

STAR TREK: THE NEXT GENERATION

Kris Rogen – Episode 1

by

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Chapter One

He was not looking forward to this week.

In a few hours, the Enterprise, the Federation's flagship, would be orbiting Plantus, a technically-advanced planet in the Corellian system. A dispute had arisen between Plantus and its neighbor Spadilus, a smaller world that provided Plantus with a precious metal known as veral.

Veral was not found on Plantus, but was in great demand as it provided a base metal for many products produced by Plantians. The Spadilons, an advanced world that chose not to travel in space, wanted a new contract with Plantus. They had begun to feel bullied by their space-traveling neighbors. They also wanted a supply of agricultural machines built according to their specifications. Spadilus's climate, the food growing areas, were fickle. The new machinery was meant to keep up with the times.

Spadilus was willing to give Plantus their usual supply of veral in exchange for the machines. Plantus wanted to increase the amount of veral obtained, without having to produce any new equipment. They claimed the people of Spadilus could work just fine with "established" technology. They did not believe that the climate variations on Spadilus were as cumbersome as they claimed.

Therefore, Plantus was refusing to renegotiate with Spadilus. Furthermore, they were so outraged that the smaller,

mostly weaponless Spadilus would threaten to stop giving them verbal that the Plantian government had sent three warships to Spadilus.

The situation was tense, and it was the Captain's job to ease tensions and negotiate a contract that satisfied both parties, while also keeping the hot-headed ruler from Plantus from firing at Spadilus.

Then, in two days, the Enterprise was expected in the Orion system. The Romulans had been given permission to enter the system in order to obtain a rare medicine needed by the Romulans called Xyxlene. The Federation had offered to procure the needed Xyxlene and deliver it to the Romulans at a designated meeting place at the Romulan/Federation border, called the Neutral Zone, but the Romulans insisted they had to collect the Xyxlene themselves.

Xyxlene was, at one time, abundant in the Romulus system. The herb was needed by the Romulan people to keep the disease, Raylon K, in check. Raylon K had no known cure. Without the herb, Raylon K was potentially fatal to any Romulan.

Seventy-five years ago, a virus destroyed all of the Romulus Xyxlene. Romulans had to look elsewhere for the needed herb. Every five years, the Romulans obtained permission from the Federation to enter one of their neighboring universes, the Orion system, to pay for and retrieve a large quantity from the only four planets where Xyxlene still grew.

The Enterprise's assignment was to act as chaperone—make sure the Romulan medical ship quietly visits the four scheduled planets, obtains on their shipments of xyxylene, and then returns to Romulan space without incident.

Finally, at the end of the week, Captain Picard had to meet with the Ferengi.

He despised the Ferengi.

Not officially, of course. Officially, he will smile and nod through the vomiting ramblings of the Ferengi captain T'targar. He will hear the complaints while attempting to offer a slice of advice here and there, knowing that the Ferengi, not just the captain but all six of them (the Ferengi always descended on him in multiples) will begin to shout and complain that Picard even dared to offer advice. The Ferengi problems were always more important than any problems in all of the universes combined.

The thought of dealing with the Ferengi in six days was already giving Picard a headache. The Stardate on his computer said "44422.0." He looked forward to a week from this day.

He heard a chime at his door.

"Come," said Picard, without a glance at the door. He was determined to study the Plantus/Spadilus situation. His meeting was only hours away.

The access door to the rest of the ship slid open.

Lieutenant Anderson stood outside the open door. A crewman passed behind her. She didn't notice. She hesitated to enter Picard's ready room. *Is this really what I want to do?*

Lieutenant Anderson was not Lieutenant Anderson. She was Kris Rogen. But, on the Enterprise, she couldn't be Kris Rogen or Lieutenant Rogen. She had to be Lieutenant Kris Anderson.

That was the deal she had made with Admiral James Peterson.

It was a one-sided deal. She knew it. But, she had had no other choice. She had to get off of Star Base 325. She had been picked up by the Federation after leaving the only home she ever knew, a moon in the Omega system. Since that time, she had had nothing but misery. But, that seemed long ago.

At this moment, she was about to reveal her true identity to Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the USS Enterprise. In doing so, she was breaking her promise to Admiral Peterson. She was betraying Peterson, yet approaching the Captain with vital information. Vital information about Admiral Peterson, which Kris Rogen knew would be of interest to this specific captain.

Now that she was away from Star Base 325, and stationed on the Federation flagship, was exposing herself prudent? Potentially volatile? It was a combination of both.

She was concerned, of course, because it was very unclear if she could improve her current position. Her only demand will be to be sent to a different Star Base. She did not wish to return to 325.

The best case scenario would be for Star Fleet to release her from duty. The only complication with that was her “temporarily suspended” status as FA12; which was a dangerous alien species, identification undetermined, origin unknown, requires security confinement.

Her FA12 status has always confused her, and Star Fleet had never properly explained *why* she was given that distinction.

Kris was no alien. She was a genetically engineered humanoid comprised of six species. She told officials at Star Fleet what she was when she first arrived at 325. They didn’t believe her. They did the appropriate medical tests and still didn’t believe her. They said her medical tests were “inconclusive.” They said she was so alien and unknown, and she was alone that to them it was “safe” for them to give her that statue. They locked her up as an FA12.

That was five years ago.

Peterson had bailed her out. It took four and a half years, but one day he simply showed up with a deal in mind. “I’ll make you a Star Fleet officer, a Lieutenant, and put you on the Federation’s flagship, the Enterprise. You’ll be an engineer, maybe even a pilot someday. All you have to do is incorporate a

personal order from me. These orders will be secret. Only between you and me, Lieutenant.”

He had said it just like that.

Now, she was about to throw it all away.

* * *

Kris strolled into Captain Picard’s ready room. The Captain was reading something on his PADD, personal access display device. His facial expression was stern, concentrated, with no humor at the edges of his eyes. From what she knew of Picard, he was a very serious humanoid.

“Captain?” she said.

“Yes.” He still did not look up.

Kris waited.

Picard glanced up at Kris, his look was brief and dismissive. “What is it?” he said as he returned to reading his PADD.

“Captain, may I speak with you?”

“Commander Riker handles all personnel issues, Lieutenant. So, if you don’t mind, I’m very busy at the moment-“

“You knew my mother,” Kris said, interrupting the Captain. She stepped into his ready room, stood tall and straight, hands at her side.

Picard looked at Kris, this time assessing her. *Tall, thin, angular features, but soft. Short hair. Her face looked...familiar. Was it the mother?* “Who is your mother?”

Kris walked closer to Picard, only the table stood between them. “Elizabeth Rogen.”

The name made Picard lean back in his chair. That was not a name he had expected. The young woman in front of him looked nothing like Elizabeth Rogen. Not that he really knew Elizabeth Rogen, but his memory of the woman.

Trying to move this along, Picard said, “I do remember an Officer Rogen,” He had not been a fan of Liz Rogen and his very brief encounter with her so many years ago had left him with a distasteful memory. “She was a scientist.”

“She told you about a project she had been working on,” said Kris.

It was a statement, not a question. Picard recalled the project, however. It was so unusual, hard to forget. “Star Fleet had very little interest in her...project. If memory serves, it was an idea that seemed highly...It didn’t seem at all viable. Your mother insisted she had the proper data-“

“She did,” Kris again interrupted him. Doing so, now twice, was clearly beginning to get on the Captain’s nerves. Officers did not interrupt their captain.

His face tightened just a bit. He said, "Star Fleet did not think so."

"My mother left Star Fleet."

"I recall." Picard stood, he suddenly had enough of this walk down memory lane. "Lieutenant, if you'd excuse me. I'm quite busy."

"I am the product of my mother's work."

The room was silent. Picard stared at her. It was another statement. Picard both knew and feared what that statement meant. "You are...Your mother's work?"

"I am a genetically engineered humanoid." Kris let that statement, her third, hang in the air for a moment. She wanted to see his reaction. She knew her mother would have approved. Her mother had a flair for the dramatic, and she had had strong feelings for the younger Picard. *How long had I waited to say that to Captain Jean-Luc Picard? Mother would have wanted to have done it herself, of course. She will feel I robbed her of her moment. But, no matter. It is finally done.*

"I am six species," Kris said. "Each work... independently...one at a time, if you will."

Kris was in Vulcan, but she decided to switch to Betazoid in order to assess how Picard was reacting to this information. She had to know. It was that important to her. Her Betazoid skills were enhanced, more so than the ship's senior officer, Counselor Troi, who wasn't even a full Betazoid. Kris had stayed out of Betazoid while stationed on the Enterprise

for the last two weeks so she wouldn't be detected by Troi. But, now, she had to know.

No reaction. Captain Picard kept stoic, even on the inside. *Fascinating.*

Kris had to continue, she had to get it all out. Or, rather, most of it. She couldn't do all of it, however if she stopped now, she feared she would never speak again. "I am Vulcan, Human, Altaran, a non-Federation species called Muztarif, and Betazoid, which I am in now. I do not know my sixth species."

More silence. Picard just stared. Assessed. Calculated. It was any number of things.

Kris probed Picard and finally found what she was looking for. *He does not believe me.* "You do not believe me," she said.

"Of course not. I am, however, going to call my security officer--"

"I predicted you would be skeptical," Kris interrupted yet again. "Perhaps, I can prove it."

"Lieutenant, I do not have time for games." *If this is a game. There is something about this young woman. She looks so much like...no, that is impossible. This is impossible.*

Captain Picard pressed a comm button.

Kris produced a small needle. She held it out.

Picard froze with his finger on the comm. *A weapon?* The device appeared to be a needle, but Picard was no fool. Still, he did not fear for his life. Instead, he felt...intrigued.

Before Picard could speak into the comm, Kris pricked her own finger and squeezed out blood. The color was red.

“Betazoid blood is red. A bit darker than human blood, but a close match in color.”

Kris changed into Vulcan. The blood turned to green.

She did not have to see Picard’s mouth open slightly to know that it had happened. “I am now in Vulcan. Green blood.”

Kris changed into Altaran. The pigment of her skin took on an Altaran green color. Altarans were from a planet in the Bernaline system, Altara. Their species had space travel ability, yet Altarans did not often leave their home world. They were a plant-based species, their biology possessed traits similar to vegetation. They not only ingested for sustenance, but they needed to be around vegetation in order to survive. More than a few weeks without exposure to vegetation could be fatal.

Her skin was not the only thing to turn green. Kris’s blood turned to a lighter shade of green, lighter than the Vulcan blood color.

Picard’s mouth opened a bit more.

Kris did not think, she simply continued with her demonstration. She changed into Muztarif.

The Federation knew little about the people of the distant planet Muztarif. They had attempted first contact twice, only to be politely rebuffed. Muztarif was an extremely playful and complex species. The Muztarif people had been compared to their distant cousins, the Wadi, a race of people who also played games. But, the Wadi games were aggressive and could be dangerous. They played theirs for revenge or teach a lesson. They were not innocents.

Muztarifs played for joy and laughter, socialization and relaxation. The notion of harming someone else never occurred to them. Their governing was loose, but with no crime and only the occasional bickering, there really wasn't much governing to do.

They could be fickle and very sensitive. For those reasons, they turned down the Federation in order to maintain their privacy. They believed other species would not accept their unique way of life, and felt that if visitors came to their planet, they would only mistake them for silly fools who chose game playing above ambition, space exploration, education, or any kind organized government.

The Muztarif blood was bright orange tinged with purple. It sparkled.

Kris slipped into human. The blood turned red.

She lower her finger and went back into Betazoid. She now sensed what she had expected from Picard, astonishment. Not that Picard showed it.

He removed his finger from the comm button and paced away from Kris. His mind was racing. He glanced at the comm button, again considering calling Mr. Worf, his Klingon head of security.

“You still don’t believe me,” said Kris.

“That was...an interesting demonstration.”

Kris took a deep breath. Revealing herself was not the real reason why she was here. She had to tell Picard the truth. “I was assigned to the Enterprise by Admiral James Peterson,” she said calmly.

She waited for a reaction that she could register in Betazoid. She immediately sensed a bubble of anger mixed with regret. Of course, she knew why.

Peterson and Picard were friends long ago. Picard was also friends with Peterson’s wife, Carol. Eighteen years ago, something happened to Carol while the three of them were on leave on the planet Brella. She had been found dead. Picard had found her. Her death was unexplained and an inquiry was ordered. It was eventually ruled an accident.

Peterson had never believed it was an accident. He had always blamed Picard for Carol’s death. A lover’s tryst gone bad? Or, something that Picard had planned in order to secretly destroy Peterson? Peterson had been after Picard ever since. For the most part, he had tried several times to get Picard kicked out of Star Fleet. Peterson knew a Court Marshal would serve as a death blow to Picard.

Picard denied being involved in her death. He had discovered her, yes. But, he said explained that they had planned to meet, and Peterson knew of it. No charges were brought against him.

Still, Peterson's view of things had never changed.

The name, Peterson, had gotten Picard's attention, yet he again tried to hide his emotions. "Admiral Peterson has assigned other personnel to my ship," he said.

"I was assigned, officially, to engineering. Unofficially, Peterson gave me another task."

"Admiral Peterson." It was in his blood to correct that mistake, whether it had to do with a person who had tried to get him kicked out of Star Fleet—multiple times—or not.

Kris hesitated. This was the real reason why she was standing here in Picard's ready room. Peterson—no Admiral Peterson—had given her a secret assignment. She did not want to do as he had asked. In Betazoid, she knew Admiral Peterson was manipulating her, using her for his own personal vendetta. It had made her uncomfortable the minute it was proposed.

Once she was aboard the Enterprise, she decided she couldn't go through with the secret assignment. She couldn't help Peterson find evidence to get Picard court marshalled. She had been on the Enterprise for two weeks, but had yet to even attempt to log in to the ship's computers in order to do some "investigating." Admiral Peterson's word, not hers. She knew it

was wrong. Now, she had to come clean. She had to give herself up to Captain Jean-Luc Picard.

“Admiral Peterson assigned me to spy on you,” she said.

* * *

Commander William Riker loved his job. The Enterprise’s First Officer was second in command of the Federation’s flagship. He was in charge of fulfilling the Captain’s orders. He was responsible for the smooth coordination and interaction between all departments shipboard. He had plenty of responsibilities with all of the varied interactions the Enterprise experienced. And, he was also in charge of personnel, all nine hundred twenty-six, currently.

Riker was naturally a social person, good natured, and a good listener. He loved to interact, daily, with what he considered “his crew.” *The captain has his ship, I have my crew.* The distinctions were, of course, minimal, and mostly something made up by Riker. But, that’s the way it felt to him.

It wasn’t entirely true. Riker knew that Captain Picard would lay down his life for his crew. Star Fleet personnel all swore that oath. They would all give up their lives to protect each other.

On the most base level, though, Riker had that personal touch that the captain lacked. He felt his responsibility in every bone of his body. They were “his crew,” and he loved them.

Breakfast was his favorite time because, on most mornings, he could meet with his closest friends; Data, Worf, Geordi, and the lovely Deanna Troi

Riker sat down, all six foot five of him. A smile spread across his bearded face. “Good morning,” he said to his friends.

“Morning,” was Troi’s quick response. Her smile made him feel good inside, always had, from the moment he met her three years earlier. He loved the sparkle in her eyes, the Betazoid eyes with the black irises. That was the only physical difference between Humans and Betazoids, those dark irises—and their telepathic abilities. Riker knew he had deep feelings for Deanna. She probably knew it, too, her abilities would tell her. But, she kept it to herself. According to her Star Fleet directive as a Betazoid officer, when it came to her telepathic abilities, she had to keep what she knew about Riker’s feelings to herself. Plus, Riker wasn’t always sure what he felt, anyway.

As Riker helped himself to some of the breakfast choices—scrambled eggs, hash browns, and Wayleen toast—Geordi La Forge, the chief engineer, leaned in. “Commander, Data and I think that we may be able to synthetically produce verbal.” Geordi La Forge was a brilliant engineer, and a kind and amiable person. It seemed like everyone on the Enterprise loved “Geordi.”

But, Geordi had a physical disability—he was born blind. He had had a rare condition that current medical technology could not repair. Geordi had ascended to his lofty status in a unique way by wearing a highly sensitive device that allowed him vision. Not only vision, but Geordi could detect things that even some sensors couldn't.

“Really? That’s never been done before,” said Riker.

“It has never been attempted, as far as records indicate,” said Mr. Data, a humanoid-looking android. It was Mr. Data’s goal to become as human as possible, as much as any android could become. Even though he was far from his goal, most of the crew had long ago accepted Mr. Data as one of them. If he never got more human than he was now, that would be fine with the Enterprise crew.

“Never? I find that hard to believe,” said Riker.

“You’re doubting Mr. Data?” said Troi in that teasing way that Riker loved so much.

“I could never doubt Mr. Data.” He shuffled a forkful of eggs into his mouth.

“It would have made sense for the scientists on Plantus to attempt to synthesize veral, however, there are no records of any attempts ever made,” said Data.

“Or, they’re keeping those records to themselves,” added Geordi as he grabbed a piece of Wayleen toast.

“Any scientific advancements, such as synthetically producing veral, would have to be reported to the Federation. And to Spadilus.”

“Which may be the reason why they’ve never tried,” added Troi.

Riker nodded. He looked from Geordi to Data. “And?”

“We are conducting final trials,” said Data as he sat in his straight posture, hands in his lap. Mr. Data did have the ability to eat foods, yet he seldom did so. He joined in the breakfasts in order to continue to learn how to be humanly social.

“Well, let me know,” said Riker. He made it a practice to never worry too much about something until there was something concrete to actually worry about.

He smiled at the always-sullen Mr. Worf. “What about you, Worf? Not eating again?”

“I ate in my quarters. This food is not acceptable to my palate,” said Mr. Worf, a Klingon. As it was with most Klingons, Worf typically did not mince words. He was not trying to be rude, it just often came out that way. Yet, like Mr. Data, Worf did “enjoy” a bit of social time. He did not approve of socializing with most of the crew, however, Riker, Troi, Geordi, and Data was considered acceptable.

“What did you eat?” asked Riker.

“Klingon beef with *rechentis*,” said Worf. “Delicious.”

“We can have that here, Worf,” said Troi. “We can add it to the spread.”

“There is no need. I am simply...enjoying the company.” Mr. Worf scowled. This made Riker laugh. “Of course you are,” he said, beaming. “It’s lovely company. What is Rechentis, by the way?”

Worf thought for a moment. “Your equivalent would be...ocean weeds.”

“That would be called seaweed, Mr. Worf,” said Data.

“I suppose,” grumbled Worf.

Riker beamed at Troi. “Are you going with the captain today?”

“I am. The Captain wants me to focus on the lead representatives. He suggested that I only interject with him personally, and only if one side seems to be creating an unfair advantage.”

Betazoid’s telepathic abilities allowed them to sense the feelings and emotions of other beings. When engaged in her job, Troi would interpret what another being was really saying or feeling to Captain Picard and others, if she could. There were only a few beings that she’s met, Ferengi being one example, where Troi could not sense their feelings.

Truthfully, Troi was only half Betazoid, her father was human. However, as the ship’s counsellor, Troi’s Betazoid half

had proven worthy many times and her telepathic abilities were strong.

“Kind of vague orders,” commented Riker.

“I know what he means. I’ll be there to observe. If I feel the representative from Plantus is attempting to, let’s say, use their position in space travel to gain an unfair advantage, then I will indicate that to the captain. Privately, since both sides are sensitive and tensions are high. If I feel both sides simply don’t like each other, yet are fairly trying to create the best deal possible for their respective worlds, then...”

“You say silent.”

“Exactly.”

“Records indicate the last three negotiations between Plantus and Spadilus have taken an average of three point two days,” said Data.

“That was before the Federation sent Captain Picard in as mediator,” said Riker. They all smiled, knowing exactly what Riker meant. Captain Picard was one of the best negotiators in the Federation.

Troi wiped her mouth with a napkin. “I thought maybe the captain would prefer to extend the negotiations, rather than babysit the Romulan medical ship.”

“Oh contraire, Counsellor, the captain wants to be the Romulan escort. Just to make sure that all is well between the Federation and the Romulans,” said Riker.

"I see." Troi stood. "I'm going to go review previous treaties between Plantus and Spadilus."

Geordi also stood, as did Data. "We need to get going, too."

"Let me know about the trial," said Riker to Data and Geordi.

"We'll do," Geordi and Data walked out of Ten Forward with Troi.

Worf nodded to Riker. "I will have an updated duty roster for you in an hour, sir. I have six officers preparing for the Romulan transfer of veral."

"We're hoping to not need security."

"It is good to be prepared, Commander," said Worf.

"It is, Mr. Worf." Riker watched Worf stride out of Ten Forward.

Riker looked down at his breakfast. His plate was empty. Time to get to work. He stood, and caught the eyes of lovely Ensign Amanda Walker. "Morning," he said in his sweetest voice.

"Good morning, Commander," said Ensign Walker as she headed to the door.

"May I walk with you?"

"Of course."

Seizing yet another opportunity to chat with a crew member, Riker and the ensign walked out together.

* * *

“What did you just say?”

“Admiral Peterson assigned me to spy on you,” repeated Kris.

Captain Picard did not need to think long on his response. “What you’re saying is treason. I can have you court marshalled with one call to Star Fleet headquarters.”

Kris nodded. She went into Vulcan, she did not need to be Betazoid any longer. “That is true, captain. I am in Vulcan now. Vulcans do not lie.”

“Assuming you are what you say you are, parlor tricks aside. Additionally, I have questioned that particular Vulcan mantra in the past. Vulcans do not lie, but they can work around a lie.”

He’s challenging me to prove my innocence. “I was given those instructions by Admiral Peterson before I boarded the Enterprise.”

“How?”

“In person.”

“Verbally?”

“Yes. With no witnesses.”

“Nothing in writing or recorded on computer, verbal instructions only? That means his word against yours.” Picard paced. When he was pacing, he was thinking deeply. *Peterson has been after me for so long. Could this be true? If it is...* He stopped and turned on Kris. “Why are you on my ship under an assumed name?”

“That’s a whole other matter. The one involving my mother,” said Kris.

“Star Fleet is not in the habit of casually changing the names of its officers.”

“After my arrival on Star Base 325, I was designated FA12.”

“A dangerous alien?” Picard’s body instinctively wanted to step back and his mind instructed his arm to reach for the comm on the wall. He wanted to call Worf and get this imposter out of his ready room and off his ship.

Instead, he did not move. *Dangerous? How many times has Star Fleet designated an FA12 status to any being?* There was a captured FA12 Borg. As well as the lethal substance discovered on Mentrone Six. It was believed to have life, yet no communication was ever established with it. Instead of investigating further, it was designated dangerous enough to warrant an FA12. Picard knew that if this Kris Anderson or Kris Rogen, or whatever her name was, had presented herself to

Star Fleet the same way she presented herself to him, there would have been an investigation and a medical exam. Questions would have been asked, and answered. Presumably.

“What happened on Star Base 325?” Picard asked.

“Five years ago, I left the moon where my mother had raised me. I was traveling in a small ship. I ran across a Star Fleet transport ship. They contacted Star Fleet headquarters. The next thing I knew, I was on a starship and they were taking me to the nearest Star Base. I was in the brig.”

“325. The Omega sector.”

“Yes. I explained myself to the authorities there. Instead of the brig, they assigned me to quarters, but said I could not leave. Their doctors examined me, of course. Several times.”

“And?”

“Inconclusive.”

Picard stared at the young woman. *The resemblance is uncanny. Her face. Those eyes. They're just like...No, it's impossible.* Picard went to the comm button. “Dr. Crusher to my ready room. Bring your kit.”

“Acknowledged,” came the feminine voice of Dr. Beverly Crusher over the comm.

“That is logical,” said Kris.

“That’s right, you’re Vulcan now,” said Picard skeptically.

Kris nodded. “I am. I try to be in Vulcan, expect when I’m working.”

“Why is that?”

Kris shrugged her shoulders. “The Chief Engineer wears a visor that would certainly detect when I change species, but may also detect some subtle enhancements that I possess. He has said nothing so far, but I stay in human around him just in case.”

“What did you say about your sixth species?” asked Picard.

“It is unknown to me. If I go into it, it’s...blank. Empty. It’s like an empty void. I do not know why, and my mother refused to explain it to me.”

Picard shook his head and sat down. He felt exhausted. He checked the time. Less than two hours until the arrival at Plantus. He took a deep breath. He knew he needed to be more decisive with this lieutenant. It was not like him to hesitate. He was always so sure of himself. Most of the time.

For some reason, this seemed like one of those times when waiting seemed more prudent. If this young woman proved true, the situation would be very interesting, to say the least. *Looking at her reminds me of... it can't be. It's merely a coincidence.*

A tall red-head, Dr. Beverly Crusher, walked into Captain Picard's ready room without knocking. Dr. Crusher usually enjoyed the times when she felt some leeway in bending the rules a bit, knowing that it often would rattle Captain Jean-Luc Picard's cage. She enjoyed it. That was the red-head in her. The rebel. She just had to occasionally knock Jean-Luc from his stoic perch from time to time.

"Captain?" she said, then gave Lieutenant Anderson a side glance.

Without a hint of emotion, Picard gestured to Kris and said, "Examine her."

Of course, Dr. Crusher had immediate questions. *"What is going on?" "Why am I being ordered to examine someone in his ready room?" "Who is this person?"* Her mouth opened, but nothing came out. The look Jean-Luc was giving her made her stifle those questions, for the moment. She could tell he was not in the mood. And, when Jean-Luc was not in the mood, Beverly knew to bury her rebellious tendencies.

Dr. Crusher removed her medical tricorder from her kit. She turned it on and pointed it at Kris. The readings began to come on the screen, they were surprising. "Vulcan?"

She looked at Kris's ears. "No ears. The eyebrows a bit, but no ears?"

True. When in Vulcan, Kris did not have the typical Vulcan ears. Her eyebrows did slide slightly upward, but her ears did not change. Her Muztarif ears reduced considerably

when she was in Muztarif, and her skin turned green when in Altaran, but why no ears?

Kris had asked her mother about this omission, the lack of the most significant Vulcan feature. Why leave the signature Vulcan ears out of her Vulcan engineering? Her mother had admitted she “couldn’t quite get the ears to work, so she quit on it.” Kris had thought this answer was particularly odd since her mother was a perfectionist. Still, she had no other option than to accept it.

“Apparently, when my mother made me, she could not perfect the Vulcan ears,” said Kris. “So, she decided not to create them.”

“Your mother?” said Crusher.

“Continue with the exam, doctor,” ordered Picard.

Crusher again stifled her questions. As she continued to puzzle over her tricorder vitals, Kris knew what Picard expected of her during this exam. She changed into human.

It took a moment for Crusher to react. As she stared at a new panel of numbers and vitals, her eyes bulged. “Wait... Now I’m getting...human.”

She checked her equipment—which was to be expected. She knew to always make sure your equipment was in proper working order. She reran the vitals. “Human.”

Kris changed again.

The doctor stared at her tricorder, but this time she was truly stumped. She felt as if she were using a tricorder for the very first time, or maybe she was examining her first ever patient and seeing the amazing way a piece of equipment, the tricorder, could sum up a life in just a few numbers. It could break down a being into its infinitesimal bits and pieces. It was stunning, which was how Crusher felt.

“These numbers...Betazoid?” said Crusher. More questions formed in her brain. She looked up at Kris, then to Picard. Both wore faces of stone.

Kris was not done. She changed into Altaran. The doctor noticed her skin color change right away. “What...?” She looked down at her tricorder, adjusted the settings, and reran the vitals. “I don’t get many of...We have Altarans in our database, but... That’s what it says here, but...” She shook her head. What was happening here was not possible.

Kris was not done. This last one was really going to stump Crusher.

After changing, she waited. So did Picard. Muztarif was not in the Federation’s database. No one from Star Fleet had ever examined a being from Muztarif. So little was known of them, only the location of their world and a few general characteristics. They definitely didn’t know vitals like blood pressure or pulse.

Dr. Crusher shook her head. “I don’t know what’s going on now.”

“What are the readings?” asked Picard.

“I don’t recognize them.” She pulled her tricorder away from Kris with a flourish of frustration, and glared at Picard. “What’s going on?” she said without a hint of politeness.

“I am in Muztarif, doctor,” said Kris.

“Muztarif? I’ve never heard of them. And, what does ‘in’ mean?”

“Muztarif are not members of the Federation,” said Picard.

“First contact was attempted twice, but Muztarif chose to remain autonomous,” added Kris, ignoring the second part of Crusher’s question.

“So?” Crusher took a few steps closer to Picard. “You’re still not telling me what’s happening here. Why is this lieutenant saying she’s ‘in’ a species. What does that mean?”

“Would you be willing to say what this person is?” asked Picard.

Dr. Crusher still didn’t understand. “I’m not quite sure.”

“Would you say ‘inconclusive’?” he asked.

“I would say I need to do more...” Crusher stopped, then looked at Kris. “What are you?”

“I am a genetically engineered being composed of six different species.”

Crusher shook her head. "Each one...One at a time?"

"Yes, doctor. Human, Vulcan, Betazoid, Altaran, Muztarif, and one unknown species."

For a long moment, the ready room was filled with silence. Captain Picard leaned back in his chair. He watched Dr. Crusher return her medical tricorder to the kit. Kris stood still.

Crusher still had many questions, but this time it was not Picard stopping her. She didn't know where to begin, what to ask. Worse, she hated being clueless.

Picard took a deep breath. He stood. *Proceed with extreme caution.* He now understood that this situation, whatever it was, was extremely delicate, perhaps one of the most delicate he had ever experienced. Why he felt that way, he had no idea. His instincts, perhaps.

"Dr. Crusher, take the Lieutenant to Sick Bay," he said. "Take her to a private room and conduct all of the tests you need, but do it in private. Confirm her claim. Do not discuss this with anyone." Picard rushed around his desk, knowing that he needed to get into Beverly's face to establish eye contact in order to make his orders perfectly clear. *She does like to walk that line with me. Not always listening to exactly what I'm saying.* "Dr. Crusher, do you understand? You do not discuss this with *anyone.*"

Dr. Crusher nodded. "Understood." She picked up her kit and headed to the door. She turned, expecting Kris to be behind her. But, Kris had not moved.

“Captain, you did not hear my terms,” said Kris.

“Your terms?”

“Whatever happens, I do not wish to be returned to Star Base 325.”

“Do you think you’re in a position to demand terms?” said Picard.

“I’m not demanding. I am requesting. Anywhere but there.”

Kris stared at Picard with pleading eyes, a look she had yet to give him. She knew Picard was no softy, he was a hardened starship captain. The toughest in Star Fleet. The captain of the flagship, Enterprise. Pleading with him was pointless, but she had to try.

“I want Dr. Crusher do her exam. Then, we’ll take it from there.”

Kris nodded, turned, and left with Dr. Crusher.

* * *

When they arrived, Sick Bay was relatively quiet. Dr. Hanson was busy working on her project—a study on the transformation of cells in aging Andorians. She was half

Andorian and a study of this type could help assist Andorians in treatments of several diseases.

Dr. Platt, a young male human who had recently joined Dr. Crusher's team, was administering treatment to a patient. It was a standard monthly treatment that was non-life threatening.

Dr. Crusher walked in ahead of Kris. Being the Chief Medical Officer, she was content that this part of the ship was one hundred percent *hers*. Her Sick Bay, all three locations. Her medical instructions, and her responsibility for the health of each and every crew member, including herself.

Kris followed her. The last time she had been in a sick bay was on Star Base 325. Three weeks of medical tests had been performed by countless doctors. She was told the result of each and every test—inconclusive. She hated sick bays and medical tests and anything to do with examining her. She had been a specimen her whole life. She was sick of it. Always uncomfortable.

Crusher led her to a door. "We'll be in here." Over her shoulder, Crusher said, "I'm putting on the 'Do Not Disturb'." Doctors Hanson and Platt both acknowledged the order without question.

The door opened and Crusher and Kris walked into a private treatment room. Crusher locked the door behind them. Kris noticed. *This will be just like 325.*

Crusher went to a wall computer and began to input instructions. She had several tests in mind already. The first two were to *disprove* this young woman's claim. "Is this a trick?" she asked while continuing to program the tests.

"Sorry?"

"Do you have a device on you, or in you, that causes these changes?"

"I suppose you can call it a device. My brain."

"Impossible." Crusher finished programming the first two tests. She removed a medical tricorder and transferred the data.

"I can understand how you might feel it is highly implausible," said Kris.

"I don't like wasting my time on things like this." She faced Kris. Before activating the tricorder, she said, "Tell me your story. From the beginning to Captain Picard's ready room. All of it."

"I was developed on a moon in the Omega sector. My mother, an accomplished scientist, had devised a way to genetically engineer a being that was composed of several multiple, independent species." Kris closed her mouth, a signal to Crusher that she was done.

"That's only a summary of your story. And, you talk like you believe it."

Kris did not need to go into Betazoid to examine Dr. Crusher's emotions. They were written all over her face. She was skeptical and annoyed. Kris said, "Doctor, I was conceived in a laboratory. I was raised on a moon with only my mother and a pair of Lewtropics."

"Lewtropics? They're very rare."

"Yes. The dominant was in charge of my development and education."

Lewtropics were a dying but very unique breed of humanoids. They were nomadic and always came in pairs, either two males or two females. These pairs were not genetic twins, like Twinned Mindarans who were brothers or sisters, but were a single self. Lewtropics were paired at birth.

The Federation didn't quite know the origin of Lewtropics. Neither did any living Lewtropic. One of the pair was the dominant, the other was the submissive. Lewtropics, once bonded, could only live apart for a few weeks. Once a Lewtropic was a pair, the bond was physical, emotional, and permanent. One could not live without the other. If one died, the other soon followed. Typically, the dominant was science-based, disconnected from social situations, and highly intelligent. The submissive was carefree and emotional and socially needy.

Crusher was correct, there were very few Lewtropic pairs left in any galaxy. The exact count was unknown. But, Kris had known one pair, Ga' Reth, the dominant, and Ga' Shain, the submissive.

Crusher held up her tricorder and activated the first program. "I need you to...be each one again. I want to do all of the readings again."

"In what order?"

"Does that matter?"

"Perhaps not."

"I hope you're not wasting my time," said Crusher.

* * *

Crusher paced, her arms crossed and then uncrossed in front of her body. Her feet could not stop moving. Nor could her mind. This version of her personality was the fiery red-head, the rebellious part that felt restless by unanswered and nagging questions. There was a puzzle out there that she could not solve, and that irritated her.

Picard calmly watched his chief medical officer.

"Doctor?" he said calmly.

"Captain, I don't have much to add. Five hours of exams and I came up with nothing. And, now you say Peterson is involved in this?"

"Were your results inconclusive?"

"You have to tell someone about Peterson," she said.

“Admiral Peterson.”

“An *admiral* who needs to be court marshalled himself. Jean-Luc, if this is true-“

Picard cut her off. “Doctor, would you call your exams inconclusive? Would you use that word?”

“Of course not. I just don’t know what they conclude. Or how. I don’t know who she does it.”

Crusher stop pacing. She glared at Picard and took a deep breath. She plopped down—exhausted—into a chair. “So far, she appears to be what she claims to be. As far as I can tell her brain...changes. Her chemistry...changes. Her physiology changes. I don’t know how, but it does. Her Vulcan heart is located where all Vulcan hearts are located. Her human lungs are in their proper place. The bloods change, the bones change, everything changes. Ears, skin color. And, all of it in a heartbeat. It’s incredible to watch the molecular changes, even if I don’t have a clue as to how it happens. And, when the changes occur, there’s no trace of the other species except the one that she’s *in*. I can only detect one species at a time.”

“How does she eat?”

“Food fuels her entire body, but again one species at a time.”

“Don’t the others get short changed?”

“All of them appear to be healthy. So, that would mean, there has to be some...sharing of food intake, water intake, air intake, sleep...there has to be. I just can't find the evidence.”

“And, you do not know how her brain changes?”

“I'm baffled. There's no extra mechanism, no extra body part inside her brain, and no device of any kind. I checked and rechecked each of them. There's only one physical brain in there, only one set of lungs at a time. If I believed in magic, which I don't...there has to be a reasonable explanation.”

“What about this unknown sixth species?”

“No readings at all for that one. She says she feels... blank. Like there's nothing there. And, my readings, on that one, confirm it.”

Captain Picard hit a comm button. “You can come in now.”

The door slid open and Kris strode in. In whatever species she was in, her body was tall, lean, and lanky. She had an amazing physicality.

“Have a seat,” said Picard. Kris sat down next to Crusher.

“How does your brain work?” asked Picard.

Kris sighed. “As I told Dr. Crusher seven times, I do not know exactly how it works. It was never explained to me.”

“How is that possible?”

“I inquired a total of four times. Each time, I was told it was not necessary for me to know exactly *how* I did the things I did.”

Picard asked, “Your mother told you that?”

“I only asked her once. The dominant Lewtropic told me that the other three times. I tried to argue that it was my body and I needed to know, but my mother gave me a definitive response.”

“Which was?”

“Protection,” she said.

“Protection against whom? Doctors who may need to medically help you?” asked Crusher.

“Protection against her formula. My mother wanted to protect the technology.”

Crusher shook her head. “If you are the creation, you’re the one being that can be trusted with that knowledge. You need it. It makes no sense. How can you not know how you work?”

“I don’t, doctor. I *think* of one of my species, and I become it. I don’t know how the change happens. Except that it happens inside my brain and inside my body. I am thoroughly whatever species I am in, at that moment.”

“Always one at a time? Never more than one?”

“Never.”

Picard leaned forward. "However, the doctor and I discussed how your body must share certain things. Food, water, sleep. There has to be crossover."

"Agreed. There is."

"But, she, meaning me, doesn't know how that works, either," Crusher chimed in, her frustration flowing into sarcasm.

"I understand, doctor. All I can say is that it works," said Kris.

Picard took a moment. He said, "You left the moon five years ago?"

"Yes. I was ten. I felt I had done everything I needed there and I wanted to go into space."

"Excuse me?" Picard interrupted. "You said you were ten? Ten years old?"

"That is correct."

Both Picard and Crusher took a moment to study her. Kris was female, her hair cut short, and Crusher's exams showed only the body of a twenty something.

"You said you were at Star Base 325 for five years?" said Picard.

"Yes."

"That makes you fifteen years old," said Crusher.

"Correct," said Kris.

Crusher looked at Picard, they stared at each other. Kris spared them the math. "Accelerated growth. I am fifteen years old. However, I appear older."

"I put you at twenty four," said Crusher. "You do not look fifteen."

"That is a decent approximation, doctor."

Picard stood, it was his turn to pace. He walked behind Kris and Crusher, arms clasped behind his back. He curled around his desk and stared out the window at the planet of Plantus. The Enterprise had been orbiting it for the last three hours. His first negotiation meeting was scheduled to begin in twenty minutes.

Picard turned to look at Kris. "I am removing you from the duty roster."

Kris had expected this. "Sir, do you really want Admiral Peterson to notice such a move?"

"Has Peterson contacted you since you've been on the Enterprise?" asked Picard, using a notable lack of the "Admiral" moniker.

"Twice," said Kris.

"How does he contact you?"

"He sends me a message that establishes a time when he will contact me directly. I am to be available in my quarters at the specified time. He contacts me via a scrambled channel."

“Untraceable,” said Picard.

“Yes, sir.”

“Your word against his,” said Picard. “I’m working on a few ideas. Unfortunately, right now I have more pressing matters.”

“Captain, if I can continue to work-“

Picard cut her off. “I’m about to agree with you. I can’t risk him monitoring our duty rosters. You may remain on the active duty roster, but I will make sure your duties are limited to engineering, and I will have Mr. Data monitor your computer activity.” He stared at Dr. Crusher. “I am including Data in this. But, no one else. Only you and Data. No one is to speak of this situation with anyone. That is an order.”

“You don’t have to explain orders to me,” complained Dr. Crusher.

“Doctor, do you understand the severity of this order?”

“Of course. Mums the word.” Crusher stood and headed to the door.

“Not yet, doctor.” Dr. Crusher stopped at the door. “You stay for a moment.”

Kris stood. Picard glared at her. “If all of what you claim is true, there are a lot of...details to work out. I need time to consider everything. If Peterson contacts you, I am to know immediately. In the meantime, perform your duties, and speak to no one about any of this. I am going to make a private

inquiry. I have a friend at Star Fleet headquarters. He's not a member of the council, but he's rather high up. I'm going to see what he says. I need to find a delicate way to discuss this, and I believe this friend is my best chance. I will contact you when I know more."

Kris nodded. She walked past Crusher and out the door.

Picard looked at Crusher. He sat heavily in his chair. He needed to somehow find energy for his upcoming Plantus-Spadilus negotiation. For the moment, he had none.

"One more question, doctor. Did you notice...Do you think there was some kind of resemblance...?" He stopped and shook his head. "Never mind."

"Jean-Luc?" Beverly became suddenly concerned. He seemed almost pensive.

Changing the direction of the conversation, Picard said, "If Peterson put her here to spy on me, I don't know what to do with a situation of that kind."

"One thing at a time, maybe?"

"What does it seem like to you?"

"Do I believe her?" Crusher nodded. "I think I do. I don't have a lot of evidence to support her, but there's something about her. Medical exams aside, it seems unlikely that she's *not* what she claims."

"But, you still don't know how she works, or why she was made?"

“Not really. If she is what she claims, she’s extraordinary.”

“And, if this being was put on this ship to help an admiral go after me, then how do I proceed? A situation like this creates a very unsettling feeling. For example, whom at Star Fleet do I trust?”

A long moment passed between them, years of conversations and heated discussions, and mutual respect and trust. Even love. Finally, Crusher shrugged. She turned and walked out.

* * *

Picard put in a call to his friend, Ambassador Roger Ewell before meeting the representatives from Plantus and Spadilus. He knew it was highly unlikely that Roger would be available to talk immediately. He mentioned the negotiations in his message, and said, “Nothing urgent. Just checking in with you.” Picard wanted the message to seem casual, just calling a friend. He and Roger talked from time to time, so nothing should appear suspicious.

Picard then had to get down to business with Plantus and Spadilus. The first meeting with the representatives was tense, as Picard had predicted. Of course, he had a plan. First, he would do nothing until Plantus ordered their warships to return to their planet.

The Plantus negotiator did so, begrudgingly.

Then, Picard reminded both parties that each wanted one thing, a partnership built on trust. This trust had to be secure and both planets had to benefit equally. He laid out a possible solution right away, the meat of his plan. He recognized Plantus's need for more veral than they were currently getting from Spadilus. Yet, he also conceded the ever-changing climate on Spadilus that often hindered not only their ability to mine veral, but also caused overall problems with the Spadilus food production.

Picard laid out what he thought was the solution to the problem. Plantus would provide new and technologically-updated equipment for both the mining and farming on Spadilus in exchange for a larger, per monthly quantity of veral from Spadilus.

Both sides immediately disagreed and walked out.

Being an experience negotiator, Picard knew this was not going to be easy. He reluctantly returned to the ship to study information on why these two worlds disliked each other.

Back on the Enterprise, he went over their respective histories. He discovered something interesting. It was an account of a recent slight by a government official from Plantus who had married a female from Spadilus. Inter-marriage was a very rare occurrence. The offensive slight was brushed off by the leader of Plantus. He refused to even acknowledge that anything was said in bad taste. Leaders from Spadilus, seeking a formal apology, were enraged by their response—or lack

thereof. Spadilus, an emotional people, began to demand the return of their bride, the daughter of the Second Premiere of Spadilus, second in charge to the First Premiere. It was a mistake, they said, to inter-marry. A century earlier, two previous inter-planetary marriages between high officials had been attempted, both done to help bond the two planets. Neither had worked out.

Since the marriage had not been dissolved, and had worked out, Picard was hoping to begin the next meeting with an apology from both sides.

While studying the earlier marriages, Captain Picard's comm signaled an incoming call. He looked at the name of the caller, Roger Ewell. He activated the call, and smiled. "Roger."

"Jean-Luc," said the silver-haired, but boyishly handsome Ambassador.

Picard and Ewell had been friends since the Academy. Both were driven, Picard wanted to be a starship captain, and Ewell had always gunned for a high position in the governing of Star Fleet. Ambassador was a decent ascendancy, but the ambitious Ewell wanted more someday.

"How are you, Roger?"

"I have only minor issues at the moment, nothing like the pettiness between Plantus and Spadilus. You calling for some advice?"

"Not really. We haven't spoken in a while."

“True.”

“How’s Caroline? And, Kimberly?”

“Both doing well. Kimberly is a botanist now.”

“I remember her studies. Good for her.”

Ewell smiled, he knew Picard well enough to know that he had something else on his mind. “Jean-Luc, when are you going to tell me why you’re really calling?”

Picard nodded, and took a deep breath. *How do I start this? Perhaps, it’s not as complicated as it seems.* “All right. I have an officer on board. Lieutenant Kris Anderson. She was put on the Enterprise two weeks ago, transferred from 325. By Peterson.”

“Go on.”

“Without going into it too much, I’m curious as to Lieutenant Anderson’s background. I knew her mother once, a long time ago. Elizabeth Rogen. At the time, Liz Rogen had a project she was working on. According to Lieutenant Anderson, after Star Fleet rejected her project, her mother left the Federation to pursue her work privately. She had apparently made progress on it, and I’m wondering what Star Fleet headquarters knows about this particular project.”

“What’s the project?” said Ewell.

“A genetically engineered humanoid.”

Picard waited, he watched Ewell nod. Then, he added, "The humanoid would have multiple species."

"A hybrid?"

"Of sorts. This being can be one species at a time."

Picard stared at Ewell. "Interesting project," he said. He shook his head. "Not anything I've ever heard of. You want me to ask around, right?"

Picard smiled. "Would you mind?"

"For a bottle of the good stuff the next time we see each other."

Corellian rum. "You got it."

Picard ended the call. He leaned back in his chair. *Have I opened a can of worms, or am I chasing my tail? Do I even believe this Kris Rogen? Kris Anderson. Whatever her name is. Perhaps I should have told Roger about the name change. Or, about her claim regarding Peterson.* He shook his head. *No, that was enough. There's something going on here. I must know what it is.*

* * *

While on the Enterprise, Kris spent almost all of her time in one of two places: Engineering or one of the chambers on the holodeck.

The holodeck was a recreational part of a starship where one could take a break from ship life and visit—well, visit anywhere that was programmed into the computer. The chosen place would be instantly recreated on the holodeck. On a holodeck, you could feel like you were actually at the real location.

Earth, Betazoid, Vulcan, the Romulan Empire, even the distant world of Brutarpin, the Federation member furthest from the Milky Way galaxy, could all be visited on a holodeck chamber. The computer stored thousands and thousands of possible locations.

Kris often visited Altara while she was on the holodeck. Since her Altaran had matured, approximately a year earlier, Kris's Altaran metabolism had a primal need to practice Altar—the necessary fitness of an Altaran. This was better known as the running tree jump.

Eighty percent of the planet of Altara was made up of trees, tall thick Altar trees with huge trunks and strong branches. Branches on some trees were relatively low so Altarans could ascend into the trees from the ground. Not that they often were on the ground. Most of the existence of Altarans took place in their trees—they slept, ate, and socialized among them. Altarans not only needed consistent exposure to vegetation, but they also had to exercise among

growing things in order to refuel. That was Altar, the exercise of running among their trees.

During the time known as Al Tureff Moin, Altarans practiced a few weeks of what was akin to war games, clan fought clan all over the planet. They were organized clashes and they did not escalate to hatred or conquering of other clans. That was the old way on Altara. This new way allowed them to practice their skills without killing or conquering.

Altarans had ancient, warlike instincts. These were not as furious and obsessive as Klingon instincts, but they were rooted in physical combat, trying to best an opponent with wits and strength. Al Tureff Moin was a ritual time when all Altaran combat skills were tested and refined.

Besides the war games, Altara had been a peaceful planet for over two hundred years. Any aggression left over from the clan wars had been long forgotten. The government was centralized, and clans lived within planetary rules and regulations with minimal compliant. Issues were handled in a timely manner, and the citizens of Altara were generally content.

Even though they lived among their trees, Altara was a technologically advanced society, and their people were highly intelligent. Forty years ago, they had achieved space travel. They had a small fleet of sixteen space ships specifically built for the needs of their people, complete with plenty of vegetation on board.

But, they didn't often travel in space, instead choosing to travel only when absolutely necessary.

The people of Altara were so dependent on nature and vegetation for their survival, they feared straying too far from their lifeblood—their home trees and vegetation. They preferred to stay home.

Kris's Altaran body ached like all Altaran bodies, the need to move around in nature was bothered her on a daily basis. Tree running, or even running along the ground were ways to "calm" or "settle" an Altaran body. Feed it. Nurture it. Give it what it needed, sweat, oxygen, the sensory and even molecular input from vegetative surroundings.

Altarans bodies received more input from their surroundings than humans received from theirs. On Earth, humans got their oxygen from trees and plants. Altarans received not only oxygen but a form of chlorophyll—Kyotiphy—from vegetation. It was a mineral that was needed in their bloodstream. An Altaran could feel when their body was low on Kyotiphy. A body low on Kyotiphy meant the typical super strength of an Altaran—Altarans were stronger than Vulcans or Klingons—could be compromised.

Kris had completed her shift in Engineering, and headed to the holodeck. She did what she often did on the holodeck, run. Altarans had excellent stamina and since the vegetation on the holodeck was only synthetic, a six to seven hour run was necessary for her to refuel her Kyotiphy.

Plus, she preferred privacy. When she wasn't refueling her Altaran body, she was usually sleeping—always in some outdoor program. She often didn't require much sleep. Altarans, Vulcans, and Muztarifs had longer awake cycles than Betazoids and Humans.

When she did sleep, she preferred to do so in an outdoor simulation. She had discovered that she was more comfortable in that situation than in her assigned quarters. A real planet would also suffice, of course. As long as she was outside, not inside, not in her quarters.

Someday, she hoped to run on the real Altara. Or, even run on a planet with a lot of vegetation. As far as Kris knew, an Altaran body was capable of receiving other forms of chlorophyll and converting it into Kyotiphy, no matter the type of a planet's vegetation.

She would also feel something else if she ran on a real planet—free. She longed to feel free. The holodeck gave her a bit of that feeling, but it wasn't truly real. She loved being on the Enterprise—working on a starship and someday piloting a starship was her dream—but, she mostly felt as trapped here as she did on 325.

Someday, I won't feel like this anymore. I'll be the pilot of the Enterprise, or I'll be in my own small ship, going wherever I want to go. Visiting planets, freely leaving whenever I want.

It took two days for the representatives from Plantus and Spadilus to agree to the terms of a new contract, the exact ones that Picard had laid out. This did not surprise him. With Troi's help, he had to begin the negotiations anew, this time tackling hurt feelings and stubbornness. Troi was better at this part than he was, so there were times he let her take the lead.

Finally, when it seemed as if both sides were talking in circles, Picard issued a deadline. He said, "The Enterprise is leaving in two hours. If there is no signed deal, I will return to Star Fleet empty-handed. I will request that Star Fleet examine the 'good standing' status of both Plantus and Spadilus. I will recommend the affiliation of both planets in the Federation to be revoked."

Troi did not like this threat by Picard, even though she kept quiet.

Still, it did get the leaders to finally focus and the deal was hammered out within the hour.

The Enterprise left the system on time, and was on its way to the Orion system in order to escort the Romulan medical ship.

Picard was relaxing in his quarters when a call from Ewell came through. The usually mild-mannered Ewell's expression was subdued. "Picard, about that project you mentioned."

*He's going right to business. No "How are you?"
Something is wrong.*

"Don't do it again," said Ewell. His face was stern, jaw locked, and his eyes bore into the screen.

"I...I don't understand," said Picard.

"We've been friends a long time, Jean-Luc. I'm giving you a warning. As a friend. Don't make any inquiries on that project, or Lieutenant Anderson, again. Ignore her. Let her do her rotation on your ship, like she doesn't exist. Do you understand?"

"Actually, I don't. Roger, you sound as if--"

"Picard," said Ewell in a very disturbing tone as he leaned forward. "That's an order. No more inquiries about that Lieutenant or anything that has to do with her. Understood?"

Ewell waited for Picard to answer. Picard hesitated. He was not used to this tone, especially from a good friend like Ewell. "Understood."

Ewell quickly disconnected the call.

Picard leaned back in his chair, stunned. *Roger just gave me a warning. If I move forward on this, he knows nothing about it. I'm on my own. He's telling me... this is big.*

* * *

Escorting the Romulan medical ship went without a hitch. Geordi and Data were able to assist the Romulan medical team with a rough blueprint for synthesizing veral, but they failed to make their final product satisfy the needed forty-forty-twenty mixture of elements to make the plant effective as a drug. Data hypothesized that this was due to the fact that the Enterprise couldn't quite recreate the exact conditions needed for producing veral naturally. They couldn't quite get the soil right. He suggested that the Romulans try on one of their planets where veral used to flourish.

Two days later, the captain survived his brisk meeting with the Ferengi. It was brisk because he made it so. Since the Ferengi demands—this time—were not entirely outrageous, the captain brokered a meeting with a Federation official more suited to assist them. As long as it wasn't him.

Captain duties aside, Picard's thoughts were often wandering to Lieutenant Kris Anderson. He had yet to devise a reasonable plan for what he now feared was a very sticky problem.

Dr. Crusher wasn't helping, either. She was pestering him every chance she got. At breakfast, she sat across from him, and said, "What's going on with Anderson?"

"I have yet to make a decision, doctor."

"And, you won't tell me what your Star Fleet contact said?"

“I do not want to share more details with you, doctor.”

“Why not?”

“Doctor-“

“There’s something going on here. She told me

Anderson isn’t even her name-“

“Doctor-“

“And, how does she even exist? Someone in Star Fleet must know. Why the secrecy? Star Fleet developed her, didn’t they?”

“I’m not at liberty to say-“

“You need to tell me what’s going on, Jean-Luc.”

No, the bigger problem here is you are not listening to me. “Please stop talking. I have a lot to consider. And, I am doing just that.”

Picard stood and picked up the used breakfast dishes. He discarded them. “Don’t you have work to do?” he said, then gestured to the door.

“That’s it?” Crusher gave her best exasperated look.

“Yes, doctor.”

Crusher stood and sulked her way to the door. She glanced back at Picard, but he wisely turned his attention to his computer.

After Crusher was gone, Picard took a deep breath. *I do need to figure this out.*

A few minutes later, Picard strolled onto the bridge. The bridge of the Enterprise was a well-oiled machine, and he liked it that way. The bridge was his true calming place, not his ready room or his quarters. He preferred being on his bridge.

He sat in his chair and looked at his First Officer, Riker. "Report."

"In route to Star Base Fourteen, as ordered," said Riker. He looked to the back of Mr. Data, who was sitting in the navigation station. "Time, Mr. Data."

Data swiveled in his chair to face the captain and first officer. "We will arrive at Star Base Fourteen in seven hours, thirteen minutes, sir." Data swiveled back to face the screen. He had wanted to be more accurate in his report, giving the arrival time down to the seconds. But, Picard had ordered Data long ago to *not* give him the seconds. Hours and minutes, he said, would do.

Picard checked his computer, he was up-to-date on his logs and there was a lack of pressing matters. He wished he had something to occupy his mind.

After a few minutes, Picard stood. Over his shoulder, he said to Riker, "You have the bridge." He headed to a turbolift.

Once inside, he barked, "Engineering." The turbolift swiftly delivered him to the Engineering level of the ship.

He strode quickly to Main Engineering where he found Lieutenant Anderson working on a nearby panel. He stood and watched her. *If she were not a competent engineer, Geordi would have informed me by now. She must be fitting in here. Was that all she was, though, a decent junior engineer?*

After a moment, his chief engineer, Geordi, noticed him. “Captain? Anything I can do for you?” Geordi quickly hustled to his side.

“I’m going to have a private word with your lieutenant,” he said, and then walked up behind Kris and waited.

Kris had heard Picard speak to Geordi. Kris’s ability to hear in human was better than most humans. Many of the functions in each of her species were enhanced a bit more than found in a typical sample.

She was “in” human due to Geordi and his incredibly sensitive visor. She made it a point to only change when away from him. She had, for example, changed into Vulcan while walking the corridors, but she always checked the location of Mr. La Forge before doing so.

Without looking away from her project, Kris said, “Captain.” He was standing right behind her.

Picard waited. This time he tried not to look at Kris’s face. *Each time I look at her, it makes me jump. She looks so much like...But, it simply cannot be.*

Kris paused her project—calculating the space between each initial damper and finding out if each one could be

calibrated to the one thousandth degree. Commander La Forge had assigned her this project, one of many “busy-type” of projects Kris had had to do in the last eight days. She didn’t mind. She enjoyed the work in Engineering.

She faced Picard. “Follow me,” he said, and then turned and walked into a side room.

Once they were both inside the private room, Picard said, “My friend at Star Fleet headquarters had a very bizarre reaction to my inquiry.”

“You told him about me?”

“Partly. I inquired about your mother’s project, without naming you as the exact subject. What I got back was, more or less, a very stern warning to leave that topic alone. And, he mentioned you.”

“I see.”

“However, I believe, sub-textually, my friend was also telling me that something very big is going on. He couldn’t tell me straight out, but-“

“Captain, I have been contacted by Admiral Peterson. I am to be in my quarters at oh eight hundred hours tomorrow morning to receive his communication.”

Picard nodded. “Good. Let’s see what he has to say.”

Chapter Two

It was Stardate 44449.0. For a brief moment, Picard remembered that he was looking forward to this week. Instead of resuming his usual duties, however, he arrived at Lieutenant Anderson's quarters at exactly oh eight hundred hours.

As he walked in, Kris's computer dinged, a personal message was coming through.

Kris looked at Picard before answering. He nodded, then took a position behind the computer, well out of the way of any visual angle the caller may see of him.

Kris accepted the call. Admiral James Peterson appeared on the screen. He was balding with a wide nose that appeared larger on his long face. His look was stern and serious, his ability to light and playful was lost long ago. He was a man obsessed, and that singular obsession was Jean-Luc Picard.

"Sir," said Kris.

"Do you have anything to report, Lieutenant?"

"I do not. I have been assigned contained compass projects over the last ten days by Chief Engineer La Forge. I have not had reason to access the ship's main computer banks. Only the Engineering statistical-"

"You've done nothing for over four weeks," interrupted Peterson.

"I have not had an opportunity-"

"A good officer creates opportunities, Lieutenant. If you are to succeed in Star Fleet, you must be ambitious. It is imperative."

"Yes, sir."

"Perhaps, a transfer is needed. It may be a case that you do not fit in on the Enterprise. Four weeks and the chief engineer is only assigning you compass projects?"

"We have had a good deal of down time, sir. For example, we are now at Star Base Fourteen-"

"I know where you are, I don't need to be told your location. What I need is an officer who understands that duty comes before anything."

Kris nodded, but remained silent.

"I personally oversaw your training, Lieutenant, and I must say I'm disappointed. Get better assignments, ones that will utilize your...talents. And, perform your duty to your full capabilities."

"Yes, sir."

"You did begin at 325. Maybe you fit in better there."

"I understand," said Kris.

"I hope you do." Peterson hit a button, and his image disappeared.

Kris stared at the blank screen for a moment, then she looked at Picard.

Picard stepped in front of the computer. "He didn't say anything that would implicate him. He was being very careful." He hit a button on Kris's computer. "Computer, this is Captain Jean-Luc Picard. Access code one, one, three, four, nine, seven, six, one, five. Trace the last message sent to Lieutenant Kris Anderson's quarters and report."

The sultry computer voice said, "Working." A short moment later, the computer voice said, "Lieutenant Kris Anderson has received no messages."

"No messages?"

The computer voice did not reply. Picard knew it had given him an accurate response, he also knew the computer wasn't going to repeat that response unless he asked it to do so. The computer said that Lieutenant Anderson had had no messages. Picard knew what that meant.

"Scrambled on a channel our ship doesn't recognize," he said, more to himself than to Kris.

"Can it be traced at all?"

"Not when the source is Star Fleet headquarters and the channel is unknown." Picard paced. "He didn't admit to anything. He chose his words very carefully. He only referred to your 'duty'."

"Did he know someone was in the room?"

"It doesn't matter, he was successfully vague. And, yet got his message across. If anything were to happen, it would still come down to his word against yours as to his original instructions. He doesn't need to repeat them. Peterson is very smart."

Kris nodded.

"The only thing we do have my witnessing him contacting you," added Picard.

"Which means you believe me," said Kris, in a statement not a question.

"I know the man. I know his hatred for me."

"I read your file. It didn't appear to me as if you had anything to do with-"

"You read my file?" interrupted Picard.

"Peterson gave it to me. He demanded I read it," said Kris. "You had nothing to do with the death of his wife, Captain."

"That's not what he believes."

"He's wrong."

Picard glared at Kris. "Your opinion is not relevant."

Kris hesitated. "Captain, I am in the middle of a very unique situation. I do not know what to do. I want to be on a starship. I dreamed of this. One day, I hope to pilot-"

Picard bolted for the door. "That's not going to happen." The door slide open, Picard waited to leave. "I think the best thing to do is to transfer you to another ship. Perhaps Peterson will simply give up. Perhaps we'll give him some false trail to satisfy him, and let it be."

"He won't go away, sir. He's quite determined."

"I don't know what else to do." Picard walked out. Kris watched the door close behind him.

* * *

Kris really had no inclination to go to Ten Forward, the social center of the Enterprise. Kris wasn't all that social, she had no friends on board the Enterprise, and she wanted to be alone as much as possible. That was her nature, and her choice.

Yet, there was something about Ten Forward that was... calling her. She had had a strange feeling after leaving Engineering. She had gone into all five of her known species, and the feeling was the same in each. A sudden need to visit this part of the ship.

It wasn't a need for socialization. Kris knew she was lacking in that area, and had no desire to improve anytime soon. It also wasn't for sustenance. She ate only food cubes. Within her specifically engineered body, food cubes where exactly what each of her species' needed to maintain proper

health. The dominant Lewtropic, Ga' Reth, gave her the formula for these cubes before she left her moon, and he insisted that they were all that she needed.

The reason Kris stood in the open door of Ten Forward was due to a new, unexplained feeling. It was this feeling that had drawn her here. But why?

Since remaining in the doorway would solve nothing, Kris wandered to the bar. She sat down on an empty chair. A Star Fleet ensign bartender asked her if she wanted anything.

"Nothing," she said.

The bartender looked a bit perplexed, as if that was the last answer he had expected. He walked away to help a couple at the far end of the bar.

"Then, you don't know why you're here?" asked a voice from her right.

Kris looked at the source of the voice. A colorful gown, a wide, dark face, and a swooping hat that dipped down the right side of her head. Kris stared at this being for a moment. The female-looking being did not wear a Star Fleet uniform, which did not tell her much. She could be off-duty. Kris's next thought told her that this being was not in Star Fleet. She was... something else entirely. She did not know how she knew this, she just did.

"The name is Guinan."

The being named Guinan stared at Kris. *Humanoid? No, this Guinan is not from this universe. She is from...somewhere else. But where? Should I ask? No, she won't tell me. How do I know this?*

Kris remained quiet.

"I can offer twenty seven different types of humanoid drinking water," said Guinan.

Kris shook her head.

"Are you meeting someone?"

"No."

"Hungry?"

"No."

"Not drinking, not meeting someone, not hungry. But, here you are in Ten Forward. Very unusual," said Guinan, who then smiled. Kris thought she even detected a wink, even though her eyes didn't wink at all.

"I'm apparently in the wrong place," said Kris. She stood.

"Or, looking for the wrong thing. You never know sometimes." Guinan pretended to tidy up underneath the bar.

Kris stared at her. *Pretense? She wants me here, I know it. Yet, now this being acts as if she has other matters to attend to, without a care in the world. Strange.*

“Do I know you?” asked Kris.

“I just said my name is Guinan. You know me now,” she said.

Kris inhaled, she was not one to waste time. She headed for the door. *I want nothing to do with that being. Getting away is probably best.* She walked out. Even though, deep inside, she continued to feel...What? *That that being means something to me. Something.*

Guinan watched Kris leave. Whether she did it with her eyes or not, Guinan remained riveted on Kris Rogen for several moments. When she was out of her sight, Guinan still felt her presence. And, she knew that Kris still felt her.

Of course, Guinan knew what Kris Rogen was. A six species genetically engineered being. Five humanoid species. The sixth was, well, Guinan knew exactly what that one was.

How did she know? She knew Kris’s mother.

What was Kris’s mother? Was she a humanoid?

She was not. She was Ramos.

The Ramos species existed before Guinan’s people—the El Aurian. They co-existed with The Continuun peacefully for many millennia, another highly evolved species. However, there came a time when the two species began to clash. The Continuum felt they were superior to Ramos. They were too often trying to dictate how the Ramos should live.

In response, the leader of Ramos, known as The Ancient, developed a new species, the El Aurian. The Ramos were essentially their parents. One reason The Ancient did this was because The Continuum could not create new life. Only Ramos could do it.

The Ancient made the El Aurian a long-lived species of "listeners," a quality The Ancient had failed to see in members of the Continuum. The Ancient hoped the El Aurian would create harmony because of the way they would live their lives, and their more corporeal existence, they could eventually die. The Continuum would not feel threatened by them. They were of a similar intellect and had most of the Ramos abilities, however, The Ancient made sure that the El Aurian had a higher conscience than beings from The Continuum. Their ability to listen would evoke sympathy for other beings.

The beings of El Aurian eventually began to outnumber the Ramos ten to one. By this time, many of Ramos began to evolve into different planes of existence to allow the El Aurian to flourish. They did not want to stand in the way of a new evolving species.

Unlike members of The Continuum, the El Aurian traveled often in order to experience the wide varieties of galaxy after galaxy. Still, they definitely had a home universe, which was called Ramos. They continued to grow in numbers as only a handful of Ramos, and The Ancient, remained.

Then came the Borg.

The Ancient clashed with the remaining Ramos over what to do about the invaders. The Ancient wanted to destroy the Borg in order to protect the El Aurian. The Ancient knew the peaceful El Aurian could not defeat the Borg.

But, the remaining Ramos objected. They felt the Ramos should not be involved. If the El Aurian were going to survive, this new species needed to do it on their own.

The Ancient ignored the other Ramos and began to interfere, protecting the El Aurian. The Ramos were forced to destroy their own leader. Eventually, the Borg had taken over the Ramos-El Aurian universe. The remaining Ramos left, and the surviving El Aurian scattered.

Kris's mother was one of the Ramos. She was involved in the destruction of The Ancient.

She spent a millennia or two traveling throughout different universes. Eventually, she began working on a project, a mixture of her species with ones that had intrigued her. Guinan knew Liz Rogen had other reasons for eventually creating Kris, but the species she was targeting had so impressed her. They were so sweetly limited, yet possessed qualities unknown to them. Could the integration of a select few with her own abilities amount to something?

When she was ready, choosing the five species was easy for Liz Rogen. She had had her reasons for choosing Human, Vulcan, Betazoid, Altaran, and Muztarif. It had taken her over a millennia to find the perfect combination for her purposes. Plus, she had so enjoyed the research and

observations while wandering around the humanoid-like universes. She often inserted herself in the lives of these very beings to make sure she knew exactly what made each one tick.

Even though Liz Rogen had never admitted to Guinan why she had plans to make a being such as Kris, Guinan had always believed her efforts were the result of a deep regret. She helped destroy her own leader, The Ancient. And, now she wanted to return to the “old” Ramos ways of creating and not destroying. Creating a new hybrid species was her way of healing the true soul of the Ramos.

Guinan knew about Kris the moment she left the moon where she was developed. She could feel Kris’s Chhybra, the center of the Ramos brain, even though Kris’s brain had yet to awaken. That ancient link between El Aurian and Ramos still existed, even if faintly.

But, Guinan knew she had to wait. She felt that Kris would come to her. When she was transferred to the Enterprise, Kris was exactly where she was meant to be.

She doesn’t yet know about her Ramos. But, is she a true Ramos? A true being from Ramos was just that, Ramos. They did not have several humanoid parts attached to them. Guinan had always been unsure about how this kind of hybrid would affect the universes. The making of a humanoid/Ramos being was remarkable, and quite dangerous.

Guinan would have to ponder her next move, knowing that she had to act soon. She couldn’t simply let things work themselves out. There were unknown challenges with

consequences that affected many universes. One was coming very soon.

Kris Rogen was indeed a challenge. The biggest Guinan had ever faced.

Chapter Three

One week later, the Enterprise had been ordered to the Delta sector to take geologic readings of an unusual asteroid belt. These asteroids were composed of a type of metal typically found in a completely different sector. Somehow, the metal particulars had traveled by either forming small asteroids or attaching themselves to larger asteroids. Now, the new belt was being moved by the metals themselves. The belt was slowly heading back to the metals' original sector. It was as if the metals had entered space, travelled millions of miles to find a small, boring asteroid belt, attached themselves to it, and were bringing it back to their home sector. It was interesting work, for the geologists.

Not so much for Picard.

He was on the bridge monitoring the progress, looking forward to the completion of the work. A few moments later, he received a call. "Higgins to Captain Picard. We're finished with our readings, sir."

Picard hit a button on his comm. "Thank you, Lieutenant. We'll be on our way." He turned off the communication. "Mr. Data, set a new course--"

The Enterprise came to an abrupt and sudden stop. It had been on impulse power, paralleling the asteroid belt. The force of the stop was not jarring, but certainly noticeable.

Picard instinctively grasped the arms of his chair. "Mr. Data, what just happened?"

Mr. Data's fingers floated across his large console. Without turning to face his captain, he said, "Unknown, sir. But, it appears as if we are unable to move."

"Put us back into impulse, Mr. Data."

"I cannot, sir. It appears we are being held in this position."

Picard glanced at his First Officer, Riker, seated next to him. He then glanced at Counsellor Troi, seated to his left. Neither said a word. "Red alert," he ordered.

The Enterprise immediately went into a battle-ready preparedness status called "Red Alert."

Picard jumped out of his seat. "Investigate, Mr. Data. Why are we being held?"

"Unknown."

"Boost engines. Move us," Picard commanded.

Mr. Data's fingered flitted across his screen. "Ineffective, captain," he said.

Picard hit the comm on his shirt. "Mr. La Forge, we need power."

"Sorry, sir," said Geordi over the comm. "There's no power and I don't know why."

“Find out,” barked Picard. He spun to face Worf. “Mr. Worf, contact Star Fleet command. Let them know that we seemed to be stopped for an unknown reason,” ordered Picard.

Mr. Worf’s fingers worked his own panel. He looked up at Picard, and said, “Communications are out, sir.”

Picard paced. He wanted answers.

Suddenly, Kris Rogen appeared on the bridge. She was standing next to the pilot, Lieutenant D’Orb Grace, a competent pilot from the Zentra colony on Flogan Five who sat next to Mr. Data.

Kris looked perplexed as she looked around the bridge.

Picard glared at her. “Why are you here?”

“I don’t know.”

“Picard,” came a booming, yet familiar voice. “I want answers about this being!”

Picard turned to his left to face Q, a being from The Continuum. The beings from Q’s universe, ruled by this Continuum, were eons ahead of beings from Picard’s universe, or most known other universes. They had evolved to beings of pure intellect, despite most of Q’s interactions with humanoids. These beings could transfer matter with their thoughts. They could move people against their will. If Q wanted to have a Mariachi band on the Enterprise, he would think it, and that band would appear, as it had once appeared on this very bridge.

Not even Mr. Data could explain how Q did the things he did, except to say that Q and his species were highly evolved and eons ahead of humanoids.

To Picard's knowledge, Q was the only member of The Continuum who behaved as if he were a bully let loose in a carnival of his choosing. He knew Q had taken his "jokes" too far, once having his powers stripped by the leaders of The Continuum. But, Q had regained his powers, partly due to Picard, which he had often regretted.

Q had been a thorn in Picard's side for years. He was the quintessential middle child of all beings from that universe. He was a bully, an under-developed toddler, and his bad behavior seemed endless. Q's main goal for even visiting other worlds was born out of sheer boredom, and that boredom had often translated into using "inferior" beings as his personal playthings.

Picard had first-hand experience of Q's tactics. Q had intentionally disrupted his ship more than once, and Picard had also witnessed Q bully other species.

Because of this experience, Picard was not surprised by Q's sudden appearance—unannounced and unwelcome.

"Q," barked Picard. "What are you doing?"

"It's not good, Picard," said a female voice from behind his left shoulder.

Picard spun around to see Guinan standing on his bridge. He was momentarily stunned, more by the appearance

of Guinan on his bridge than by the appearance of Q. Guinan was never on his bridge. "Guinan?" he said in a softer tone. Picard had a personal friendship with Guinan. It was based on mutual respect and maturity, a much different relationship than the one he had had with Q.

Picard knew Q and Guinan were from the same universe and appeared to have similar powers. Guinan had not offered many details to Picard, and had never asked. He had too much respect for Guinan. If she had wanted to tell him, she would.

In her advanced way, Guinan had always been very nurturing towards Picard. Picard knew this, and never questioned it. There were times Picard felt Guinan was gently holding his hand through a particular problem, and guiding him in a direction he didn't always understand. Still, it felt safe.

Picard stepped back a pace or two. He had to buy himself a moment. *The sudden appear of Kris, Guinan, and Q on my bridge? What is going on?*

"Captain, your dog cannot help you this time," said the venomous Q. Q despised Guinan as much as Guinan despised Q. His tone indicated he was not here to "play" this time around. Something larger and far more serious was happening. "Picard, you have gone too far," he said. "Creating that being!" He pointed at Kris. "How dare you?"

Picard shook his head. "What are you talking about, Q?"

Q smiled, but even his smile didn't have its usual glint. "Don't try to act as if you don't know, Picard. Your species is guilty, and I'm here to prove it." He held up a small rod with a slightly curved end. He attached it to his left shoulder. "I have been given the Detante."

Picard looked to Guinan for help.

Guinan said, "He's being allowed by the Continuum to act as counsel. They gave him this power." She closed her eyes and shook her head in disbelief. "Fools."

"Guinan." This time Picard did bark her name. "Explain to me what's going on."

"There's no need, Picard," Q chimed in. "It's simple. Your species has gone too far this time, and I am going to see to it that you are punished this time around."

"You're being redundant, Q. You put us on trial at Farpoint. There, we were charged with being a dangerously savage child-race."

"Yes, Picard, and that test of humanity continues. You can consider this part of that test, or a completely different one, I don't really care. Be aware, however, there are grave consequences this time that involve future races. What is also different this time, Picard, is I speak for The Continuum. They have given me the Detante, and with it comes my judgement as to what to do with this abomination. Your race is being charged with creating a hybrid, part humanoid, part Ramos. That's a no-no in our book. I'm going to devise tests to prove that this being

cannot be both. In the end, a choice must be made. And, she must make it.” He again pointed at Kris.

“Ramos?” said Picard. He looked at Kris.

Kris ignored Picard, but stepped closer to Q. “I do not know you. And, I do not understand what you are saying and doing here.”

“He’s saying you’re Ramos,” said Guinan.

Kris looked at her from across the bridge. She wanted to say, “What is Ramos?” but she didn’t, because she couldn’t. She suddenly knew. It was as if a door had opened and everything Ramos was rushing into her mind at an incredible speed. She was so quickly over-whelmed that she clutched her head and paced away. “What...What are you doing?”

“I’m not doing it. You’ve unlocked yourself,” said Guinan.

It was quick, so quick. The flurry of information and history and her very being as a Ramos, it was speeding into her—a Chhybra, her Ramos brain. It was now awake. Yes, that was it. All of it was awakening at once. Her sixth species was finally rushing into her.

Kris thought she was going to burst from the speed of it all. “Stop this. Stop!”

“What’s happening?” said Picard.

“She’s doing something to me,” Kris said, while continuing to clutch her head.

Guinan remained calm. “No. It is not me. It is you.”

“You’re sending me...giving me all of this.” Kris straightened and slowly released her head. The light was on, and Kris understood. “Yes, it is me. I see it now. My sixth species. It’s...” She went into her sixth species—for the very first time. *I’m Ramos.*

This was like nothing Kris had ever felt. None of her humanoid species’ felt like this. This was something much more than magic. Power. A feeling of freedom like nothing she could have imagined. As she continued to process all of it, she suddenly knew what she was, what a Ramos was. It was incredible.

Q clapped his hands. “Enough! This abomination is going on trial.”

“Q,” said Guinan, “You have it all wrong. As usual. Kris is no threat to our world, or yours.”

Q laughed. “Just like the Ramos had said about your people.” He laughed again. “I’m amusing you had a hand in this, Guinan. Helping them create this hybrid. No matter. I am still going to prove that It is wrong for her to be both humanoid and Ramos.”

Q turned on Picard. As usual, his games, serious or not, were personal—they always became about him and Picard. “Get ready, Picard. This is a test you are not going to enjoy. You and Guinan have crossed a line, and I hold you accountable.”

“Of course you do,” mocked Picard.

“I wouldn’t, Picard,” said Guinan. “He’s very serious this time.”

Picard studied Guinan for a moment, then looked back at Q. “Q, let’s talk about this. Perhaps it all a big misunderstanding-“

“No,” shouted Q, interrupting Picard. “I will find out, Picard. Get ready. When you lose, when that being proves that she cannot uphold six species at once, one of them far superior to the others, then I will have the backing of the Continuum to procure punishment. Finally, my redemption.”

Q disappeared.

* * *

Kris was trying to keep her breath steady. Her entire sixth being—a very powerful being—was coming at her faster than she could process it. All of the Ramos that had been Ramos for eons was charging into her mind, into her very being. It was both delicious and frightening. Her humanoid parts were banging heavily against her mind throughout all of it. As if they were pleading for the madness to stop, and yet satisfied that even they finally knew who shared their space. It was chaos.

“Lieutenant, what is going on here?” asked Picard.

Picard was in her face, acting as if Kris could explain it all. She couldn’t speak. She was locked inside her head trying

desperately to integrate a very powerful species with five humanoid ones. She felt pressure to find space, fearing there was not enough room. Her other species were beginning to act as if this intrusion was a virus they had to kick out of her head. But, it wasn't. Ramos was permanent, as soon as she could somehow get a handle on it.

With Kris unresponsive, Picard turned to Guinan for answers. "Guinan, explain this."

"Q has the backing of the Continuum. They've given him the power of barrister."

"Barrister?"

"He has convinced them to put Kris on trial. He claims that your species, with my assistance, has created Kris. He has convinced them that her creation goes against natural laws that exist between humanoids and beings from Ramos."

"This is preposterous. Lieutenant Anderson...is a member of my crew."

"Captain," Riker said. The First Officer wanted to be brought up to speed, but he had important ship business first. "Sir, we're getting reports. Most of the crew are incapacitated."

"What?" Picard hit a button on his personal console. "Computer, current personnel status of the Enterprise."

A feminine computer voice said, "The Enterprise has a current active status of seven crew members. Nine hundred and eighty three crew members are currently in stasis."

“Computer, how is it possible that most of my crew are in stasis?”

“Unknown,” replied the computer.

“Sir, it can be assumed that Q is responsible,” said Mr. Data.

“Yes, Mr. Data.” Picard looked at Lieutenant D’Orb Grace, she sat motionless at her station. He approached her slowly. “Lieutenant?” She did not move. He touched her shoulder. Nothing.

Picard hit the comm on his shirt. “Dr. Crusher, explain what has happened to my crew.”

Dr. Crusher replied immediately. “As far as I can tell, none of them are dead. They’re suspended or something. All vitals are steady.”

“What does that mean?”

“Stasis of some kind. That’s all I have right now.”

Picard looked around his bridge. A few other bridge officers were frozen in a stasis mode, just like Lieutenant D’Orb Grace. A few others were fine. Mr. Worf was manning his station, and Riker, Troi, and Data appeared to be unaffected.

With Q gone, Picard turned to Quinan. “Give me back my crew.”

“I can’t,” said Guinan. “He has the ability to do it, and the backing of the Continuum. I cannot undo it-“

“I do not care who has given Q permission to put my crew in stasis. I want them back. Now!” said Picard, interrupting Guinan.

Guinan stared at Picard, but said nothing. The turbolift opened and Geordi hustled onto the bridge, followed by Dr. Crusher. “Captain, my crew is...they’re not responding.”

“They’re all in stasis,” said Crusher.

Picard said to Geordi, “Status of the ship?”

“The ship’s in a similar state, I guess. It’s frozen. No controls, but nothing seems to be wrong.”

“You need to prepare it, Picard,” said Guinan.

“For what?” Picard answered while getting close to Guinan. He needed answers.

“For Ramos space.”

“Ramos?”

“My universe. Q’s universe. And, the universe of the beings known as Ramos. That is Kris’s sixth species. And, that is where Q’s ‘trial’ is going to take place. Currently, your ship cannot go there. It needs modifications.”

Geordi said, “What modifications are we talking about?”

“It its current state, your ship won’t last more than five seconds in that space. There are protections that can be put in place.”

“Guinan, I can’t do that. I don’t know how,” said Geordi.

“I do.”

Everyone who wasn’t frozen turned to Kris. She was still struggling with the enormous amount of Ramos information flooding into her, but just after Geordi had said it, Kris’s brain had pictured exactly how to modify the ship for Ramos space. It was easy.

Geordi moved closer to Kris. She knew he was examining her through his visor. “You’re different. You look like...nothing I’ve ever seen before.”

Kris changed into Vulcan. Geordi saw the change. “What just happened? Now, your body temperature...Your blood is... If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were Vulcan. How did you go from whatever you were to what you are now?”

Picard’s movements were swift. He stepped between Geordi and Kris, ignoring Geordi’s discovery of Kris’s abilities. “You know how to modify this ship? How?”

“I’m getting it from my Ramos.”

“Ramos?” said Riker.

Picard looked at Riker, then at Troi, Mr. Data, Worf, and Geordi. Dr. Crusher crossed her arms. They all waited for Picard. He gestured at Kris.

“This is Lieutenant...Anderson. Rogan. I’ll explain that at another time, but for now...you must know that Lieutenant Anderson is a six species genetically engineered being. Lieutenant?”

“I am human, Betazoid, Vulcan, Altaran, and Muztarif. And, as of a few minutes ago, I now know that my sixth species is Ramos. The home universe of both this Ten Forward bartender, Guinan, and this Q being. Each of my species work independently of one another, one at a time.”

The bridge was silent for several moments.

“What does that have to do with Q?” asked Riker.

Picard looked at Guinan. She sighed. “Q is being his typical self. He feels slighted that a being was created that mixes the humanoid with Ramos.”

“Except he’s not Ramos, not exactly,” said Picard.

“To him, it’s close enough. The point is he’s not out on his own this time, Picard. He does have the backing of the Continuum.”

“I want to talk to this Continuum.”

Guinan shook her head. “That won’t happen. Right now, you have to prepare this ship as fast as you can. I don’t

know how much time Q is going to give you. If your ship isn't ready when he takes it to Ramos space, it'll be destroyed."

Picard took a deep breath. He looked Kris.

Kris shook her head. "I didn't ask for this." She turned and walked off the bridge.

* * *

Kris stood in the observation lounge, her back to the door. She stared at the stars. *All I wanted was to fly among them. Be free. I didn't ask for any of this.*

Kris heard the door open behind her. She did not have to be in Betazoid to know that it was Picard.

"Guinan has explained what needs to be done in more detail. You need to assist Commander La Forge in preparing the Enterprise for Ramos space. Mr. Data will assist. It appears as if there's only nine of us that are not... frozen by Q."

"I did not ask for this," said Kris with a soft voice.

"I don't know what else to do besides protect my ship."

"Do you realize what's going on with me? I'm in my sixth species, one I have never known. It has always been there, but not. I have always been curious, but now...it is quite overwhelming."

“You don’t know how to prepare the ship?”

“I do know. It is easy.”

Kris suddenly disappeared.

Picard’s mouth dropped. He looked around.

“But, do I want to?” Picard spun around, Kris was suddenly behind him.

“Ramos comes with certain abilities. Did you ever wonder how Guinan came and went without the means of a ship?”

“I know, a bit. Enough. However, I never really asked.”

Kris nodded. “Did Guinan ever have to involve herself in your business?”

“No. Not intentionally. She has made it clear she is only here as...an observer. A listener, she said once to me. I have always understood she is not from our universe. She has mentioned being akin to Q’s people. Guinan and Q couldn’t be more different.”

“True. Yet, not true.” She circled back to the window, looked out. “I do not have to do this.”

“No, you do not.”

“I can leave. Go wherever I want to go. Peterson couldn’t ever find me again.”

“Are you still a Star Fleet officer?”

Kris stared at the stars. *I always wanted to be. Then, came Star Base 325. Can I still feel loyalty to the Federation after my experiences there?*

Kris faced Picard. "Will this Q follow through on his threats?"

"Yes. I wasn't sure about it in the past, but this time... Guinan has convinced me."

"So, I'm to be put on trial?"

"Lieutenant, I believe you have done nothing wrong. You were made the way you were without malice. I believe that, without really even knowing you. You came to me about Peterson. You proved you have a conscience. I will do everything in my power to protect you."

"You protect me? I just demonstrated my power. And, there is more."

Picard nodded. "Yes. I have always respected Guinan, as I will respect you. But, right now I need to protect my ship."

They stared at each other.

Respect is one thing, Picard. I might not know how to defeat this Q. However, will that respect continue if he destroys what you hold dear?

* * *

Kris joined Geordi La Forge and Mr. Data in Engineering. She was hesitant at first, especially with the Chief Engineer and the android Second Officer watching her. But, it got easier after she began to work. The transition was easy for her. She put a visual of how the Enterprise works into her head, visualizing the warp core, environmental controls, and other systems. She didn't even have to look at schematics.

Then, she visualized something else, a Ramos protective covering that would lay over all of it. Like an energy blanket. It was clear in her head how to protect the Enterprise. She knew what to do in order for the Enterprise to travel in Ramos space.

It took them five hours. Kris was allowed to instruct Geordi and Data on precisely what was needed to be done in precise order. She asked Mr. Data to record the steps. Even though she was Ramos and she knew Mr. Data could not prepare the Enterprise in the future, she thought it wise to have him record the steps, in case something happened to her.

While working, she thought about what would happen if Q were victorious in his testing of her. *What were the tests going to be? And, why? Why does this seem serious, yet also some kind of game? A serious game.*

She asked Mr. Data about Q. He explained that, in their experience, Q apparently preferred games. She asked him why, and he said he did not know. He said, "I have observed that the being Q has always been more comfortable, perhaps as a

control device, to construct all of his encounters with the Enterprise as if they were some type of game. Perhaps it is the way of highly advanced beings.”

“You are a highly advanced being, Mr. Data.”

“Within the humanoid sphere, that is correct. However, I do not possess the abilities that Q and Guinan possess. And, yourself.”

When they were done, all three of them made their way to the bridge.

“The ship is prepared, captain,” reported Mr. Data, as they made their way onto the bridge. “The Ramos protections have been put in place.”

“Thank you, Mr. Data,” said Picard.

“Now what?” said Riker.

“The tests begin,” said Q’s voice.

A moment passed, then Mr. Data looked at his board. His deft fingers quickly calculated, checked and re-checked his instruments. “Captain, I believe we are in Ramos space.”

“Picture,” said Picard. Mr. Data activated the giant screen that was the “front” of the bridge. Their first view of Guinan’s and Q’s home world was not unlike past experiences when the Enterprise first encountered new places. They were explorers, all of them. Seeing something new was ingrained in all of them. That’s why they were in Star Fleet.

Ramos space had its own uniqueness. The color was not the usual black, but a dull green. There were stars, but the patterns and compositions of them were unlike any they had seen.

Ramos space not only looked different, it felt different, to the humanoids. None of the non-stasis crew said anything, but they all felt it.

Guinan looked calm, her eyes were closed as if in concentration. In truth, she was absorbing the energy from her home space. Beings from Ramos were one with the energy of their universe.

Kris felt it, too. Yet, her reaction was less pleasant. Her humanoid parts were screeching at her, apparently this space made each of her other five parts very queasy and off balance. As if she were suddenly struggling to keep them inside of her, or else they'd float away into the greenish space.

"Mr. Data, are you recording this?"

"Unable to record, sir," came Data's smooth yet monotone reply.

"Well?" Picard looked around at his commanding officers, at Guinan, at Kris. "Do I really need to ask? Q, what are these tests?"

"Oh, Picard, please ask. I like it when you do."

"Why aren't you appearing?"

No answer. Picard looked at Guinan. A smile crossed her lips. "The Continuum is watching, Picard. Q has to behave now. I'm guessing they're not as confident as Q."

"I have their full backing, drone. I have been allowed to begin, however, before we do let me make one thing clear, Picard."

"What is that?"

"Failure to pass a test will result in the destruction of this ship. I know, of course, that it has been protected while in our space, but, trust me, it can still be destroyed."

"Does the Continuum realize that you are making all of these rules, with prejudice? You are again allowed to be both judge and jury, and law-maker. This is not a proper court at all. The possible destruction of my ship verses what? A test of what? And, why? To prove what, Q?"

"Nice speech, Picard, but it's not going to sway the Continuum. Or me. We are ready to proceed," said Q's voice.

Picard had an itch to add something important. He said, "One more thing. Whatever happens here is not only on you, Q, but on them as well. For your Continuum to allow this preposterous demonstration with lack of any decency. And, not for the first time, I might add. If this test is allowed to move forward, I declare that this Continuum are not comprised of superior beings at all. Just the opposite. They are the lowest forms of life."

Picard was hoping for a last minute reprieve by pleading with Q's bosses, the Continuum, however none came. Q apparently was in charge.

The next thing Picard knew, he was minus two officers —Kris and Mr. Data.

Chapter Four

Kris stood next to Mr. Data. They looked at each other, and then at their surroundings. Not a lot of vegetation. Mountainous. Hot and very humid. Data instinctively reached for his tricorder, which was not strapped across his body. Still, Data was a computer after all.

“Mountainous, desert-like, extremely humid, thinner atmosphere due to strong surface gravity. Its physical characteristics appear similar to that of Vulcan.” He looked at Kris. “What are we supposed to do?”

“I’m not sure,” said Kris.

They heard what sounded like humming from across a hill. Curious, they followed the sound. They carefully climbed over the rocks. They peered around a large rock, being careful to keep themselves somewhat obscured.

In a small valley below them, knelt seven beings. They wore long robes with hoods. The hood on one of them fell off to one side to reveal pointed ears.

“Vulcans,” said Mr. Data.

“You were correct, Mr. Data,” said Kris.

The kneeling Vulcans continued to chant in low hums. They put their hands on the ground, faces an inch from the red dirt. In unison, the humming stopped. The Vulcan’s arms

stretched out far in front of their bodies. They put their elbows on the ground, chests hidden beneath their robes.

All of a sudden, all seven Vulcans rolled onto their sides. They were silent, motionless.

Data looked at Kris.

Kris was stunned, but only momentarily. Something clicked inside of her. She switched into Vulcan, and felt a collective feeling—of death. Even though having a feeling was very un-Vulcanlike, they did have them. This one told Kris that all seven Vulcans were now dead. And, she knew exactly how.

Mr. Data began to move down the hill, toward the dead Vulcans.

Kris reluctantly followed.

Once at the bottom of the hill, Data checked one of the Vulcans for a pulse, on a Vulcan the optimum area was located on top of the right shoulder. No pulse.

Data looked at Kris. “Should we check them all?”

“They’re all dead,” said Kris. “I’m in Vulcan, Mr. Data. I can...feel it.”

“I do know Vulcans have that ability. However, I am not understanding what happened here.”

“It’s called Re ‘Ugan. Vulcans ritualistically mediate. This began sometime around the time of Surak. When they do, they follow a certain path in their mind. There is a tangent

along this path. It is difficult to locate but it is there. This path leads to a door. That door leads to Re 'Ugan."

"What is Re 'Ugan?"

"Vulcan suicide."

Mr. Data processed this information, his head slightly twitching, and his eyes steady. "There is no such thing as Vulcan suicide."

"Vulcans do not talk about it, Mr. Data. It has never been recorded. If it had been recorded within their history, when Vulcans purged their emotions any mention of it was expunged. Vulcans will not admit to having the ability of mind-controlled suicide. Even the Vulcan High Command will deny it. However, they do possess it."

"Why?" asked Mr. Data. He looked at the dead Vulcans. "Why did these Vulcans commit suicide?"

"I don't know, Mr. Data." Kris wandered away from the dead Vulcans. "However, I may be understanding a little bit about what Q has in mind. I'm in Vulcan now, I believe we are on Vulcan, and you, Mr. Data, are...well, the Enterprise didn't have any Vulcans on board."

"I am the closest replication of a Vulcan?"

"Something like that," said Kris. "You're logical, you don't have emotions. To Q you're the closest thing to a Vulcan."

"And, you believe we are on the real Vulcan?"

“I feel it.”

“Explain to me, how you are ‘in’ Vulcan?”

“I’m Vulcan, Mr. Data. I think it, and then I am. If I think about being human, I will be human.”

“And Betazoid, Altaran, Muztarif, and Ramos?”

“Yes.”

“Interesting. You are in Vulcan, yet you do not possess the Vulcan ears.”

“My mother didn’t give me the ears. Eyebrows, yes, ears no.”

“Even with that physical omission, you may be a genetic engineering accomplishment of the highest standard.”

“That’s what they told me about you, Mr. Data.”

“We share some similarities. However, I understand Q’s trial. He objects to the mixture of humanoid with his own species, all in one being.”

“It appears that way,” said Kris.

Data looked around. “Are we here to solve a puzzle?”

“Q said I had to prove that I could ‘uphold six species at once.’ We are on Vulcan. I am with you, Mr. Data. This much be the test of my Vulcan.”

“However, now that we are here, what exactly is the test?” asked Mr. Data.

Kris looked at the bodies of the dead Vulcans. “First, I believe we need to determine when. If Vulcans are still performing Re ‘Ugan, then the period must be before ‘The Great Awakening,’ before the time of Surak.”

“We have traveled to the past? Why would Q test us in the past?”

“Me, Mr. Data. I thought the test was for me.”

“If it Q does not want to test us together, then there would be no reason for me to be here.”

A noise—the sound of a gong—was heard some distance away. Kris looked at Mr. Data, and said, “We should not be discovered near the bodies. I suggest we leave here. There’s nothing we can do for them.”

Data nodded. They hustled away together.

The gong continued once every minute. Kris and Data followed the sound. Soon, they came near a temple. The structure was tall and looked spacious. A large group of Vulcans were gathered in front.

“Who are you?” said a voice behind Kris and Data.

They turned and faced a very tall Vulcan. The Vulcan wore a battle vest and warrior helmet. In a low growl, he said, “What are you?” He was apparently talking directly to Mr. Data.

Kris quickly glanced at Mr. Data. She moved slightly to her left, away from both of them. She nodded at Mr. Data, but spoke to the Vulcan. “That being is artificial. It was created on the Vulcan moon, Sulandul. Did you not know of its existence?”

Mr. Data answered, “Vulcan has no moon.”

The tall Vulcan turned to Mr. Data. At that moment, Kris reached up with her right hand, and placed it on the Vulcan’s right shoulder. She gave her hand a squeeze. The Vulcan fell to the floor, the victim of Kris’s Vulcan nerve pinch.

Mr. Data looked impressed. “I believe you are Vulcan.”

“You were not believing me, Mr. Data?”

“I did not have enough evidence. I have more now.”

“These beings can see us,” said Kris.

“Indeed. We should remain out of sight.”

They took off and headed away from the temple. They ran for a few minutes, stopping near the entrance of a cave. Kris spotted two more Vulcans. She quickly grabbed Mr. Data and the two of them hid behind a large rock. The two Vulcans did not see them as they entered the cave.

Data pointed to a nearby cluster of trees, signaling his thinking—that the trees might be a safer place for them. However, Kris stared at the cave. She headed toward it.

It took Data a moment to realize he was alone. He spun and saw Kris near the mouth of the cave. He hustled to join her.

“I do not believe this is a good idea. We have confirmed that we are visible to the beings of this time period. We do not know exactly what time period of Vulcan’s history we are visiting. And, we do not know exactly why we are here. It is possible that our appearance here might alter Vulcan history.”

“Isn’t that why Q would send us? He wouldn’t send us if our visitation didn’t have an impact, according to how Q’s behavior was explained to me. Additionally, his behavior is more serious than it has ever been. Mr. Data, we have been sent here to do something—me or both of us. Something within Vulcan’s history is my best guess.”

“Guessing is not common for a Vulcan, Lieutenant Anderson.”

“So, now I’m not Vulcan?” Kris smirked. *I’m sick of being called Anderson.* “Kris. Mr. Data, can you call me Kris?”

Data nodded, “I can.”

Kris gestured for quiet. “Listen,” she whispered. In Vulcan, Kris’s hearing was better than a typical Vulcan’s, and a typical Vulcan hearing was far superior to humans. Mr. Data, of course, also had superior hearing. From the mouth of the cave, they both heard a conversation.

“You have doubts?” said a deep voice.

“Those Who March Against the Raptor’s Wings do not want peace. They want war,” said a quiet voice. “The violence has to stop. Our existence cannot stand the barbarism. Not

anymore. It has to end. I want this end. But, the opposition is strong.”

The deep voice responded, “Surak, a great number want to advance your idea of peace, your code of emotional control. Go to Shi Kahr. Face the Raptor’s. Face your supporters, and those who still need guidance. Bring them all together, Surak. If you allow this separation to continue, you’ll lose your chance to unite this planet.”

Data and Kris looked at each other.

“Surak,” said another voice. “You are the chosen one. Many are behind you.”

“Many are not. Those who are confused feel hopeless. I believe, I felt, seven more have joined those above. Seven more souls are lost.”

The second voice spoke again, “And, how many more will withdraw from their physical being in order to prove to you that you are the one to lead us to peace? The confused die because they are leaderless. They need you. The Raptors can be turned.”

“I do not see it, T’ Put,” said Surak. “The bloodshed rips at my heart. The lives lost. The madness. Who has chosen me for this cause?”

“The Gods, Surak. You know it for truth,” said the deep voice.

“I fear confusion has its hold on me. I will mediate,” said Surak.

They heard feet shuffling. Data pulled Kris to the side, a few feet away from the mouth of the cave. Hidden to the side, they watched three Vulcans leave the cave and disappear.

“This is the time of Surak and ‘The Great Awakening’ on Vulcan,” said Kris.

“The time of logic and the purge of emotions,” added Data.

“Surak’s Code of Emotional Control. Suppress emotion for logic.” Kris glanced back at the mouth of the cave. “Q put me here to test my individual species. I am here on Vulcan, and I am in Vulcan. Do I only observe, Mr. Data?”

“You are using logic to deduce what Q intends as your purpose. I believe it may not be a good idea to apply logic to Q. In my experience.”

“I must. However, I am conflicted. Am I to prove my Vulcan-ness in order to satisfy Q that I am a Vulcan? I have four other humanoid species. Do I prove each one?”

A portion of the rock in front of them shimmered. A picture appeared. It was the Enterprise’s bridge with Captain Picard sitting in his chair, and Riker, Worf, and Troi at their stations. Geordi, Crusher, and Guinan were also seen in the picture. All but Guinan seemed to be struggling, reacting to something that appeared to be in the air. They instinctively clutched their throats. Gasping gestures were evident.

Kris and Data watched. "Q is threatening us," Kris said. It was a statement, not a question. Without Mr. Data noticing, Kris quickly turned to Ramos. She browsed the history of Q. He was not beneath killing beings for his own pleasure, according to her newfound information.

Back in Vulcan, Kris looked at Data. "It appears as if we must act."

Data looked puzzled. "We cannot be involved in the past. Our presence here can change the natural course of events."

"What if we were supposed to be here, Mr. Data? What about those seven who committed Re 'Ugan? We could have saved them. We didn't. Surak is conflicted. If he does not face the Raptors today then he may never gain the power he needs to implement his ideas. He had detractors."

"Our presence is not in recorded history."

"This time period for Vulcan does not have a complete historical record. Surak is alone now. He is pondering whether to withdraw from leading the sect of Vulcan that eventually wins over the populace. They will purge emotions and embrace logic. If he withdraws, the Vulcan history is changed forever. If he has doubts, perhaps we are here to assist in eradicating those doubts."

Mr. Data hesitated. "Perhaps we should seek an alternative."

“If the lives of the Enterprise crew are being threatened, it is because of Q. It is a threat, but it may also be a message. Why show us? He wants something of me, Mr. Data. He wants me to interact. He wants me to...play his game. With you.”

“His game is very dangerous.”

“Agreed. However, do we walk away?”

Data considered his reply. “I do agree that it appears as if we have very little time. You have given a very logical argument. We should proceed.”

“That’s why you’re here, to make sure I’m being logical.”

“Hm,” said Data.

They entered the cave together.

Crude lamps were placed at sparse intervals along the sides of the cave, which were smooth, if not slightly damp. The humidity inside the cave was stronger than outside. The lack of light did not bother either Data or Kris, both had superior eyesight.

After fifty feet or so, the cave branched into two directions. Data and Kris hesitated. They heard a noise from the cave on the left. They followed the noise and came upon a slight man dressed in a colorful robe. The man knelt in front of an altar, four of Vulcans Gods were depicted above it. The man

was not wearing his hood, his face looked lined, and his eyes were squeezed tight.

The eyes suddenly opened, and the man shook his head. He stood slowly, as if his body held a heavy weight. The man put his hands behind him as he paced. Upon seeing his visitors, he stopped.

“You may enter,” he said to Kris and Data.

Kris and Data looked at each other. Kris stepped toward the man, with Mr. Data staying tucked near the door and away from any direct light. He supported Kris’s decision to enter the cave. However, with such little data available to him, he was still unsure if approaching Surak was wise. He had learned over the years that humanoids have instincts. Often, they trust them. Data has, on numerous occasions, trusted the instincts of Picard, Riker, and the others. Kris Anderson was unknown to him. The data he had on her suggested that she was a highly evolved being, five humanoid parts plus a species known as Ramos. Data knew Guinan. He admired and trusted her, according to the data he had collected about her over the years. Mr. Data knew that “instinct” and “trust” were human features. He was an artificial being wanting to become human one day. To exercise an instinct and build trust was something he felt capable of, if only he had more information about the parameters of this test.

Perhaps he was sensing a kind of kinship with Kris. They were both created by non-biological means. If Kris were what she claimed—and Mr. Data was beginning to believe it so—Kris

was a being of enormous scientific success. She appeared as if she wanted to disprove Q, as would Picard, Riker, and the others. Mr. Data decided to stay hidden and see what came of her interaction with Surak.

“Surak?”

“I am.”

“Is today the Day of Arrival at Shi Kahr?”

“I do not know of this. Who are you?”

“My name is Kris. I have come...to support you.”

“I do not know you.”

“True. I am Vulcan.”

Surak looked closely at Kris, noticing the lack of Vulcan ears. “You do not appear so.”

“I was not born with the correct ears.”

“An anomaly?”

“Of sorts. As I am, I believe in logic. I do not allow emotions to cloud my judgment. I learned this from you, Surak. I studied your teachings. I am one of your followers. There are many.”

“My followers. They believe I can teach them the way to peace.”

“This is truth.”

Surak paced away from his dais. He took a deep breath. "Every death along this path is painful. There have been too many already."

"I felt it, too, Surak. Seven. Just a short time ago."

He again studied Kris. "Why are you here?"

"I believe you are displaying emotion. Fear."

Surak took a deep breath. "You are...it is strange...I feel...You are saying I am fearing you?"

"You are fearing what you must do today. You fear your leadership. You must go to Shi Kahr."

"You should not be here." Surak headed to the corner. He picked up a mallet, swung it at a gong. The sound echoed loudly inside the smallish chamber. "You are with the Raptors."

"If I were, would I be encouraging you to face them today?"

"They have sent agents that walk amongst us. It is difficult at times to know the path. I accept all who enter, yet all who face me do not seek my enlightenment. Some have tried to dissuade me."

Surak was wringing his hands, his forehead showed beads of sweat. "Too many have died. Some by weapons, others by Re 'Ugan. I am the reason."

“Surak, you must control your emotions. You are now displaying confusion, panic. You do not fear me, you fear the truth.”

“What is the truth? Are not my brothers and sisters dying for me?” Surak picked up a rock, held it firmly in the palm of his hand.

“They are. Because they believe in you,” said Kris.

“One who commits Re ‘Ugan does not believe.”

“Or, they believed too much. You mourn them. All of them.”

“Yes!” Surak screamed. He squeezed the rock and crushed it. His breathing was labored, as if he had been running.

Three Vulcans, all three big and warrior-like, rushed into the chamber. They looked at Surak. “Surak, are you all right?”

Surak took a few deep breaths. He looked down at the pulverized pieces of rock in his hand. He let them slip through his fingers. “I am letting the deaths of many cloud the mind of one.”

“You are the one,” said Kris.

The three Vulcans headed to Kris. Mr. Data stepped out of the shadows. “I would not,” he said, getting the guards’ attention.

Two of the guards headed for Data, one grabbed Kris. She did not fight him.

“Wait,” said Surak. He held up a hand to stop his Vulcans. The one guard let go of Kris.

Kris stepped closer to Surak. “When you are finished uniting Vulcan, leading their transfer to use logic over emotion, Vulcan will forever embrace the needs of the many. The confusion of all of your people will dissipate. As will your confusion. Logic, Surak. You must force yourself to maintain it.”

Surak swallowed, took a deep breath. He was calmer. He nodded and said, “The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.”

“After you lead them, Surak. They do not know that their needs are more important. You do not know it yet. The needs of the whole of Vulcan rests in your hands. The one. Until you have succeeded, the needs of the many will not be fulfilled. After you succeed, the needs of the one will no longer torment the minds of a Vulcan.”

“You are here as a guide?” He nodded to Mr. Data. “And, your companion?”

Kris looked at the guards, then at Surak. “A moment of privacy?”

Surak understood the request. “Leave us,” he said to his guards.

The guards slowly backed away and left the chamber.

Mr. Data stepped closer to Surak. “We do not belong here, Surak,” said Mr. Data. “With the exception of guiding you. It was an assignment we needed to fulfill. I believe we are finished.”

“They believe in me,” he muttered.

“Many do,” said Kris. “The others can be swayed. Today, you will convert many. You will save many.”

Surak stepped to the opening of the chamber. He turned to face Kris. “I was fearful. My emotions overtook me. Doubt. Confusion. I thank you for speaking truth to me.”

“Vulcans do not lie.”

Surak nodded his head. “Interesting. I will remember that. There is much work to do.” Surak walked out of the cave.

“That one was easy,” said Q’s voice.

Kris and Data disappeared.

* * *

They reappeared on the bridge of the Enterprise.

The crew members that had not been frozen by Q were slumped in their chairs or kneeling on the floor. They suddenly inhaled deeply as if they had been holding their breaths for almost too long. Only Guinan looked unaffected.

Picard staggered to Kris and Data.

“Q is very serious,” he said between deep breaths, regaining his color and composure.

“What about the frozen crew members?” asked Mr. Data.

“I don’t think they were affected,” said Dr. Crusher, as she was also trying to regain stable breathing. Geordi helped her to her feet. “I’ll check them just in case.”

Riker jumped out of his chair to check on Troi. Worf stood to his full height and grabbed the ledge of his station. The ridges on his forehead were red. “When I get my hands on Q,” he said. Anger propelled Worf to regain his senses quicker than the others. Mr. Worf’s behavior, being a Klingon, was often ruled by anger. This time, Picard let it slide.

“Yes, Mr. Worf,” said Picard. He looked Kris and Data. “What happened? Where were you?”

Data answered. “Q sent us to Vulcan at the time of Surak. We were apparently meant to talk Surak into going to Shi Kahr to begin the process of converting Vulcans from violence to logic on the Day of Arrival. Surak was having doubts and being quite emotional.”

“I reminded Surak of what he needed to do for Vulcans in order to lead them away from violent emotions and toward logic,” added Kris.

“The time of Surak?” said Picard. “You must have succeeded since we didn’t die.” Picard walked around his bridge. He looked at Guinan. “Well?”

“I don’t know, Picard,” she said.

“Q sent Kris and Data to Vulcan of the past. Why?”

“I’m not sure,” she said. “I don’t know his game, Picard.”

“We hypothesized that I am the crew member most like a Vulcan, since the Enterprise currently does not have an actual Vulcan on board,” said Mr. Data.

“And, you were ‘in’ Vulcan?” said Picard to Kris.

“I am.”

Picard nodded. “So, Q, you tested Kris’s Vulcan. And, apparently she passed, is that correct?” He said this loudly. No answer. Picard again looked at Guinan.

“It appears so,” she said.

“Why can’t this end, Q? Why go through all of this?” Picard shouted to the air.

“There will be an end, Picard. That was only one test,” said Q’s voice.

“And, if I failed? You have not explained the rules, Q,” said Kris.

“I can’t explain all of the rules,” said Q’s voice. “What’s the fun in that?”

Suddenly, Kris disappeared. And so did Troi.

* * *

Troi looked at Kris. “Me?”

Kris studied their surroundings. They stood atop a plateau of a mountain. Other vegetative mountains surrounded them. It was picturesque, to say the least. The air was cool and crisp, but not uncomfortable. A sun shined brightly, but nearby trees afforded shade.

Behind them was a structure. It looked oblong, yet only the opening visible to them. The rest of the structure appeared to stretch a distance across the plateau. The structure was ornate, made of a dark brown wood that gleamed in the sunlight and marble plaques that decorated the sides of the opening. Four statues stood “guard,” two on each side. The ground in front of the structure was paved with beautiful marble stones. A form of light could be seen just inside the opening.

“I recognize this place,” said Troi as she looked around. “We’re on Mount Bett Renna on Betazed. Those are statues of ‘The Four Deities.’ If this is the real Betazed.”

“From my experience with Mr. Data on Vulcan, we can assume that it is.”

“Is this the past?”

“Unknown.”

Kris realized she was still in Vulcan. If this were Betazed, and it was likely since Q had sent her with Counselor Troi, then she should be in Betazoid, not Vulcan. She hesitated to change into Betazoid.

Kris had always favored Vulcan and even Altaran over her other three humanoid species’. She was more comfortable with the three species that displayed less emotion, they were less confusing to her. They were calmer inside, easier to process.

She reluctantly switched to Betazoid. Once in Betazoid, Kris was floored by strong feelings that she had not felt before. A flood of emotions and thoughts threatened to engulf her.

Troi knew it. She stared at Kris. “I can sense you. You are Betazoid now.”

“I just changed from Vulcan.”

Troi shook her head. “This is all new to me. You, I mean.”

“Yes, Counselor, I understand your confusion in regards to me.” Kris paced, she wanted to either go back into Vulcan or clutch her head in order to stop all of the...noise going on inside there, but she did neither. She had to maintain control. Going from Vulcan of the past to this Betazoid was difficult.

“You feel... confused,” said Troi.

“I believe you are not allowed to ‘read’ another crew member unless given permission.”

“I read them all the time. I am not permitted to express what I have learned, except under extraordinary circumstances.”

“Am I giving you permission?”

“Doesn’t this qualify as extraordinary circumstances? You have never been on Betazed.”

“My confusion exists because I am not often in Betazoid. Only for brief periods in order to satisfy a need. Being on the home world of Betazoid is quite overwhelming.”

“So, you think this is the real Betazed?”

“I believe so.”

Kris paced and forced herself to concentrate. She was more Betazoid than normal Betazoids, as she was with all of her humanoid species’. She felt strongly that she could control the flood of feelings that were currently choking her, if only she could concentrate and focus. She had learned long ago that some of the strongest Betazoids from The Great Houses had

had trouble blocking out the thoughts of others. But, she was stronger than them. She decided that all she had to do was envision a wall—of sorts. Plus, she needed to create some distance from Troi. Telepathic distance.

She looked at Troi. “You need to block me out.”

“I can’t. I’m a strong Betazoid, but I’m also half human. I don’t have the ability to block others. Very few Betazoids do. They refer to it as compartmentalizing.”

“Yes, of course.” Kris nodded, closed her eyes, and focused. She looked back at Troi. “Please, thrust your thoughts elsewhere for a few moments. I need to control my mind. You can do that, can’t you? Think of something else?”

Troi nodded. “Yes, if that will help.”

It took a few minutes, but Kris finally began to feel better. She quickly and efficiently created “storage” within her Betazoid mind, placing people, events, thoughts, feelings, etc. into each compartment. Once she realized she was able to do this, the ability took hold and quickly freed up her mind. The process moved along very quickly.

After a few minutes, she strode around and examined the structure.

“Are you better?” asked Troi.

“Yes. I have found homes for all of the noise. I believe I am blocking *you*.”

“True. I’m not getting much from you anymore. Curiosity, though.”

“Of course. What is this structure?”

“The Temple of Metzen Dal. It is one of our sacred places. A Betazoid can achieve BA DOR Ramen here.”

“What is BA DOR Ramen?”

“Well, the strongest Betazoids in our culture, in terms of their telepathic abilities, descended from ancient Betazoids. They’re called Betatal. They can sense thoughts and feelings across galaxies. They can read minds of all beings, including Ferengi, and many lack the ability to block out anything. Those Betatals are often close to madness. There are very few of them, though. In order to become one, you have to have years of specific mind training, you have to be descended from a very strong ancient family, and they can only achieve Betatal level by passing through BA DOR Ramen.”

“It is a test?”

“A very difficult one. Many have died trying.”

“You’re from a very strong family, are you not?” asked Kris.

“My family holds some position of authority on Betazed. We are a strong house. However, no one in my family has ever tried to achieve Betatal.”

Troi suddenly moved closer to the opening of the structure. This movement was not of her own volition. Startled, Troi cried out, "What was that?"

Kris watched as Troi's body made yet another movement toward the opening.

"Why am I...What is happening?"

Troi rushed to a nearby tree and grabbed it. The grip did not last long as her arms were forced to let go of the tree. Her feet moved closer to the structure. "Help me," she said to Kris.

Kris stood still. "I think...Counselor, Q sent us here. It appears as if he wants you to go into BA DOR Ramen."

"I can't," she said as her body continued its awkward pace to the opening. She was resisting the movements, but it was doing no good. "I'm not prepared. I'm not qualified at all. I'm only half Betazoid. Only Betazoids who are fully ready and approved by the Betazed council can enter. Going in will either get me excommunicated from Betazed, or more likely, get me killed."

I must be here to save her from entering. Still not knowing nor understanding Q's rules, Kris had to go with her gut feelings. They were easier to obtain while in Betazoid, compassion and helping others came naturally to Betazoids. Kris had to act on her Betazoid instincts.

She ran to Troi and grabbed her. She knew she was much stronger than Troi, and assumed it would be easy to stop

her body from moving. Yet, that was not so. Troi's arms easily slid from Kris's grasp, as if she were suddenly coated with something very slippery.

Kris tried again, and again failed to maintain a hold on Troi. After several more attempts, she realized what was happening, she could not hold onto Troi because of a push that was happening against her own body. She assumed Q was doing this.

Troi was in front of the opening, she grabbed one side with both hands. Kris grabbed her by the waist. Suddenly, a force—not wind, but a force stronger than an Earth hurricane—pushed both of them inside BA DOR Ramen. They tumbled, together, to the floor, just inside the opening.

Both looked up, they appeared to be free of whatever had forced them inside.

“We must leave,” said Kris. She stood and helped Troi to her feet.

“We can't,” said Troi. “You don't understand. Once someone is inside BA DOR Ramen, you cannot leave. But, I can't be here. I don't have the strength to even attempt to become a Betatal. I have never had the highest abilities of my people, plus I'm only half Betazoid.”

Kris felt Troi's emotions—panic, and fear. “There must be a way to leave. We were forced in here by Q. There must be a provision that allows for mistakes such as this.”

“There isn’t. Once inside, you are considered committed. You either leave a Betatal, or you die.”

* * *

Kris reappeared on the bridge of the Enterprise. She was holding Troi in her arms. She was back in Vulcan where her Vulcan strength was needed to safely transport Troi.

Riker and Dr. Crusher were the first to approach Kris. “What happened?” asked Riker.

“She is alive, but unconscious,” said Kris.

“Sick bay,” ordered Picard.

Kris quickly boarded a turbo lift with Riker, Crusher, and Picard, and the unconscious Troi. Once inside main sick bay, Kris laid Troi gently down on a bed. Crusher immediately began to examine her.

“Q forced us to enter BA DOR Ramen,” said Kris. “I fared better than Troi.”

“What is BA DOR Ramen?” asked Picard.

Mr. Data, who appeared behind them, answered. “The strongest Betazoid abilities, telepathically speaking, are obtained when an individual enters a temple called BA DOR

Ramen. When an individual enters, they are subjected to the extremes of senses, feelings, emotions, and thoughts. Passing through the temple of BA DOR Ramen is a test of the highest possible Betazoid abilities. If the individual passes the test, they are called a Betatal. Betatal possess the strongest in abilities of the Betazoid culture. Distance, for example, is no longer a barrier to a Betatal.”

“What happens if they don’t pass this test?” asked Riker.

“Death,” said Data.

“Q forced both of your into this temple?” Picard asked Kris.

“Yes. Once inside, we were forced to go through the trials together. At first, I was not sure if these trials were real, however, as in my Vulcan test, I believe this Betazoid test was very real. I am now Betatal.”

“What about Counselor Troi?” asked Picard.

“I do not know. She survived. However, I had to help her at many stages. We did most of it together. I’m afraid her test results were not ideal,” said Kris.

“Not ideal,” barked Riker. “She better come out of this, Lieutenant.”

“Commander, I did not put her there,” said Kris.

“Additionally, I did all I could to assist her, we performed all of the necessary activities together. However, since I am at a

much higher Betazoid level than Troi, and she is half human, she struggled.”

“I can’t seem to revive her,” added Crusher, who had not stopped working on Troi while the others conversed.

“Perhaps it is best not to, Dr. Crusher,” said Kris. “The adjustment to this highest level of Betazoid abilities is what’s keeping her unconscious. She cannot handle the transition consciously.”

“You have handled the transition?” asked Picard.

“When I return to Betazoid, I will have to continue to adjust. I am in Vulcan,” Kris said.

“Why change?” asked Riker, his question laced with anger.

“I changed at the very end of the test, in order to see Troi safely back to the Enterprise.”

“How convenient,” replied Riker. He turned his full attention to the unconscious Troi. “What can you do, Doctor?”

“For now, I’m in agreement with Lieutenant Anderson. Keeping her unconscious might be better, especially until I find out exactly what she’s dealing with. If I force her awake, I’m not prepared to help her,” said Crusher.

“Let’s return to the bridge,” said Picard. “Kris’s test is not over. Doctor, you stay here.”

Before Picard, Riker, Data, and Kris had a chance to make it to the sick bay door, Riker and Kris were gone.

* * *

Kris and Riker appeared at the entrance to an enormous room. It was brightly lit with ceilings that seemed to have no end. Before them were hundreds of pieces of equipment. Some of the pieces were connected to each other, others not. Every piece was painted a bright color. The walls were colorfully patterned, and also had equipment. Climbing games, board games, games of all type were scattered throughout the room. It was a childhood game/equipment overload.

Riker looked at Kris with disgust. "Why me?" he asked. He paced, immediately trying to find a way out. "I need to get back to the Enterprise." He hustled back to the large opening. At the mouth of the opening, a force field propelled Riker to the ground, he fell hard onto his back.

Kris stared at him, then laughed.

Riker grimaced, and slowly got to his feet. "Quiet Lieutenant," he barked in his meanest Commander voice. "How dare you?"

"Commander," said Kris. "I believe we are on Muztarif." She laughed again.

“What? That’s impossible,” said a still very angry Riker.

Kris tried to control her giggles. She said, “Commander, I have already been in Vulcan of the past, and Betazoid. They were both real. This, I believe, is the planet Muztarif.” She smiled and laughed yet again. “We are here to have fun.”

“You have got to be kidding me,” roared Riker. His anger had not dissipated. If possible, it had increased. ‘Having fun’ with Lieutenant Anderson was the last thing he wanted to be doing right now. He was too worried about Troi. His feelings for her were always strongest whenever she was hurt or in danger. He always hurt inside whenever Troi was injured.

Riker again tried to find a way out. He approached the force field. He was about to touch it, then thought better of it. He traversed the entire perimeter. It took him thirty minutes. When he returned, his mood had not improved. She saw Kris lounging comfortably in a chair, kicking her feet in the air, catching a variety of glowing, colorful balls.

“What are you doing?”

“Dulraff,” said Kris. She caught a blue ball and it dissipated in her hand. She did the same with four more blue balls. Then, she held out a hand and the other balls of varying colors dove into her palm. They all disappeared. “Four points,” she said, then smiled. “I’m doing really well.” Her attention was fully on the game, not on Riker.

Riker hovered over Kris. “I need a weapon. I have to get out of here,” he said.

“Commander, the people of Muztarif do not have weapons. They are fun loving people. Fun is the basic element of their lives. They are carefree and relaxed and always seek amusement in some form. They love a good joke, a brain teaser, games of chance, funny stories, and physical amusement, such as rides at an amusement park. I believe that is what we are meant to do.”

Kris stood up. “Oh, and every Muztarif is born with the ability to play Dulraff. It’s a game that can be played alone or in groups. Their hands have extra glands that produce the balls. The red ones-“

“I don’t care,” said a furious Riker while interrupting Kris. “There is no way I’m staying in this amusement park, Lieutenant,” Riker grabbed Kris by the arm and stood her up. “The Federation knows very little about Muztarif. And, I’m not going to find out about them now.”

“True that the Federation knows very little about them. However, Commander William H. Riker, I do know a bit about them. I learned it on my moon. I know the basics of what it means to be Muztarif.” Kris wiggled her arm from Riker, and did a pirouette. She laughed a belly laugh.

“Stop this right now,” said Riker, as he watched Kris add a dance to her routine.

Kris swiftly moved around Riker, a huge smile on her face. “Catch me.”

“What?”

“Let’s play chase. Come on, catch me,” she said.

“I am not going to-“

“Commander,” interrupting Kris. She laughed, hopped on her feet, and bounced closer to Riker. “Let me tell you a story.” She looked around to see if anyone else was listening. “It’s a secret.” She put a finger to her lips, made a “shhing” sound.

“What?” said the very confused Riker.

“Here’s my story. It’s a good one. There once was a being named Q who decided to put another being named Kris through a series of tests. These tests focused on each of Kris’s species. The first was Vulcan, the second Betazoid, and the third Muztarif. She is now in Muztarif,” she stopped long enough to stifle a giggle. “Soooo, Kris is now thinking that her companion, the grumpy Commander Riker, had better start having a jolly good time, and quickly. Because he is here for a reason. Q made it so.”

She laughed again. Riker got threateningly closer to her. “I’m not in the mood,” he said.

“Let me finish my story, Willy Boy.” She winked at him. “Kris is thinking that she’s in Muztarif and Q is watching. Now, this Q has threatened the members of the crew of the Enterprise. For example, some of them couldn’t even breathe during her Vulcan test. Imagine that?” Kris roared with laughter. “Do you know what it was like when Q made it so you couldn’t breathe?”

“I was there,” growled Riker.

“Kris knows it,” said Kris, with a pleasant lilt to her voice. “The end of the story is this, Willy Boy. Perhaps this Q is threatening members of the Enterprise crew once more. Perhaps even...Troi.”

Commander Riker straightened to his full height, which was well over six feet, almost as tall as Worf. As imposing as his body language appeared, he stood a foot taller than Kris—who was not short. Riker finally began to understand what was happening, he was being forced to have fun—with Kris. The very last thing he wanted to do. But, he had to it, in order to save Troi.

Riker took a few deep breaths. He looked around at all of the playful equipment. He looked at Kris, who was slowly backing away from him. “Storytime is over, Commander. It’s chase time. Come on.”

Riker needed a few more moments to prepare. He didn’t feel like playing, but he had to admit that Kris was probably right. He knew Q, he understood Q was serious. He saw Troi’s condition after her visit to Betazoid with Kris. And, Q knew something else about Riker. Q knew that Riker was a playful person. He was well liked among the crew because he was social and friendly and genuinely liked most people. The core of Riker was work—hard work and career success. But, Riker had an easy nature. He had a light personality, most of the time. He could always recognize a joke or irony or see

humor in a situation. That was his connection with most people, connecting with their lighter side.

Riker forced a smile on his face. He took a few steps toward Kris, then stopped. He stared at Kris, but stood frozen.

Kris sported a pouty face. "Will Riker, Commander William, this has to be real. Inside of you. Real fun and games. For Troi."

Riker's lips broke out into a huge grin. The playfulness that others saw in his eyes returned. They twinkled. "I'm quicker than I look," he said, then darted after Kris. He missed as Kris bounced away.

* * *

Laughing. They were laughing.

Picard stood in sick bay, he was utterly confused. Why was his First Officer and this genetically engineered being laughing? They reappeared, and here they were...hysterical. He was stupefied as to why they were both clutching their stomachs and sharing a deep belly laugh.

Riker looked around and quickly contained himself. He took a deep breath, and then noticed Troi still on a medical bed. His face quickly changed from mirth to concern. "How is she?" he asked Crusher.

“Better,” replied the doctor. “She got worse after you... disappeared.”

Riker looked at Kris, who had gone back into Vulcan, her demeanor calm and stiff. “You were right,” he said.

“Right about what?” asked Picard.

“Q sent us to Muztarif. They’re a very playful people. If the Lieutenant and I didn’t have fun, we speculated that Q would harm Troi,” explained Riker.

“Q appears to have a pattern, he is sending me with one of you while threatening the lives of the remaining crew,” said Kris.

“When I get my hands on him, I’m going to wring his neck,” said Riker as he looked at the sleeping figure of Troi. “Has she been awake at all?”

“I might try right now.” She looked at Picard, who nodded.

Crusher used a medical syringe to inject a stimulant into Troi. Nothing happened for a few moments, then Troi woke up in a fury. She bolted upright. “No,” she screamed. “It has to stop.”

Kris stepped forward. She put a hand on Troi’s shoulder. “Compartments, Counselor. You are the one that taught me that.”

Troi rocked in her sitting position, she clutched her head. "It's too much." She began to cry. Riker went to her, Crusher picked up a hypo-spray.

"No," interjected Kris. "She needs to stay awake now and fight it."

Dr. Crusher and Riker looked at each other, both backed away to give Kris more room. "Counselor, focus on one at a time. They will keep coming, but each has a place of its own."

Kris changed from Vulcan into Betazoid. Kris's mind quickly flooded, she wanted to scream out like Troi, but she contained herself. She thought perhaps that touching Troi was making it more difficult for both of them. She removed her hand from Troi's shoulder.

"Stop, you're too close. No!" yelled Troi.

Riker yanked Kris away from Troi. "What just happened? What did you do?" cried Riker.

Kris quickly changed back into Vulcan. "I went into Betazoid," she explained. "It was a mistake. I'm not ready for it, and it overwhelmed Troi."

Picard got in between Kris and Riker. "We need to return to the bridge," he said. "I sent Data ahead. Commander, stay here."

Picard gestured for Kris to follow him. At the exit, Kris looked back at Troi and the others. She joined Picard in the

hallway a moment later. "Why was going into Betazoid a mistake?" he said as they walked.

"As I stated, I am not controlling the Betatal changes as of yet. I'm doing better than Troi, but I still have a transition that I must go through. However, I can put it aside for now while I am in another species. Still, for a moment, I thought perhaps Troi and I could make progress together because we went through BA DOR Ramen together. However, I think I may have added to her difficult transition. It was unintended. I am not certain, but she did get worse when I changed into Betazoid."

They reached a turbo lift. Once inside, Picard barked, "bridge."

After a few moments, Picard and Kris arrived at the bridge. They disembarked from the turbo lift, Picard heading for his familiar position in the middle of the bridge, in front of the main screen and Mr. Worf. Guinan was no longer on the bridge.

"Mr. Data, status?" said Picard.

"Unchanged, sir. The Enterprise has not moved. There has been no sign of Q," he answered.

"Where did Guinan go?"

"Unknown." Picard understood his meaning, Guinan had simply disappeared.

Kris stood next to Picard. Suddenly, she pivoted and looked at Mr. Worf, who stood at attention at his station. His

demeanor was imposing. Even at rest, Mr. Worf looked battle-ready.

“I’m guessing you are next, Mr. Worf,” said Kris.

“Me?”

“Altarans are large beings with incredible strength,” said Captain Picard as he, too, looked up at Mr. Worf. “By process of elimination, I’m afraid she may be correct.”

Mr. Worf growled, then he and Kris disappeared.

* * *

They reappeared in an outdoor environment. They were surrounded by large trees with thick jutting branches. Many of the branches appeared to look more like steps. The usual rounded appearance of typical Earth tree branches were replaced with a top part that was flat. The trunks of the trees also had what appeared to be steps built into them. The branches of each tree were interspersed, these powerful trees had no boundaries between each other.

There was thick vegetation everywhere. Lush grass, full-looking shrubs, and each tree bloomed full, like it was the height of summer on Earth, complete with plenty of moisture and sunlight. On Altara, thick canopies at the top of the trees could not prevent an abundance of sunlight beaming down to the ground. Just the opposite—the canopies allowed the

sunlight to pass through, thus bringing it down the surface. The vegetation at ground level seemed healthy and immense.

Kris knew exactly where she was and immediately switched into Altaran. The hue of her skin changed to a light green and ridges appeared on her neck. When she reached out and touched a large leaf, the skin color on that hand went into a deeper shade of green.

Kris smiled and breathed deeply, it felt good to be on Altara and in Altaran. She had dreamed of one day visiting the real Altara. Her Altaran blood seemed to flow with the surrounding vegetation, like she was suddenly one with her surroundings. That was how a real Altaran felt.

She had not had direct access to real vegetation in a long time. Altarans were vegetation-based beings. All Altarans needed exposure to real vegetation to remain healthy. Without plant exposure, their bodies would begin to decay after four or five weeks.

Since leaving Star Base 325, Kris was only able to satisfy her Altaran needs with the synthetic vegetation from the holodeck—which allowed her to practice Altar, the running of the trees. This running in an outdoor vegetative holodeck program did help. The Enterprise's arboretum had the vegetation she needed to remain healthy, but the arboretum was small and did not have room to exercise or run, or run the trees. Still, the vegetation there was not synthetic.

Kris breathed deeply, her Altaran was suddenly full of energy. She looked around at the trees, and wanted very badly to climb, Altaran running-style.

“We need to climb, Mr. Worf,” she said.

“Climb?” said Worf. He stared at Kris’s changed complexion. “What happened to you?”

“I am in Altara. The skin color of Altarans is green, various shades depending on their exposure to vegetation. My musculature has also expanded. I am now stronger than you, Mr. Worf. And, I have your ridges, except mine are on my neck.”

“I do not believe it,” he said.

“Then, you do not believe your eyes. It is not important whether you believe. Altarans live and thrive within their trees. Most of Altara is covered with trees and vegetation. They climb, run, and live up there,” Kris said while pointing high up at branches that Mr. Worf wasn’t even sure he could see.

“Climbing the trees, also called ‘Running the Trees,’ is more common on Altara than walking on the ground. They have a primal need to do it. Their fitness training is called Altar. They must move their bodies among vegetation in order to feed them. Their main food is a type of chlorophyll. They feed on other foods, of course. But, nothing feeds an Altaran like running. Which, to you is climbing.”

Worf grunted. “I do want to be a part of this,” he said. “I cannot climb trees.”

“I understand, Mr. Worf. However, you are here with me. This is Q’s Altaran test. Commander Riker had to have fun with me in an amusement park. And, I believe you must do what Altarans do. Klingons do conduct military drills, do they not?”

“Often. We must keep are skills sharp,” he barked, as if Kris had insulted him.

“Well, Mr. Worf, Altarans must practice their skills as well. Altara used to have clan wars, but now Altarans do not kill their own and they are no longer warlike. They have purged their desire to kill. That does not mean their instincts are gone. Because they still have those instincts, they exercise them during Al Tureff Moin, the most important Altaran holiday. Al Tureff Moin is a worldwide combat training exercise and war game. It is taken very seriously.”

“A fake war?”

“Altarans have died, Mr. Worf. They do not kill each other on purpose, but deaths do occur. They are few in number, and most are not the result of direct combat. Injuries are more frequent than deaths during Al Tureff Moin. Altarans have the ability to fight while injured, and when their minds are focused on Al Tureff Moin, they often do not know how to stop fighting. Exchanges are bloody. They fight with only one weapon, an Amincoff, similar to your bat’ leth.”

“It must be difficult to kill them,” commented Worf.

“Like Klingons, Mr. Worf. They are built for combat.”

“Except clans no longer conquer each other? What is left? There is no purpose. Just to practice is meaningless.”

“Altarans changed their warlike instincts in order to maintain their numbers and their culture ever since they realized they had no desire to leave Altara and expand to other worlds. They want to protect their own, exercise their abilities, and celebrate their existence. Their festival for doing this happens once a year. Besides this time of Al Tureff Moin, they only want peace.”

“I would argue that they are true warriors,” said Worf. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I believe this is the time of Al Tureff Moin.”

“Why don’t you join my clan and find out?” said a deep voice from above them. The huge form took two tree steps and landed gracefully on the ground. The Altaran man stood to his full height, a foot taller than Worf. His skin was a deep green and he had many ridges along his neck. He wore a skin tight outfit that covered his torso and lower midriff. He wore no shoes. His muscles were taut and well-defined. He was an imposing figure.

Unlike Klingons, his facial features appeared gentle and kindly, there was no anger behind his green eyes. He was not smiling at the moment. However, the smile lines beside his eyes were cut deep.

“Visitors to our world?” he asked.

“We are,” said Kris. She moved closer to the Altaran man, so close their faces were an inch apart. They locked eyes. “It is Al Tureff Moin?”

“This you know,” he said.

“We will join.”

“It is not allowed.”

“I am Altaran.”

“You lie.”

“When the time is Al Tureff Moin, the senses are taken over by strategy and movements and battles. You have invited us to join you, yet you call me a liar?” Kris and the Altaran man maintained their close proximity and eye contact. Neither was going to budge.

“That is my truth,” said the Altaran man.

“You have wavered. You show disrespect,” said Kris.

“I can kill you for that remark.”

“Altarans do not kill.”

“In Al Tureff-“

Kris interrupted the man. “Altarans no longer kill.”

The two had not moved. Their eyes remained locked onto the other, the staring contest continued.

Mr. Worf shuffled uneasily. As Chief Security Officer, he was ready to jump in and defend Kris. It was not only his job, but Mr. Worf was always ready to face a foe.

He did not move, however, as he watched Kris and the Altaran man stare at each other. This posturing lasted for two minutes when Worf finally thought it was a good time to try to separate them, if only to unlock their awkward stalemate. He was about to intercede when the Altaran man backed away. "You are owed a calm," he said to Kris.

"A what?" asked Mr. Worf.

The Altaran man glared at Worf. Mr. Worf read this look as an invitation to engage the man. He stepped toward him menacingly, only to be stopped by Kris's arm, which suddenly held Worf in place.

Worf grabbed Kris's arm, in order to move it out of the way. She had no right to stop him. Worf tried to move the arm, but couldn't. He quickly realized that Kris now had possession of some kind of unnatural strength. Or, was it the strength of an Altaran?

Worf's eye narrowed. "Move to the side," he ordered his junior officer.

Kris ignored the command. With her eyes still locked on the Altaran, she said, "This being is Klingon. Altara would benefit from his inclusion in Al Tureff Moin."

"He does not know how to fight," said the man.

“What?” barked Worf.

“The Klingon has honor. This I know. Altarans have pulal, the rage of the warrior. It is much more effective than the Klingon honor,” said the Altaran man.

“You insult me,” roared Worf.

“What is your name?” Kris asked the Altaran Man.

“Wil Dur.”

“Cro Wil Dur, I owe you a calm. However, the Klingon stays with me. He fights with me.”

Wil Dur shook his head, but his eyes did not leave Kris’s. “Does he run the trees?”

“He learns.”

The Altaran man looked at Worf. “The kill is not. Short of that, Al Tureff Moin is our lifeblood. Will you honor it?”

“You disgrace me. How can I honor your lifeblood,” said Worf.

Worf took a step back.

Kris faced him, “Mr. Worf, we are here because of our ship. It is in peril.” She looked at the Altaran. “We must join your clan for these training drills-“

“No,” said Wil Dur. He swiftly darted at Worf. He grabbed Worf by the shoulders and slammed him to the ground. He removed an Amincoff that had been hidden behind

his back. He pointed it at Worf's throat as he put a foot on Worf's chest. "Because I choose not to kill my brethren, does not mean I cannot protect my person from you," he said as he hovered over Worf. "You insult once too often."

"I spoke true. The Klingon owes a clam, but we must join your clan. You invited us. Both of us," said Kris.

Worf snorted, he longed to get back on his feet and engage this being in combat. But, he was pinned, and quite effectively. He was curious about this Altaran's strength and combat training, as if his warlike curiosity was suddenly getting the better of him. This feeling was strange to Worf, who so often felt only anger. This opponent seemed not only worthy, but better. And, Worf longed to know how.

"I will join your clan," said Worf. "I owe you a calm." *Whatever the hell that is.*

The Altaran man did not move. After a few moments, he pulled his Amincoff back, and held out a hand. He helped Worf to his feet.

"Let us climb," he said.

In one motion, his Amincoff was returned to its position on his back. He took two steps to reach the nearest tree, and easily propelled himself up, as if climbing was his nature. He began to run the trees, and then he was gone.

Worf looked at Kris. "What is a calm?"

“At the end of Al Tureff Moin, the Altarans return to their peaceful ways. Calms are stories told to those you have wronged during Al Tureff Moin. They are pleasant and uplifting tales told to entertain. The best ones are more like humorous parables. Calms are an attempt to create smiles on the one owed. If you give them a smile through your storytelling, all is forgiven.”

Worf grunted. “Strange culture,” he said.

“Very orderly, actually. Mr. Worf, we are now officially a member of a clan engaged in Al Tureff Moin. I do not know how much longer this period of Al Tureff Moin has left, but we must participate to the best of our abilities.”

Worf looked up into the trees, not feeling all that confident in his ability to run the trees, climb them, or whatever else he had to do up there. “It’s all done up there?” he asked.

“Most of it. Not all. There are rest breaks, times when the clans regroup. But, the rest of the time, for the most part, we’ll be up there.”

“Lieutenant, if I have not done much climbing-“

“Mr. Worf, it is much easier than it looks. Follow my example. I believe you will master most of the Altaran fighting abilities in no time.”

“Lieutenant, what are we doing here?” he asked. “Are the crew dying while we run around and climb in trees?”

“Quite possibly,” said Kris. In her joy at finally being Altaran on the real planet Altara, she had forgotten their real reason for being here. “My guess is the crew is fighting for something, or are engaged in some sort of fight. Theirs, however, can be fatal.”

“I see. I am going to kill Q,” said Worf.

“Put your feelings for Q away, Mr. Worf. You have much to learn in very little time. As I explained to the others, you must concentrate and fully engage in this test. You are the most war-like and combat ready of all of the crew of the Enterprise. That is why you were chosen to accompany me here to Altara. However, Mr. Worf, I still believe that if I fail, if we fail, the crew of the Enterprise will be harmed. Do you understand?”

Worf nodded, he looked at a tree. His eyes trailed it all the way to the sliver of sky above it. He took a deep breath. He was not pleased at being forced to climb a tree, however, he accepted the challenge. “Let’s go,” he said.

He watched Kris deftly run the nearest tree, it was as if she was thirty feet above his head in mere seconds. Mr. Worf approached the tree, put his foot in one of the steps, and began to climb.

* * *

When Kris and Worf returned to the bridge of the Enterprise, they landed in the middle of a raging physical battle.

Picard, La Forge, and Data were each engaged with a combatant. Both Riker and Crusher had been forced to leave sick bay and each were fighting a foe. Their enemies fought with fists, no weapons, but they had matching strength—even Mr. Data was not faring well. The beings appeared humanoid-like with the correct number of limbs. Their skin was red. Their faces had two noses and their cheekbones flared outward, and they were hairless. Crusher's opponent appeared to be female, while the others appeared male.

Since the crew members of the Enterprise did not have weapons, they had to resort to individual physical confrontations. Fist fights.

Mr. Worf acted quickly. He pulled the being off of Picard. As he held the being by the collar, it suddenly disappeared, as did all of the rest.

The slightly battered crewmembers all breathed a sigh of relief. Data helped Crusher and Geordi to their feet. Each member checked themselves for injuries. "How is everyone?" asked Crusher, rather breathless and weakened.

"We appear to be fine," said Picard after a quick glance at each of this senior officers.

Guinan suddenly reappeared on the bridge. "Picard," she said.

"Returning are you? How convenient."

"I took a step back," she explained.

“How about staying here and helping me stand up to the Continuum? Get them to stop this charade? One of my officers was injured.”

“Troi will be fine,” said Guinan calmly.

Picard did not like her answer. “Who do you answer to, Guinan? I hold your people equally responsible for this atrocity. You are all using us.”

“Nothing can be done, Picard,” she said quietly.

Picard shook his head. He looked at Mr. Worf. “Worf, what happened?”

“We were sent to Altara. They are beings with great physical strength. They were engaged in their combat training event, a very useful and intricate battle between clans. It was... enlightening. Altarans have much honor.”

“I’m glad you’ve been enlightened, Mr. Worf,” said Picard sarcastically.

“We battled with a clan during the Altaran time of Al Tureff Moin. Kris was ‘in’ Altaran. She is a very formidable warrior,” added Mr. Worf.

This was not what Picard wanted to hear. He was tired of this game. He glared at Kris. “Apparently, you keep passing these tests?”

“I’m not sure, Captain,” said Kris. She was back in Vulcan.

“You have been sent away with members of my crew, while, at least one of them had to fight for survival here on the Enterprise.”

“That is the way Q has arranged this,” said Kris. “No one has died. Even though I have completed four of the tests, I still do not know what Q wants from me. I am assuming he will tell me the results at the end of all of the tests.”

“I want this stopped now. All of it,” shouted Picard.

“That is out of my hands, Captain. It is logical to assume that it must be completed.”

“Logical, a very Vulcan word.”

Silence reigned between the two of them. “No results,” he mumbled. He glared at Guinan. “And, you can’t tell me anything.”

Guinan did not respond.

“What now?” Picard said in a very loud voice.

“You,” said the voice of Q. And, Picard and Kris disappeared.

* * *

Kris and Picard reappeared in a large, empty room. Blackness surrounded them, and there appeared to be no ceiling. It was endless blackness.

Picard looked at Kris. "What is this? Where are we?"

"I do not know where. But, this is the human test," said Kris.

"How do you know?"

"I have only human and Ramos left. You are with me, so I am guessing," she said, realizing she was still in Vulcan. She again felt a restless tug at having to go into human. Betazoid, Human, and especially Muztarif were her least favorite species. Yet, she suddenly realized she hadn't minded going into Muztarif with Riker. Strange. She typically only went into Muztarif in private, and infrequently. However, with Riker, she went into it without thinking, and... she had actually enjoyed herself. Was it Riker who did this to her? She did not know.

She turned into Human, and looked around at the vast darkness all around them. She said, "Is this Earth?"

"Not any Earth that I know of," said Picard. He packed, feeling the need to summarize the events in order to orient himself. "First, Data disappeared with you."

"To Vulcan for the Vulcan test."

"And, then Counselor Troi."

"Betazoid."

“Riker was Muztarif, Worf was Altaran, and now it’s my turn in a Human test?”

“It appears so,” said Kris.

The sudden appearance of a portion of a room caught their attention. It looked like the set of a play. The furnished room, old English style with dark woods and floral drapes, was incomplete—missing its “fourth” wall. There was a window, and vineyards could be seen in the distance.

Picard walked slowly toward the room. He looked at Kris. “What is this?”

“I don’t know,” said Kris.

“You’ll recall key moments in your life, Picard. You will live them—again,” said the voice of Q.

“What? Q, how can I live key moments in my life again?” asked Picard.

“Play acting, Captain,” said Kris.

“Wrong,” said the voice of Q. “It must be real, as if it is just happening.”

Picard watched as a woman entered the room. He recognized her. “That looks like our house maid, Genevieve. She helped to raise my brother and myself. My mother died when I was young. This was our sitting room in La Barre.”

“Key moments, Picard. Remember, I’ll know if it’s not completely real,” said Q.

“Are you threatening my crew again, Q?” raged Picard.

“Captain,” interrupted Kris. “You’ve been left behind while I’ve been tested. He’s been threatening one or all of you who remain during each test. Did you feel as if he wouldn’t follow through on one of his threats? In each of my tests, I could not take that chance.”

Picard thought it over. His mouth opened when a man walked into the room. The man ignored the house maid, who busied herself with tidying and setting out a breakfast. Picard was stunned at the sight of the man. “My father,” he whispered. “I know this day.”

“Captain, perhaps we need to do what Q says,” said Kris. “There seems to be little choice.”

Reluctantly, Picard moved toward the room. As he did, Genevieve said to Maurice Picard, Jean-Luc Picard’s father, “Try to go easy on the lad.”

Picard stopped in his tracks and listened to his father. “Easy? He wants to go to Star Fleet, does he? I will never let that happen.” The elder Picard said down and poured himself a cup of coffee.

Picard took a deep breath, and then proceeded to enter the room. Genevieve was about to leave, but stopped when she saw Picard. “Jean-Luc, good morning to ya,” she said, then smiled. She nodded at Picard, and scooted close to him. “Ya can do this, Jean. Ya strong like ya ma. Good luck to ya, lad.” She turned and ducked out of the room.

The younger Picard walked to the table where his father sat. "Good morning," he croaked.

"Clear your throat, boy," he said, without looking at Picard. "Breakfast."

Picard responded to the command by clearing his throat. Oddly, he felt nervous, like this was the actual time that he approached his father to tell him that he was not staying to work on the family vineyard, he was enlisting in Star Fleet instead. He did not have to make himself feel nervous, standing in front of what was clearly his father easily made him so. His father was a very intimidating man.

"I am... I have enlisted in Star Fleet," he said quietly.

"No, ya haven't," said the elder Picard.

"I have. I must report--"

"I had it pulled," he said while casually pouring himself a bowl of cereal. He still hadn't looked up at his son. "George pulled your application. You're seventeen."

"Two weeks away from legal age," said Picard.

"Aye. Still, you cannot enlist in this Star Fleet."

"Don't act like you don't know what I want, Papa," said Picard. "You don't know what Star Fleet can really do."

Maurice Picard looked up at Jean-Luc and forced a crooked smile. "Oh, I know what they do. Take youngings into

space forever. You'll not be one of them. A Picard has never been in space."

"You're wrong," said Picard. His father glared at him, and he unconsciously took a step back. He purposely stood up straighter, feeling as if that would help strengthen him. "Star Fleet does more than just take people into space. They seek interactions with all races."

The elder Picard put down his spoon and rose, all while not taking his eyes off of his son. "You'll do this against the family? Against your mother's wishes?"

"We do not know her wishes-"

"I do. She wanted her two sons to run the vineyard."

"Robert is more than capable."

"Does he know that? Does he know that he gets to do it all by himself while you go off and play in the stars?"

"Papa, whether I go now or in two weeks, I am going."

Maurice Picard stepped toward Jean-Luc. Again, he felt like stepping back. His father was an imposing figure. He had always ruled his house with strictness and swift justice of wrongdoings. There had been no love, no easiness or gentleness when it came to his father. Picard forced his feet to stay in place, and forced his eyes to lock onto his father.

Jean-Luc's father towered over him. He was much taller than Picard. Jean-Luc's brother Robert, had gotten their dad's

height, not Jean-Luc. Picard knew this moment would shape the rest of his life.

“I am going,” he said quietly, his eyes still locked on his father’s. He backed away slowly, but not with a coward’s gait. He backed away with his back straight, a smirk on his face.

At the door, his father said, “You disappoint me. That will never change.”

The elder Picard disappeared.

A dining room appeared adjacent to the sitting room. It had several people in it, all taking plates and filling them with food set out on a long table.

Kris watched Picard step into the dining room as the sitting room vanished. Picard recognized some of the people, yet the names eluded him. They smiled politely at him. He waited by the door, not quite knowing what key moment in his life was about to happen.

An older, frumpy-looking woman in a long, black dress touched his arm, and whispered, “I’m so sorry for your loss.” She picked up some utensils and walked out with her plate of food.

She was passed in the doorway by a very tall, gangly man. His facial features did not resemble Picard’s except for the nose and cheekbones. “You came,” he said to Picard.

“Robert,” said Picard. He now recalled the event, the wake after the passing of his father. “Has everything been handled?”

“Of course. By me. You’re not here,” said Robert.

“Is there anything I can-“

“No,” he cut off Picard. “As a matter of fact, you didn’t need to come at all.”

The others in the room began to quietly slip out in order to leave the two some privacy, and to escape the obvious tension.

“Well, now that you’re here, let us sum up. Father is dead. I am named in the will as sole inheritor. You are not mentioned. I will continue to run the vineyard. You will continue to not be here. The house and all of the land are mine.”

“I expected as much,” said Picard.

“Other news? I was married six months ago to a woman named Marie. As of last month, we are expecting. I know you thought I would be the terminal bachelor, you with your charm and uniform, however it looks like the reverse. She is strong, wants to help with the vineyard, and actually loves me.”

“Congratulations. I didn’t know.”

“Of course not. You were not informed.”

The brothers stared at each other. “You should leave.”

“I’m not allowed to be at my own father’s wake?”

“You left to join Star Fleet, and we assumed that was the end of you. You always did what you wanted. Mother protected you. You were allowed to have a free spirit of adventure, and you got it. Now, kindly go back to it. There is nothing here for you.”

“Robert, it does not have to be like this.”

“Yes, it does.”

“Order, please sit,” yelled a judge as the dining room suddenly became a courtroom. Picard stood next to his brother, who looked strained while holding in a silent fury. Across from Picard and Robert sat a lawyer and his client. “This is case 334BG776. Picard versus L’ Ang.”

Picard instantly recalled this key life moment. He had come back to Earth to assist his brother who was being sued by a neighbor. At stake was the vineyard. The neighbor had claimed he had old documents that proved that Picard’s grandfather had signed over their land during a time of financial crisis as collateral for a loan. The neighbor claimed the loan had not been repaid, therefore the lands reverted to him.

Picard immediately immersed himself as Kris looked on. He acted as barrister for his brother. The judge heard testimony from both sides. All the while, Robert sat quietly and said nothing, just stewed in silence.

During Picard’s closing argument, he said, “Our records indicate the loan was repaid. Yes, it had not been filed with the

local authority, but that does not mean it didn't happen. Our father, Maurice Picard, was impeccable with the books, Your Honor. And, with his debts. He would have known if his father, our grandfather, had had anything outstanding. After our father's passing, my brother, Robert Picard, was equally as diligent. This is clearly a case of a misplaced document, which the opposition knows. We submit that the debt was repaid, in full."

The judge ruled in favor of the Picards, the Picard lands were saved.

Picard made his way over to Marie, Maurice's wife. She held a six month old baby, Rene, Picard's nephew.

"Congratulations," he said to Marie, then smiled at the babe. "It was nice to finally meet him."

"Come to the house," she said.

"He will not," said Robert, from behind Picard.

Picard took a deep breath. "I really must return." He faced his brother. "I know you didn't want me here, but I had a right to help you fight for our family lands."

"Lands you gave up for Star Fleet," he growled.

"Robert," admonished Marie. "Don't."

Picard did not look at Robert. "It's all right. I know how my brother feels. It was nice to meet you, and you, young lad. Goodbye."

“You’re not going to get a thank you from me,” said Robert.

“I was not expecting one,” said Picard, then he walked away.

Picard rejoined Kris as the courtroom suddenly vanished. Darkness again engulfed them. “Key events in your life, Captain?”

“Yes,” said Picard.

A new room suddenly appeared. It appeared to be a very large, hollowed out cave. It looked drab and uninviting. It was furnished with rows and rows of equipment.

“Apparently, it is my turn,” said Kris.

“Where is that?” asked Picard.

“The moon where I was raised,” said Kris. She strolled into this room and sat down at a computer terminal. Two male Lewtropsics appeared. The taller one, the dominant named Ga’ Reth, was so skinny it appeared as if his dark-skinned, humanoid body had unnatural bends to it. He was busy working at a computer, while his pair, the more-wide-than-tall submissive named Ga’ Shain, sat at a table, slumped over a card game. Ga’ Shain looked as if he were concentrating very hard on the game.

Lewtropsics were rare and unique. The dominant was the intellect, strong and sturdy and full of energy. The dominant had universal knowledge and an eidetic memory. The dominant

could not survive long without his submissive. Lewtrops were paired for life and always of the same gender. Ga' Reth's submissive, Ga' Shain—his pair—was small, slow, and had the mind of a child. His energy was low and he slept a lot. The submissives were simple-minded, yet they were emotional. They were generally considered the social center of the pair. They were caring and sensitive to their surroundings. They had the ability to make friends, while the dominants typically did not.

Kris's back was to Ga' Reth and Ga' Shain. All three seemed immersed in various work. Neither of them acknowledged the entrance of a short-haired woman who looked like she was in her fifties. The woman walked with a confidence like she was in charge. And she was.

Kris did not look like her mother, Elizabeth Rogen. Liz's features were light, her bone structure pointy at the shoulders and hips. Her face was wide with pronounced cheekbones.

Elizabeth Rogen had had two obsessions: One was to create a genetically engineered being. Kris had been her success in this area. Her second obsession had been Captain Jean-Luc Picard.

The elder Rogen was a scientist who had met Picard at the Mars Colony twenty years ago. Picard was a First Officer, but he was on leave to attend a conference. He had not wanted to attend this conference, however he had been ordered to do so.

To Elizabeth Rogen, they had clicked instantly. She thought they shared special something that future lovers could look back on and say, “We knew right away.”

In reality, Picard, had not clicked with Liz Rogen. He had been polite the night they had met. He was drinking alone, as was his habit. He had wanted to be alone, but Liz had spied him and moved in. They had shared a pleasant conversation for two hours, with the last hour dragging on—at least for Picard. He had spent that hour trying to figure out how to politely excuse himself. By that time, he had realized that this woman’s instant “affections” for him were one-sided. Picard had felt nothing.

Unfortunately, the two had “accidentally” run into each other for the next three days of the conference. Each meeting filled Picard with anxiety. Each time, his signals to Liz Rogen went unnoticed. By the third day, he finally had to say, “I am not interested in a romantic entanglement.” It was impolite, but he felt he had to put a stop to it.

The only memorable part of it was, during one of their meetings Liz Rogen had shared her ideas for engineering a genetic humanoid. Picard had listened intently to her science, which he thought was sound. However, he rejected her ideas as something completely unattainable. At that time, even Mr. Data was unknown to Star Fleet.

After the conference, Picard felt relieved to finally be away from Liz Rogen.

Picard stood up straighter at the entrance of Liz Rogen. He was yet again annoyed by Q’s ability to insert himself into

Picard's life. Seeing Liz Rogen again put him on edge. He watched as Kris stood and approached her mother.

"I am leaving the moon today," she said, with a stiff back and no hint of hesitation.

Liz Rogen acted casual. She sat and looked up at Kris. "You are?"

"There is an extra shuttle. I will take it. I hope to run into a Federation vessel."

"You have planned this?"

"I have. I have sufficient supplies. I have studied the surrounding twelve sectors. There is nothing left for me here." Kris looked at the submissive Ga' Shain, who was staring at her. He looked about to cry. Kris walked to him. "I will miss you, Ga' Shain."

Ga' Shain stood and beetled quickly to his pair. Ga' Reth ignored Ga' Shain. Instead, he turned from his computer and nodded at Liz Rogen. He held up a hand as a gesture for Ga' Shain to remain quiet. Ga' Shain did not. "She leaves?" he said, his voice breaking.

"She must. You will accept it," said Ga' Reth coldly, without looking at him.

Ga' Shain's pouty face looked back at Kris. "You leave?"

"Yes, Ga' Shain. I have discussed this with you."

Ga' Shain nodded. He sat and wiped tears from his eyes. Kris looked at the dominant Ga' Reth, whose face was dry. She hoped that Ga' Reth would comfort his pair, even though she knew he would not. He was a cold fish.

Kris returned her attention to her mother. "I will not return, mother."

"This is so," she said.

"You will not try to stop me," said Kris, making sure her mother understood that it was a statement and not a question.

"You are leaving, Kris. Your mind is made up. It is time," said Kris's mother.

Kris hesitated, but only slightly. Without looking at the others, she picked up a bag and walked out.

The cave on the moon disappeared and was replaced by a room that looked familiar to Picard. It looked like a shuttle bay of a starship.

Kris faced the captain of the ship, Picard could see the man's insignia. He was a tall bearded man whom Picard did not recognize. There were three security officers at the ready nearby.

"Must I remain here?" asked Kris.

"I am sorry for the delay. We are transporting you to a nearby Star Base. Three two five," said the Captain.

"I understand," said Kris.

“I have been ordered to escort you to our brig,” said the captain.

“Brig? A place of confinement for those deemed dangerous?” said Kris.

“Those are my orders.”

Kris nodded. She let the security officers escort her out.

The shuttle bay disappeared and became another room that looked familiar to Picard, a Federation living quarters. There were two rooms, the living room and the bedroom. A full bathroom was off the bedroom. The living quarters looked comfortable and had a full wall of windows.

Kris sat in a chair. She sat still for a long moment.

Finally, a buzz was heard. Kris stood and said, “Enter.”

A Security Officer entered. He let the door close behind him before addressing Kris. “Your medical results are inconclusive.”

“How is that possible?” asked Kris.

“I am not a medical officer. I have been ordered to keep you here. You have been designed FA12. Your unknown status has been deemed potentially dangerous. Until further notice, you will remain here. We will continue to investigate.”

“Investigate what?”

“You. And what you claim to be.”

“I am what I claim.”

“Not according to three doctors.”

Kris hesitated. “How long will I be required to remain?”

“That has yet to be determined. You have everything you need here. You are not in the brig.”

The Security Officer turned and walked out.

Kris sat. She put her hands on her knees.

She sat for several minutes. Picard waited, he shifted his weight from one foot to another. *This is highly irregular. If this is what actually happened to her...Then, it is atrocious.*

Finally, another buzzing noise sounded at Kris’s door.

She stood and said, “Yes?”

In walked a man whom Picard recognized instantly—Admiral James Peterson, his former friend and current agitator. Picard grimaced as he watched Peterson stroll casually into Kris’s quarters.

“Hello. My name is Admiral James Peterson. It’s nice to meet you.”

Kris said nothing.

Peterson strolled around the room, not acting at all like Kris was dangerous. Peterson was a big man, as tall as Riker. He had a receding hairline and tired-looking eyes. “You have been

assigned to me.” He faced Kris, expecting a reaction. He got none. Kris did not move a muscle.

“I understand your reluctance to talk to me. Four and a half years is a long time. However, your status has changed. First, your FA12 designation has been suspended. Unfortunately, I was not able to get it revoked. Second, I have been allowed to offer you a deal. I successfully argued that you and your talents are being wasted here. We have an artificial being that has proved very valuable and I argued that you, too, could be useful to Star Fleet. That was part of my argument to get you out of here.”

Kris took a deep breath. “I am to be released?” she asked.

“Not quite,” Peterson said. He sat down and leaned back comfortably. “I have been given permission to train you to be a Star Fleet officer.”

Kris tried hard not to change her facial expression. This was easy to do in Vulcan. Yet, her stomach had indeed lurched. Becoming a Star Fleet officer had been her dream.

“I can be a Star Fleet officer?” she asked. “How? What has changed?”

“Need,” said Peterson. “And, some convincing that you pose no danger. It was all a big misunderstanding.”

“A long one.”

“Yes. My apologies.” Peterson stood. “Your training will begin tomorrow. If you want it, of course,” he said, as he made his way to the door.

“I do,” said Kris.

“Good,” said Peterson. He smiled. “Keep in mind, however, that your assignments, when you eventually get them, will be specialized. I will be personally utilizing your talents.”

“I understand,” said Kris.

“Good,” said Peterson. “Be ready at oh eight hundred.”

Peterson walked out, but the door remained open. He returned to face Kris. “Harder than you thought?” he said. “Star Fleet training isn’t easy.”

The door closed behind Peterson.

“The training is going well, sir. I have not been bothered by any of it.”

“No, you have not,” he said. He smiled and walked around the room. “It’s time we discuss your first assignment. I believe you’ll be ready in a month or two. Would you like to leave here?”

“Yes, sir,” she said.

“Good. I have a problem that could be solved using your skills.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Kris. “I will do my best.”

“I will hold off discussing the assignment for now until I have worked out all of the details.” Peterson moved closer to Kris. He lifted a hand and touched a strand of her hair. “There is something else that I require,” he said, almost in a whisper.

Picard’s eyes widen and he gaped. *Did I just hear what I thought I did?* He took a step forward.

Peterson held onto the strand of Kris’s hair, he twirled it in his fingers. “I have needs, Kris. You will satisfy these needs.” He ran his hand down Kris’s cheek. “And, you will tell no one.”

Picard took another step forward, acting as if he needed to quickly intercede. *This is impossible. He cannot... But, he is.*

After another step, Picard forced himself stop. *This is Q’s test, he reminded himself. My crew will be in danger, will be harmed if I try to intercede. Did this happen? How is that possible?*

Peterson took Kris’s hand and led her to the bedroom door. “Do you have knowledge of sexual intimacy between a man and a woman?”

“I have read about it, sir.”

“Good. You will accompany me in here, Cadet Anderson.”

“Sir?”

“Oh, I forgot to tell you. That will be your name when I assign you to a starship. Anderson. We can’t call you Rogen.”

If Kris weren’t in Vulcan, she would have cracked a smile. *A starship!* She smiled inside. She didn’t care what people called her. Anderson was fine. As long as her assignment was a starship.

Peterson stepped to the bedroom door. It opened. He waited for Kris.

Kris went in first, followed by Peterson. The door closed behind them.

The living quarters were empty, Peterson and Kris were nowhere in sight. Picard tried to look “around” the crew quarters set. He knew it was not real. He knew it was only a replica of Kris’s quarters from Star Base 325—as were the other locations in this test. Oddly, the other four locations had been real. Even Vulcan in the past was real. But, Picard knew Q well enough to know that he didn’t need the real locations in this test to do what he wanted to do, to put Kris and Picard through a test of emotions—the human test.

He waited. Still not Kris or Peterson. He was stupefied. Where was Kris? In order to keep his crew safe, Kris and Picard had to partake in this test, but why make her disappear?

Picard was about to step onto the living quarters set when he thought better of it. Instead, he took a few steps back. *I cannot be sucked into Q’s games*, he reminded himself. *Or,*

rather, I have to play this game very carefully. Play it how Q wants me to.

The living quarters room disappeared and was replaced by a Star Base hallway. Kris stood in front of Peterson. She wore the Star Fleet uniform of a Lieutenant. "Lieutenant Anderson. I trust you understand our agreement?" said Peterson.

"What if I don't find anything, sir?" said Kris.

"You will. Picard has his secrets. His crew protects him, but I'm confident you'll find something. Don't tip your hand, Lieutenant. Be discreet. And, tell no one."

"Yes, sir."

"You remember what I told you would happen if you fail at my assignment?" Peterson said with a smile on his face. Two Star Fleet officers were passing near them.

"Sir, I do wish to be clear," said Kris, who glanced very quickly out at Picard, who was watching this exchange intently. "If I just happened to not find anything on Captain—"

"Lieutenant," Peterson said, cutting her off.

"My apologies. I am hypothesizing the possibility that the information you seek is well hidden on the Enterprise. I will have limited access. What if the subject of this personal assignment did commit fraudulent actions against Star Fleet regulations, as you assume the subject has done? However, what if the subject in question has left no trace? You told me you have been frustrated by this in the past. The subject's

ability to 'get away with things.' With my limited access, what can you reasonably expect me to find, sir?"

"I expect you to be creative. Use your abilities. Your access is not as limited as you think it is. Find something, Lieutenant. Or, you'll end up back here in those same quarters. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," Kris said. She turned and walked away from Peterson.

The hallway disappeared as did Peterson.

Kris and Picard were alone yet again. In the darkness.

Picard slowly approached Kris. "What happened with Peterson? In your bedroom?"

"Another one of my duties, Captain."

Captain Picard took a breath, still not believing what he saw. He suddenly realized that perhaps Kris did not understand what had happened to her. "Lieutenant...Kris, do you understand what Admiral Peterson... What he did to you? It's called something."

"You want to call it rape, Captain. However, I would have done anything to get off of Star Base 325," she said calmly while in Vulcan. She had cheated a bit by going into Vulcan when Peterson took her into the bedroom, and she remained in it. She had been in Vulcan when that event had actually happened, so she felt the switch was justified. She was also in Vulcan when Peterson was talking to her right before she

boarded the Enterprise. That had been done on purpose as well. She wanted to use that last “scene” to prove her innocence to Picard. Peterson had wanted her to spy on him. What she had told Picard was the truth, now he saw it for himself.

Picard shook his head. “It was... Whether you were told it was a part of what was expected of you, nothing could be further from the truth. Rape in most societies has been eliminated. What he did-“

“I would do again,” said Kris.

Her admission hung in the air for several long moments. Picard still felt she didn’t understand. *She has to be very naïve in many ways. Being raised in isolation and having very little contact with others.* Picard had done some digging of his own since Kris had first approached him in his ready room. He had asked Mr. Data to look into Kris. His report was that she was either working in Engineering or on the holodeck, with the exception of the time Picard had ordered her to remain in her quarters. She was never among a group, always alone.

If only he had known she had been imprisoned in quarters on Star Base 325 for four and half years. He was eager to investigate why. Why had she been given an FA12 status? Why no legal representation? Why did no one help her, until Peterson recruited her to do his dirty business?

As Picard’s mind raced, the most important issue of Lieutenant Kris Rogan Anderson came to him... Why wasn’t she treated fairly under the Federation’s Prime Directive? She was a

new species. She came to the Federation seeking their acceptance. Why was she treated in such a way?

For the moment, he put that thought out of his mind. “I don’t think you truly understand, Kris,” he said as gently as he could. “What Admiral Peterson did-“

The sudden appearance of yet another room interrupted Picard. This room had rows of chairs facing a podium. Flowers were placed along the walls and the windows were colorfully tinted. A woman was looking at an open casket which lay next to the podium. To one side of the casket was a large portrait of the deceased.

Picard’s breath left him for a moment. He knew this scene immediately—his mother’s funeral.

He had been nine when his mother died. It was one of the worst times of his life.

He ignored Kris and slowly approached the room. He was focused only on one thing, the portrait of his mother. It drew him to it. He walked closer and closer.

The woman who was at the casket turned and saw him. In a hushed voice, she said, “Hello, little Jean. Are you doing okay?”

Picard barely heard her. He could not turn away from the portrait of his mother. She touched his arm to break his concentration. “Oh, yes Auntie. I’m doing fine,” he said quietly.

She patted his arm and walked away. Picard returned his attention to the portrait.

After a moment longer, he turned and glared at Kris, who now stood at the back of the room.

Picard looked from Kris to the portrait, then back again. That was the face he had recognized when Kris first stepped into his ready room.

The face of his mother. Kris's face.

Q's voice was loud and clear. "She's your daughter, Picard."

Chapter Five

Picard and Kris returned to the bridge of the Enterprise. All seemed serene, even if Picard had yet to notice. It was unlike him to return to his bridge and not instantly call out, “status” or some other command that immediately gave him up-to-date information on the Enterprise and its crew. Especially during this Q emergency.

There had to be something tremendous weighing on him for Picard to ignore his bridge.

He could not look away from Kris. He didn't look at Riker, Data, or any of the rest of them. He didn't even notice that Guinan was not present. He was tuning it all out.

“Did you know?” he asked in a soft voice, softer than he had intended. He was burning inside with anger. How dare she? *No, Kris didn't do it. She's not responsible. It was Liz Rogen.*

“I did not know, Captain,” said Kris in a Vulcan-like tone.

“I don't believe you,” said Picard. Had he really meant that? *It's a disgrace, but what kind? A sickness. She had to have known. Her mother must have told her. How dare she not inform me.*

“Captain, I was not consulted when choosing my looks.”

“Who was responsible?”

“My mother,” she said.

“Now that I have you on my side, Picard, perhaps you’ll finally agree with me,” said Q, who had reappeared in front of the big screen. “This creature should not exist.”

Kris, Picard, and Picard’s superior officers all looked at Q. “Q,” said Picard. “This trial proved nothing. It was no more telling than Farpoint. It only satisfied your own quirks.”

“Ahh, wrong, Picard. As of a few moments ago, you now want this being to not look as she does. You want her gone. I feel it inside of you,” said Q with a smirk on his face. “She has lost. You have lost.”

“How exactly?” asked Kris. “Did I not pass the five humanoid tests? Mr. Data and I helped Surak. Troi and I completed the Betatal transition. Riker and I entertained each other on Muztarif. Mr. Worf and I successfully integrated into an Altaran clan during Al Tureff Moin.”

“But, you failed where I thought you would fail. Human.” Q shook his head. “It’s always the humans who fail. Miserable, pesky race.”

“What did she do wrong, Q?” asked Picard.

“Besides being your biological daughter?” Q paused to let that information sink in to Picard’s crewmates. Q never passed up a good dramatic pause. He smiled when Riker shot a look to La Forge, and La Forge looked at Crusher. He noticed Worf grunt, and even Mr. Data had a slight reaction. Precious.

Both Picard and Kris kept their gazes on Q. Neither of them were prepared to face the rest of the crew with this news, especially Picard. *How will I explain it? Obviously, my DNA was stolen. I am a victim. Kris's mother... Yet Kris did nothing wrong. Seeing my mother when I look at her... I must reign in my emotions, my ship and my crew are at stake. As is Kris.*

Q paced, a slow deliberate victory lap around the front of the bridge. "You also were Vulcan while in the human test."

Kris nodded. "Yes, I was. I had been Vulcan during those events."

"But, you were in a human test. Clearly, you do not know the difference. You remain in Vulcan often, while ignoring most of your other species. Occasionally, you like to be this Altaran, but why avoid the other three as often as you do?" asked Q with a twinkle in his eye.

"Why are you so concerned, Q?" Picard responded for Kris.

"Because beings from my universe are pure. They were not built in a laboratory. We cannot choose to be something we are not. I would never do it, but I cannot chose to one day be a Vulcan or a Muztarian. Even though I admire Muztarif, they choose to be fun, and they reject being a member of your Federation. My point is I have now have proof that it is unnatural for this being to exist."

Crusher stepped forward, her medical curiosity getting the better of her. “Q, is it real, what she does? What she is? How does she do it?”

Q waved a hand at her. “I don’t care, doctor. All I care about is righting a wrong. She failed a humanoid test. She has only two options left.” Again, Q paused for the effect, he loved how it always made Picard squirm. “She can be Ramos only, which would mean purging her humanoid parts forever. Or, she can be destroyed. I prefer option number two. Choose.”

Picard took a deep breath. Q had gotten under his skin yet again. He had managed to overcome him and his games in the past, but this time it was not a game. It was life or death.

Picard looked at Kris, then at his superior officers, all but Troi was on the bridge.

He glanced at Q, and suddenly took note of something potentially helpful. “Q, you are no longer holding the Detante. Is that what Guinan called it? Why do you no longer have it? Didn’t it mean you were representing the Continuum?”

“You’re worried about a trinket, Picard,” he said quickly, too quickly. He glared at Kris. “Choose.”

“Does the Continuum still back you, Q?” asked Picard. “Are they still on your side?”

“Delay is not your style, Captain,” said Q.

“Oh, but it is. When there is obviously something else going on, a delay tactic can be very useful. What has changed, Q?” Picard strode a few steps closer to Q.

“Captain,” said Kris. “I am in Ramos. There continues to be a large amount of information I have yet to fully process, however, I do know that Q alone cannot destroy me. It takes three beings in the Ramos universe to destroy one.”

“Wrong,” said Q with a laugh. “I can destroy that Guinan creature. El Aurians are not nearly as powerful as my race. But, she is not Ramos. Only three Ramos can destroy me.”

Guinan and a member of the Continuum named Alpha R suddenly appeared next to Q. Guinan and Alpha R reached up with their right hands, a wave of light emitted from each hand and hit Q. He was suddenly trapped in his own stasis. Unable to move.

The crew of the Enterprise that had been frozen were suddenly freed. A bit of a commotion swept over the bridge. “Quiet,” ordered Picard. He hit the comm button on his shirt. “To all crew, stay where you are. We will explain what has happened. Wait for my instructions. Picard out.”

Picard stepped closer to Guinan and the new visitor. “Guinan?”

“I persuaded them, Captain,” she said. “This is Alpha R, a member of the Continuum.”

“Captain, a bit of business first,” said Alpha R, a bulky-looking, hairless being. He looked at Kris. “Kris Rogen, you were

correct. It takes three of our beings to destroy Q. However, Q was wrong about an El Aurian. If they are teamed with others, they can assist in the destruction. My people have voted, it was unanimous. We have reserved our position. Q has tricked us for the last time. He has continually done damage outside of our universe, and it must stop. Because of that, he must exist no longer. Kris Rogen, if you believe Q has done you harm, then your participation is now required.”

Guinan and Alpha R kept their beams—energy of enormous power that their bodies produced upon will—focused on Q. Q remained trapped, his expression one of surprise. Kris detected a slight eye movement from Q, guessing that he was aware of what was happening.

Kris lifted her hand. She was still in Ramos. She hesitated in order to consider her options. Thinking in Ramos was quite different than thinking in any of her humanoid species, especially since her Ramos was so new to her. It was still highly disorganized. Strange how her Betazoid was even more chaotic. Ramos didn't have feelings as humanoids did, perhaps that was the difference.

For a moment, Kris was unsure if she even knew what to do. How would she join with Alpha R and Guinan to destroy Q? Then, she intuitively knew exactly what to do. She lifted her hand, thought about the beam of energy, and her own energy appeared.

It was a ball in her hand. She knew how to extend it and point it at Q.

She also knew what it meant, it would kill. She would be the third. She could kill Q.

The beam of energy grew as Kris's thoughts began to focus. She considered aiming the beam at Q. The energy jutted out, began to reach for him.

Can I kill? Should I? What harm has this Q done to me? The philosophical argument of his tests was sound. He was questioning my existence as it pertains to creating a being that crosses universes. Those universes are immensely diverse. The beings of Ramos are much more evolved than the beings from the humanoid universes. Even El Aurians are more evolved than any in this universe. It isn't wrong for these beings to question potential cross-contamination. From their point of view, that's what it might mean. Q wasn't wrong. Even if Picard and the others felt as if this trial was unjust, it might have been warranted. She had questioned her own existence in the past, before she even knew that her sixth species was Ramos. Q was right about something else, she did avoid three of her species. She only went into Human, Betazoid, and Muztarif in order to occasionally quiet them. Can she destroy a being who really was only trying to prove a point?

Kris lowered her hand. "I will not destroy him," she said.

"Kris, I couldn't think of any being that deserves it more. He's despicable," said Guinan. "This needs to be done. Q has tortured beings from other universes long enough. He looks

down at all species that are not his equal. Look what he put you through.”

“He did me no permanent harm,” said Kris.

“What about Counselor Troi?” said Crusher.

Kris faced her. “True, Counselor Troi was unprepared to become a Betatal. However, if she can recover, and I believe she can, she will be better for it. The issue was did Q do me harm. He did not.”

“Can we all vote on this?” said Riker.

Picard stepped forward in front of the group. “I would like nothing better than to never see Q again, but this is not our decision.” He looked at Kris. “Are you certain?” he said.

“I cannot kill,” she said.

Guinan glanced at Alpha R, who nodded at her. Guinan lowered her arm, and her energy beam dissolved. She stepped back.

Alpha R’s energy beam changed color, it went from blue to dark green. Q’s body shrank into the size of a tiny box. The box floated to Alpha R, he caught it and held it in his hand.

“Q will be punished,” he said. “However, he will live.” He stepped closer to Kris. He glanced at Picard, then looked back at Kris. “You should know, it was the Continuum who posed the question. We did not want to act on it, but Q convinced us. In the end, we thought better of it. However, the truth should be known.” He paused while studying Kris. “It was

decided the question did not need an answer. Your existence does not pose a threat to our world. The discussion is over.”

“You have a funny way to conduct a discussion,” said Picard.

Alpha R gave his full attention to Captain Picard. “Captain, we understand Q’s intrusiveness has caused humanoid distress. We also understand it has gone on for too long, especially for you. You must know the Continuum, the El Aurian, and the few remaining Ramos beings are peaceful. Q does not represent us,” said Alpha R. “He will not be allowed to interfere again.”

“Long overdue,” said Picard.

“Indeed,” said Alpha R. He looked back at Kris, again appearing as if to study her.

In the next moment, he smiled slight, and then he was gone.

Guinan remained. “If you check your equipment, Picard, you will see that you have been returned to your own space,” she said.

“Very well,” answered Picard. He wanted to remind himself that he was Guinan’s friend, but at the moment, he was angry with her for not stopping this charade sooner.

“The ship needs to have the Ramos removed. It cannot go anywhere until it does,” said Guinan. “I’m sorry,” she added. She stared at Kris. She nodded, but said nothing.

And, then she was gone.

Kris looked around the bridge, at the faces staring at her. She was uncomfortable, and did not want to be here. Still in Ramos, she knew she didn't have to stay. She would never again be locked in her quarters or unjustly accused of wrongdoing. She was free to leave.

And, she did.