’t crash. No lives were lost. We’re on our way to Star Base Sixteen for further repairs and a

short shore leave. All is well.” Picard’s face told a different story, and his senior officers understood it.

Picard expressed his thoughts. “There’s yet another layer to this new normal that concerns me. A crew member with...extraordinary, dare I say, God-like powers. Does she belong here? Opinions?”

“Are you really asking that, after what we went through with Q?” said Crusher. She looked at Troi, and said, “What Deanna went through.”

“I am asking. For me, the answer is yes. For me, it was worth fighting Q. My problem is I continue to hesitate when it comes to Kris’s Ramos. I am reminded of something Alpha R said. He said that Kris’s presence did not pose a threat to *their* world. Does her presence pose a threat to ours? Why did Star Fleet keep her locked up?”

“They didn’t know about her Ramos, though?” said Crusher.

“No, but she may have posed a threat to them. An unknown threat. She had been created by an ex-Federation scientist. They didn’t know how or why, or what she really was, for that matter. We know more now, but the layer of Ramos makes me uneasy. I’m not entirely sure why. Kris acted by instinct to save this ship. What else will she do by instinct? And, will it cause harm at some point?”

The room was silent.

“There’s nothing we can do, sir,” said Geordi’s calm voice. “We fought for her like we supported Data when he had to prove the Federation didn’t own him. It’s not exactly the same thing, but my point is we gave Data a chance, he’s a sentient being. Kris deserves the same.”

Picard nodded, so did Riker and Crusher. “You’re right, Mr. La Forge. I say we do what we always do, we move forward. However, I have one more question...And, I’m going to ask Kris this one as well...How did she move this ship and keep it together? Was it her, or the Ramos, or both?”

Mr. Data answered first. “I suspect it was only Kris when she was in Ramos. She could not have done it while piloting in a humanoid species with Ramos going through her, as she has explained. So, therefore it was Kris in Ramos.”

“Which means both,” said Geordi.

“Does the DNA in the ship count for something?” asked Riker.

“It’s a connection,” said Troi. “I’ve asked myself the same question. Could it have been all six, with Ramos in the lead? That would explain why the five humanoid species’ were damaged.”

“I assumed she stressed them too much,” said Crusher.

“Exactly,” said Troi. “They’re a part of her, she can’t disconnect them. They’re in there.”

“Let’s put these questions to the side for now,” said Picard. “My report will reflect a spontaneous supernova transition of a star that badly damaged our engines as well as other systems.”

“We’re keeping out the whole almost-crashed-on-a-planet part only to be saved by a Ramos being part?” said Riker.

Picard took a deep breath. “Again, I’m hesitant to fully expose all the details to Star Fleet. Which is why I’m beginning to ask these questions of you. They’ll be more. We’ve advanced into a completely new phase of the unknown. I do not know, half the time, how to proceed. There will be an end to it all, that much I will promise you. Because I cannot keep it up. I need to decide how to deal with Admiral Peterson, and these other issues will, hopefully, follow suit. I’m hoping this happens sooner rather than later. I appreciate your patience. I know this has been hard on all of you.”

Picard stood. “There is one more question I will pose. It is perhaps an even larger question, and yet it also cannot be answered at this time. This one has also been bothering me. How did Kris’s mother built Kris? If Elizabeth Rogan took my DNA, she therefore had to get DNA from five other species. Logically, one of them was from a Ramos being. How did she do it? Hard enough to put together five humanoid species, yet Elizabeth Rogan put together six. And, one of them, well, one of those species is a very powerful being. Strong enough to hold a star ship together. That’s a question for another day.”

CHAPTER FIVE

The Enterprise spent four days at Star Base Sixteen. By the time they reached the Star Base, there were very few issues left that needed retrofitting, to the surprise of the engineers at the base. Geordi had told them that his crew had continued to make repairs when the ship was in route, yet he left out the part about the repairs that had happened without his crew's intervention. Those repairs were mostly minor, yet there were enough of them to make it noticeable. Another notch for self-repairs, said Geordi to Data as way of explanation. Kris couldn't explain it, so Geordi decided to not even try.

Kris did not pilot the week after they left the Star Base. Picard insisted she take a break. She did not want any time off, however, so she kept busy in Engineering. Geordi assigned her tasks, some of them he felt were quite beneath her. Kris didn't mind, however. She liked the work. Mundane tasks, details, and time-consuming tasks were fine with her. She preferred to be busy.

Kris was finally assigned to pilot again on a second shift. She headed to the bridge.

The Enterprise was in orbit around Urbane Five, a mining planet. For centuries, Urbane Five worked in tandem with a "sister" planet, Cellinum, in the Gamma sector. The planet of Urbane Five was rich in adamantite, they had

thousands of mines. Adamantite was rare in this sector with Urbane Five having the only deposits. It was also valuable to Urbane Five because the mines regenerated its stores of adamantite every five years. The planet would literally never run out.

Similarly, the planet of Cellinum was rich in mithril fibers. When the adamantite was mined, it was shipped to Cellinum where it was heated and mixed with mithril fibers. Mithril fibers were the only ones that could hold the adamantite together in order to create the titanium-strength metals that were essential to life in this galaxy. The metals were used in the production of buildings, star ships, medical replacement parts, almost every facet of life. The mithril fibers were only used to combine the melted adamantite, and the finished metals could not be made without the adamantite. These two materials had worked hand in hand for generations and generations.

With only the occasional stoppage of production. Over the centuries, these stoppages always had a Common theme—either Urbane Five insulted Cellinum or vice versa.

There had been times when authorities on the richest planets in this galaxy, the two planets that all the other planets relied on, acted like spoiled children. Which meant, their entire galaxy had to suffer, until the children kissed and made up.

The last such tiff was two decades ago.

This time, the Enterprise was asked to negotiate a truce between the two planets after both had stopped production of their respected materials. Apparently, the daughter of Urbane

Five's High Counselor, MonDuleA, was left devastated after the abrupt halt of her marriage plans to the son of Cellinum's President, Deekka Ruh. The son had walked out on her wedding day. MonDuleA announced that his people would not accept such an insult. Deekka Ruh fired back that he was not in favor of the union in the first place. Which had been suggested by the Council of Twelve, a ruling body on the planet of Titan X—the largest planet in the galaxy—as a gesture of goodwill.

The gesture had backfired.

Kris relieved the pilot on duty and sat at the Comm.

She brought up her board, and checked the systems. All steady.

“On screen,” said Picard. He hovered behind Kris and Data, who sat at OPS. Riker, Troi, and Worf were in their usual positions.

The face of Urbane Five's High Counselor, MonDuleA, appeared on the screen. MonDuleA could have easily passed for a gentlemanly Earth grandfather-type with his sparkling eyes and slight smile. His kind-looking face could put a hardened criminal on the path to lawfulness.

“This is pointless, Mr. Picard,” he said, in a quiet voice. Even his voice had a gentleness to it.

“Captain Picard,” corrected Picard.

“Ah, yes. You Federation types prefer your titles. We are not negotiating.”

“You refuse to even sit down with the Cellinums?”

“It took a month of negotiating when I was new at this job two decades ago. There’s still plenty of time yet,” said MonDuleA.

“Meanwhile, planets in your galaxy get to suffer.”

“This time is different. This time, well, I am not taking up the negotiating mantle. I have hired it out, if you will.”

“Hired it out? You have a barrister?”

“I have an advisor. This advisor strongly suggests that we hold out until we are fully satisfied. We demand reparations,” he said.

“Because a would-be bridge was injured by an arranged marriage?”

“We arrange marriages, Mr. Picard. We have been doing it for centuries.”

“Captain. High Counselor, I need to sit down with a representative from your planet, and one from Cellinum. That is what needs to happen,” said Picard.

MonDuleA’s attention was focused to his right. It appeared as if he was listening to someone. He looked back at Picard. “That is satisfactory. My advisor will represent us,” he said.

“Fine,” said Picard.

“I have been asked to introduce my advisor. May I do so?” asked MonDuleA.

“Of course.”

MonDuleA moved away from the screen. For a moment, the screen was blank, no one appeared.

Picard shifted restlessly.

Finally, a female sat in MonDuleA’s seat.

Kris’s eyes shot open.

So did Picard’s. His mouth opened. *This is not happening.*

Elizabeth Rogan.

MonDuleA’s advisor was Kris’s mother.

“Hello, Jean Luc,” she said with a smile on her face. She looked down and to her left. “Hello, Kris. So nice to see my daughter again.”

* * *

Kris wasn’t sure she was breathing. She was, of course, but the proverbial punch to the gut had hit its mark. She was shocked to be staring at her mother.

Of course, Kris looked nothing like her. Elizabeth Rogan had smooth skin for an “older” woman, but age-crinkles were evident around her eyes. Her hair was curly and perfectly groomed, her chin a bit pointy and her cheeks flushed. Her eyes were piercing. And, she knew it. It was as if Liz Rogan used her eyes when she really needed to hammer home a point, they could bore into steel.

“What is the meaning of this?” Picard said quietly.

“I am advisor to the ruler of Urbane Five in their negotiations with Cellinum. I thought that would be obvious by now. Or, has age caught up with your hearing?”

Picard ignored the slight, he did not engage in childish taunts. “This situation is quite un-necessary. An arranged marriage didn’t work out. So be it. Why would both sides be so angered by something rather trivial that they feel the need to stop production of necessary materials?”

“Trivial? Oh, Jean Luc. It was love. How insulting to the beings of both planets. How little you think of love. Besides, you have yet to hear all of it. MonDuleA’s daughter was most distraught, so much so she tried to kill herself. MonDuleA asked for an apology from Deekka Ruh and his son, they refused. They sent back the shipments of adamantite, and froze all accounts on Urbane Five. Cellinum has more advanced technology, you see. Two months without a flow of currency for the people of Urbane Five, all because of a little thing called love. Oh, and Urbane Five reacted badly to their banking systems being frozen, they took it too far.”

“How?”

“They killed the son.”

Picard’s intake of breath was heard throughout the bridge. “They killed him?”

“That’s just between us. ‘He died unexpectedly after the consumption of a bad squid-fish,’ that’s the official line. If squid-fish is not prepared properly, it can be deadly. It is delicious and it was known that Deekka Ruh’s ate it often. Deekka Ruh strongly suspects that MonDuleA was behind the death of his son, since it was coincidental. I have advised MonDuleA to continue to deny his involvement.”

“So, now you may be responsible for starting war? That is how you act as advisor?”

“I had nothing to do with the poisoning, Jean Luc. That happened before my arrival. Yet, my advice to MonDuleA is to keep is quiet. Cellinum has no proof.”

Picard shook his head. “I understand what I’m dealing with now.”

“You don’t have to do deal with anything, Jean Luc. You can leave anytime you want to. Which, sometimes isn’t a bad idea. I have always felt that the Federation gets too involved.”

“You know I cannot do that. The entire galaxy is suffering.”

“Hmm, sad isn’t it?” Liz Rogan looked down at Kris. “You are so quiet, Kris. Aren’t you happy to see your mother?”

Kris had been quiet for a reason. Picard had taken the rightful lead in speaking with her mother, but more importantly Kris had finally figured out a very large piece of her puzzle. For the moment, she chose to keep it to herself. “I am surprised to you see you, mother.”

“Only surprised? Oh, how disappointing. Don’t I deserve better from you, dear daughter?”

Kris remained quiet. She truly did not know what her mother wanted from her. She also didn’t know why she was on Urbane Five acting as an advisor.

“Ms. Rogan, can we focus on the business at hand. First, Deekka Ruh needs to be properly informed regarding the death of his son, and reparations need to be made. If escalations continue, in my experience, the only result would be war, which would be devastating for this entire galaxy. Cellinum may not be satisfied until justice has been served. The two sides must negotiate a truce that would restart the extraction of the adamantite and the production of Cellinum.”

“Oh, Jean Luc, always so serious. I’ve missed you, you know. We had such good times.”

Picard again ignored Liz Rogan. *I will not be baited by this woman*, he thought.

Riker glanced at Troi, but both to remain quiet. Worf stood rigid at his post as did Mr. Data.

“There needs to a plan-“

“Oh, I have one, Jean Luc,” Liz Rogan said, interrupting Picard. She made no attempt to hide her smugness. She wallowed in it. She had patiently waited for this opportunity—to have the upper hand on The Great Jean Luc Picard—for a long time.

She said, “The first thing to happen is we need to stop this screen-to-screen conversation. It is quite boring and impersonal. As you have undoubtedly done hundreds of times, you need to come down here. Negotiate face to face on the planet. I think that’s the best way.”

“I understand,” said Picard, trying very hard to hide his reluctance to once again be face to face with Liz Rogan. The woman who...*stole my DNA*. Picard buried the anger he was feeling.

Troi noticed, though. So had Kris. They glanced at each other and instantly knew what Picard was trying desperately to hide. Anger that could easily turn to rage. A face to face with Liz Rogan was like taking a flame and hovering it over a pile of dynamite.

“You won’t, by the way, be the only one coming down here,” Liz Rogan continued. She stopped to examine her manicure, which only served to irritate Picard. “I think your entire senior staff needs to come down, to show good faith in these negotiations. MonDuleA and the Urbane Five people have been embarrassed and devastated. Yes, MonDuleA did reacted badly. Unfortunately, I don’t believe Cellinum will get

reparations that will be satisfying. And, that's where your entire staff comes in. Both Urbane Five and Cellinum need to see that the Federation takes them seriously. They need to see proof that you are not here to simply return this galaxy to the status quo and then leave. You are correct, Jean Luc, things have gone too far. Which means a full strength display of diplomatic strength is needed."

"I will bring my counselor--"

"No, Jean Luc. You're not listening. All of them."

"There is no way I can bring down my entire senior staff."

"Fine. Your role in these negotiations are over," Liz Rogan reached to end the Communication.

"Wait," said Picard quickly. *What is she playing at? This is serious business. A person has lost his life. And, she's treating it like...like a game.* "Liz," said Picard. *I have to cater to her ridiculous whims. I hate this.* "Wouldn't two senior staff members suffice?"

"Under normal circumstances, yes. Not this time. All of them, Picard, or I tell MonDuleA the Federation does not care about the beings in this galaxy. I inform Cellinum that the death of Deekka Ruh's son was tragic, however Urbane Five was not involved and we will no longer be extracting the adamantite. As you may have noticed, MonDuleA listens to me. To avoid a diplomatic nightmare, you and your six senior staff members will come down to Urbane Five for these negotiations. You will

be here in fifteen minutes or you will leave. Oh, and my daughter will also come down, of course. I believe a family reunion is in order.”

Liz Rogan ended the Communication.

The bridge was silent.

Kris stood. “Captain, I need to speak with you. In private.”

Picard did not hesitate. He marched to his Ready Room, Kris was right behind him.

* * *

Once the door was closed, Captain Picard stood face to face with Kris. His nostrils flared, his anger on the edge of explosion. “Speak,” was all he was able to say.

“My mother is Ramos,” said Kris.

Neither moved for a long time. The only reaction they both had, yet in different ways, was a touch of relief. A question had been answered.

“It makes sense,” said Kris.

“Are you sure?”

“Agreed.”

“How long have you known?”

“I had never suspected. But, the moment I saw her on screen, I knew it. I felt it. Perhaps I could never feel it before, on the moon, because my Ramos wasn't active. I don't know. But, I am sure of it. My mother is Ramos.”

Picard paced. *Yes, that does provide some needed answers. It is reasonable.* He looked at Kris. “What does she want? Why is she on Urbane Five acting as an advisor?”

“That's something I don't know. She was often not on the moon. She would leave for extended periods, and when she returned she would never discuss where she had been. I guess I never bothered to ask. I was uninterested.”

“Her demand to bring down my entire senior staff?”

“It is unusual, as I understand situations like this. It is your decision, of course. However, I would ask permission to go down. I need to speak with her.”

“About your Ramos? About...” Picard stopped, he shook his head.

“I want to confront her about why she stole your DNA.”

Picard sat heavily in his chair. *Problems just keep mounting.* He rubbed his face.

“You don't want to deal with her. I can-“

“You will not substitute for me. We will all go. I will have to deal with her.”

Picard's body slumped, he did not often display this body language, especially in front of someone else. His body language did not match his words.

"I have a piece of advice." Kris waited until Picard looked at her. She stared into Picard's eyes, her eyes. Picard's mother's eyes. "Don't trust her. No matter what you do. That's my advice."

* * *

Miles O'Brian was ready to work the transporter controls. He stood rigid, a curl from his mop of curls hung slightly down the side of his face. He needed a haircut. He sucked in his pouch, he also needed a bit of a diet. His new wife's cooking was so good, O'Brian had to stop asking for seconds.

A moment later, O'Brian watched as Picard, Riker, Troi, Crusher, Data, Worf, Geordi, and Kris strode into the room. The group took their appropriate places on the pads of the transporter machine. "You are in charge, Mr. O'Brian. Remain in orbit until you hear from me. Do nothing else unless you hear from me, Mr. O'Brian."

"Yes, sir," said O'Brian. He adjusted the controls. "Ready for beam down."

"Initiate," ordered Picard.

A moment later, they disappeared.

The group reappeared in a smallish chamber. O'Brian had informed Riker that the beam down point could hold a party of eight, but just barely.

Worf stepped down first, his girth only made it feel that much more claustrophobic on the small transporter pad. The others followed suit.

Riker and Worf walked around the room, a wide, spacious room with a generous view of a city from a long window. There were several couches and chairs. One end was dedicated to refreshments. Another end to entertainment. The decorations enlisted a feeling of comfort and leisure. One could easily take a vacation and relax in this room.

It put Picard and the others on edge.

Kris turned to Picard. "My mother would like to see me. Alone."

"She contacted you?"

"I have just been told," said Kris.

MonDuleA walked in. He really was gentle-looking, a grandfatherly presence. Picard and the others felt it immediately. *Yet, this grandfather ordered the death of someone*, Picard thought.

"Hello, treasured guests. I would like to request that you remain here. These are quarters reserved for our most honored

guests. There is plenty of room, and I believe they are comfortable.” He gestured to a hallway that branched off of spacious room. “There are many bedrooms down that way, if you need to rest. Meals will be brought upon request. Just hit the Comm button. How are you all feeling?”

Picard took a few steps closer to this grandfather/murderer. “We feel like beginning these negotiations. Now.”

“Oh, not right now. We are not ready, and the delegation from Cellinum has yet to arrive.”

“Have they been asked to come?” said Riker.

“Oh, I believe so. I believe they’re on their way,” said MonDuleA. His smile was mischievous, like his had a secret he was keeping from the others, one he was enjoying immensely.

“Where is Liz Rogen?”

“I’m not entirely sure. I will be back to check on you in a short while.” He headed to the door.

“Stop,” ordered Picard. MonDuleA did not stop immediately. He waited until he was in the doorway to look back at Picard. “You must remain here. Did I say that yet?”

He slipped out, and the doors closed.

“Mr. Worf,” said Picard. Worf hustled to the door. It did not open. He attempted to pry it open, it did not move. Worf gestured to Data, “We can get it together,” he said.

“No, Mr. Data. Back off, Mr. Worf.”

Disappointment shown on Mr. Worf’s face. He liked nothing better than to use his brute strength—aided by Mr. Data—to break out of a prison. “Sir, they have locked us in-“

“I understand, Mr. Worf. For the moment, we need to wait.”

“Why?” asked Riker.

“Because we have no other choice for now, Number One. Kris has left to talk to her mother,” he added.

The group looked around, Kris was gone.

* * *

Kris stood in front of her mother. She was in Ramos. Liz Rogan was Ramos. They were two very powerful beings face to face.

They were in a different room, which was somewhere in the capital city. Kris didn’t know where exactly it was located, nor did she care.

“You’re Ramos.” It was not a question.

“Yes.”

“You never told me.”

“You couldn’t know until the time was right, Kris.”

“Why?”

“Oh, in good time I will answer all of your questions. For now, can’t we just visit? Talk. Can’t we be mother and daughter for a short while?”

Kris noticed her mother didn’t appear as formidable as she had when she was on the Enterprise’s screen dealing with Picard. Her smugness was gone. She even looked vulnerable.

Kris knew her mother had enormous amounts of confidence. She had always displayed a superior attitude. Kris hated it when she dismissively spoke to either of the Lewtropsics, especially the submissive Ga’ Shain. Her mother had no respect for them, she treated them like servants.

But, this version of her mother appeared to be different.

Kris, however, was prepared. *Don’t trust her.*

“Why Picard?” asked Kris.

“Can’t you sit?” Liz Rogan said, ignoring Kris’s question.

“I prefer to stand.”

Liz Rogan gestured with her hands. “Fine. Do I really have to answer that question? It had to be someone. Why not him?”

“Did you steal DNA from six individuals?”

“Steal is such a strong word.”

“It is what you did, mother.”

“Can’t you sit down and relax? Can’t we just talk like... like we love each other?”

“I don’t think I feel that way about you. Do I possess your DNA?”

“What do you think?”

“I think you’re answering a question with a question. What is the answer?”

“I am Ramos. Only a Ramos could have built you. Do you really think even one humanoid, even the most intelligent humanoid ever produced, could have built you? Even that android couldn’t do it.”

“Does Ramos have DNA?”

“Of course not. We are different. You know that. Ever since your Ramos was activated, you’ve known it. Did you let on with those humanoid fools?”

“You’re Ramos, and Ramos beings do not possess conventional humanoid DNA. You must have used some part of yourself to create the Ramos part of me.”

“That is true.”

“But, the humanoid parts of me, those were also stolen?”

“I do not like that word.”

“It is what you did.”

“Kris, I don’t want to do this with you. We have not seen each other in a long time.”

“Yes, since I left the moon. Since I was imprisoned by Star Fleet for four and a half years. They questioned me about you often. It was the only time they would speak to me, to ask about you.”

“Well, of course. They knew I built you. They wanted the technology I had used to construct you. It wasn’t just me, Kris. I assure you. I did need some Ramos technology. I trained the Lewtropics to use my technology. That’s what Star Fleet wanted.”

“Not me?”

“Not really, dear.”

Kris looked at the floor.

Her mother tilted her head. “You never figured that out? They were after me.”

“You’re Ramos, they could never capture you.”

“No.”

“Then, why leave me there?”

Kris's last words echoed in the room. This room was smaller with less decoration. Impersonal. Honored guests didn't stay in this room. Then, why was Kris's mother here?

"You left me," said Liz Rogan quietly, almost a whisper. "I didn't think you would. I thought we would go out into the galaxies together, when you were ready. I would activate your Ramos and we would introduce ourselves together."

"I don't believe you. I don't believe you are hurt, mother. You came and went at your leisure. You wanted to keep me there so you could control me."

"If that were so, I wouldn't have let you leave."

"You wanted me to be intercepted by the Federation. You knew how they would treat me."

"I wasn't completely sure--"

"I don't believe you," Kris shouted again.

Liz Rogan rubbed her face. She looked tired, like she had no energy. She didn't want to fight with Kris. All she wanted was to make peace with her daughter. It was not going according to plan.

"What do we do now, Kris?" she asked in a soft voice.

"Why are you here? And, don't tell me it's to help these people. I won't believe that."

"Then, you don't really know me, do you?"

Kris hesitated, she closed her eyes. *I never did. You are a stranger. You always have been. But, what do I do right now?*

“Are you really here to help?”

“I’m going to have to let my actions prove to you that I’m not the monster you think I am. Yes, Kris, I stole DNA. I had my reasons. Which, will be presented to you, in due time. Until that time, I have accepted a job here. There’s nothing in it for me, except to mend things. Why else would I bother? I’m Ramos. Why would I insert myself into this petty humanoid problem, except to help them get out of it?”

“I wish I could believe you.” *I don’t.*

“Can I ask you to try? Would that be too much to ask?”

Kris again closed her eyes. When she opened them, she saw her mother—older, slouched, veins on her hands, tired eyes. The weight of...many universes on her shoulders?

Did Ramos grow old? How long does it take?

Kris knew she was seeing a human version of her mother, the one she had known her whole life. The Ramos version was still new to her. *Is the Ramos version better? Or, is that what she wanted me to think?*

Kris decided not to answer her mother. That was the best way to escape from this conversation, she badly wanted to escape.

She disappeared, and re-appeared in the room with Picard and the others.

Picard joined her. “Well?” he said.

“I stand by what I said. Don’t trust her.”

* * *

O’Brian sat in Picard’s chair. It felt...wrong.

This wasn’t the first time he had sat in the Captain’s chair. He had been put in charge once before, over a year ago when the Enterprise was battling an aggressive species called the WyNominds. Picard and Riker were trapped without Communications on the planet, WyNomin. Geordi had been injured and Mr. Data disabled. Doctor Crusher put him in charge. His Command lasted seven hours.

Lieutenant Kapler said, “Signal coming in, sir. From the Devore.”

“The Devore? Where are they?”

“On route,” he said. “Should I put it on speaker?”

“On screen,” said O’Brian. He stood to face the front viewing screen.

Admiral Peterson’s face appeared on the screen. “Sir? How may I help you?”

“Where is your Captain?”

“On the surface, sir. In negotiations between-“

“I know the mission, Commander,” Peterson interrupted him. “Where is Number One?”

“It had been requested that the entire senior staff beam down.”

“Requested by whom?”

“The advisor to the High Counselor-“

Peterson slammed a fist onto an unseen table. “What fool in his right mind beams down to a planet with his entire senior staff? Doesn’t Picard know the importance of this mission?”

“It had been requested-“

“This is why the Federation sent me, because of idiots like Picard,” Peterson interrupted O’Brian once again.

O’Brian shuffled nervously. *I have to strongly disagree, sir*, he thought but did not dare speak. O’Brian was smart enough to know when to keep his mouth shut.

“Give me the beam down coordinates. I’ll have to go down there to straighten out this mess all on my own,” he said, not bothering to try to hide his scowl.

“Sir, if I may request-“

Peterson's image disappeared from the screen, Peterson had disconnected reception.

“Sir?” said Lieutenant Kapler.

“Send him the coordinates, Kapler. Also, send a message to the captain that the Devore is a few minutes from orbit and Admiral Peterson will be joining him.” *That's about as much as I want to get involved*, he thought.

Kapler said, “Sir, I cannot get through to the landing party.”

“What? Why not?”

Kapler's fingers worked the controls while O'Brian waited impatiently. “No, sir. I can't get a signal through to them.”

“Have you tried all of them? Riker? Crusher?”

“Yes, sir. The signal is being blocked.”

O'Brian inhaled. *Now what do I do?* To Kapler, he said, “Inform the Devore. Make them aware that it's either a Communication breach of some sort or a hostile act. They might want to bring security. Let them know we're here to support them. *Let the Admiral deal with it. He wants to take over, let him.*”

He sat down heavily in Picard's chair. *Command is exhausting*, he thought. *And, certainly not my cup of tea.*

Kris explained to Picard and the others what had occurred between her and her mother—which mostly amounted to nothing very useful. Her mother confirmed she was Ramos, but Kris did not glean from her her true reasons for being involved in this diplomatic problem.

Kris purposely didn't get any details regarding Picard and his DNA. She chose to explain that, according to her mother, Ramos didn't have DNA like humanoids. So, therefore, DNA was obtained for both male and female for all of her five humanoid species', but apparently not for her Ramos. It was Kris's mother and the technology. The technology had to do the job of constructing all of Kris, but was central for the Ramos part.

This led Geordi to point out that Kris's DNA was in Enterprise's core. "Didn't it have to be Ramos-related, especially since she regularly pilots the ship with Ramos coming through her humanoid?" he asked.

Kris could not directly respond to Geordi, since she didn't know what to say. Her only response was, "The next time I see Guinan, I have some questions for her."

"Guinan is not here," said Picard. "And, here we wait. We cannot leave, and we cannot contact the ship. I demand to know what is going on."

"I will explain it to you," said a new voice.

Picard, Kris, and the others turned in unison to face a newcomer. Troi gasped. Crusher put a hand on her arm to help steady her.

Kris took a step back.

Worf took a step forward. Riker stopped him from taking another step toward the door.

Picard's face was steel. His lips thinned. His arms hung by his sides, yet he slightly clenched one fist for half a second. This movement was involuntary. Or was it?

Admiral James Peterson stepped into the room.

The door closed behind him.

“Apparently, Picard, according to High Counselor MonDuleA, you are mis-representing the Federation in this extremely delicate situation. I am told you have been unable to get the two parties to the table, and you even accused MonDuleA of poisoning the son of this Deekka Ruh?”

“We were told-“

“Sir,” corrected Admiral Peterson sharply. “You will address me properly, Captain.”

Picard shifted slightly. “Sir, we were informed that-“

“That Deekka Ruh's son had a heart defect that rendered him sickly for most of his life? That he contracted...something like the version of Earth's old influenza. Apparently, it's quite

common on Cellinum and any medication, including ones from Star Fleet, had proven ineffective.”

Crusher took a step forward. “I’d like to review those records-“

“Sir,” barked Peterson.

“Sir, if I could review the medical records, I could confirm-“

“There’s no need. An autopsy confirmed it,” said Peterson, interrupting Crusher. He glared at Picard. “Have you and your entire senior staff lost your minds?” he spat. “This son died from complications of this flu. MonDuleA and his people had nothing to do with it. You apparently also told MonDuleA that you were under the impression that all their financial records had been frozen. And, that his daughter had attempted suicide? Picard, where did you get all of this?”

“MonDuleA has an advisor. Elizabeth Rogan.”

Peterson hesitated, but only slightly. “I was informed about a new advisor. The name I was given was Tres Fabian, an experienced diplomat from the Mars colony.”

“You have been misinformed.”

“Sir!”

Picard swallowed.

Troi rubbed her hands together. She wanted to intervene, she knew they were both reaching a boiling point.

“Sir, you have been misinformed.”

Peterson stalked around the room. He made eye contact with Geordi, Riker, Troi, and Crusher. Wisely, he kept some distance from Mr. Worf. He stopped at Kris, who stood next to Data.

“The Federation’s two anomalies,” he said.

“Sir,” responded Data in his usual tone, “I believe anomaly is not quite accurate-“

Peterson waved a hand at Data, who immediately stopped talking.

Peterson stared at Kris.

Troi wanted to stand next to her during this moment. She sensed...fear. Kris was extremely uncomfortable so close to Peterson. Kris’s reaction to Peterson was the opposite of what she had claimed about him—that she didn’t care that he had raped her, that she allowed it to happen for her own reasons, to get off of Star Base 325. That she was in Vulcan not to protect herself, but because she preferred being in Vulcan. That what Peterson did to her...did not affect her...at all.

Troi knew differently. In this moment, Troi understood.

“Lieutenant?” said Peterson.

“Sir,” responded Kris. She cast her eyes to the floor. She was in Vulcan. She dared no go into Betazoid, or Troi would

find out... Kris considered going into Ramos, so she could disappear. She really wanted to disappear.

“I will be re-evaluating your assignment after I clean up this mess,” said Peterson.

He turned and walked to Picard. He got close to him, too close.

Riker, Worf, and the others all tensed. They were ready to spring into action. To do what? Separate the two men, if need be? Or, assist Picard in the pummeling of Peterson? None of them were sure, yet they were all battle-ready.

“I want to dismiss you from these proceeding. Send you on your way so that I can finish this business. However, we need to address the falsehoods that were allowed to spread. Both planets are upset at us. We need to fix this.”

Peterson waited for Picard’s response. He got none. Picard wasn’t even blinking.

“Be prepared to address the parliaments of both planets. That’s how we’ll begin these talks.” He bolted for the door, all business. “I’ll let them know to be ready in three hours.”

Peterson didn’t break stride. The door opened for him, and he walked out.

The others didn’t move or speak, they waited on Picard. *What is stopping me?* he thought. *How could I not take my hands and...Because I’m a Star Fleet Captain, and he’s a Star Fleet Admiral. That’s why. My personal feelings don’t matter.*

He turned. The first person he saw was Kris.

He glanced at the rest of his senior staff. He felt...weak. Embarrassed. *They would have backed me*, he thought. *They feel the same as I do.*

Picard needed to be alone. He strode to the hallway and disappeared into one of the bedrooms.

“Don’t leave,” said Troi to Kris.

“What?”

“Don’t go into Ramos and disappear.”

“I wasn’t going to...Why would I?” Kris walked to the window. She sat, looked out of the capital city of Urbane Five. She locked her gaze onto a building under construction. She guessed it was six blocks from this location. The building’s framework had been completed. Half of the outside panels had been assembled. It appeared as if it was going to have a spire for a top.

Do they build it right there one floor at a time? she thought. *Or, do they assemble the pieces elsewhere and then put them together along the framework? Is the building complete in a matter of days, like on Earth or other advanced planets? Different planets construct buildings in different ways. Hundreds, thousands of different ways.* Kris had even heard of a planet—the name escaped her at the moment—that melted huge chunks of pre-assembled materials into the shape of the building, and the building was completed when it was all dry. *How extraordinary.*

Kris turned away from looking out the window. Picard sat next to her. *How long have I been staring out the window?*

Kris glanced around, the others had wandered away, giving them some space.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Of course,” Kris said, a bit too quickly.

Picard gave her his best you-can't-fool-me look. He decided to let it go, though. “I am convinced your mother is up to something. The lies...They seem rather pointless to me.”

“Except if she contacted Peterson and brought him here.”

“Simply to embarrass me? I would expect more out of her.”

“You'll get it,” said Kris.

Picard nodded. “Any ideas at all?”

Kris took her time. She thought about her mother, a woman she hardly knew. Especially now. *I have no clue about her motivation. Except...*

“She wanted to bring you, me, and Peterson together. I think it's safe to say that.”

Picard nodded. “All right. Why?”

Kris slowly shook her head, but remained quiet. *I don't know.*

Picard studied the view for a long moment. Without looking at Kris, he said, “I suppose we’ll find out soon enough.”

* * *

An “escort” came to get the group two hours and fifty four minutes later.

He showed up exactly one minute after Kris had returned from speaking with her mother. Picard had requested that Kris return to her mother and try to find out something about her plans. Anything.

Kris didn’t have any luck.

The only difference this time was Elizabeth Rogan was no longer that weak, tired-looking woman Kris had spoken to earlier. The smug, confident Elizabeth Rogan had returned. The woman who had a huge secret she was dying to reveal, but she was only going to do it when she damn well felt like it.

The group somberly followed MonDuleA’s escort. He walked them to a large chamber.

Only one person waited for them—Elizabeth Rogan.

After the escort left and closed the door behind them, Picard said, “Where are the representatives from Urbane Five and Cellinum?”

“Oh, they’re meeting right now. In another chamber.”

Picard tensed, so did his senior staff. These officers were trained to recognize threats. Mr. Worf was itching for a physical confrontation of some sort. The others were simply hyper-aware that something was going on here. They were prepared for anything—or, so they thought.

A side door opened, and Admiral Peterson strode in. His gait exuded confidence, perhaps more confidence than the man had felt in years. It was as if he also had a secret he was ready to spill.

He walked straight to Picard. “The delegation from Cellinum arrived an hour ago. They are speaking with MonDuleA and his counselors. Negotiations are progressing.”

Picard did not respond. *What does he want?*

“This isn’t all I have, Picard. Remember that little favor you did a few years back for Turak from Vulcan? You didn’t file a report, I wonder why not? And, then, that “friend” of yours? The archeologist? Funny how she should have been up on charges with the Federation.”

Silence.

Kris approached her mother. “What is the meaning of this?”

“Shh, don’t interrupt,” she said. “He thinks he has enough.”

“I do have enough,” Peterson spun and spat out the words. “They’ll add up.” He looked back at Picard. “It began with the killing of my wife.”

Picard punched Peterson. He fell hard to the floor. He remained there, wiped blood from his lip. “Striking an officer. Add that, too.”

Picard took a step back. *I did just strike an officer. What is happening to me?*

“I didn’t see anything,” said Riker.

Peterson leapt to his feet. He looked at the scowling Riker, then at Crusher, Geordi. He nodded at Mr. Data. “I have a computer recording all of this,” he said.

“I was not recording, sir?” Mr. Data said in his monotone. “Would you like me to do so now?”

Peterson considered the lie. He shook his head. “You can’t, Mr. Data. None of you can.”

“And, they won’t,” said Picard. “The truth will come out. All of it.” Picard looked at Kris.

Suddenly, Crusher’s body stepped back several steps. The look on her face implied she didn’t do this of her own will.

She was followed by Geordi and Worf. Data moved opposite them. Next to him was Riker and Troi. They were all moved to form a semi-circle around Picard and Peterson.

None of them could move.

Kris looked at her mother. “You have done this. Why?”

“We need to speak. Before...well, I have certain things I need to do before...” She stopped. She walked close to Kris. She put her hand on Kris’s arm, it make Kris very uncomfortable.

“Kris, there is something you are not understanding. You were right about me, I am Ramos. But, I am a special breed of Ramos. One that...well, there used to more of us. We are almost gone now.”

“What you mean, ‘we’?”

“The Ancients. *More than* Ramos. More than any member of the Continuum. More than...any being you could find in any galaxy. I built you for a reason, Kris, exactly the way you are for a reason. I cannot be the last one. You need to become me.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You need to become an Ancient so you can complete your task.”

“My task?”

Liz Rogan looked around at the room, she approached Peterson, then Picard. The two were squared off, ready for battle.

Yet, they were also frozen. Liz Rogan wasn’t quite ready yet to unleash them.

“I am the most advanced being in all of the universes,” said Kris’s mother, “yet, I could not ignore one tiny urge. Love. It is true that love is universal. It exists everywhere.”

“Please explain yourself better.”

“Isn’t it ironic that lost love is what brought us to this planet? That boy did leave his bride at the altar. The rest was a bit of fiction. Love is indeed fickle.” She gently stroked Picard’s cheek. She faced Kris. “I need to finish something important to me, Kris, before I am no more. When this task is complete, I will then pass on everything I am to you. You will be an Ancient. You have to do this, or all of the universes—including the Ramos-Continuum universes—will die forever. That was why you were built. Because I was not good enough to accomplish this monumental task. You have to be good enough, Kris. After I do one more thing.”

Kris looked at Picard and Peterson, she understood her mother’s “task.” She shook her head. “Don’t,” she said. “Please don’t. They don’t deserve it.”

“The luscious part is I really do not know who will win. Well, I can help...urge one over the other. And, I will. When the time is right. But, I need this, Kris. Before I no longer exist.”

Liz Rogan released the humanoids.

But, only Picard and Peterson.

Picard’s senior officers were still frozen. They watched with dismay as Picard and Peterson circled each other, hunched like wrestlers, both searching for an opening to attack.

In a throwback to ancient Earth times, it was about to be a physical tussle to the death. Both were ready as their rage had reached a peak. It was consuming them. It had been held in check for decades. But, no more. There was only one way this was going to end.

The battle began when Peterson attacked. He dove on top of Picard. Picard, the smaller of the two, was stronger than he looked, and more cunning. He kicked Peterson in the groin.

Peterson rolled off of Picard, and Picard leapt to his feet.

Neither man was in their prime, yet both were sparring like they were young, strong, and deadly. They gave punches, and easily absorbed them. They tackled each other, then one or the other would find a way out.

Oddly, they remained within the confines of the semi-circle created by Picard's crew members.

Riker tried to intervene several times. He couldn't move.

He looked around at the others—Worf, Crusher, Data, they were all trying to get to the two warriors battling it out in hand to hand combat. But, none of them could move.

Nor could any of them speak.

Crusher put a hand to her throat. Each time she attempted to speak, nothing would come out.

It was the same with others.

They had to stand and watch as a Federation captain and a Federation admiral pummeled each other. They were helpless.

Kris wasn't.

For the first two minutes, she didn't know what to do. She had been so focused on the spectacle, she had done nothing. *Why? Why am I simply watching this?* She looked at her mother, whose face exhibited nothing short of pure pleasure. *She loved them both, and now she's...playing out some dual fantasy? Which she is controlling.*

Kris was in Ramos. She stepped forward and reached out. She was about to grasp Picard when she was suddenly flung backwards. She landed hard against a wall.

The only two people in the room who hadn't noticed were Picard and Peterson. The others reacted as much as they could without the ability to move or speak.

Kris slowly got to her feet. "Mother, stop this."

It was as if Liz Rogan hadn't heard Kris. Peterson had pushed Picard against a wall. His punch missed as Picard had ducked. Picard stopped his advancement by flinging a chair at Peterson.

Elizabeth Rogan's smile grew. Kris saw her fingers flinch. She watched the fight as Peterson again gained the upper hand. Peterson took out his knee, turned him, and wrapped his big hands around Picard's throat.

Kris watched her mother again. Another flick of the fingers and Picard managed to push Peterson off him, grab a vase, and smash it onto Peterson's head. Peterson staggered.

This is just a game to her.

“Mother, listen to me. I will do what you want. But, you must stop this.”

“I cannot,” said Liz Rogan, whose eyes couldn't leave Picard and Peterson. She was riveted.

Kris lunged at her mother. She didn't make it far as her body was stopped and then thrown against the opposite wall. She again hit it hard. She crumpled to the floor.

A moment later, she slowly stood. *I have to find a way.*

Kris changed tactics. She concentrated.

After only a few seconds, she was again launched against a wall.

“Stay out of this,” yelled Liz Rogan.

Kris dragged her body up. She concentrated again. This time on Riker. Peterson again had Picard by the throat.

Kris finally found a way to intervene as she used Riker's body to smash a table against Peterson's back.

He let go of Picard, who gasped for air.

“No,” screamed Kris’s mother. She directed a bolt of green light at Kris. The beam hit her in the chest and slammed her into the wall. “You cannot interfere.”

Kris rolled. From the floor, she said, “I have to stop this, mother.”

Picard and Peterson were circling each other as Riker was shoved to the floor.

Kris stood. She moved Mr. Worf forward, placing him between Picard and Peterson.

Finally, Liz Rogan looked at her daughter. Her eyes were on fire. “Do. Not. Interfere!”

The bolt of light was thicker this time, but slower. Slow enough that it allowed Kris to put up her hand to block it. The light was absorbed and did not harm Kris.

Elizabeth Rogan’s eyes grew bigger. “I have to do this, Kris.”

“You are not going to do this, mother,” said Kris calmly.

With a burst of strength foreign to him, Peterson put his head down and slammed it into Worf. Worf was pushed to the ground and Peterson went with him.

That was when Picard saw the object. It was wedged inside a couch.

A knife.

Picard reached into the couch and pulled out the knife. If Troi and Crusher had had voices, their audible gasps would have been heard on the Enterprise.

Kris saw Picard holding the knife. The thick, eight inch long, shiny blade fit Picard's hand like it had always been a part of it.

Peterson again went after Picard.

Picard was quick with the knife, wasting no time.

He plunged the blade into Peterson's chest. He held it there, and pushed it upward. The blow was deadly. Picard had known exactly how to kill a humanoid instantly.

Picard's crew watched in stunned silence. If they had their voices, they wouldn't have used them. If they have use of their feet and legs, they would not move. Even Crusher, whose instincts were to render medical aid to anyone—even Peterson—could not move.

They were in shock.

Kris was enraged. Whatever secrets her mother had kept from her all of her life, this battle had been...pointless. This was love? It had only been a humanoid urge to satisfy some deep hurt she had felt. She had manipulated these two beings in a display of strength, stamina, and guile. And, she had directed a winner.

She had killed Peterson.

She had had Picard kill him.

For her own amusement.

Kris saw it on her face—her now satisfied, relieved face.

It was wrong.

Kris summoned all of the Ramos in her body to the surface, more than she had when saving the Enterprise from crashing on a planet. Like that time, she didn't know she could do it until she was doing it. She was summoning it.

The same held true this time, with one exception.

This time she wanted strength. Pure power. All of her energy. All of what made up a Ramos.

And, she wanted to fire all of it at Elizabeth Rogan.

Now. Right now.

Kris stormed across the room. She avoided Picard, who stood hunched over while holding the knife he had removed from Peterson's torso. He was staring at the knife, and at the body of Peterson on the ground. He looked stunned.

Kris didn't care. All she wanted was to punish this other being, this being who called herself her mother. She wanted to rip her mother to shreds.

Elizabeth Rogan stood waiting for Kris. She looked calm, ready. "Kris, I have a few instructions before we begin the process—"

That was as far as Elizabeth Rogan got.

Kris grabbed her, lifted her high in the air, it was easy.

Kris emitted a blue light, which then changed to green.

Liz Rogan's colors were yellow, which began brightly than began to fade.

Liz Rogan fought Kris. She hadn't been quite ready yet. She had had things she still wanted to say to Kris. A few details left to cover. Kris needed to be properly prepared. The transition could not be accomplished by shear force.

And, yet, it was happening.

Kris knew it.

Elizabeth Rogan knew it.

Kris's power was overwhelming Liz Rogan.

It took Kris's mother a few moments to realize she could no longer control Kris. She could not be stopped now. Kris had summoned her entire Ramos being, and now that she held her mother—an Ancient whose existence had been dedicated to Kris—there was no way to stop the transition.

Kris was becoming an Ancient. Elizabeth Rogan was giving it to her. She gave up fighting it and let it happen. It had to happen. This much she knew.

And, life had always been a bit unexpected. So had love.

Picard and his crew watched helplessly. Picard had straighten, and still held the knife, yet he couldn't turn away. Neither could the rest of them. They weren't quite sure what they were seeing, of course. They knew they were probably bearing witness to an enormous transfer of...power. Energy. Abilities. Strength. More that they couldn't fathom.

All right in front of them.

All within a bubble of light. None of them could even guess what was really contained within that bubble, it was easy to understand it was more power than they had ever seen.

Then, it was over.

The light dissipated.

Kris stood alone.

Beneath her was a pile of...what was left of Elizabeth Rogan. When an Ancient transitioned, what was left was what the Ancient had been. The essence of the being before.

To the Enterprise crew, it looked like a pile of dust or debris. Kris knew it was more than that. She stared at it.

Until she finally acknowledged the others. She had forgotten they were there.

"I'm sorry," said a familiar voice.

Kris spun to face Guinan. So did the others, who could finally move their bodies.

“I should have told you,” said Guinan.

“You knew she was Ramos?”

“Of course.”

“And, that she wanted to make me...”

“You have to be an Ancient, Kris.”

Riker stepped closer to Guinan.

Crusher hurried to Peterson. She checked for a pulse.

She shook her head at Picard. He didn't need Crusher to confirm that Peterson was dead. He knew it already.

“Why did this have to happen?” asked Riker.

“This,” Guinan gestured at the body of Peterson. “This is nothing.”

Picard quickly advanced on Guinan.

“Nothing?” he croaked. “I have killed a Federation admiral.”

Guinan shook her head. “None of you get it? Not one of you have figured it out yet?”

They stared at Guinan. No one spoke.

Guinan pointed at Riker, her finger close enough to his chest to barely touch it. “Muztarif.”

She walked to Mr. Worf. “Altaran.”

She went to Crusher. “Human.”

At Troi, she said, “Betazoid.”

She stopped at Mr. Data. “Vulcan.”

She circled back to Picard. “The father.”

She sighed and looked at Geordi. “Sorry, Geordi, I don’t know how you fit into it.”

“Into what?” Riker said, spitting it out like a demand.

“Kris was built for a reason. Her humanoid parts were chosen on purpose.” Guinan looked at Kris, who stood apart from the others. “Don’t you see it now?”

“I don’t see anything,” she whispered. She looked down at the pile that was her mother. She looked at the dead body of Peterson. “Except...” She stopped. She took a breath, briefly closed her eyes. “I didn’t ask for any of this.”

“Guinan, you knew this whole time?” asked Picard. “Kris’s mother was Ramos. She built Kris for some reason. She brought us to his planet to do this...whatever it is Kris?”

“A transition. Kris is now an Ancient. She is only one of two left.”

“Why?” asked Picard.

“That explanation will have to wait,” said Guinan.

“No,” screamed Picard. “It will not wait. You are using us, Guinan.” Picard pointed to the remains of Elizabeth Rogan. “She used us. I killed a man. Tell us why. Right now.”

Picard’s words echoed. The silence that followed and the look on Guinan’s face Communicated to Picard that he wasn’t going to get his answers on this day.

Guinan backed away. “We will see each other again, Jean Luc.”

She disappeared.

Picard looked at his hand, the knife still in it. He dropped it. The noise of it hitting the ground was deafening to him and his crew.

So was the buzz on his Communicator.

By instinct, he reached to answer it. He stopped just short of hitting it. He had blood on his hands.

He looked at Riker. “The ship is yours,” he said quietly. “I resign effective immediately. I will confine myself to my quarters, unless you feel the brig is appropriate.”

Riker didn’t know what to say. He stammered, “No, your quarters. Captain, do you-“

“I do. Do not call me Captain. That is your title now. I have murdered my Commanding officer. You will formally put me under arrest.”

Riker hesitated, then nodded.

“Wait a minute,” said Crusher. “You didn’t do this on your own. You were manipulated-“

“Stop it,” yelled Picard. “Enough. It’s over.”

Crusher looked for help from Geordi, Worf, Troi, and then Data. She knew it was pointless, but misery loved company. The others could not help.

Troi looked at Kris.

“You’re leaving.” She posed it as a statement for a reason. Troi felt it. Kris could not stay.

Kris looked at Picard. “I am sorry.”

Then, she was gone.

Riker hit his Communicator. “O’Brian, send a medical crew to our location. Beam up Mr. Worf and Picard.”

“Captain Picard,” said O’Brian’s voice.

“The captain has been relieved of duty. Mr. Worf will escort him to his quarters. I will be informing the delegates from Urbane Five and Cellinum. Counselor Troi and Mr. Data will remain down here. They will assist me until an agreement is reached between the two parties. Dr. Crusher will escort the body of Admiral Peterson to his ship. Please let them know. I will speak to them as soon as I can. Do you understand, Mr. O’Brian?”

“I have your orders, sir. I...don’t quite understand all of it, though. To be honest.”

“Neither do I,” said Riker.

* * *

Picard wore civilian clothes. He sat at his desk. He was looking through old family photos. He wasn't sure why he was doing it. Something to do, he figured.

He door chimed. “Come,” he said.

Troi walked in. “How are you?”

“Dr. Crusher has certified me physically fit,” he said.

Troi sat across from him. “That's not what I meant.”

Picard turned off his computer. “I am accepting my fate. As well as my upcoming court martial.”

“Why...” Troi stopped. She didn't want to believe that Star Fleet had called for court martial proceedings against Picard. Yet, she knew that they had to do it. A Star Fleet admiral had been killed by a Star Fleet captain. The High Counsel had to court martial Mister Picard.

“I'm sorry, Jean Luc.”

“None of this is your fault.”

“Yet, it appears as if we’re all involved.” Troi looked at her hands. “I think Kris has returned to Muztarif. I don’t know for sure, but I sense she’s okay. I think, anyway.”

Picard nodded.

“It’s not over, is it?”

“My part in it is,” said Picard.

Troi shook her head. “I don’t think so. Guinan told us there was a reason we were chosen. I feel that reason is bigger than all of us. At least, all of us humanoids put together.”

“I can’t let it go. I close my eyes and see myself plunging the knife into his body.”

Troi leaned forward. “What do you remember before that?”

Picard thought about it. He shook his head. “Nothing. I remember Peterson walking into the room. Challenging me about having evidence to finally put me away. And, then...the next thing I knew...” he stopped.

“You were killing him.”

Picard nodded.

“Jean Luc, that’s enough evidence to suggest you *not* were not in control of your actions. Kris’s mother was doing it to you. You should have seen the look on her face during your fight with Peterson. The pleasure she was taking from it. She was manipulating both of you.”

“That does not matter.”

“How could it not matter?”

Picard stared at his hands. His right hand. The one that had held the knife.

He looked at Troi, looked deeply into her eyes. “I wanted to do it.”

The End.