

STAR TREK – THE NEXT GENERATION

Kris Rogen – Episode 3

By

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Chapter One

Picard wasn't nervous to be facing the Federation Tribunal Council. He personally knew two Council members—Creeloon from Benzar (Beta Quadrant) and Thomas Vi from Earth (Terra). He had some knowledge of the other seven members of the highest branch of governing for the Federation of Planets, but Picard also knew that didn't matter much.

He had faced the high court in the past, just never as the accused.

He knew all nine members would be in attendance, none were “off world.” These nine were going to be his judge and jury. The court martial of a captain accused of killing an admiral was a matter the Federation did not take lightly. He was pleased they had chosen the Tribunal Council instead of the full council. It was possible that some of the members of this smaller body would understand that Picard had not intentionally killed Admiral James Peterson.

Or had he?

Picard had been struggling with this question since he was engaged in a fight that had been controlled by Liz Rogan. Even though he knew Liz was controlling his actions, a part of him felt he had done it, actually done it. Kill the man. By his own will.

Picard was wearing his dress uniform. It was mandatory when facing the council.

Picard's senior staff—Commander William Riker, Commander Data, Commander Geordi LaForge, Commander Worf, Dr. Beverly Crusher, and Counselor Deanna Troi—sat behind him. They were also dressed accordingly. They were here to support Picard, even though Picard had specifically asked them not to attend. Riker had decided that since he was now in command of the Enterprise, due to Picard's suspension, he was allowed to ignore Picard's request.

Picard really didn't care either way. He adored these people, his senior command crew for all these years. More than that, they were his friends. He loved them and trusted them with his life.

However, Picard was unsure how the tribunal would decide his fate. He had killed an admiral. It was highly likely that his career was over, he would spend the rest of his life no longer wearing a Star Fleet uniform.

At this moment, all he could do was wait for the members to appear through a side door, let them conduct the hearing (which meant a trial), and let the members announce his fate.

Picard thought about who wasn't here. Kris Rogan.

Kris had left shortly after Guinan had shown up on Urbane Five to explain to the Picard and his senior staff that they were all apparently part of some larger plan that she had

known about for a long time. The plan centered around Kris Rogan, the six species genetically engineered being that had come into his life and turned everything upside down.

Kris had been gone since Urbane Five. She had disappeared shortly after destroying her mother and taking her place as a Ramos Ancient. Shortly after Picard had plunged a knife into Admiral Peterson and killed him.

On Arcane Five, Guinan had given Picard and the others only a skeleton of what she thought was happening. She had said Ancients were “higher” in the Ramos pecking order and that Kris’s mother had been one. Now Kris had taken her place. She had said there was now only two Ancient left. Kris and an Ancient she would not name. All she would say was that the “transition”—Kris destroying her mother to become an Ancient—had to happen. It had been part of a larger plan, one that Guinan refused to explain. She said she would when she was sure and when they were “ready for it.”

Guinan left more questions than answers.

Then, she disappeared.

There were so many unanswered questions.

Why did Kris’s mother pit Picard against Peterson? Why couldn’t Guinan tell them the real reason Kris “had to become an Ancient?” Was destroying her mother the only way? What was this secret that Guinan kept? How exactly did they all fit into this secret? Guinan had told them that all of them fit into some kind of large scheme, but purposely left out many details.

How? When was all of this chaos supposed to happen? She had implied that there were specific reasons for why Kris was built the way she was. She had left without answering any of these questions.

Guinan had left a mess.

Riker was in charge of the Enterprise. Picard was up on charges for killing a fellow officer and was now about to face a trial. Kris was gone, and something bigger than all of them was brewing somewhere, somehow.

Normally, Picard would be angry and frustrated. He would brood and wait impatiently for a chance to face Guinan to demand answers.

This was not a normal situation. To Picard, his situation was rather simple and could be dislodged from any and all of Guinan's wild theories.

In this moment, Picard felt he only had one problem, one that haunted him. It was not the charges he was facing. It was not standing in front of the members of the Federation's highest court, and it was not having to face his friends in disgrace. None of that was bothering Picard in this moment.

What bothered Picard was the part of him that had not been controlled by Liz Rogan when he fought and killed Peterson. The part that had wanted to kill him. The part that had killed him. Sought revenge. They guilty part of Picard. Picard was beginning to believe he had murdered Peterson.

The tribunal members entered the room.

Picard and the others stood. They waited to return to their seats once the members had taken theirs. A silence reigned for several moments.

As he settled back in his chair, Picard was ready to accept his fate. He would never again captain a starship. Never again wear the uniform. He would forever be less-than in the eyes of his peers, and in his heart and mind. He had willfully killed a fellow officer, an admiral.

He was guilty.

* * *

Breathe. In, out. In, out.

Concentrate on the breath.

In, out. In, out.

Kris sat on the ground. Her eyes were closed, arms spread wide, resting on her knees, her legs twisted comfortably in front of her.

She was doing Vulcan meditation. She had been instructed on Vulcan meditation when she lived on the moon. It was the only time that the Lewtropic, Ga' Shain, was allowed to give her lessons.

Kris was reaching deep into her Vulcan Katra, exploring her unconscious Vulcan self in order to assist her Vulcan help in the maintenance of emotions.

Kris wasn't raised on Vulcan, nor was she just Vulcan. Only when she was "in" Vulcan.

Kris didn't know *how* she did it, yet when she thought about being a Vulcan, she was a Vulcan. Her ears changed shape slightly, her eyebrows, though, did not. Her blood turned green and her heart moved in her chest, it was now located on the right side of her chest.

Did it move or was it there the whole time? Doctor Beverly Crusher, the Enterprise's Chief Medical Officer, believed it did, however she was just as baffled about the "hows" as Kris.

In, out. In, out.

Kris's body was relaxed. Her mind let thoughts and emotions float past. Her mind was not focused on any single thought, she let them all swim by. This was the purpose of meditation. For Kris, the meditation was healing, relaxing, and fortifying a Vulcan mind against the overload of potential emotions. It was taught to Vulcans at a young age and almost all Vulcans participated in some form of meditating, many of them as a daily routine.

Kris did not do it daily. She sometimes went a week or two without.

Yet, similar to her need to run when she was in her Altaran species, she would soon feel the need pressing on her to meditate in Vulcan.

Breathe. In, out.

Go that way.

Kris held firmly to her meditation, even though she realized it had taken a turn. She was about to follow a path, an ancient one long forbidden by Vulcans. No other Vulcan (that she knew of) would even consider doing what Kris was now doing.

The Vulcan Katra had two paths, one was so ancient and dangerous that it was forbidden and no longer discussed openly among Vulcans. This path led to Re 'Ugan, Vulcan suicide.

Kris was headed down this path.

When she first discovered this second path—while being held hostage aboard Star Base 325— she had gone down the path out of curiosity. She had very little “freedoms” while being locked up for five years. She had sought out the Federation only to have them label her FA12 and had imprison her. She did her mediation daily, often going down this path.

Four and a half years in, Admiral James Peterson had stepped in. He took over Kris's “case,” trained her to be a Star Fleet officer, and assigned her to the Enterprise.

Peterson had recruited Kris to spy on Captain Jean Luc Picard.

Admiral Peterson and Captain Picard had once been friends. Until Peterson's wife passed away and he blamed Picard for her death. Since that time, Peterson had been plotting ways to either embarrass Picard, humiliate him, or, preferably, to Court martial him and lock him up for good.

None of it was true. Picard had played no role in the death of Peterson's wife. At the time, Picard had been cleared of any wrongdoing. Picard was relieved, yet he had lost two dear friends, one to death, and the other to guilt and revenge. Since then, he had done his best to avoid or ignore Peterson.

Until Kris.

Soon after she had been assigned to the Enterprise, Kris had confided in Picard about Peterson. Later on, Kris's mother, Liz Rogan, had forced Peterson to fight Picard to the death. Liz Rogan had been somewhat in love with both men, and (in a sick way) wanted them to "fight" for her. Of course, Liz Rogan knew exactly what she was doing. She was forcing her daughter to choose between the two. She was testing her loyalty to Picard. Mostly, she was preparing Kris to become what she was...an Ancient.

Fortunately, Kris hadn't struggled all that much was the transition from a "regular" Ramos being to an Ancient. Kris had had a very difficult time when her Ramos specie had been "unlocked," right before she and the Enterprise senior officers had been "tested" by the being Q.

In several ways, the Ancient form of Ramos had stabilized Kris. Her humanoid species were integrating well with this higher-powered Ramos being.

She knew she now possessed an enormous amount of power, so much more than being a regular Ramos. She knew this power could be dangerous in many ways. Yet, in many ways, her humanoids species were much easier control.

With one exception.

The second path. One that led to Re ‘Ugan. Re ‘Ugan meant death during the ancient times of Vulcan, the time of Surak. No Vulcan for centuries would dare go down this path now. Most hadn’t even realized that the path was still there. They had been told it had been removed. This may have been true.

Kris had gone down it many times. She had gotten very close to the danger, the end, death. Death was, in face, a door. If one went down this path and through this door, one would die.

Vulcan Suicide. Re ‘Ugan.

When Q had sent Kris and Mr. Data to their “Vulcan test,” they had both witnessed Re ‘Ugan up close. They saw Vulcans kill themselves using Re ‘Ugan.

Yet, that had not been the first time Kris had had experience with this path. She had gotten close to Re ‘Ugan many times, as close as one could get to suicide without actually dying.

When on Star Base 325, Kris had experienced various stages of depression and change, both physically and emotionally. Physically, she was a teenager, ages ten to fifteen. (Kris had been designed with accelerated growth.)

Kris’s Altaran had still not matured to the point of a need for physical exercise. She would do it on her exercise machine, but more of a way to maintain health and a routine.

Her Betazoid was restricted to sensing the emotions and feelings of the very few Star Base personnel who had happened down the hallway near her quarters. It simply did not have any reach yet. And, it was untrained.

Her human was going through puberty, most of which Kris didn't quite know what to do about.

Her Muztarif was playful, and Kris used it to entertain herself, to more or less kill time.

And, her Vulcan had trouble controlling her emotions. She had desperately needed meditation. However, Kris had only had instruction on mediation from Ga' Shain, and only because his dominant gave him a task out of pity. No Vulcan had ever taught her.

Emotionally, when Kris first left her moon, she had been excited and hopeful. She wanted to be discovered by the Federation, brought into the fold of routine and exploration and the discovery of other galaxies and planets. She wanted everything a typical officer experiences on a daily basis.

Yet, the Federation had not welcomed her. They had imprisoned her. They had lied to her. They had conducted physical exam after physical exam. Kris had grown to dislike Federation doctors until recently when Crusher came along.

The Federation doctors had questioned Kris extensively on how she "made up these readings." *What potions had you used? Is this a Romulan trick? If you don't give us answers that*

make sense, we will have to conclude that you are an unknown entity, dangerous to all humanoid life. FA-12.

The Federation designated FA-12, locked her up, often without anyone visiting her for weeks. She had been alone, lonely, and very confused. Why had things turned out like this? She thought the Federation was welcoming to all species. They wanted new partnerships and friendships; this was what Kris had thought. And, worse, where was her mother to come and explain to them who and what she was? Claim her and defend her. Why had her mother left her rot in her quarters on Star Base 325? Liz Rogan was a former Star Fleet Officer. Where was she? Why had she abandoned her own daughter?

Kris knew the answers to these questions now. But, back then, when she was locked in her quarters, Kris lost her trust in others. She became skeptical, fearful. She knew she was different—very different. Her experience on 325 forced Kris to create a self-protective cocoon around her.

Her loneliness turned to depression. She didn't know why she was being treated like a leper, diseased, untouchable, something wrong. As a teenager, the hurt was deep and constant.

Within that first year on 325, Kris discovered the second path.

And, the door.

When she first discovered the door, the temptation to know what was behind it was too great. She managed to open it.

Once open, it didn't take long to realize that death lay beyond its threshold.

She had often been tempted. On very dark days, Kris would tease herself by going down the path, getting close to the door, so close, too close.

She was right on the precipice of suicide. The door was open, all she had to do was go through it. Like many Vulcans had done during Surak's time. Re 'Ugan was a Vulcan-like kind of death. Quick. Elegant. Mind-controlled. Lacking emotion.

A pattern emerged—perhaps it was Kris's other humanoid species that would stop her each time. Each time she got close, all she needed was one more step... then she would pull herself back. After Kris got used to getting very close to that last step, then she would pull herself away at the very last moment.

She would come out of her meditation breathing heavily and feeling exhausted.

She had pulled away each time. Just barely.

Kris had had some kind of control, that's what it really was. It was her way to be in control something. Not going through that door of death was the only thing she had for years.

Kris had treated it like some kind of game, a thrill sport. When she survived each and every time, it gave her a reason to wake up the next day.

She needed that reason.

It was often the only thing she had.

Ever since the day she had opened the door, it remained open. Whenever she ventured down that path, there was that open space. The door frame. It was inviting. Calming. Open.

Kris was now a combination of the most powerful Ramos being, an Ancient, one of only two left in existence (according to Guinan) and her five other humanoid beings. The Ancient felt good alongside her humanoid parts, it blended well and helped with issues she had struggled with in the past.

Yet, even being an Ancient could not stop Kris from venturing down this path.

Go. Keep moving. Get closer.

Closer.

Closer.

At the door.

It's open. There it is. Open space. And the beyond.

Move forward.

One more step. So close.

Kris hadn't ventured down this path for months. The last time had been on 325, the last time Peterson had stayed with her after training. Kris had wanted to escape. If she knew how to admit it, she felt dead inside. Since she was already in Vulcan,

she went down that path to regain some control. She needed to get close to death.

She had pulled away. The experience had been the same as always.

The next day, Peterson shipped her to the Enterprise.

Once on board the Enterprise, things had happened fast. She was free of Peterson, and then felt she needed to come clean to someone.

Picard.

Kris had been nervous about trusting someone again. Yet, she told Picard everything. Most everything. She knew her mother had loved Picard. Picard hadn't returned the favor. But, perhaps Kris felt she could open up to him because of her mother's feelings.

Kris also knew that what Peterson was trying to do to Picard was wrong. He wanted Kris to spy on Picard in order to get him kicked out of the Federation in disgrace.

Kris may have been hurt, afraid, and lonely, but hadn't turned away from her sense of decency. She couldn't let Peterson get away with this. Meeting Picard that first time in his ready room had given her some hope. The road ahead was bumpy, but that was the moment Kris began to believe in herself again. Freed from captivity. Her Ramos got activated. Kris had a sense of renewal.

Step forward. Just one foot. You're almost there. Sweet death. Come to it.

Move forward.

Kris couldn't pull away. She knew how, she had done it so often before... Why couldn't she do it now? Pull away. Pull.

She was trapped inside the doorframe right at the precipice of death. Yet, this time was different, she could not pull herself out like she had many times on 325. She wasn't in control of it.

Pull away.

Now, pull.

Closer. Closer.

Pull away. Survive.

Death. One more step...

No. I don't want... Pull away... Pull... Pull...

Kris screamed.

She yanked her mind out of meditating. She was back in control of it, yet her mind was troubled. What had grabbed her and held on? Why couldn't she break free?

This was not right. It had never been like this. Something was wrong.

Kris slowly got to her feet. She wiped sweat from her face. She was soaked, worse than a three-hour run in Altaran. Her body slumped, she had to catch her breath.

Finally, her breathing slowed. She paced around the glen she had discovered on Wyttken, a planet in the Beta System. She wanted to make sure all her parts still worked.

What happened? she thought. *I always used to be able to control it. What's changed? Is it my Ancient? Why would my Ancient make me almost commit Re 'Ugan? That was too close.*

Kris drank water from a bottle.

She turned and faced Guinan.

A frown instantly appeared on Kris's face. She did not reply. She walked away, heading through an opening in the bushes that Kris knew led to a nearby town. The town was small and pleasant. The Wyttkenan people were friendly enough. They didn't often get "off world" visitors but left them alone when the visitor was there to simply... get away from Guinan.

Guinan knew this. "You can't keep running from me, Kris," she said to Kris's back.

Kris turned back. "I told you to leave me alone."

"And, I told you I can't. Your time is now."

"I don't have a 'time'."

"You were created..."

Kris got close to Guinan, inches away. “I am not bound by your rules of why you and my mother made me. I do not have to do anything you say. I am free to make my own choices.”

“Actually, you’re not,” said Guinan calmly. They had gone over this territory several times in the last three weeks. Since the day Kris left Arcane Five right after her mother had forced Picard to kill Peterson and right after Guinan had showed up to announce that Kris was now an Ancient and that she and the senior officers of the Enterprise had to do something to with...something. She hadn’t given them any more details except the officers were somehow connected to her.

“The name of the other Ancient is Regor. You and Regor are the only two Ancients left, from a population of hundreds.”

“Hundreds?”

“Yes, not many at all. Kris, you are not free because it’s up to you to destroy Regor.”

“Why? What has he done?”

“You’re not ready for those details yet.”

“That’s convenient.”

“Let’s just say that I don’t know all of the details. I’m working on it. I just know Regor, if he still exists, is going to do something.”

Destroy universes? Possibly. Destroy planet after planet, habitable or not? Guinan said that was also quite possible. Destroy all life as humanoids currently understand it? Guinan was... pretty sure.

Guinan had to admit she had very little evidence to go on. First, she wasn't one hundred percent sure that Regor was still alive. She had not seen him since back when he was "good," and before he had apparently been "corrupted" by some desire to eliminate... well, everything. She again stopped short of explaining anything more.

Any information that Guinan had acquired over the millennia was mostly circumstantial. There was nothing concrete. She had no idea exactly what Regor was going to do, but she had dedicated her life to the idea that he was planning to do something. She had assisted in making one very unique individual because she had believed it.

Kris thought Guinan was insane and that Guinan and her mother had dedicated their lives to a fantasy. She couldn't take Guinan seriously because, more than anything else, Kris was not about to let Guinan steal her newfound freedom. She had let that happen once before, never again.

Kris demanded proof time after time, yet Guinan either wasn't ready to share all of what she had, or she really didn't have anything. Kris suspected the latter.

"Guinan, from what I've heard from you these past weeks, you don't even know what you're talking about. Not exactly. You have this name..."

“I know enough. Your mother and I dedicated our lives...”

“Your lives. Not mine.”

“You were the whole point.”

Kris smiled. “Me and the officers on the Enterprise, too? Who came up with that? Oh, and why is my DNA part of the Enterprise? All the times you’ve been chasing me, I’ve forgotten to ask.”

“It’s needed.”

“Why?”

Guinan hesitated. Each and every time Kris insisted on some proof, Guinan hesitated. “You don’t know or you’re not willing to tell me why. Not now. I’m not ready.” Kris shook her head. “Go away, Guinan. I’m not doing anything for you. I don’t want anything to do with you and your secrets, your plans, your guesses, any of it.”

“Kris, stop.”

“Stop what?”

“Before you disappear again, I need to tell you something.”

Kris threw her arms in the air. “How many times do I have to tell you that I don’t believe you? I’ve asked you to leave me alone...”

“Kris, I am not the only thing you are running away from.”

“I’m not running, I’m trying to live my life...”

“Picard is about to face a court martial, Kris,” Guinan had shouted. She didn’t like to raise her voice, yet she found herself doing it often lately. “You don’t care, do you? You don’t want to listen to me. You don’t want me around. You leave, I find you, I try to talk to you, and you ignore me. Fine. Kris, I know you hate Star Fleet. Part of me doesn’t blame you. But, you’re leaving him all alone. You know that Picard killing that admiral wasn’t his fault. You know it.”

“Picard was my mother’s doing. She did that to him and Peterson.” Kris looked away. Thinking of Peterson made her stomach churn.

“Kris, one thing I know for sure, one thing that we didn’t do—your mother and I—we didn’t create a selfish being. You were hurt, Kris, but you are not selfish. You can’t turn you back on...”

“On you and your plan. You’ve used that argument before. I do not have to do anything you say, Guinan. None of it. Leave me alone.” *To hell with all of them. I really don’t need anyone.* Kris remained silent. *Guinan doesn’t understand me. She’ll never understand me.*

“I wasn’t talking about me, Kris. I was talking about them. I have cared about them for a long time. Picard is still my friend. I don’t want to see him hurt.”

“Then, you go help him.”

“I wasn’t there.”

Kris glared at Guinan; she had heard enough.

Kris disappeared.

Guinan remained. She stood frozen in place and shook her head. *Why did we give her your stubbornness, Liz?* she thought.

Guinan sat on a tree stump. Chasing Kris around the many universes and galaxies was exhausting. If only she were finished. She wasn’t. She had to continue to try to get through to her.

But how? Chasing her wasn’t working. Kris had her freedom now and would fight like hell to keep it. Guinan couldn’t blame her on that front.

She had to find a different way. She had to.

* * *

Kris reappeared on Xx-Ripa, a medium-sized moon. She ran her hands through her hair. *What did Guinan think she was doing? Piling on the guilt?*

Kris changed into Altaran. Her muscles bulged and her skin tone had a greenish tint. She wanted to run. For a really long time.

Kris ran for four hours. Nonstop.

When she was finished, she was physically tired. Not exhausted because Altarans could run for eight hours or more if needed. Yet, the exercise hadn't helped, she still felt wound up, unbalanced. She felt this pressure from Guinan, one that had increased every time she had caught up to Kris.

Where was she? Kris was surprised Guinan had yet to show up to bother her. Was Kris disappointed? Was Guinan slipping?

Picard.

Kris thought about what had happened. She thought about Picard's character and his career. The captain had accomplished great things in his career. There was still more to do.

Kris knew her mother had used Picard. She had felt it. She used them both, Picard and Peterson. She had pitted them against each other in a fight to the death.

An outcome that Liz Rogan had determined?

Why? Kris had always known that her mother loved Picard. She hadn't known anything about her mother and Peterson. But, maybe there was something there? Maybe she had wanted one of them, the victor. Maybe she didn't really know

how to love another being. Maybe neither of them had wanted her and she wanted to punish them?

Then, why did Picard win? *Because of Guinan's Regor theory? Picard had to win? That was her mother's plan all along?*

But, Picard didn't win.

"That's what she wanted," Kris whispered.

Picard is still being punished. That was her plan. My mother had been humiliated by Star Fleet, she wanted to get the last laugh. She wanted the Federation to take down one of their own, one of their best. That was her mother's real plan. She wanted to destroy Picard in the very place where it would hurt the most. She really had loved Peterson all along. Perhaps she had lust for Picard, but it was really Peterson. She destroyed him the easy way, the amusing way. She did it by making Picard do it. And, the rest of her plan was to destroy Picard in his own backyard.

"Damn her."

Kris took a deep breath. *Guinan had finally made one good point.*

* * *

Picard looked at the nine members of the Federal Tribunal. He could read most of their faces, they were not pleased to be deliberating in this case, not pleased to even have the existence of this case.

Yet, they had a duty to perform.

The Senior Council member in charge was D'Ruy Argo from Bolarus IX. He stared at Picard before speaking. "Let us commence these proceedings," he said in a low, firm voice. His voice projected well, no one had to strain to hear him. Without saying the words, "I am in charge here," everyone knew by his tone that he was, indeed, in charge.

Argo said, "Captain Picard is charged with the murder of Admiral James Peterson. Statements from Captain Picard's Senior Staff, who were present when the incident occurred, have been accepted as evidence. Because they are very similar in their accounts, I am going to choose to question only one member. In my opinion, the most reliable member. Mr. Data, please come forward."

Dr. Crusher looked at Troi and Riker. "That's not fair," she whispered. Her volume was not low enough to escape the excellent hearing ability of the people of Bolarus, in this case Argo.

"You will be silent, Doctor. Do you understand?" said Argo directly to Dr. Crusher. He looked from her to Troi to Riker to Worf and finally at Geordi. "All of you will remain silent unless asked to speak. That is an order."

Dr. Crusher inhaled deeply but said nothing.

Mr. Data stepped in front of the members.

“Mr. Data,” said Argo, “please describe the scene that took place on Arcane Five that resulted in the death of Admiral Peterson.”

Mr. Data hesitated, but only slightly. In his quest to be as human as an android could possibly become, Mr. Data allowed his mind to wander for a few seconds: *I will be hurting my friends. I will be hurting my captain. The events were not as they appeared. There was no proof to the contrary. I must speak the truth; Captain Picard would want it no other way.*

“Liz Rogan had rendered us immobile,” he said.

“How exactly?” asked Argo.

“Liz Rogan was of a being from the Ramos system, an immensely advanced society of beings. In my opinion, more advanced than Q from the Continuum.”

“Just the facts, Mr. Data,” Thomas Vi interjected. Picard knew Thomas to be fair, but expedient. He wanted things to be done efficiently with the utmost integrity. Picard admired the man and knew that they both felt awkward about these proceedings. Thomas Vi had never liked Peterson.

“I do not know exactly how Liz Rogan was able to render my crews and myself unable to move, however, we were... unable to move. We were forced to witness a physical confrontation between Captain Picard and Admiral Peterson...”

“They were fighting?” interrupted Argo.

“They both had obtained knives and were being force to fight.”

“Mr. Data, I chose you to testify for your ability to present facts. Not your opinion,” said Argo.

“I am doing that, sir. It is a fact that neither Captain Picard nor Admiral Peterson had begun this physical confrontation under their power. That was obvious. When the two came together in that chamber, neither had motivation.”

“They had a long history, Mr. Data.”

“True. However, to be accurate, that history had not been in evidence during this time period. Captain Picard and Admiral Peterson had been... frozen... like all of us. Then, they had been released by Liz Rogan. They had immediately begun their physical confrontation. I highly doubt they would have immediately engaged as they had without motivation. Liz Rogan had somehow influenced them.”

“Do you have proof, Mr. Data? Or, just speculation,” asked Thomas Vi.

“More importantly,” added Argo, “Why was this explanation not in your report?”

“It has just occurred to me, sir. Additionally, Kris Rogan attempted several times to stop the confrontation. He had asked her mother to ‘stop this’. Clearly, it meant that Liz Rogan was

doing something to influence the physical confrontation between the two.”

“Steering them to fight each other, Mr. Data? Is that what you’re trying to say?” said Thomas Vi. Was he attempting to help Picard?

“Yes, sir. In a similar manner as the rest of us were unable to move.”

Thomas Vi nodded. “Logical, Mr. Data. However, just how far did this puppetry go? Was it complete? Did it involve the thrust of a knife into another officer? Where is your proof of that, Mr. Data? Can you say factually that the control of this Liz Rogan was one hundred percent?”

Picard frowned. *My friend, he thought. The reason why I’ve like him for so many years. He’s being a true member of the highest court in the Federation. He may be trying to help me, but he cannot show any favoritism. He has to move forward with plain facts.*

Mr. Data glanced at Picard. “I cannot, sir.”

“Thank you, Mr. Data, please be seated,” said Argo.

Argo waited for Mr. Data to return to his seat. Then, he said, “To our best understanding, the events that took place on Arcane Five was as follows... The senior officers of the Enterprise were rendered immobile by this higher-powered being. Personally, I am not familiar with this being nor do I have knowledge, beyond the reports about this Q being, or experience to advance the idea that this being was fully capable of such an

act. However, I am willing to accept that it did occur. The officers of the Enterprise were frozen by powers unknown.

“At some point, two officers of Star Fleet, a captain and an admiral, fought each other using deadly weapons. How these weapons were obtained is unclear. One officer, Captain Jean Luc Picard, eventually killed the other, Admiral James Peterson with a blow to the chest. The extent of interference by the being known as Liz Rogan is yet to be determined. The witnesses to this physical confrontation, even though rendered immobile, cannot testify as to intent by Captain Picard. Whether being forced to fight or not, did Captain Picard kill Admiral Peterson with intent?”

Dr. Crusher stood up. “Hatred does not prove intent. Nor does revenge. Admiral Peterson had wrongly accused Captain Picard of involvement in his wife’s death. Captain Picard had been exonerated...”

“Dr. Crusher,” Argo interrupted her in a loud, irritated voice. He did not like disobedience. “You will remain seated and remain silent or you will be removed and held in contempt. I will give no further warnings, doctor.”

Crusher couldn’t recall jumping to her feet. She impulsively needed to speak her mind. It was habit, one that had gotten her into trouble in the past.

A glare from Picard forced Crusher to her seat immediately. That had not been the first time Picard had admonished her for speaking out of turn, and it would probably not be the last time.

“Captain Picard, stand please,” said Argo.

Picard stood.

Argo stared at him. “I have your report, Captain. Do you wish to amend your statement?”

“No,” said Picard.

Riker looked at Crusher and the others. They could not believe the captain was giving up like this. Troi closed her eyes. *He feels he's guilty because he wants to feel guilty. To protect Kris. His anger toward what Peterson did to her allows him to accept that he would have done this act whether Liz Rogan had forced him to do it or not.*

Troi did not speak up. She knew it would be pointless. She had already put her perspective into her own report. She had explained her new Betatal powers to the members. By asking only Mr. Data to testify, they had obviously chosen to ignore her input.

“Captain Picard, please state what you feel happened. For the record.”

“I believe I killed Admiral Peterson.”

“Were you influenced?” asked Thomas Vi. Picard knew this question had come from a place of friendship. Thomas was firm and exact, but loyal. His eyes gave him away, he was giving Picard an opening. *Come on, Jean Luc, cop to it that it wasn't one hundred percent you at the moment. You were under*

an influence, like alcohol or a drug. Explain it to us, Jean Luc. Don't ruin everything like this.

Picard saw the opening but ignored it. *I wanted Peterson to pay for what he did.*

In that manner, Captain? You wanted him dead?

Picard heard the voice in his head. He spun and glared at Troi. *Get out of my head*, he thought. But, Troi shrugged. It hadn't been her.

“Captain, are you saying that you are fully responsible for the death of Admiral James Peterson? You killed him willingly and purposefully?”

Picard looked back at Argo and the rest of the members. *What was that voice?*

He opened his mouth to speak.

“He did not,” said a voice other than Picard's.

Picard turned to his left.

Kris stood next to him.

Stunned silence followed. Some of the silence confused Kris. The officers of the Enterprise were used to her sudden appearances. *Why were they staring at her?* She decided to ignore them.

She definitely ignored Picard. If she engaged with him, he might try to stop her from interfering. Kris stepped into the

middle of the room and faced the members of the tribunal. They were the highest law in the Federation. Respected members of the Federation Council.

They were also the ones responsible for locking Kris up for five years. They were the law of the Federation. This body had known about her, Kris was sure of it. The Prime Directive was a matter of Federation law, so was ignoring it.

Kris used her Betazoid Betatal to read each of the members. She knew this would open her up to Troi, but Kris wanted to answer one question that had haunted her for years. Which ones knew?

It took Kris fifteen seconds to determine that two of them had known about her. Only two. The one at the end to Kris's far right, and the one in front of her, Argos.

Kris went back into Ramos. "Captain Picard did not willingly kill Admiral Peterson."

D'Ruy Argo leaned forward. "Who exactly are you?"

"You know who I am."

Argo shook his head. "I do not. Security, remove this... person."

Everyone in the room waited, yet the doors did not open. They would not.

"Security will not be coming. Say my name," said Kris.

Kris and Argo glared at each other. "You and that one there," Kris pointed to the Efros named WayLu Treemond, who flinched slightly. "The two of you knew about my imprisonment. I have sensed your knowledge and guilt in Betazoid. Say my name."

Argo remained silent.

Picard faced Kris. "Kris, this is not the time..."

"I have wanted to face them for a long time, Captain." She looked at Picard. "I thought I came here to assist you, but I need them to say it." She looked from Treemond to Argo. "Say my name."

"You will refer to me as Member Argo and her as Member Treemond," said Argo.

"I will not. You both knew about me," said Kris.

D'Ruy Argo jumped to his feet. So did Thomas Vi, yet Argo was first to speak. "You will respect this tribunal..."

Kris interrupted him. "Because you afforded me the same respect when I willingly came to the Federation?"

"Kris..."

"What is my name?" Kris looked directly at Argo. She refused to look at Picard.

"Kris Rogan," responded WayLu Treemond.

Kris waited; her eyes were locked on Argo's eyes.

“I was told at some point that that was your name,” he said.

“You knew about me.” Kris purposely made it a statement not a question.

“I just said...”

“You played a role in my imprisonment. I know this.”

Picard glanced back at Riker, Crusher, and the others. He didn't know what to do. This was not the time. His thoughts betrayed him. *There's no stopping this. Kris has a right.*

Thomas Vi stepped out from behind the long table that served as the bench for the nine justices. “Let's all just calm down here. This in an inquiry...”

“A trial. To determine how Admiral Peterson died. I am here as a witness,” said Kris.

“Captain Picard has stated...”

Thomas Vi stopped talking. His right arm rose above his head. He put all his weight on his left leg... and he twirled. His left arm lifted at a right angle in front of his body. His right leg was bent, the front of his foot touched his left knee. He was a ballerina.

He twirled and twirled.

The members of the Federation Tribunal stood, not to get a better view, but in astonishment. Their mouths hung open.

So did the members of the Enterprise crew, they all sprang to their feet.

Picard was mortified. He looked at Kris. “Kris, what are you doing?”

“Demonstrating how my mother controlled you in order to force you to plunge a knife into Peterson to cause his death.”

“Stop this.”

“This is necessary...”

“Kris,” shouted Picard. “Stop this now.”

Kris did not want to stop it. She wanted to... she wanted some payback. *This is fun. Just like my mother had fun with Picard and Peterson. Just like her.*

Thomas Vi stopped twirling. He stood normally again; embarrassment flushed his cheeks. He straightened his uniform top, just to give himself something normal that would help with composure.

Kris lowered her head. *I'm not like her.*

She stepped closer to all of the members. “I am here as a witness. I am here because my mother was an Ancient, the highest form of a Ramos being. I am one now. My mother no longer exists. She gave me her powers. I know what she did to Picard and Peterson. I just demonstrated the control my mother used to pit Picard against Peterson. She chose a winner, Picard. This is what happened.”

“I’m afraid you are an unreliable witness,” said Argo.

Picard and Kris were both stunned.

Picard spoke first. “How exactly?” He immediately regretted it. *I don’t want Kris here to help me. I’m guilty. But, she has a strong point. If two members in front of me are responsible for locking her up, the highest court in the Federation ignored the Prime Directive. Kris has a right to face her accusers If Argo did know, was he trying to get out of it?*

Argo would not be intimidated. “The Federation status of this... person... was FA-12...”

Picard refused to let that one go. “Her name is Kris Rogan. She came to the Federation willingly. You assigned her that designation due to your ignorance. You didn’t understand what she was, so you hid her away for five years. You ignored the Prime Directive.”

“You, Picard, should know that the Prime Directive does not apply to beings considered harmful to this federation of planets,” said Argo.

“She was not deemed harmful. She was an unknown...”

“She was designated FA-12...”

“Wrongly...”

Argo and Picard were going back and forth. Kris had stopped listening.

She had reasoned it out. “It wasn’t me,” Kris said.

Picard and Argo looked at her. Everyone was quiet.

“It wasn’t about me.” Kris walked away, clearly lost in her own thoughts. She ended up at the other end of the room. She turned and looked at the Enterprise senior officers. Troi nodded. Geordi smiled at her. Riker and Crusher looked sympathetic. Data’s head tilted. Worf looked like he wanted to tear off a member’s head. They had understood.

Kris had learned from Argo’s mind the real reason she had been locked up by Star Fleet.

“It was the technology,” Kris whispered, yet loud enough to be heard. “They locked me up and waited for my mother to come. Waiting to figure out where I was made, and how. They were waiting to get their hands on the technology that was used to make me. That’s what it was all about.”

The room was silent.

Not even WayLu Tremond or D’Ruy Argo could respond. They wouldn’t. Couldn’t. They knew the truth. They knew that what Kris said was the truth.

Picard looked at Thomas Vi, his friend. “Was that it?”

“Jean Luc, I don’t know,” said Thomas.

Thomas looked at Argo and Tremond. They nodded.

Picard approached Kris. “I’m sorry, Kris.”

“They never cared about me at all,” said Kris.

“No.”

Kris looked at the tribunal members. “I do not know the location of the technology used to make me. However, if I did, or if I ever learn of its location, the technology is mine.”

“That is debatable,” said Argo.

“It is not,” said Picard. “Kris Rogan is a being who was created using technology unknown to the Federation. Liz Rogan was an officer for Star Fleet. Yet, you rejected her attempts to development the technology on your own turf.”

“The technology was in development during the time Liz Rogan was an officer. Therefore...”

“No,” shouted Picard. “Enough. You do not own Kris. You had no right to lock her up. And, Star Fleet has no right to the technology used to build her. This has to stop. Now.”

“Jean Luc...”

“No, Thomas. The Prime Directive was ignored. They locked her up for five years. Unlawfully. Immorally. The Federation failed her.”

Argo would not give in. He said, “Captain, do you understand what it would mean if, say, the Romulans were to get that technology and build... that being?” said Argo. This question made the other members look at each other. The question appeared to have sparked some kind of debate on the subject.

Picard would have none of it. “Kris, her name is Kris. And, I don’t care.”

“If you are no longer an officer in Star Fleet, then you do not care...” said Argo.

“There has been no ruling here,” interrupted Thomas Vi.

“Picard has admitted...”

“I believe Captain Picard did not willfully kill Admiral Peterson,” said Thomas. “He was used as a puppet. He might have hated the man, so did I, if truth were told. Arrogant S.O.B. Peterson wrongfully believed Picard had played a role in the death of his wife...”

“Admiral Peterson committed rape.”

Everyone was again stunned into silence. They all stared at Picard.

“There is truth,” said Samton Molmaan as she rose from her seat. Her voice was soft and melodic. “Some members had suspicions. Some years ago. Some more recent. Charges levied on Argon Six. Dropped suddenly. I speak truth. I believed, yet no proof.”

“Picard, you believe Admiral Peterson committed rape? Who did he rape?” said Argo.

“My daughter.”

“Jean Luc, you don’t have a daughter,” said Thomas Vi.

Picard looked at Kris. She did not respond.

Crusher stepped forward, hesitating slightly. She didn't want to spend a night in the brig, yet she felt this interruption was necessary. She said, "Kris's DNA tested positive for a match with Captain Jean Luc Picard."

Argo did not try to hide his smirk. "So, what have we here? Stunning new evidence..."

"A very complicated story. One that does not put the Federation in a good light," said Riker, taking a turn from Crusher and needing to support Picard and Kris.

"These proceedings have gone well beyond the scope..."

"You are suspended from your position, Argo, pending a full investigation. The president will be immediately informed," Thomas interrupted.

He looked incredulous. "Excuse me?"

Thomas Vi looked at the other members, all but Tremond. "Vote to suspend D'Ruy Argo and WayLu Tremond until the full council can meet. All in favor?"

Thomas raised his hand, the six others eligible to vote raised theirs as well.

Thomas headed to the door, he stopped, looked back at Kris. "May I get my security officers?"

The doors opened immediately.

Yet, before Thomas Vi could move, Kris asked, “Is Captain Picard cleared of the charges?”

Thomas Vi again looked at the six remaining members. They all nodded.

“He is.” Instead of heading into the hallway to summon security, Thomas Vi stopped in front of Kris. “I promise to fully investigate what happened to you. In the meantime, please accept my apology. Our apology.”

Kris chose to ignore Thomas Vi’s attempt at an apology. “If I find my technology someday?”

“It is yours. We hope... you choose to use it wisely.”

Thomas Vi stepped into the hallway. He returned with two security guards. He instructed them to escort Argo and Tremond to their quarters, they were under arrest.

The security detail left with the two disgraced members. The rest of the members also left.

Picard looked at his senior officers. “This is going to be mess,” he said.

He looked for Kris. She was gone. He frowned and looked at Troi. “She couldn’t stay,” she said.

Picard nodded. He understood.

Chapter Two

Kris reappeared in what she thought was an old, long-abandoned home. She didn't quite know which planet she was on. She didn't care.

I did what I had to do. She sat on what remained of a bench. I can stay away now. Any connection to Star Fleet or the Enterprise, to any of them, can be severed. I owe them nothing.

Kris still had a problem. She looked around, expecting Guinan to show up.

She waited several minutes. Still no Guinan.

What would my mother do with the technology? She half expected her mother or Guinan to answer her unspoken question. She listened but heard nothing.

She looked out a window. All that was left was the opening, any glass that had been there was long gone. The view was not unpleasant. The yard closest to the dwelling was overgrown with weeds, yet further away there was a meadow. To her right was a clump of trees. What looked like a hammock swung between two trees.

She searched her Ramos memory and came up with the name for this planetoid. Dennrebeck in the Mobias System.

Humanoids no longer lived here. A Class B planet. Dying. Kris did not know what happened to the beings that once lived here.

She noticed a hill at the other end of the meadow.

She switched to Vulcan in order to examine the hillside better with Vulcan eyes. She saw old scar marks, perhaps from some type of blast. A mountain behind the trees looked as if half of it had been sliced off. *Something catastrophic happened here.*

Her Vulcan mind itched. This feeling was new. Her Vulcan mind had never itched to go into meditation before. She did it out of habit.

Kris returned to the bench. She laid her hands on her knees, closed her eyes, and concentrated.

She began her Vulcan meditation.

A moment later, her eyes sprung open. She quickly got out of the meditation. *I have never done meditation in this manner. As if I were being led. Told what to do. Told to go down the forbidden path. To the Door. To death.*

She closed her eyes and tried to meditate again. There it was... the path. The dangerous one. She was being led down it. Not willingly going there. She was being told to go.

Kris's face grimaced. *Out. Get out. Open your eyes.*

Kris's eyes burst open, she stumped forward, but caught herself before falling to the ground. Her breathing was heavy.

She stood and paced. She rubbed her face and laced her fingers through her hair. *What just happened to me?*

Kris calmed down after a few minutes.

Vulcan. There's a problem with my Vulcan.

Kris went into Human. She decided to avoid Vulcan for a while. Ignore that pulling sensation. She also wanted to stay out of Betazoid. She didn't want Troi knowing anything about her.

She went to the exit, a doorframe lacking a door. She headed to the hammock without noticing the irony.

* * *

Troi waited outside Picard's quarters. "*Captain*" Picard, she reminded herself. *Captain Picard is going to return to us.*

"Come," said Picard's voice from inside the quarters.

The door opened and Troi stepped through.

Picard was dressed in civilian clothes. He looked relaxed. He held an old-style human book in one hand, a finger used to mark his place. A cup of what Troi assumed was tea sat next to him.

"Hello, may I speak with you?" she said.

Picard gestured to the chair across from him. Troi sat down.

A few moments of awkward silence passed, both smiling at the other.

Picard finally began. "Are you going to say it?"

"I've made my case for two weeks now."

"You have." Picard laid the book down. *Conversations like this with Counselor Troi are never short. My reading will have to wait.* "I am going to instruct Captain Riker to drop me at Regulus." Picard took a strange delight in calling his former first officer "Captain Riker."

He fully understood that not only did Riker deserve the position, but he had faith that he could handle it. Picard did, however, feel awkward at still being on the Enterprise. He still felt he didn't willingly give up the title. He just no longer deserved it. Thomas Vi had tried to talk him into regaining the captaincy but to no avail.

"Regulus?"

"Don't I deserve a little relaxation?"

"Of course, you do."

"Well, the Enterprise is headed to Alcon Ten. Regulus is on the way. Or, if the needs of Alcon Ten are pressing, he can always drop me after."

"Why are we going to Alcon Ten?"

A wry smile crept across Picard's lips. "I do not know."

"Captain..."

"Jean Luc or Mister. Please."

Troi smiled. "Jean Luc, I came here with a different approach. One in which you tell me what's really going on."

"I've done that for two weeks."

"No, you've stated you have made your decision and that decision is final. You have not given me any satisfactory reason."

"Do you need one?"

"I think I deserve one. So does Will, Data..."

"Counselor, I feel I cannot serve the Federation anymore."

"Because of Kris?"

"Because," he stopped. *Troi is trying to wear me down.*
"I have resigned, Counselor."

"Why?"

Picard reached for his tea and sipped it. It was cold.
Remaining quiet like this worked on her yesterday, and the day before.

"Stop that," said Troi with a sense of authority.

Picard leaned forward. "You promised not to read me."

"I'm breaking my promise. Because I need answers. We all do."

Picard stood; his feeling of whimsy having disappeared. His muscles felt tight, his jaw clenched. Lately, this is how he felt whenever he tried to sleep. He had worn a path on his carpet from pacing.

Very quietly, Troi said, "I'm no longer reading you. Is it because of Kris?"

"Yes," Picard spat, not meaning for it to sound so angry. Yet, he was angry. There was more, though. *Ah, bloody hell.* Picard returned to his seat. He rubbed his bald head, a gesture he rarely did.

"The institution I have dedicated my life to has committed an unthinkable act. Star Fleet is ripe with politics. I have known this for a very long time. I have managed to avoid most of it. I have disliked all of it. I remain... remained a captain on a star ship in order to keep some autonomy and not get embroiled into anything that smelt of politics."

"What does politics have to do with this?"

"Politics is a game. Always have been. A game I do not like to play. Politics is the dirty part of this institution. For that reason, I stayed away from it. I focused on the important parts of being a Star Fleet officers. The Prime Directive is... was... the most appealing thing I had ever heard. Any planet can choose to be a part of what the Federation has created or not. So, may any

individual. That is explicit in the Prime Directive. When someone chooses to join the Federation, they are treated with kindness, assistance, and respect. The actual wording of the Prime Directive means so much more than what is written within its pages.”

Picard lifted his old-style Earth book. “*To Kill a Mockingbird*.”

“The Prime Directive was the one rule of law I was convinced would never be compromised. It would always be respected by every member of the Federation, especially a founding member. Every officer, every official, every ambassador. As this military body brings in other beings, we have to follow the highest code of ethics ever imagined.”

Picard stopped. His face looked drawn. Troi noted his face, it looked like he wasn’t sleeping.

“I don’t know if I can work for them anymore, Deanna. How can I go out there and uphold this beautiful thing, knowing that there had been a time when it was ignored? For selfish reasons. For awful reasons. I feel betrayed.”

“What about Peterson?”

“I’m not sure how long he knew about Kris. I am beginning to think that he and Liz Rogan met at some point. Why else would he have shown up at Star Base 325 asking to train Kris?”

“Did he know Argo and Treemond?”

“Possibly. Yet, I have no proof.”

“Will says the president ordered an immediate full council meeting in an emergency session. The two tribunal members have been dismissed from their positions and brought up on charges. There have been a lot of high-level meetings.”

“Politics. My fear is there may still be bad eggs. They may not catch everyone that was somehow connected to Kris’s imprisonment.”

Picard leaned back, closed his eyes.

“You’re disappointed?” asked Troi.

“Devastated,” said Picard with eyes still closed. He opened them to look at Troi. “Can I still be here in all good conscious? After what they did?”

“It was only a select few.”

“I simply cannot get it straight in my head.”

“Thank you for opening up to me...”

Troi stopped, her words suddenly cut off.

Troi disappeared.

At first, Picard thought he was dreaming. *What the bloody hell just happened?* When he was convinced that he was awake and that Troi had suddenly disappeared, he rushed to the alarm. “Code red, Captain... Picard’s quarters. Missing crewman. Security. Code red.”

* * *

The ship was in “Code Red.” The senior officers were on the bridge with Picard. Mr. Worf’s security officers were checking in and reporting no Troi. At his station, Mr. Worf said, “She has to be here.” His voice sounded angry.

Mr. Data swiveled in his chair. “Detecting a ship, sir.”

Picard almost responded to Mr. Data, then caught himself. Riker said, “Scan, Mr. Data.”

Mr. Data’s fingers worked quickly. Dr. Crusher sat in the seat usually occupied by Troi. Picard stood behind Mr. Data, yet off to the side as much as possible. He desperately wanted to be in charge. He needed to be because someone he cared about was missing. Gone. Right in front of his eyes.

With no idea of where she went.

“Type of ship is unknown,” Mr. Data reported.

“Explain,” said Picard. He frowned. *I am not the captain.*

Riker looked sheepish, stuck between a grin and a frown wrapped around immense awkwardness. He did not repeat the order, knowing he would have said the same thing.

Mr. Data didn't miss a beat. "Scanners confirm there is a ship. Sensors cannot penetrate the ship."

"What happened?"

Everyone turned to face Kris, who suddenly appeared behind the Conn.

"Deanna disappeared," said Picard, assuming that was enough of an explanation for Kris, who had a Betatal connection with Troi. Picard knew Kris had come out of concern for her.

"There's a ship nearby," added Riker.

Kris disappeared.

They knew where was. She had gone to the unknown ship to retrieve Troi. In Ramos, Kris could travel anywhere, with just a thought. It was a useful trait of being a superior being.

Yet, this time it didn't work. Kris reappeared, she looked concerned. "I cannot penetrate it."

"Is that possible?" asked Picard. He had, apparently, taken over without realizing it.

"I do not understand. The ship is made of materials that somehow block me," said Kris.

Riker looked at Picard. It was hard for any supreme being to admit defeat. They knew Kris was honest. This honesty was killing them because it meant potentially losing Troi.

“The ship is headed toward the Adrianal System,” announced Mr. Data. He cocked his head, a gesture that meant Mr. Data was perplexed, but also possibly impressed. “The ship is moving at an incredible rate of speed.”

Picard’s mouth opened, but Riker beat him to it. “Warp ten, Mr. Data. Pursue.”

The Enterprise immediately began to chase the ship. After only a few seconds, though, Mr. Data said, “At warp ten, we will lose the ship in nine minutes, fourteen seconds.” Mr. Data was always accurate, sometimes irritatingly so.

Kris went to Picard. She noticed his clothes. “You are not the captain.” It was not a question, yet it still stung Picard.

“No,” replied Picard.

Kris looked at Riker yet stayed near Picard. She went into Betazoid so she could read Troi. It also gave her the benefit of understanding what was happening with Picard and Riker. Yes, Riker was technically in charge. They all felt this was most likely temporary. Riker wanted Picard back. And, in the moment, Picard was in an almost desperate need to be in charge. It was taking every ounce of control to not bark out orders. He respected Riker enormously, approved of his decision-making and his skills, but that didn’t mean he still wanted Riker in charge.

“Captain,” said Kris to Riker. “I can sense Troi on that ship. We cannot lose it. Since I cannot get on board, I suggest I activate the Enterprise Ramos. It will only take a few minutes.”

Looking over Kris's shoulder to the back of Mr. Data, Riker asked, "Do we have a few minutes, Mr. Data?"

Data swiveled in his chair. "Eight minutes, twenty seconds."

Before Riker could answer, Kris said, "Geordi and I can activate Ramos in five minutes."

"Do it," responded Riker.

Kris disappeared.

She almost immediately reappeared in the engineering section. She saw Geordi LaForge. "Mr. LaForge, can you assist me in activating Ramos?"

"If it will help get Troi back, let's do this," Geordi replied. Geordi's casual and friendly nature was always welcome, even during times of stress.

They both took to stations to begin their tasks. This was the third time that Kris's Ramos would be activated on the Enterprise's engines. Kris's DNA was a part of the Enterprise's core. A few months earlier, Kris had been informed by Guinan that she had the ability to "blanket" the Enterprise with her Ramos. This allowed the Enterprise to not only be protected yet also allowed it to fly much faster. At the time, Kris's own Ramos had just been activated, yet the process of integrating Ramos technology into the Enterprise's engines was clear in her mind. She hadn't realized, at first, why it was easy to activate the Ramos on this Federation ship. When she learned that her DNA was a part of the Enterprise's core, Kris understood. She

still didn't quite know how or why, yet she knew her mother and Guinan had made it so.

Having Ramos as a blanket on the Enterprise systems made the Enterprise extremely fast and efficient, without harming any systems. It made the Enterprise a super starship, unlike any in the fleet.

A super starship was what was needed right now. Kris felt that whomever had taken Troi must possess technology and skills, at least, equal to her own. How else could that ship shut her out? Activating Ramos so that the Enterprise could keep pace with the ship and not lose Troi was only leveling the playing field.

Kris continued to bring up the Ramos systems. Her thoughts races as she worked. *How come I can't penetrate that ship? What could they possibly have that I don't? Nothing has been able to stop me ever since my Ramos was activated. More so with my Ancient. Is this mother playing another game? Maybe Ancients aren't as powerful as they have told me. Why take Troi? Who took her?*

Kris and Geordi completed the engineering part of the task in under four minutes. Geordi nodded to Kris when they were done. Kris disappeared.

She reappeared on the bridge and immediately went to the Conn. Riker knew what she needed to do. "Lieutenant Amal, relinquish the Conn," he ordered.

Lieutenant Amal reacted quickly, she stood and resumed her work at a side station.

Kris sat down and finished activating Ramos. She nodded to Riker when she was ready.

“Catch up to the ship,” ordered Riker.

Kris used her Ramos with her piloting skills to speed up the ship. The Enterprise was now enveloped in Kris’s Ramos and increased speed to warp eighteen.

Mr. Data kept constant vigil on the ships systems, as did Geordi in engineering.

For the next nineteen minutes, Kris kept the Enterprise running smoothly as they gained on the ship. Riker monitored everything from the captain’s chair. He twice suggested to Picard to have a seat, somewhere, anywhere, yet Picard declined. Picard preferred to pace.

They were finally able to see the ship. Mr. Data put it on the front screen. To Kris, it didn’t appear to be so powerful that it could stop her from entering. Yet it did. *What material is it made of? It must have a force field of some kind*, she thought.

She glanced at Mr. Data. “Data, any readings?”

Mr. Data’s fingers moved swiftly across his panel. He shook his head. “None.”

“Any force field?”

“Unknown.”

Has to be, thought Kris. What could possibly keep me out?

While maintaining the Enterprise's Ramos, Kris went into Betazoid. Her Betatal link with Troi was unchanged. She knew Troi was on that ship. She felt that Troi was doing relatively well.

She swiveled in her chair to look at Riker, knowing that he, above all the other officers aboard the Enterprise, was most concerned about Troi. "I continue to sense Counselor Troi onboard the ship. I believe she is unharmed."

Riker nodded. His expression looked stoic, yet his insides were suffering. Kris returned her Conn panels, knowing that Riker's concern for Troi went beyond one for a fellow crewmate.

Both ships had passed through the Adrianal System and were now at the far end of the Rratnid System, a relatively uninhabited system that Star Fleet very rarely visited. There simply wasn't a lot in it. There were only a handful of planets that sustained life. Those planets were mostly self-sufficient and not eager to maintain off world relationships. The largest was Rrapluss. They were considered non-friendly.

The senior crew members knew that beyond the Rratnid system was uncharted space. Rrapluss had never allowed space exploration beyond their system. Star Fleet had requested to be allowed to explore the Rratnid system four times over the decades. The response had been a firm "no" each time.

Kris's fingers worked frantically on her panel, the tips of her fingers had a blueish tint.

She swiveled to face the others. "A hole has opened."

"Mr. Data," said Riker. Mr. Data didn't need to hear the order, he knew what Riker wanted. He worked and seconds later the "hole" appeared onscreen.

Kris, Picard, Riker, and the others watched as the ship they were pursuing flew into the hole and disappeared.

Riker stood. "Full stop," he ordered.

Kris and Mr. Data initiated the full stop.

Each of them contemplated what had just happened. Mr. Data stated the obvious. "The ship has disappeared through the hole in space."

"Analyze, Mr. Data," said Picard. He had moved in front of Riker, in between Kris and Data. Whether Riker knew it or not, Picard was taking over. No more hiding in the back row.

Mr. Data studied his board for a few moments. "It is possible that the hole is a portal..."

"Probable, Mr. Data," interrupted Kris.

"To where?" asked Riker who assumed a position next to Picard. He was not challenging Picard, just very eager to get Troi back safe and sound.

"Another system," said Data.

“What system?” said Picard.

Kris had an idea. Her Muztarif was beckoning her for some reason. She went into Muztarif. Normally, she tried to avoid Muztarif, especially around these other humanoids. The Muztarif people were rather unknown, and what Star Fleet knew about them, due to their recent temporary membership status in the Federation, was misunderstood.

Kris had a good reason for going into Muztarif. The Muztarif people had a hidden talent. They could sense levels. Levels of existence. Planes of possible parallel systems that co-existed with their own. They didn't know what exactly they were sensing, yet they knew they had this ability.

The Muztarif people, for example, had always known that their planet, which was located in the Orion System, was quite probably wedged between two alternative planes of existence. They felt them. They had no proof of this, of course, nor did they share this information with their new friends (unless they were sufficiently inebriated). Openly discussing this ability, they felt, would make them look crazy, silly and crazy. Their ability would be dismissed as fantasy.

For the most part, the Muztarif were silly. They lived life to the fullest fun they could possibly have, each and every possible moment of each and every day. For this reason, they protected this secret, because Muztarif loved secrets and because they knew “others” were around them, perhaps above them and/or below them, somewhere within another dimension. There were “others.”

Muztarifs had agreed long ago that the “others” were nothing to be afraid of. They weren’t as scary as mountains, for example. Any “others” that existed “on whatever level they existed” weren’t nearly as bad as say... a bad day at fun. Now that was something to be truly afraid of.

Kris smiled. It was almost impossible to be in Muztarif without smiling. And giggling.

Kris did both, neither went over well in the moment.

“What are you...,” barked Picard. “Why are you in Muztarif?”

Kris controlled her laughter, for a moment. “To feel,” she said, then laughed.

Riker’s mouth twisted into a snarl. To him, Kris was making light of Troi’s disappearance. He was infuriated. “Don’t you do that in Betazoid? If you lose your link with Deanna...”

“She’s up there,” said Kris, who pointed to the ceiling. “Not another galaxy, another dimension. I can feel it.” Kris put her hand on her mouth to help stifle the giggles. “In Muztarif, I know where she is.”

Kris was talking very fast. She did this whenever she was in Muztarif.

“What are you talking about?” asked Picard.

“It’s a secret we keep. Yes, a good one. Sssshhhh, we don’t tell others this secret. Muztarif beings keep this secret,” Kris said. She put a finger to her lips and whispered, “shhh.”

“Kris,” Picard said through gritted teeth, “now is not the time.”

“You’re not listening,” Kris replied in a sing-song voice. “Muztarfians have a special ability that no one knows about. Wait.” Kris froze, she concentrated. The others thought she was listening. In a way, she was, she was “listening” to Troi’s location in the other dimension.

“Kris in Muztarif can explain. Ramos is in our dimension and so is the place the Continuum exists. All the same dimension. Troi feels like she just went above. Or around. Different than where we are now. I can feel it.” Kris nodded. “Ramos can’t travel there the way Kris likes to travel. Nope. Can’t do it. But, in the ship... Yep, I think I can travel to this other place. The other dimension that has Troi to visit with ‘others.’ Yes, Kris can do that.”

The bridge was silent. Riker and Picard’s faces were a mixture of fury and confusion.

Kris stared at both of them for long moments. *They’ve had enough of me in Muztarif.* Kris returned to Betazoid. She took a deep breath.

“Captain,” she said, directing her comments between Riker and Picard because she still wasn’t sure which one of them was in charge. They weren’t sure, either. “That hole leads to

another dimension. I confirmed it in Muztarif. They have a unique ability to sense other dimensions.”

“Is Troi there?” asked Riker.

“She is. We are still linked. If we want to retrieve her, we must enter this other dimension. I cannot go there in Ramos, similar to how I could not penetrate that ship. I do not why, yet I am blocked.”

Picard turned to Mr. Data. “Any data on this dimension, Mr. Data?”

“No, sir. Our sensors cannot read anything beyond the hole in space.”

Picard looked at Riker. Both decided immediately. They said it together, “Plot a course...” Both stopped at the same time. Picard gestured with a hand as he stepped back a few steps. He was surrendering. Riker finished the order.

Moments later, the Enterprise headed into the unknown.

* * *

The unknown was indeed another dimension, Kris was right. This universe was unlike any the crew of the Enterprise had ever seen. The composition of the space was similar, it contained hydrogen, helium, neutrinos, dust, and cosmic rays, yet Mr. Data noted several undocumented particles.

The Enterprise was able to pick up a trail left by the ship. Riker and Picard agreed that the trail of super charged helium particles was most probably left on purpose. They agreed they didn't have a choice. The ship obviously wanted the Enterprise to follow it in a very deliberate direction.

After two hours, Riker ordered a full stop. Mr. Data's sensors had found the ship stopped ahead of them. The ship was in a small system with four planets. Mr. Data reported that only one of the four planets contained lifeforms.

Riker, Picard, Kris, and the others studied the system on the front screen.

"The smallest planetoid is Class M and contains over one million lifeforms scattered along the northern hemisphere. The atmosphere is oxidizing. It does contain three unknown elements. Unknown to us, that is," said Mr. Data. "

"Magnify. Let's see this planet," ordered Riker.

Mr. Data's fingers moved around his panel. A moment later, the Class M planet in question appeared on the screen.

The view took the Enterprise Crew's breath away.

The planet had what appeared to be a long, spikey asteroid planted firmly in the southern hemisphere. Over half of the asteroid was stuck in the crust of the planet, dug in as far deep as the outer core. It hung on the planet like an ax wedged into a piece of wood and left there.

Mr. Data noticed the major problem caused by the asteroid. "The planet does not appear to be able to rotate."

"It's stopped by... that," said Riker.

"What is that?" asked Picard.

"That is a blaydoid," said a male voice.

A strange being now stood to the left of the front screen. The crew turned to the being. Mr. Worf quickly left his station and approached the being.

Everything about this being seemed...casual. The garments he wore were neither a military uniform nor a suit of fine linens or an outfit of Bynaas robes. He wore business casual. He was leaning against a jut in the wall with his feet crossed like a spectator at a dance who had no plans to dance but seemed to be enjoying the party. His arms were crossed. Comfortable. Playful, but not in a Muztarif way. There was a definite plan behind the eyes.

Mr. Worf said, "Security to the bridge." To the being, he said, "State your business."

The being, in no rush at all, straightened and uncrossed his arms. He took a step to Worf's left in order to get a better view of Kris, who stood next to her chair at the Conn.

"Kris Rogan, I am in need of your services," he said.

Kris did not respond.

Picard took a few steps forward. He asked, "Who are you?"

"The name's Damian. This is my universe," said Damian.

"You are not Ramos," said Kris.

"Oh, no. Not that." Damian smiled.

Picard thought, *Con artist. Don't trust him.* "To Damian, he said, "You must have similar abilities. You have the ability to shut out a Ramos being."

"Partly true. I have a few tricks up my sleeve. Still, my abilities are limited compared to her," he said, gesturing at Kris. "Like her, I can pop in and out of places, yet only in my world. When I go to your dimension, I have to travel in my ship."

"One which I cannot penetrate," said Kris.

"Yeah, it's got a few good features. That's just one lucky one," he said, then smiled.

"Why?" asked Picard.

"Because, as I stated, I am in need of the services of an Ancient. Kris Rogan."

Kris glanced at Picard and Riker, then back at Damian. "Where is Deanna Troi?"

"Unharmd and on my ship. She was not pleased to learn that she was being kidnapped. She preferred not to be,

apparently. However, I have not harmed a hair on her pretty head.”

Riker stepped forward, his right hand curled into a fist. “Return her now.”

“Oh, if only I could. See, I need a favor.”

Kris had been in Betazoid and was unable to read anything regarding this Damian. She switched to Ramos. She still couldn’t “get” anything from him, except for detecting a nervousness. Not a fear for his life kind, but another kind. Something was bothering him enormously, yet he was hiding it. Kris felt it didn’t really have to do with her directly.

She looked at the screen, at the planet with the asteroid sticking out of it.

She understood.

“You want me to...,” she stopped.

Damian grinned. He wanted very much to be liked by this group of people, even though he had an agenda. “My space is relatively small compared to the universes in your dimension. I only have a few planets with lifeforms. That is one of them. It is called Quekkat. The people are a beautiful people. They are my favorites. Two years ago, that happened. The thing sticking out of the planet, as I said, is called a blaydoid. I named it myself many millennia ago.

“Blaydoids are composed of materials similar to your asteroids yet much harder. Their shapes can destroy planets.

They have a few times. One planet that was destroyed by a blaydoid, a long time ago, had millions of beings. I was devastated. This..." He stopped to gesture at Quekkat on the screen, "...has never happen before. That blaydoid stuck there and did not destroy the planet. Most of the inhabitants had already lived on the northern end of the planet. Only a few thousand lives were lost in the southern end. However, as Mr. Data noted, the blaydoid is stuck in a manner which does not allow the planet to rotate. Our sun is similar to one in your system, Captain Picard."

"Mister," said Picard. This quick response made Damian smile again.

"The planet needs to rotate," he continued. "The crops have all died out. The people are starving. To the Quekkats, I am a powerful being. I do have some abilities, as I told you. However, I cannot remove the blaydoid nor can I feed the people on the planet. I cannot get the rain to fall or moderate the temperature to assist in getting the crops to return."

"Why not simply relocate the inhabitants?" asked Picard.

"The planet's atmosphere is very unique, the only one like it in my universe. It has a high concentrate of tittinium, which is perhaps a cousin to oxygen yet with heavier molecules. There is no equivalent to tittinium in your universe or in mine, except on Quekkat. Your humanoids could possibly survive on Quekkat for a few hours using one of your synthetic masks and

perhaps fabricated domes. Yet, since you are the first visitors from a foreign universe, that experience is yet unproven.

“The Quekkats cannot survive for long on any other planets in my universe, even with synthetics. There is only one planet where they could survive for, perhaps, a few days, but that would be all. An unlimited supply of tittinium cannot be manufactured.”

“Why don’t we conduct a few tests to see if we could manufacture a synthetic tittinium here on the Enterprise?” said Geordi, who had quietly slipped onto the bridge and joined the conversation some minutes earlier. Geordi was the idea person on the Enterprise, always wanting to help or try to solve a problem. “If that worked, domes can be constructed with their version of oxygen that could house the population until a suitable planet can be located. Planetoid atmospheres can be adapted. It’ll take some time, but Star Fleet has assisted other populations with specific biological needs.”

It was a reasonable suggestion, yet Damian shook his head.

“You will discover, Chief Engineer, that by the time you figured out how to manufacture tittinium, if you ever do, the Quekkats will be dead. I attempted to reproduce tittinium and failed. It is my fault, I waited too long. There are over one million Quekkats and tittinium is precisely specific to these people and the planet itself, as an inseparable couple, if you will. I am out of options. The only way to save these beings is to

repair the planet, get it to rotate once again so the food production can resume.”

He again looked at Kris. “Will you help me?”

“How did you hear of me?” Even though she asked the question, Kris wasn’t sure she wanted to hear the answer.

Guinan.

Picard knew the answer, too. He jumped in before Damian could respond. “Why don’t you ask Guinan to do your dirty work?”

Damian glared at Picard. “I don’t know a Guinan.”

They both thought he was lying.

“Do these people, the Quekkats, know about you?” said Picard.

“I visit The Five, the leaders of each of the five habitable and sizeable sectors on the planet. They meet with me in a private location. The rest of the citizenry do not know The Five meet with me. It has been this way for a long time. The Quekkats are a very peaceful people. Their leaders are fair-minded and respected. All the citizens are treated equally, and they trust in their leadership. Since Quekkats are only capable of having one offspring per coupling, the offspring of each leader assumes the role when their parent passes on. It is considered a high honor.”

“The Five know about this asteroid and they want it removed?” asked Riker.

“They have been a part of this process. They want to survive, Commander. I visited with them only hours after the asteroid hit. The resulting earthquakes were very challenging for their people. They had never experienced anything like it. They were very frightened.”

“You want our help?” said Picard.

Damian’s smile had returned. “I don’t need your help. Just hers.”

Picard had heard enough. He walked over to Kris, he quietly said, “Don’t disappear.”

Kris was puzzled. She thought for a moment, then understood what Picard meant. She nodded, then walked to the observation lounge.

Picard asked Riker, “Permission to talk to Kris alone.”

Riker hesitated, then smiled. “We can stop this charade whenever you’re ready.”

Picard, however, waited.

“Permission granted.”

Picard joined Kris in the observation lounge. He found Kris sitting on the floor, her back against the wall. Her arms were wrapped around her bent knees. Her face looked drawn. Picard immediately guessed she was in Human because she looked like she was about to cry.

Right now, Picard knew Kris needed one thing...she needed a friend.

He sat down next to her. Picard had never purposely sat on the floor of any room on the Enterprise in this manner. It gave him a new perspective.

Two minutes passed without a word out of each of them. Picard knew he had to begin.

“Are you okay?” Picard knew it was lame but couldn’t think of anything else.

“Another person who wants something from me,” said Kris quietly.

“It appears so,” said Picard. When it came to Kris, Picard learned to be honest and straightforward. It just so happened that was the type of friend she needed right now.

“I was built to be used. That’s what happening. Guinan knows it. She keeps following me, telling me what I have to do. I know she’s behind this.”

“Agreed.” Picard took a deep breath. “You have choices.”

“I don’t think I do.”

“Let’s take control of your choices, Kris.” Picard bore straight into her eyes. He saw confusion.

He stood, looked down at Kris, and held out his hand. He didn't need to say, "Take my hand and come with me." The gesture was enough.

Kris took Picard's hand. He helped her to her feet. "Let's get protection masks and beam down to this planet. Take a look for ourselves."

Kris considered his suggestion for a moment. "We don't need masks."

Picard nodded.

* * *

On Quekkat, Picard and Kris stood outside a round ornate building with stained glass windows. The roof had a steeple. The landscaping looked cared for, yet the plants and gardens looked parched, some were dead. Someone was still trying to make it look presentable but was failing.

Rolling hills and tall, thin trees surrounded the building. At the base of each hill stood. Abandoned farming equipment was scattered around. The fields refused to grow food; the land was parched. The fields should be reddish in color and the trees thick at the base and thin at the tops when they were healthy. They were far from healthy.

Kris checked on Picard, who was surrounded by a very faint blue “bubble.” She asked, “Do you feel any effects of the atmosphere?”

“No,” said Picard. “Your Ramos suit seems to be keeping me safe.”

“Suit?”

“For lack of a better term. Are you all right?”

“I am in Ramos. The atmosphere does not appear to be affecting me.”

“Ramos was not my concern.”

“Understood. Perhaps it would be a good idea to not stay long.”

Picard’s attention became fixed on one of the windows. The figures in the stained-glass scene were obviously children holding hands. The scene looked delightful and made Picard smile.

“Where do we meet The Five?”

“I am not sure.”

“Captain, do you think...?” Kris stopped. “I apologize.”

Picard smirked. “It appears as if the title still suits me.”

“You will return to the captaincy of the Enterprise.”

“That was not a question,” Picard commented.

“It suits you,” Kris said. A rare non-Muztarif smile passed her lips. It didn’t stay long. “What will I learn from being here, sir?”

“That a new perspective isn’t a bad idea. I understand your feelings toward Star Fleet, Kris. I am struggling with something similar. Guinan’s putting pressure on you. I believe that this Damian is probably affiliated somehow with her. However, his problem, the people on this planet who have been suffering, appears to be legitimate. At least, there is one way to find out.”

“And, if it is... Why does it have to come down to me?”

“My suggestion for coming down here is to get you away from Guinan, or Damian, as well as away from the ship. To slow things down. That way, perhaps you can handle one thing at a time without influences that haven’t exactly been working for you.”

They were interrupted by a rustling from behind them. The Five Quekkats, the designated leaders of this planet, approached them.

The members of The Five were composed of three males and two females. They all wore long, ornate robes. Several belts wrapped around the robes from thighs and calves to mid-section. One thin belt wrapped around their necks. Jewels decorated each belt. They all appeared to be the same height. None of The Five wore any footwear. Besides their gender, the only definitive way to tell them apart was by their hair styles,

each was unique and quite extraordinary. A hairstylist would love them.

The Five approached Picard. They stood silently in from of him for a long moment. As a group, they turned to Kris. One of the female Five said, "Introduce and explain."

Another female said, "You introduce yourselves, then we."

One of the males added, "Then, explain your presence."

Kris said, "I am Kris. He is Captain Jean Luc Picard of the Starship Enterprise from the Federation of Planets. We're from a different dimension." Kris purposely didn't look at Picard, knowing he would object to be introduced as "captain." She said, "The Captain cannot survive on your planet without my assistance. He is surrounded by a bubble of my energy. It protects him from your atmosphere. Without it, he would die. I do not need such a protection."

The first female to speak said, "I am Tu R."

The second female to speak said, "I am Pa V."

The male who spoke said, "Ss Ee."

The other male said, "I am called Wrr."

The third female said, "I am Dr Y."

Tu R said, "We find protecting an offlander to be approved."

“We find approval in the decision,” said Pa V.

Dr Y added, “The choice to protect the offlander is approved.”

Kris glanced at Picard. Part of her hoped he would take the lead in talking to The Five. His experience dealing with other species was much more extensive than her own. Not that she really knew why they were there, but Kris didn’t want to come across as naïve.

Picard understood Kris’s look. “It is our pleasure to be here. Thank you for allowing us to talk with you. Do you normally meet Damian inside this structure?”

“We meet Damian the Traveler here,” said Wrr.

“Here, we always meet,” said Dr Y.

Tu R said, “Damian and The Five meet in this spot.”

“We simply want to follow established protocol. We understand that your people do not know about offlanders. Damian has explained to us that only The Five know about him,” said Picard.

“And, you,” said Ss Ee.

“You are offlander, too,” said Wrr.

“Damian and Kris and Captain Jean Luc Picard are offlanders,” said Pa V.

“I believe what Captain Picard means is what would happen if some of your people see you talking with offlanders?” Kris said.

“This place is protected,” said Dr Y.

“A protection so they don’t see,” said Ss Ee.

“We understand...” said Picard.

“We protect same as Kris protects,” interrupted Wrr.

Kris noticed a pattern. *They speak in threes and all three say basically the same thing*, thought Kris. She surreptitiously signaled with her hand, holding out three fingers.

Picard nodded ever so slightly, he understood.

“Does The Five understand what happened to Quekkat? The blaydoid?” asked Picard.

“We understand.”

“The blaydoid harmed the planet.”

“The Five understands a blaydoid and the damage done.”

“Does The Five need assistance from Damian to help with the blaydoid?” asked Kris. *Nothing wrong with testing the waters.*

“Damian explains he tried to help, could not.”

“Damian tries, does assist, not with blaydoid.”

“Damian the Traveler explains the blaydoid, the earth shakes, he helps us. He explains why Quekkat cannot grow food.”

Dr Y stepped closer to Kris. “Damian explains we need more help.”

“My help?” asked Kris.

The Five did not respond.

“Does The Five understand that I may not be able to help?” said Kris.

The Five began to speak to each other as if Picard and Kris weren't there.

Picard gestured for Kris to move off to the side in order to give them room for their debate.

Once they were a few feet away, Picard said, “Do you want to help them?”

“I'm not sure I can.”

“You didn't answer the question.”

“I might want to do it.”

“You're considering it?”

“I...I've thought about what Damian wants me to do. Remove this blaydoid from the planet? With my Ancient abilities? I want to help because I don't want people to die. Yet,

I do not believe I can do exactly what Damian wants. I'm not sure how I can help them."

"You grabbed the Enterprise and prevented it from crashing after that starburst."

"So, I can do it?"

"I don't know, Kris. You might be able to do, is all I'm saying, according to my experience of your abilities. And, you weren't even an Ancient then. Whether you want to do it, that's up to you. I will support whatever you decide."

Kris shook her head. "Do you notice the irony here? I believe by being here on this planet, one that has yet to achieve warp speed, we are breaking the Prime Directive."

"We have made contact with beings that have already made contact. We are not making contact with the general population. It's a small break," said Picard as he grinned. "Luckily, I don't think the Federation Prime Directive applies on this dimension."

The Five re-joined Picard and Kris. "We will not ask, Kris," said Dr Y.

"Asking is not why you are here, Kris," said Wrr.

"Kris is here for other reasons?" asked Tu R.

Kris thought about her answer for several moments. Everyone waited patiently. "I'm here because Captain Picard suggested coming here to meet you. He thought that actually

being on your planet would be useful somehow to aid my decision. To see the people of Quekkat. See how you and your people are suffering. I will admit that my instinct is to walk away because I am being used by certain people. I don't want to explain too much because it is not pertinent. Basically, I don't like being used."

"We do not."

"Like being used."

"We are not using."

"I'm not saying you are," Kris responded. "When I said I am not sure I can help with the blaydoid, I was being honest. Do you understand that?"

The Five nodded in unison. Kris thought it was fascinating that when Dr Y nodded, it caused several strands of his hair to fall out of their taut, perfect placement. He knew and reacted quickly by lifting one hand to the displaced hairs. He grasped them. He lifted his other arm. The wide bracelet on that wrist had a convenient mirror. The loose strands were back in place only moments after they fell.

"How is your society structured?" asked Picard, partly out of interest, partly to by Kris some time to consider her options.

Four of The Five looked at Wrr. He took one step forward. "Our planet has five large societies. They all have an equal voice in the governing of the planet. Only my Timbquek

lives nearest the Southern half of the planet. We were the most affected.”

Picard found it fascinating to note that now only one of The Five was speaking. *He is the historian?* he thought. “A Timbquek is a city, a tribe, a community?”

“Those terms are sufficient. Yet all peoples are similar, peoples from each Timbquek only differ in how one presents the top of our heads. It is most important in our Quekkat society.”

That seems about right, thought Picard. “You are not industrialized?”

“We are beginning to make advancements in regard to our agricultural equipment as well as improvements with living quarters. The advancement is slow, in terms that Damian has explained to us. He has visited systems in “your neck of the woods,” as he describes it. He says that if our planet was located in one of your universes, our planet would be centuries away from consideration into your Federation of Planets.”

“Damian has explained a lot to you,” said Picard.

“When did he first contact you?” asked Kris.

“When our planet dealt with a devastation in the past, Damian the Traveler visited us and called it a Veep Swarm. A sickness had been brought by parasites called veeps. They began to kill our population. Damian discussed with The Five how to combat the swarm before we all died. He said our entire population would be eliminated without his instructions.

“Our forbearers were saved because of Damian the Traveler, who said this was his name because came to be our protector. He explained how and where we exist within the stars and the sun. He explained the other universes and dimensions. Yours, for example. Our forbearers thanked him, and it was agreed to keep his visit and his instructions and all of the knowledge he passed on a secret. The families of The Five have higher knowledge and talents and insight than most of our population. In a way, our population are our children. Since only one replacement is born within most of the families, we are children of the children of our forbearers. We have had generations with multiple births, to keep the population steady. We keep Damian a secret to protect our children. It is written, it is said, it is kept within us.”

The other members of The Five repeated the last bit, “It is written, it is said, it is kept within us.”

The silence that followed allowed Kris to listen to some of the native wildlife. She heard the singing of a bird and the rustling of some small animal nearby. She considered switching to Vulcan, her Vulcan hearing was even better than her Ramos hearing, but she did not want to compromise her humanoids parts in this atmosphere. If Picard could not breathe their air, then neither could any of her five humanoid species. Five. She had five humanoid parts. They had five sub-groups of their population. She guessed they were spread out, the one group being nearest the blaydoid took the biggest hit. That’s what Damian had said, that many had died.

“How many of your beings perished because of the blaydoid?” she asked.

“Several thousand, most from my Timbquek.”

“How many have died since? Because your planet hasn’t been rotating?”

“A few hundred,” said Wrr. He was, apparently, still allowed to speak for the group. “Damian explains that our weather systems are directly tied into how our planet rotates toward our sun. This is not like other planets in our system. Our atmosphere gains energy and moisture and water from facing the sun for twenty-two hours of our twenty-eight-hour cycles. Under normal circumstances, our planet receives very good rains, and temperatures vary during our growing seasons. Our way of life, our existence has been greatly affected by the blaydoid.”

“Your people are starving?” asked Kris.

Wrr nodded. “We feel we have done all that we can for each Timbquek. Our people are now without hope. It is worse than the veep swarm for them because their planet, their lifeblood, the soil and the trees and the ground that they worship, the sun and the rain water that they cherish, all that they know and love has been slowly stripped away for weeks or months, as Damian calls them. Not only does the ground no longer produce the necessary food, yet our cherished natural spaces have been damaged. That harms our people as much as the empty bellies.”

“Thank you for talking to us,” said Kris.

Picard looked at her. “They need a response from you, Kris. It is only fair to definitively tell them whether you’ll help them or not. Or, as you state, whether you can help them.”

“I cannot remove the blaydoid,” Kris said to The Five.

Their lack of reaction had meant they were expecting this decision. Picard didn’t expect it. He thought, by now, Kris would have come up with some way to help them. Not for Damian’s sake or Guinan’s. Not because of anything that had to do with the Federation. But, because they needed her help.

Kris, however, did not disappoint Picard. “I may have another idea,” said Kris.

* * *

Before they left Quekkat, Kris asked The Five to prepare their people, talk to them as much as they could, and most importantly get all of them to safety. It was quite possible that the planet was going to experience a lot of earth shaking and she wanted their people to be prepared.

Once back on the Enterprise, Kris removed the shield around Picard. He immediately apologized to the actual captain of the Enterprise, Riker, for going AWOL with Kris. Riker, of course, knew where they went. Damian had informed him that he had arranged a meeting with The Five.

“You can put me under arrest,” Picard said to Riker.

“I have another idea,” Riker said with a smile on his lips. He gestured for Picard to follow him to the station behind Mr. Worf. Riker hit a few buttons, before saying, “Computer, reinstate as Captain of the Enterprise, Jean Luc Picard. Pending final approval from Star Fleet. I, William Riker, revert to Commander, First Officer, of the Enterprise. Captain?”

Riker stared at Picard. They both knew this was going to happen.

Picard stepped forward, and said, “Computer, this is Jean Luc Picard, agreeing to reinstatement authorized by William Riker, pending approval from Star Fleet. I temporarily accept duties of Captain of the starship Enterprise, flagship of the Federation of Planets. All voice recognitions and codes to be re-established under my name and identity.”

“Commander William Riker agrees under my name and identity.” The computer accepted the transition.

Riker smiled at Picard. “Welcome back, Captain.”

“It is still unofficial.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“It goes beyond just Star Fleet approval,” Picard added.

“Understood. Yet, let’s move forward as if we are no longer playing that silly game anymore.”

Picard nodded. “Agreed.”

“Captain, may I have a private meeting with Mr. Data and Mr. LaForge?” said Kris.

“Of course.” Picard nodded to Geordi and Data, and they followed Kris to the observation lounge.

After they were gone, Riker looked at Picard. “Is this about to get interesting?”

“Apparently so.”

Thirty minutes later, Kris, Mr. Data, and Geordi returned to the bridge.

Damian stood in the exact spot as before. “Well?” he said, in his casual manner.

“Troi must be returned immediately,” said Kris.

“But, the view from my ship is so much better. She’s really enjoying it over there,” Damian said.

Kris did not move, nor did she elaborate.

Picard moved next to her, he glared at Damian.

Riker’s glare was even more intense. He stepped closer to Damian. “Now,” he said.

Damian raised his hands in mock surrender. “Oh, okay, fine,” he said.

He touched a ring on his ring finger, hit a few buttons on a tiny control panel, and closed the lid.

A moment later, Troi appeared on the bridge.

She gave herself a quick moment, then looked around. She spotted Picard first. "I am unharmed, Captain," she said without flinching. She had assumed Picard had been reinstated as Captain. She knew he would be. Might as well not acted surprised.

Troi smiled at Kris. "Thank you for coming for me," she said.

"I believe Damian exploited our Betatal link," Kris replied.

"What Betatal link?" asked Damian, yet he could not completely hide a whiff of a grin.

Picard wanted to get on with it. "Kris, you said you had another way to do this?"

Kris nodded. "Are the people of Quekkat prepared?" she asked Damian.

"The Five has informed me they are as ready as they can be."

"I have stated my plan to Mr. Data and Mr. LaForge. They concur it is risky, however, it is possible. We believe it is the only way."

"To remove the blaydoid?" asked Damian.

"It cannot be removed because even with my Ancient powers, I do not believe I can remove it while repairing the

planet. Both would need to occur almost simultaneously. The planet is too damaged.”

“So, you can’t take it out? Looks like I’ve been wasting my time here.”

“Listen to her,” said Picard, he was defending Kris’s decision. *Let her do this her way. For once, would someone allow Kris to be herself?*

“What exactly do you propose?” asked Damian with a hint of frustration. His calm, casual veneer beginning to slip.

“Mr. Data and Mr. LaForge believe there is a way to educate The Five in regard to updates on equipment and other improvements that are within their capabilities. This will help with food production.”

“Except the planet is still not rotating,” said Damian.

“Hopefully, when I have shaved the blaydoid, it will begin to do so again.”

“Shaved?” Damian left his cozy spot and approached Kris. “It will still be wedged in the planet. Don’t you see how that will fail?”

“If it is done at a precise angle, leaving only enough to keep the axis tilted at a new vertices...”

“That won’t work,” Damian said angrily. He was no longer playing his ambassador-type role. His relaxed posture had suddenly got a bit aggressive.

“We believe it will. I believe it. We can help the inhabitants adjust, once I have completed the shaving. Mr. Data and Mr. LaForge will utilize tractor beams. Most of the Timbqueks should remain intact since four of them are located on northern end. Wrr’s Timbquek may receive some damage that may not be reversible. Their population may have to relocate to the north. But, they should all survive...”

“Once you assist the planet to rotate on a new axis? After you shave the blaydoid?” interrupted Damian. He shook his head.

“Yes,” said Kris.

“This is not what...” He stopped. He took a deep breath. “Proceed,” he said quietly. “What other choice do they have?”

Damian positioned himself next to Dr. Crusher, so he could have a good view of the screen. He faked a smile yet worry etched his face.

Troi gently touched Kris’s arm. “Kris, are you sure you’re up to doing this?”

Kris hesitated, but only momentarily. She liked The Five. She believed that their people were decent, hard-working people who did not deserve their fate. She was sad that The Five were the only Quekkat people she would ever meet. Once she realized she liked and supported these people, her Ramos mind went through several scenarios that could help them. This one had the best chance for success.

She wanted to try it. She had to.

“I am,” said Kris.

Everyone waited. The Enterprise crew didn’t know what to expect next.

Troi tried to read Kris, but she couldn’t. She was in Ramos.

There was no movement on the bridge for several moments. All the attention was focused on the front screen which displayed Quekkat. Everyone waited.

Kris’s Ramos mind was focused on one thing, shaving the blaydoid. One layer at a time.

A light appeared on Mr. Data’s panel. He checked it. “Movement on the planet,” he reported.

“Specify, Mr. Data,” said Picard.

“The blaydoid is losing density,” reported Mr. Data.

All the eyes on the bridge saw the southern hemisphere of Quekkat, specifically the blaydoid, losing pieces of the asteroid-like object. It was getting incrementally smaller.

It was being shaved.

After two layers of the blaydoid fell harmlessly into space, Kris’s concentration wavered as she realized she had to pay attention to the planet itself while shaving the blaydoid. Just like she had grabbed a hold of the Enterprise, while preventing it from crashing, she grasped the planet with her mind. She inserted a picture in her mind, her hands held out front of her

body, holding the southern hemisphere. She envisioned holding it steady as she resumed shaving the blaydoid.

Three hours later, the exposed surface of the blaydoid was almost flush with the surface of the planet. Almost. Kris's focus had been intense the whole time. She knew she was close to completing the shaving. She didn't want to shave too much, there was a balance problem she had to be aware of. She still worried that all of this wouldn't work, yet she pushed those thoughts away.

Kris made a pre-arranged hand signal to Mr. Data.

Mr. Data nodded to Geordi and they left to go to engineering. While Kris had worked, Geordi and Mr. Data had explained to Picard and Riker the role they had to play. Kris would hold the planet and nudge it to rotate, once the shaving was complete, but the weight of the planet would still be off. The planet needed to adjust to its new tilt in other ways—the tractor beam had to be utilized to help the planet learn its new spin. And, make sure it stayed that way.

Kris finished shaving the blaydoid as much as she felt was necessary. The planet looked like it had a mole on it, a slight bump. It looked awkward, but aesthetics wasn't the point.

Kris tested the planet by releasing it slightly. It held.

She released it some more. She felt a slight pull down.

She released the far side of the planet, the half facing away from the sun. The planet jerked.

Kris grasped it again.

She signaled again with her hand. Picard knew what the signal meant.

“Mr. Data and Mr. LaForge on speaker,” he said.

“We’re here,” boomed Geordi’s voice over the loudspeaker of the bridge.

“Mr. LaForge, direct the tractor beam below the Vramma continent. On my mark,” said Kris.

“We’re ready, Kris,” said Geordi’s voice.

“Now,” said Kris.

As Kris released the far side of the planet, the Enterprise’s tractor beam shot out of the ship. It passed by the Vramma continent, not touching it, but affecting the orbit and the tilt just enough. “Stop,” ordered Kris, and the tractor beam disappeared.

Kris and Mr. Data and Geordi continued in this manner for ten minutes. The tractor beam was utilized six times, each time just enough to adjust the orbit and “convince” the planet to hold its new tilt.

It worked. Kris’s grasp on the planet was now minimal. She took a deep breath, either this worked or it didn’t. She was ready to let it completely.

She did.

They all stared at the screen. Picard checked a few sensors at the Conn station. He didn't announce his findings, but he didn't have to.

The planet held its orbit.

But, would it rotate?

With her mind, Kris gently touched a tiny "edge" of the remaining blaydoid. She wanted to jump start the rotation. Just a bit.

She waited, they all waited.

Mr. Data and Geordi appeared the bridge. Mr. Data immediately resumed his seat at OPS. His fingers flew over the panel.

"Well," said Picard.

"It's moving," said Kris.

Mr. Data turned to face Picard. "Agreed," he said, "the planet is rotating."

Everyone felt relieved.

"How long should we monitor the planet?" asked Picard.

"A week, to be safe," said Geordi.

"Kris?" Picard looked at Kris.

“Yes, Captain, a week would be sufficient. The weather patterns should shift back into normal production after forty-eight hours of planet rotation. However, the inhabitants of the planet need to adjust as well. I suggest Mr. Data and Mr. LaForge meet with The Five in order to give instructions.”

“Agreed. Mr. Worf, I believe Damian instructed you on how to contact The Five?” said Picard.

“He did,” said Mr. Worf.

“Arrange a meeting with Mr. LaForge and Mr. Data.”

Kris’s attention could finally shift away from the planet. She focused on who was on the bridge, and who wasn’t. “What happened to Damian?” she asked.

“He disappeared hours ago,” said Picard.

“Dr. Crusher,” said Kris. “Would you meet me in sick bay?”

“Is it bad?”

Kris shook her head. “I do not believe so. My Ancient abilities protect my humanoid parts much better, however, there are a few minor issues.”

Dr. Crusher headed out. She knew Kris would go to sick bay “her own way.”

Before disappearing to sick bay, Kris looked at Picard. “Captain,” she said.

“We’ll talk more later,” said Picard. “Get to sick bay, Kris.”

Kris nodded. She disappeared.

Chapter Three

Kris spent an hour in sick bay. It her relief, her humanoid species had only minor issues: Her Betazoid had a slight balance impairment which was easily treated, her Human was dehydrated, her Muztarif's blood had a gelatin PH imbalance, her Vulcan was cold, and her Altaran skin was pale green, Kris needed to run around real vegetation to get her Altaran skin back to dark green.

Kris was relieved to discover that Dr. Crusher hadn't noticed anything wrong with her Vulcan species besides the temperature of her blood. Any problems with her meditation had not been detected. Perhaps it had improved on its own? She could only hope.

Dr. Crusher released Kris from sick bay after just twenty minutes.

Kris wanted to go to the holodeck, go into Altaran, and run, but she had a better idea. She needed to run on a real planet.

She disappeared and reappeared on Vega. She had run here before and knew how to avoid the population. She ran for five hours.

When she returned to the Enterprise, she checked in with Dr. Crusher. She went into Altaran to prove to the doctor that her green hue was back to dark green. She reported all was well. She also informed her that being an Ancient had appeared

to stabilize her in terms of her ability to sleep as well as manage her five humanoid species.

She again avoided telling her about her issue with her Vulcan meditation.

Outside the holodeck, she met Troi. “Counselor, why are you here?”

“We haven’t talked yet,” said Troi.

They stood awkwardly outside the door to Holodeck Four. Troi nodded at the door, and said, “You still prefer the holodeck over your quarters?”

“I don’t have quarters.”

“Of course, you do. If not the one you had before, there are always guest quarters.”

Kris responded to her by walking onto Holodeck Four. Troi followed her.

Once inside, Troi said, “Computer, Trellium Gardens on Betazoid.”

The holodeck transformed to a popular garden on Betazoid. “Your favorite,” said Kris.

“It’s hard for us to keep secrets from each other, even though...” She did not finish her thought. She sat on a bench and gestured for Kris to join her.

Kris hesitated.

Troi's lips curled on one side. "You're still fearful of talking?"

"What do you want to talk about?"

"Can you sit, please?"

Kris frowned, and sat next to Troi.

"Why did you come back?"

"Isn't that obvious?"

"Because I had disappeared? Captain Picard believes Guinan was behind it, which means no harm would have come to me. I never felt threatened, Kris."

"That was unknown at the time."

"Was it? You felt it," she said.

"It was a reaction."

"Well, thank you. What are your plans?"

Kris looked away from Troi, she pretended to study a plant with reddish-purple flowers. "I feel hunted. By Guinan."

"I understand that. Would you... no, you wouldn't."

Kris looked at her. "Hurt her? I couldn't do that. But apparently, she is unwilling to leave me alone. I'm frustrated."

"And, Star Fleet?"

Kris thought about the question for several moments. Finally, she said, "I looked at those council members and could feel their guilt. I understood that only two of them were directly involved. I accept that. But, none of them cared."

"You may be mistaken, Kris. Those two members have resigned and are up on charges. The president and the full council are drafting changes to the Prime Directive. I was a little skeptical at first, but the president has issued guarantees that he'll get to the bottom of this."

I read their thoughts. "The other seven members knew about the technology. They may not have known specifically about me or been complicit in locking me up, but most of them want the technology."

"It may be just to lock it up safely, Kris."

"It's mine. I own it. I'll decide what happens to it...If I ever locate it."

They sat quietly.

"Kris," Troi finally broke the silence. "I know being here is what Guinan wants out of you for this plan of hers. Staying away is a way to defy her. And, that's your choice. I support your desire to have a choice, Kris. We all do. Guinan doesn't think you have a choice, but she's wrong. However, if you ever felt like you had a home, isn't it on the Enterprise? Running around the universe must be lonely. Aren't you tired of being lonely?"

"It's what I'm used to," Kris whispered.

“That doesn’t answer my question. You’re wanted here, Kris. We want you here because you fit in with us. Not because Guinan says so. Because you do.”

Kris didn’t respond. *I should tell her about Vulcan. I think I trust her. But trusting has been a mistake, one I cannot repeat.*

“Is there something you want to tell me?” asked Troi.

“I don’t know what to do. If Guinan is right and reveals this plan, and I’m supposed to be a part of it, then I don’t have a choice. If she’s wrong. What should I do? I don’t know.”

“Kris, we feel Guinan may very well be wrong. My point is you’ve spent your entire life without freedom of choice. You have it now. You can leave here, like you’ve done before, and go somewhere, wherever you go. And, Guinan will show up and pester you. I’ve sensed you, Kris. I’ve felt the pressure she puts on you. You leave and go somewhere else and she shows up again. And, now, it appears as if she’s getting others to do her dirty work. Kris, I’m suggesting you put Guinan away in a compartment in your head and choose your life. Live your life. Where you’re wanted. Pilot the Enterprise, be with us because we want you here.”

“Stay here so because I want to be, and not because Guinan chased me back here?”

“It would be like hiding in plain sight. Guinan will know you’re here, but she’ll no longer have the power she thinks she has to bully you. Because Kris, we’ll tell her to leave you alone.

We'll remind her that you have choices. Let her think we're connected to you because of this other Ancient. Use it to your advantage."

Kris's mouth opened to reply, but nothing came out. She knew she had another concern, besides Guinan. She asked, "What about working for Star Fleet?"

"Talk to Captain Picard."

Troi stood. She looked down at Kris. "You two have something in common."

* * *

Kris sat across from Captain Picard in his ready room.

"That was the extent of my conversation with Counselor Troi," said Kris.

"So," Captain Picard said, "my question would be, would you like to stay?"

"I don't know how to do that," said Kris.

"I understand. I'm still not reconciled with the behavior of the hierarchy of Star Fleet. Not only concerning your treatment, Kris, but I feel betrayed. My feet aren't on solid ground quite yet."

"As well as with regards to Peterson?"

Picard shifted in his seat. “Another issue I have to reconcile.”

“It wasn’t you, Captain. My mother directed you to kill him....”

“Kris,” Picard interrupted. “I will have to figure that one out for myself. Again, it’s not all about you. Part of it is, but Peterson and I had a history. A sad one. I don’t relish in that particular wound. For me, getting back to work, doing what I’ve been trained to do, is a panacea. An acceptable one because while I’m working things out, I can go out there and help others. Like you just did.”

“I’m not sure I can put the uniform back on.”

“Part of my decision was based on the face that I wouldn’t know what else to do with myself. A reason for returning is I can assist and monitor necessary changes from this position. I wouldn’t really be able to do that from outside the Federation. Changes are happening and I want to make sure they stick.”

“Troi says I belong here.”

“Do you agree with her?”

“I guess I’ve belonged here better than anywhere else.”

“I would like you to pilot my ship again, Kris,” said Picard. “It would be a shame to waste a trained and talented pilot.”

“The ship and I seem to have a relationship, of sorts. Another attachment that was pre-arranged?”

“Yet, it feels good, doesn’t it? I’ve piloted a starship. Sometimes I miss it.”

Kris took her time. She felt odd knowing she may very well stay. All she had to do was say it. She had concerns, but those concerns would exist whether she was here on the Enterprise or bouncing from universe to universe. She felt a huge sense of accomplishment for helping the Quekkats. She really wasn’t sure she could do it. Yet, combined with Data and Geordi, she had.

“I’ll stay,” Kris blurted.

Picard leaned back in his chair. “About your Ramos. You being an Ancient. As a member of a ship of humanoids, I would ask for that part of you to be as limited as possible. You and I will decide when or if your Ramos is needed on a case by case basis. Like before, you’re working in universes that should not be influenced by your special abilities. You can’t go around fixing everything for everyone.”

“I am curious... Did you ask the same of Mr. Data?”

“In a way you two are similar, in other ways you are not. You have a more advanced set of skills. I can’t have a God, for lack of a better term, as a member of my crew. We established previously that you can work within your five humanoids forms and your Ramos without affecting humanoid civilizations, unless under special circumstances. I will continue

to hold you to that agreement. Do you understand what I'm saying, Kris?"

Kris nodded, yet she still had another concern. "I don't want to have any contact with anyone from Star Fleet. Only you and the others here. I can't stomach it. My fear is you getting an order from them and..."

"I have already opened that topic of discussion, Kris. Only two hours ago, as a matter of fact. I have constructed a letter to Star Fleet outlining my terms for your return to the Enterprise. They are linked to my remaining as captain. In light of recent events, I believe they will be accepted."

"Is there a possibility they'll be rejected?"

"Of course. We still have a few more days here. When we return to our universe, I will send the letter. If I am not wanted, I will resign permanently."

"I won't stay," Kris blurted, then quickly realized she needed to clarify her statement. "You understand the situation. If you have to resign permanently, no offense to Commander Riker, but..."

"Understood," said Picard. *I won't force you to say any more. You don't owe me any loyalty.*

"My proposal includes something else," said Picard. He smiled. "You're not a lieutenant, Kris. That title doesn't suit you. I think Commander Kris Rogan."

"Commander?"

“Mr. Data was made a commander.”

“I’m not sure about...certain qualities that will be expected of me.”

“Mr. Data had a learning curve. Perhaps consult with him.”

Kris took a deep breath, she stood.

“I assume you will let me know what happens with your proposal?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Thank you,” Kris mumbled, and then left quickly.

Picard watched the door to his ready room close behind Kris. He felt some relief, even though he knew things were still fluctuating. He was back in the captain’s chair yet knew even that was temporary. He had made demands of Star Fleet and there was no way to know whether they were in a demanding mood. Typically, star ship captains did not make demands to the Federation Council and especially to the president. Circumstances were different. This time, and he knew he was pushing things, he hoped they would recognize that this was the best situation they could envisioned, Kris on the Enterprise.

Picard worried about Guinan yet tried to steer clear of discussing her with Kris. He knew she would show up someday. He also knew that by Kris agreeing to return to the Enterprise, she was getting what she wanted. Kris with Picard and his senior officers on the Enterprise.

He made a promise to himself that when she eventually showed up again, he would demand to know what the hell was going on. Enough of this secrecy. Drop a name of some Ancient bad guy and then leave? That was simply unacceptable.

Guinan didn't know why he wanted Kris back on board the Enterprise. He was convinced that she was so wrapped up in this plan of hers that she missed the obvious. He wanted to protect her. Kris had never had protection, not really. Too many people had taken advantage of her throughout her life.

He felt Guinan didn't understand that even though it appeared as if she had gotten what she wanted; it was really Picard who had won.

He had gotten his daughter to stay. It was about time he acted like a real father.

* * *

Kris was determined to try to break old habits. One of them had to do with her quarters. She would never abandon her desire to be alone on the holodeck, but Kris felt she needed to try to accept the fact that her quarters on the Enterprise were not the same one as the one on Star Base 325. She decided to demonstrate a sort of good will gesture to Picard, Riker, and the others. At least she was trying.

To make sure she was giving this plan a fair chance, she requested new quarters. Due to her status as a commander, Riker was more than happy to reassign her.

So far, Kris was pleased with this experiment. It helped that her new quarters were larger than her old ones. It felt less... confining.

She was making changes in baby steps.

Because she successfully helped the Quekkat and her Vulcan had shown no ill effects from the blaydoid, she was hoping that her problem with the Re 'Ugan path had resolved itself. How else would she have shaved that blaydoid and accomplished all she did for Quekkat if she had her Vulcan pulling her toward an open door that led to Vulcan suicide?

Perhaps her Vulcan had just taken longer to adjust to her being an Ancient. Or, perhaps it was all just her imagination.

No matter. With two days remaining before the Enterprise left Quekkat, Kris felt relaxed. She had put on the uniform again, this one was command red. It felt okay. She looked good in red.

She was beginning to hope that Star Fleet accepted Picard's terms. She didn't want to leave.

In her new quarters, Kris designated an area to practice meditation. She obtained a large pillow and put it in the living room. She sat on the pillow with her legs folded and her arms resting on her knees.

She began her meditation.

At first, it felt normal. Her mind was focused, her body relaxed. This was the way it was supposed to be. Random thoughts and worries floated past while she focused on breathing and the path of knowledge and comprehension that only a Vulcan can unconsciously focus on. She worked on controlling her Vulcan emotions. She remembered her anger towards Guinan and...

Kris's body jerked, but she did not come out of her meditation.

Her mind was locked.

It was heading straight to Re' Ugan. To the open door. To death.

* * *

It had taken a long time, but Troi had finally learned to accept and live with the fact that she was now, permanently, a Betazoid Betatal. She had painstakingly learned how to compartmentalize all of the thoughts and feelings that swirled around her from the minds of the entire Enterprise crew. She hadn't felt overwhelmed in weeks because she had learned to let most of those feelings and thoughts and emotions simply float past her. She learned to choose whether to focus on something, or else let it go.

Only one time during this period of transition she did sense a situation that, to her, needed her immediate attention. She had sensed a heated argument that he felt was about to become violent.

Troi went to then Captain Riker and reported what she had felt. She had pinpointed a location, C Deck. Riker had ordered Mr. Worf to investigate.

Mr. Worf reported back that the couple in question were in the midst of an argument. Both parties were experiencing a lot of heated angry emotions. Both claimed that their fights never advanced to anything physical, yet Mr. Worf ordered them to separate to cool down.

One meeting Riker had with Picard, once Picard was back in the captain's chair, was how to deal with Troi's new abilities. What if Troi felt something physical was about to happen, how could they prevent harm and should they? Should they allow her to interfere in the privacy of others?

The three of them sat down to draw up a plan. Yes, Troi should be able to report something that she feels could be dangerous. This had always been true, before and after her Betatal. However, most of the crew still didn't know about Troi's new enhanced abilities. Most still didn't quite know what to make of Kris, either.

One argument was that Troi may be invading someone's privacy. Picard had to acknowledge this. He used the recent incident as a baseline. Security can investigate if they feel

something may be amiss. Mr. Worf and his team always had the right to do this.

In the case of Troi providing information, Mr. Worf did not have to disclose on what basis he was investigating. It could simply be a “security check. The safety of the crew of the Enterprise being paramount. Captain’s orders.” Mr. Worf had the right to investigate a potential incident. He did not have to involve himself any more than he had done in that baseline case. Both parties simply needed to take a breather, then talk over their problems with a counselor. Troi, of course.

This new protocol had value. Troi’s mental connection to her crewmates was so intensified now that Troi could—potentially—stop injuries or even death. Not that that was a concern. Troi’s ability was legitimate, like it had been before, and could be used to help people, as long as they all understood to tread lightly.

Learning her new compartmentalization skill had saved Troi from insanity. She felt lucky to have settled into her new life relatively quickly. Without any real assistance—Dr. Crusher kept her calm and sedated, but no one else, including Kris, really knew what or how to help her—Troi had stumbled into a way to feel at ease and accept her Betatal.

Of course, she couldn’t have asked any Betazoid to help her. No Betazoid beside her mother knew she was Betatal. Explaining how she became the highest level of Betazoid would be tricky. She and Picard had agreed to not go there, unless they absolutely had to.

Troi was reading a book and about to prepare for bed when a strong feeling overcame her. She knew who it was immediately—Kris.

“No!”

* * *

Kris’s Vulcan mind was trapped. She began to panic as her mind raced toward the open door and Re ‘Ugan. This time it wasn’t a slow crawl, the pull was strong and intense and instant.

To stop herself, she thought of a plan. She wasted no time initiating it.

She went into Ramos.

Kris’s eyes popped open and she jumped to her feet. She paced and ran her fingers through her shoulder length hair. *I was going there. My Vulcan was heading to death. How can this be happening? I can’t be Vulcan without meditation. Vulcans get out of balance without mediating.*

She heard a knock at her door.

Kris didn’t want to answer it. She knew who it was.

Finally, she said, “Come.”

Troi stood in the hallway, a concerned look on her face. She walked quickly inside and faced Kris. “What’s the matter, Kris?”

“Nothing,” Kris replied too quickly.

“What I just felt...”

“Counselor,” Kris interrupted her. “Am I not entitled to privacy?”

Troi took a deep breath. *Slow it down*, she advised herself. “Kris, I didn’t mean to invade your privacy. That’s not what happened. You know I don’t have the control to go in and out of Betatal or block it like you do. When things come to me, they simply come.”

“You do not have to be here, Counselor.”

Kris turned away from her. *Maybe Troi would go away if I showed her my back?*

“You’re right, Kris. I’m sorry, but it felt urgent.”

Kris realized showing her back to Troi wasn’t going to work. She turned and faced her. She said, “I was attempting a new kind of Vulcan meditation. I failed at it. That’s all.”

“You seem agitated, Kris,” said Troi calmly.

Kris gestured to the space of her new living quarters. “Because I am attempting to stay here, in my quarters. Isn’t that something you had noticed in the past, avoidance of my quarters? It is still not easy for me, Counselor. I thought that by meditating, it would help relax me.”

“I see. My apologies.”

“If you don’t mind, I need to go to the holodeck.”

Troi was blocking the door and she hesitated to move out of Kris’s way. She finally stepped aside and let Kris leave. *She’s a good liar, she thought. But, not that good.*

* * *

Two days later, the Enterprise was ready to return to their own universe. The rotation of the Quekkat planet had stabilized, and it had even rained once. The inhabitants were rejoicing and getting back to work. They had a lot of adjustments to make.

The rotation of the planet was different than it had been previously. It would never be the same again. However, the adjustments made to their agricultural equipment along with instructions on how to grow what plants in new locations—these provided by Data and Geordi—had satisfied The Five. They felt confident that their planet and its people would survive.

Picard accompanied Damian to the planet to say a final farewell to The Five. Picard was pleased to note that it appeared as if Damian was sincere in how much he cared for the beings in his universe. He felt there was still more to this Damian, but he clearly cared about his people.

A few hours later, Damian, in his own ship, escorted the Enterprise to the “hole.” He had explained to Picard that the hole

between their universes was always there, he kept it disguised most of the time. He didn't want unwanted visitors.

Just before the Enterprise re-entered their own space, Damian, his face large on the front screen, said to Kris, "I hope we don't meet again someday." There was a twinkle in his eye.

Both Picard and Kris wanted to get him to admit that he somehow knew Guinan, yet neither of them acted on this impulse. What would be the point?

Once back in his own universe, Picard sent his proposal to two people, his friend on the Tribunal Council, Thomas Vi, and Roger Ewell, another friend who had just replaced D' Ruy Argo on the very same council.

The proposal stated that Captain Picard had been reinstated with approval from William Riker. He needed formal approval from Star Fleet. He qualified the approval by stating his "demands."

He also submitted a detailed report (with a few things left out per Damian's wishes) of the assistance they had given to a planet that was in dire need. This planet was located in uncharted space and wished to remain so. Picard did his best to comply with Damian's request to keep his universe "as secret as possible."

Picard received two replies on the same day. One was a message from Thomas Vi, indicating his support for Picard's proposal. He also received a personal reply from Roger Ewell.

Picard and Ewell talked for over an hour. Ewell informed Picard that Tremond had also been replaced. He said he understood and approved Picard's demands. Having mostly been out of the Kris Rogan loop, Ewell was just beginning to understand the situation.

Ewell wanted to fully understand what Picard knew about Kris. As much as Picard knew. He also wanted to know if Kris would prepare a statement regarding Peterson. Picard thought Kris would pass on that opportunity. Ewell said the president was pressing to find out as much as possible. Now was their opportunity to expose all of it.

Ewell liked the idea of Kris Rogan as a commander on the Enterprise. He promised to work hard to advocate for both of them. Kris belonged on the Enterprise under the guidance of Picard. He already had Mr. Data, why not Kris Rogan? He avoided adding, "And, you're also her father, so there's that." That remained unspoken between them.

After talking to Ewell, Picard was relieved that his friend not only understood the delicacies involved, but he trusted Picard with this very complicated situation. Their friendship had remained strong, and now Picard had two trusted friends on the Tribunal Council. That could come in handy someday.

Of course, he couldn't tell Ewell everything. When it came to Quekkat, he only elaborated on one or two of the more general details. He could avoid those details by explaining that the planet was not ready for First Contact and that a "guardian" of the planet had asked him to respect their privacy.

Ewell was interested in Quekkat, but not as much as he wanted to know more about Kris.

Picard, however, did not tell Ewell everything about Kris, either. He did not mention Guinan at all. So much of her involvement revolved around questions that only Guinan could answer, yet she wasn't answering. He also didn't tell him that Kris's DNA was a part of the Enterprise's core and that it helped her pilot the ship. How could he report that without having any idea of how it was even possible? A Ramos thing was all he could say.

Additionally, he did not inform him that Counselor Deanna Troi was now a Betazoid Betatal. If he had told him, Ewell would be forced to inform Betazoid. Picard and Troi agreed now was not the time.

Instead, Picard focused on how Kris was raised, how she came to the Federation, and what had happened on Star Base 325, according to Kris. He said that Peterson had used Kris to spy on him as revenge for his wife's death.

Picard did tell him that Peterson had raped Kris multiple times, again, according to Kris. They discussed what had happened to Q and Kris's mother. Ewell had trouble grasping the difference between being "just" Ramos and being an Ancient, yet Picard sympathized with him, he didn't know, either.

All in all, Picard felt satisfied that this was the best-case scenario. His "demands" regarding Kris had been approved and he was being given a lot of leeway regarding Kris. Kris was still

a bit of a loose cannon, still relatively unaffiliated (with her commitment to the Enterprise being the only exception), and definitely not at all aware of a possible role in some kind of Ramos-related situation.

Meanwhile, Picard was still dealing with his own demons. A part of him still felt he had killed Peterson willingly. Even if Liz Rogan was “directing” his body to do the act, he still remembers the feeling of fury and how he wanted that man to pay for his crimes.

He reported that he felt better towards Star Fleet, especially after his talk with Ewell, but still felt that they had betrayed the whole concept of the Prime Directive by imprisoning Kris.

Kris, his daughter. Yes, he needed to talk about that, too.

He had met with Counselor Troi three times. He believed in the usefulness of talk therapy, even if he didn't love partaking himself. He knew he had to talk to her, though. He couldn't shake off the feeling of revenge when fighting Peterson, nor could he figure out how to protect an omnipotent being like Kris. Even if it may not be considered his job, ever since he had looked Peterson in the face on Arcane Five, the urge to protect Kris from predators like Peterson had taken hold.

Besides meeting with Troi, Picard was pleased that some semblance of normalcy had returned to the Enterprise. Kris was piloting the ship, Riker and Troi sat next to him on the bridge, with Mr. Data at OPS, Mr. Worf behind him at his security station, and Mr. LaForge in engineering.

This felt right to Picard, even though he had a sixth sense that things were going to be far from “normal” for quite some time.

* * *

Troi bolted upright in bed.

“Stop,” she screamed.

She concentrated. *Stop, stop, stop.*

She did it.

She didn’t know how long it would last, but, for the moment, she had stopped Kris from dying. She didn’t know how or why or what was really going on, all she knew was that her mind was the only thing that was saving Kris from death.

Troi slowly and carefully hit a communicator button because she didn’t want to distract her mind too much, she feared losing the valuable position she currently held somewhere in Kris’s mind.

“Captain Picard,” she said.

A moment later, Picard said in a sleepy voice, “Yes, Counselor.”

“Something’s wrong.”

That was all it took. Picard quickly called security. Mr. Worf was roused from sleep and went to Troi's quarters. Together, they met Picard on the holodeck where all three of them found Kris on Holodeck Two. She looked like she was asleep.

Mr. Data, Dr. Crusher, and Commander Riker joined them. Geordi was ordered in charge of the bridge, in case it was needed.

Dr. Crusher examined Kris and confirmed she was asleep, but she was unable to rouse her. She tried three different stimulants, but none of them worked.

Picard looked at Troi. "What is it exactly that you are doing?"

"I'm not sure." Troi was sitting in a chair that Mr. Data had provided. She was attempting to remain calm because she was still unsure of her ability to hold Kris within her current precarious position. "All I know is that Kris's mind is in danger. If she steps beyond my block, she will die."

"Doctor?" Picard asked Dr. Crusher, by way of getting her opinion on the matter.

"Kris is in Vulcan."

"She was in Vulcan the other day when I felt something similar," said Troi. "I went to her and she said she was attempting a new form of meditation. She wanted to be able to remain for longer periods in her quarters and thought it would help. She was lying to me."

“Can you elaborate?”

“Not now. Captain, I don’t know how long I can hold out.”

Captain Picard didn’t like the feeling of having no options. He looked at Riker and Data. “Opinions, please, and quickly.”

“If she’s in Vulcan, we need a Vulcan opinion,” said Riker.

Not knowing if the Enterprise currently had any Vulcans on board—they often didn’t have any—Picard asked Data, “Mr. Data, do we currently have any Vulcans?”

“We have a geologist named Lieutenant Pak.

Picard hit the communicator on the front of his uniform. “Lieutenant Pak report to Holodeck Six immediately.”

After only a slight hesitation, Pak’s voice answered, “Yes, sir.”

Picard returned his attention to Dr. Crusher. “What were her readings?”

“Normal. For a Vulcan. No elevated heart rate or pulse. Whatever is happening to her hasn’t affected her body, not yet.”

“And, her mental faculties?”

Dr. Crusher looked at her medical tricorder. “They appear to be normal. My readings show no sign of any stress.”

The door to the holodeck swished open, and a male Vulcan, Pak, strode in. He walked directly to Captain Picard, his hands laced behind his back.

“Captain?” he said.

“Thank you for coming,” he said, then stopped. How was he to explain Kris to... a Vulcan? Why did it have to be Vulcan? They were known for being rather inflexible. Not outwardly, yet he needed this Vulcan’s assistance and quickly. He didn’t need some kind of debate on the hows or whys of Kris and her existence. He took a deep breath and continued, “I need your assistance.”

“Yes, sir.” Pak glanced down at the sleeping Kris, who was curled up on a sleeping mat. He also glanced around at the Trellium Gardens from Betazoid that was programmed on this holodeck. If Troi hadn’t been so busy trying to keep Kris alive, she would be pleased that Kris had chosen to fall asleep in her favorite garden.

“This situation is delicate,” said Picard. “Let me begin by saying that anything that is said or done in this holodeck is confidential. You are not to speak of it to anyone. If you do not accept these terms, then you are dismissed. Do you accept them?”

Pak suppressed a grin that could have formed on his lips, were he not Vulcan. *Humans have such an illogical way to present an obvious urgent need. They believe Vulcans keep secrets?*

Yet, his curiosity was peaked. He said, “How may I assist you?” It was logical to try to find out more information, therefore he had to accept the captain’s terms.

“Commander Rogan is... a unique individual.” He gestured to the sleeping Kris on the floor. He pressed on. “She is a genetically engineered being with six separate and distinct species. She can individually be Human, Betazoid, Altaran, Muztarif, a species known as Ramos, and Vulcan.”

Picard stopped to let this sink in for a moment. He continued, “She is currently in Vulcan...”

“When you say ‘in’ you mean...?” asked Pak without completing the thought. If he weren’t Vulcan, he already would have admitted that he was confused. *A genetically engineered six species being that could individually be in each species? Impossible.*

“Kris has the ability to think about being one of her species, and then she is one of them. It is that simple.”

“And, quite impossible.”

“Excuse me, Lieutenant,” interrupted Dr. Crusher, “We do not have time to debate whether it is possible or not. Kris exists and this is how she exists. There is an urgent need here that means life or death. Please focus on that.”

Pak nodded. “Conceded. How many assists?”

“As I stated, she is a Vulcan now,” Picard said. He purposely left out the “in Vulcan,” in order to help Pak stay

focused. Dr. Crusher had been correct in pointing out the urgency of the situation. Is there any reason why a Vulcan who meditates would be...stuck? Or in any danger?"

Pak thought for a quick moment, then shook his head slightly. "I can think of no reason."

"Perhaps it is related to Re 'Ugan," said Mr. Data.

They all looked him. Mr. Data, in the way that only Mr. Data could, decided he need to elaborate. "When Kris and I were sent by Q to Vulcan of the past we encountered Vulcans who were committing Re 'Ugan. That was the name Kris had called it. Surak had confirmed that it was a form of Vulcan mental suicide."

If Vulcans were capable of looking astonished, Pak was very close to it. "Excuse me, Mr. Data, I do not understand what you are talking about. How could you have witnessed... How could you have talked with Surak? I am perplexed. Please explain."

"That's part of what we're not going to explain, Pak," said Picard.

"You must."

"Are you saying Re 'Ugan doesn't exist?" asked Troi quietly. "That it never existed?" Troi desperately needed action, not discussion.

They all stared at Pak. He was unable to tell a lie. "It is not spoken," he said.

“You need to speak of it now,” said Picard. “My commander may very well be in this Re’ Ugan place. She may be about to die.”

“That is not possible,” said Pak, his voice elevated. He was not agitated, Vulcans didn’t get agitated, aggravated perhaps.

Troi kept her voice low, she could only direct a small portion of her energy to this discussion. “Kris is in front of an open door. Her mind is locked somehow. I am in between her and a space that I can only describe as death.”

“Those doors have been closed for a long time,” said Pak.

“They existed?” asked Picard.

“Vulcans do not discuss Re ‘Ugan.”

“I am ordering you to discuss it.”

Pak did not respond.

“If it’s a part of your history, why doesn’t it exist anymore?” asked Riker calmly.

That, he felt, he could talk about. “Disciples of Surak figured out how to close the doors within our minds. Permanently. Giving Vulcan a path to mental suicide was a grave mistake. Surak knew this. His followers understood his wishes. It was stated that Vulcans will no longer speak of Re ‘Ugan.”

“As if it never existed?” said Picard.

“Captain, that door cannot be opened.” Apparently, he was talking about it after all.

“It is,” said Troi quietly.

Dr. Crusher stepped forward. “Can you find out?” she asked. Crusher knew exactly what she was asking of the Vulcan, so did everyone else.

Especially Pak. A Vulcan mind melds. It was a serious and very personal thing to ask any Vulcan to mind meld with another being.

Did Pak want to do this?

He glanced down at Kris. *A six species being? Fascinating. If it's true.*

Pak was a geologist by trade. He had hoped to one day be posted on one of the geological marvels, a planet like Beta III or Catulla. Yet, he held an interest in many of the other sciences. He had not ever given much thought to genetic engineering, though.

Yet, was there a parallel here? Surak's disciples had found a way to genetically close the door that led to Re 'Ugan. That feat of biological engineering had last for many, many millennia. The irony was not lost on him.

It appeared as if he was involved, he did want to know more. He nodded. “I will give my consent. May I have a private moment?”

Picard nodded and took a few steps backwards, so did the others.

Pak prepared his mind for a meld with another being. Like all other Vulcans, he was trained in the art of the mind meld. It was second nature to him, yet he had only done it a few times. Pak had considered himself a loner of sorts. He had applied to Star Fleet with a goal of eventually getting a geologic assignment. He didn't need a team with him, he preferred to work alone. In his experience, Vulcans who chose a path that involved more contact with others needed to be ready to use a mind meld more so than Vulcans who chose a more solitary life.

His preparation took only two minutes. When he was ready, he knelt down to Kris and positioned his hands along the sides of her face. The positioning had to be accurate.

He concentrated.

His mind wrapped around Kris's mind only moments later.

This was different. This was wrong. His mind was...
What is happening? What is this?

Pak pulled away from Kris, breaking the mind meld. His breathing was heavy, his face broke out in a very rare sight—Vulcan perspiration. He quickly got to his feet and looked at the others.

“How is this possible?”

“We explained Kris to you,” said Picard calmly. Out of respect, they were all ignoring the very un-Vulcan-like emotional response that Pak had obviously had during his mind meld.

“I felt... Six minds. It is... extraordinary.” Pak walked a few feet from the group, trying to compose himself. “That mind is...” He stopped. It suddenly occurred to him that his response had been emotional. The others were staring. They were waiting for him to be... more like a Vulcan.

He had no choice but to compose himself. “This being is fascinating.”

“Yes,” said Picard. “But, can you help her? Can you look at her Vulcan and... do something?”

Pak was at a loss. *Do what?* He wrapped his hands together in front of him. “What you are asking is something I do not think I can provide.” His voice was calm now, he was back to being a Vulcan. “Touching upon this mind is very complicated.”

“Could you sense her Vulcan?” asked Mr. Data.

“I...,” he stopped. He thought for a moment. *There was a human presence, a Betazoid... Yes, there was a Vulcan. I felt it.* “I did. I touched the surface of... five of them. The sixth... I believe it was the sixth that made me... It is very unfamiliar.”

“Her sixth species is very powerful. The beings are from a system with extraordinary abilities. To us, they appear God-like. For example, Kris can go into this species called Ramos, she can think about being on the planet Vulcan, and she can go there. Physically disappear from that spot and go to Vulcan.”

“That is most impressive,” said Pak. “If I were able to touch only on the Vulcan part of this Kris, I still am at a loss as to what you think I can do.”

“Close the door,” said Troi quietly. “I see it nearby. You can close it.”

“You ask me to confirm the existence of something that I have been taught no longer exists in any Vulcan mind, and additionally to function as a... doorman?”

Picard cringed at the metaphor, even though it had some truth to it. “Can you try?” he asked.

“I do not know what to do about this Ramos. It is very strong. Now that I have had a few moments to reflect on my experience, I can say that it may have pushed me out.”

Picard frowned at his observation. *That certainly doesn't make things easier.*

Mr. Data stepped forward. “You recently applied to a position on Catulla?”

“I did not get the assignment,” said Pak.

“You want an extended tour studying a planetoid? That’s your career goal?” said Picard. *Vulcans always want something in return for favors. We might as well cut to the chase. I need this man right now.*

“For the near future.”

Picard nodded. “Mr. Data, does Pak of Vulcan have the expertise and experience to handle a five-year position of Federation geologist on Quekkat?”

“Sir?”

Picard understood this Vulcan Pak. He had seen the type before. Pak didn’t want just any old assignment. He wanted one that allowed him autonomy yet allowed him to face an extreme challenge. Quekkat was an extreme challenge. The Five would have to be convinced to take on Pak as well as figure out how to either keep his existence secret or explain him in some way. Plus, he would either have to wear a suit or somehow be fitted medically with some prosthetic that would allow him to survive there.

Now, that was a challenge.

“Did you take any readings while the Enterprise visited Quekkat, geologically speaking?”

“Officially?” said Pak. “No. Commander LaForge for any documentation to be limited.” What he didn’t say to them was... *I was in engineering when Commander LaForge was studying a monitor that showed pieces of rock falling away from some type of asteroid-like formation that had been dug into the*

planetoid. I had attempted to question LaForge, however he said what the Enterprise was doing was classified. He couldn't explain.

Picard smiled. He knew he had him. "Did the planet Quekkat intrigue you?"

Pak nodded.

"We'd have to go back and discuss with the officials whether it is even possible. However, I believe that planet could use an individual with some knowledge of geology."

"I believe some details will have to be worked out," added Riker.

"Yes. Pak understands that," said Picard.

Pak looked down at Kris. "If I truly cannot help her..."

"Please try," said Picard. He gestured for the others to give Pak some space.

Pak again prepared himself. He knelt next to Kris, yet this time he hesitated before placing his hands. He recalled the one time Re 'Ugan had been mentioned to him. His brother, Qdeck, had once asked an instructor if a rumor of Re 'Ugan had been true. The instructor said he was not to ask such a question and had quickly moved on.

Pak put a visual of his familiar journey of meditating into his mind. He did his meditating at night, almost every night. While going deeper into meditation, it occurred to that

meditating itself was his mind taking a path, a tunnel of sorts. He steadied his breath, relaxed, and pushed away all thoughts. His focused all of his mental energy into one place. Yes, that place was a path.

He put himself onto that path, and then mind melded with Kris.

It was easier this time to locate Vulcan and avoid that Ramos push (more like a shove). It was there, but Pak's path allowed him to stay off of Kris's path. They ran parallel. He focused on following Kris's path while keeping out of harm's way.

His mind-meld was gaining strength as he moved deeper into Kris's mind.

Everything was going well, until the path split, it suddenly offered an option, right or left. He never had an option before when he did his meditation. *Where did this come from?*

He hesitated. He didn't know which way to go. He was stopped by a fork in the road.

Until he thought he had heard a voice. A nudge. A whisper.

He moved toward it, which lead him down the "left" path. It took him only a heartbeat to realize this was the unfamiliar one, the new one, the one he didn't have, or was told he didn't have.

He kept going.

Until he had to stop. He was blocked.

What was blocking him?

The whisper came again. “Close. The. Door.” Could a voice have spoken inside his head?

Pak had to do something he had never done in meditation, he had to explore an ancient and completely unfamiliar location. Even when he was first instructed in how to meditate, he never had to explore like this. That wasn’t the point of meditation. Thinking of a plan or constructing some kind of plan or even the existence of a plan, to him, was impossible.

This time he had to plan out how to close a door.

His mind reached forward. He envisioned grasping something. *There was something graspable?* This was also impossible in his usual way. He did it anyway.

He held onto an object during a mediation within a mind meld. He was doing the impossible.

Close. The voice again.

With his mind that was melded to Kris’s mind, he tested whether the “it” (the door) could move. He inched it ever so slightly.

It moved.

Impossible.

He moved it again.

Then, again.

How can I be doing this?

Yet, he was moving “it” to a space. He was closing... a door.

Quickly.

The voice.

Now.

Urgency. Now. Do it. Close it. Or else...

Pak filtered every fiber of his mind into a shove, a strong push, and he shut the door.

Then, he was booted out. Pak was flung several feet across the floor.

In the next instant, Kris’s eyes snapped open and she rolled over into a crouched position on her feet. She could have been mistaken for some kind of wounded animal.

Dr. Crusher and Riker rushed to Pak to check on him and help him to his feet.

Mr. Data’s attention went to Troi, who was also suddenly released from Kris’s mind, either by her own volition or by force. He grasped Troi to make sure she didn’t hit the floor.

Picard got close to Kris. “Kris, it’s okay.”

Kris was breathing hard. She looked around, assessing. Still a wounded animal.

Pak was all right. He stood next to Crusher and Riker.

Troi had recovered quickly. She was standing next to Data.

They were all looking at Kris.

It took her a minute to come to her senses. She controlled her breathing first. She seemed to be checking herself out, without any assistance from Crusher.

Once she had stood up, it suddenly occurred to her what had happened. She looked around at the familiar faces and landed on the unfamiliar one.

“You closed the door,” she said.

“I assisted,” said Pak. “You are a fascinating being,” he added, thinking that perhaps this comment would aid in her recovery.

Troi carefully approached Kris. She knew Kris had to be handled a certain way in a moment like this one. “Are you okay?” she asked.

Kris didn’t reply, which made Dr. Crusher step forward.

Kris put up a hand. “I’m fine, doctor,” she said.

“Are you sure?” asked Picard.

“I am,” said Kris quietly. *Now they know. They all know.* Kris didn’t know how to feel at the moment. She was physically fine and her the Re ‘Ugan door was finally closed. She was relieved. The rest, however, made her feel uncomfortable.

“How could you have opened a door that had been removed millennia ago?” asked Pak.

Kris tried to ignore him, yet instinctively begin to form an answer in her mind. She thought about saying, “I don’t know. I wasn’t consulted when Guinan and my mother built me.”

Picard, however, positioned himself squarely in front of Pak. “Thank you for your assistance, Pak. Mr. Data will go to the bridge and set a course back to Quekkat. Hopefully, we can somehow contact Damian and ask if you can be posted there. I will do my best to make it happen.”

Pak knew he was being dismissed. Now.

He nodded. “Computer. Exit,” he said.

An exit door appeared in the garden. Pak walked out, followed by Mr. Data.

Picard nodded to Riker. He touched Troi’s shoulder, she nodded at him. Then, he left.

Picard looked at Kris. “May we talk?”

“Perhaps a little later, Jean Luc,” said Crusher.

“No,” said Picard. “Now.”

Troi understood the delicacy involved. She stepped closer to Kris. “Kris, according to Pak, the path with that door had been eliminated from Vulcans, most likely through genetic engineering, ages ago. At least that’s what he was told.”

“That could very well be correct. Yet, I have that path.”

“We understand that.”

Troi hesitated, she knew her next question or two would be difficult. Yet, Picard was right, Kris had to come clean. “How was the door opened?”

Kris felt that familiar urge to run away. To disappear. She did not have to tell them anything. She didn’t want to. Yet, she was back on the Enterprise because... they wanted her, and she wanted to be here. These people... cared about her. Could she...trust them?

“I opened it.”

Picard, Troi, and Crusher did not respond. They knew they had to be quiet and wait.

“I was on Star Base 325. I would meditate often. I didn’t have my Altaran needs yet. I could play with my Muztarif gifts to kill time. My human and Betazoid were still under-developed. For many months, years, Vulcan meditation was a way to escape. My only way.

“I discovered the door approximately a year after being imprisoned. I become more curious each time I meditated. This second path was enticing. I began to go there every often.

“Eventually, I opened the door.

“I didn’t know what I had opened at first. All I knew was, what I learned over a period of time, there was a dividing line. The door was now opened and there was a choice. One side, one choice was safe, the other side, the other choice, wasn’t safe. I eventually figured out what that meant, it meant the other side was death. To cross that line with my mind meant death.

“I began to go there more often. The door was permanently open. Apparently, once opened, it never closes. I would get as close as possible. At the very last moment, I would then pull myself back. Back to safety.

“I would come out of meditating, and still be locked in my quarters on Star Base 325.”

The garden was silent. Any birds or other critters had chosen this moment for silence. As if they knew this moment needed silence.

Kris couldn’t take anymore. “Computer. Exit,” she called.

The exit appeared and Kris walked out.

Picard, Troi, and Crusher spend a minute each collecting their own thoughts. They glanced at each other, yet they couldn’t speak.

They understood what Kris had just confessed. She had developed a game while in prison. A very dangerous one. One that meant the difference between life and death. All because she

had been locked up by Star Fleet. All because the Prime Directive had been ignored.

All because it was the only thing she could control. For years.

The one thing she could control, each and every day, was her decision whether to live or die. It was all she had. There had been nothing more.

Chapter Four

The Enterprise arrived at the “hole” three days later. Kris had, again, engaged the Ramos, but this time because of expediency. Picard wanted to get there as soon as possible. He felt the sooner the better, if The Five agreed to allow Pak to remain to assist them.

The Enterprise waited at the “hole.” Picard asked Kris if she knew of a way to contact Damian. She said did not, and her answer did surprise Picard.

A plan was hatched. Kris helped the Enterprise go through the hole with her Ramos, breaking through Damian’s camouflage.

Turns out, that was all that was needed to summon Damian. The Enterprise had only been in his universe for a few short minutes before he appeared on the bridge.

Picard sat down with Damian in his ready room in order to make his pitch for Pak. Picard emerged thirty minutes later to announce that Damian had gone to The Five to seek their approval.

He returned a few hours later.

Picard quickly assembled his senior officers and Pak in the conference room.

Damian informed them that The Five had accepted their plan. He said that he had explained to The Five that Pak was an offlander who wanted to live on their planet in order to assist in any geologic needs that may arise. He also told them that Pak would study the remains of the blaydoid. He would explain that having exact knowledge of the blaydoids would assist other planets in the future, if something similar were to happen again.

It was decided that Damian would take Pak to Quekkat in his ship. It was large enough to transport all the necessary supplies Pak would need to live there for five years, including materials to construct a housing facility. Pak would live in the southern hemisphere since all of the inhabitants had, by now, been moved to other locations.

Mr. Data and Mr. LaForge would construct a suit that Pak could wear while working outside. They were confident they could make one that provided as much movement as possible, the less constrictive, the better, added Pak.

The Five added that perhaps a cover story could be made up in case Pak was someday discovered. They would work on this story with Pak, once he arrived.

As a sort of back up, in case Pak's suit failed him or his housing unit got destroyed somehow, Damian made a suggestion to Kris. He asked her if it was possible for her to provide a small amount of a contained form of her Ramos energy. This could

accompany Pak. Enough that, if needed, Damian could use, only for survival purposes, of course.

Both Picard and Kris were skeptical. They wanted to know more about this Damian. Who was he really? Where did he really come from? How does he know Guinan? For how long has he known her? What did he know about Guinan's plans?

Neither of them felt like interrogating him, though. He was doing them a favor. If anything, they wanted those answers from Guinan. And, they wanted them soon.

Pak's supplies were beamed over to Damian's ship, and Pak was ready to go. Kris walked him to Transporter Room Five.

Before he stepped onto the pad, Kris asked, "What was in like in there? In my mind?"

"I find that an odd question."

Kris remained silent. She wasn't about to repeat the question.

"Complicated," said Pak.

"Thank you for closing the door," said Kris.

Pak nodded. He stepped onto the platform, and Mr. O'Brian hit a few buttons.

A moment later, Pak was gone.

Kris headed to the bridge. She sat down at the Conn next to Mr. Data. Kris piloted the Enterprise back through the hole and into warp eight. The non-Ramos warp.

The Enterprise was headed to Corellian System. Captain Picard retired to his ready room and Riker was busy at his station. Mr. Data asked Kris, "I found it interesting that Damian suggested a small amount of your Ramos to accompany Pak."

"He said it would be used in reserve, in case something happened to him."

"Can it be used if you are not there?"

Kris thought about his question. She checked a sensor or two, to kill time. "I don't think so," she finally replied. "Perhaps he wanted a souvenir."

Mr. Data cocked his head. "I do not see why he would want that."

"I was attempting a joke," said Kris. She then attempted a smile, but it wasn't much of one.

Six hours later, the Enterprise was still a day and a half from their destination. Kris completed her shift at the Conn and headed to engineering where she informed by the on-duty officer, Lieutenant Perez, that Chief Engineer LaForge was off duty.

Kris wanted to ask Geordi about the small contained amount of Ramos she had sent with Pak. She had told Mr. Data that it couldn't be used without her. She thought that was true.

But, now that she had time to think about it, why had Damian wanted it? If she was right, and the material was useless without her, then what was the point?

More importantly, why had Kris allowed it? On the surface, it had seemed harmless. She briefly considered objecting, but the next thing she knew Picard had asked her if she could grant Damian's request. If she had concerns, she could state them. Everyone was staring at her, waiting.

She froze.

That was the real reason why she didn't object.

Then, when harnessing the small amount that had been requested, Kris had been pleased at how easy it was to construct a container durable enough to hold her energy, and how quickly she was able to transfer this little bit. It seemed to settle inside its new home quite impressively.

As a matter of fact, the Ramos piece no longer felt like a part of her once it was safely trapped inside the diriplium-lined container. Geordi had suggested adding the diriplium to line the inside of the container since diriplium was a very minor ingredient in the plasma core.

The process had so fascinated Kris, she didn't feel like questioning Damian. In the back of her mind, she thought he had his reasons, and they were not what they appeared to be.

She let it go. She stored it away as yet another thing to bring up with Guinan, when she eventually showed up.

Kris spent twenty minutes wandering the decks of the Enterprise thinking about the slice of Ramos she had sent with Damian as well as the next stop for the Enterprise—they were going to Alluss, a relatively new Federation member in the Corellian system. Picard and Riker were asked to go to assist them with a peaceful transfer of leadership (apparently things had gone awry in the past).

She was doing this to avoid meeting with Counselor Troi. Now that she could put it off no longer, Kris headed to her quarters.

She knocked and Troi invited her inside.

Once inside, Troi took a good look at Kris. “Why do you always walk in here looking so dour?” she asked. She gestured for Kris to sit across from her.

Kris hesitated. “I do not like it here.”

Troi frowned. *Every time*, she thought. *Teenagers*. To Kris, she said, “You’re fifteen, correct?”

Kris thought about it, and replied, “I believe I am now sixteen.”

“You are? When did that happen?”

“Three weeks, one day.”

“Happy birthday.”

Kris did not reply. She remained standing by the door.

This frustrated Troi. “Kris, please sit down.”

“Counselor, I do not want to ‘talk about things’.”

“Do you understand your age?”

Kris’s brow furrowed. “I do not understand the question.”

“At your age, well, human teenagers can be surly and defiant. They question authority and test boundaries. They pull away quite easy.”

“So, you believe I am acting like a human teenager?”

“Right now you are.”

They stared at each other. Kris sat down to prove to Troi she was *not* being defiant. “I do not wish to discuss anything, Counselor.”

“You need to. We’ve tried doing this before.”

“With no definitive results.”

Troi smiled. “Kris, do you trust me?”

Kris looked away. “I dislike that question.”

“Why? It’s a reasonable question.”

“Because you don’t want to hear my honest answer.”

“Of course, I do.”

Kris shook her head. “I don’t trust anyone,” she said.

“Okay.”

“You’re surprised.” It was not a question. Kris was reading Troi.

“That’s cheating.”

“Counselor, if you want to do this...”

“Try calling me Deanna. I’m calling you Kris and you don’t seem to mind it.”

Kris took a deep breath. “Fine. Deanna, you want me to talk about how I did Vulcan meditation when I was on Star Base 325. I understand that. What I don’t understand is why. What good will it do?”

“A lot of good, Kris. For example, talking to me about how those things made you feel will help you build trusting relationships.”

Kris frowned. “You claimed I was cheating? What are you doing right now?”

“Trying to get you to understand. I know how you were feeling when you told us about Re ‘Ugan. How that door got opened. Why you went there time and time again. You were sad when you told us.”

“I was sad because....” Kris stopped and shook her head. “Please.” *I don’t want to do this. These people say they want me here, but then they do this. What do they really want from me?*

“I don’t want anything from you, Kris,” Troi stated very clearly, her eyes boring into Kris’s eyes. “Now, that’s cheating.”

“You get to mind read when you want to.”

“When it’s between us. On a very limited basis and only when you’re trying to twist things. I am not trying to hurt you, Kris. I’m not trying to trap you or get anything from you. I want is for you to fully understand what happened to you.”

“Why?”

“Because I care. Because I know it will be healthier for you.”

Kris was silent, she had had just about enough.

“Listen, Kris, come to me at this time tomorrow. Come in and sit down. I will only ask three questions. You do your best to answer all three questions. And, you are not allowed one-word answers. Try to answer with complete thoughts or memories. Please, try this for me.”

Kris stood and headed for the door. She looked back at Troi. “You know I’m uncomfortable doing this. Why force me?”

“Because of all the reasons I just stated. I understand you’re uncomfortable. I’m trying to help you with that, too. I hope someday you can feel like you trust me.”

Kris left.

Troi leaned back in her seat. *And, sometimes, the damage is too deep, and the wounds can never heal. Don't forget that, Deanna.*

* * *

Picard and Riker successfully assisted Alluss in their transfer of leadership. Mr. Worf brought a team down to head off any security concerns, but there were only minor skirmishes. This had been the smoothest transfer of power for this planet in fifty years. The people of Alluss were grateful.

The Enterprise stopped at Star Base Sixty-Five. They were six hours away from departure.

It had been three days since Troi asked Kris to return. Troi wasn't surprised Kris had spent those intermediate days providing reasons why she couldn't come.

Kris finally gave in. She sat across from Troi.

"How are you?"

"Fine," said Kris, immediately ignoring the "no one word answers" rule.

"Is your Vulcan all right?"

"It is. I have meditated again. The Re 'Ugan door is closed."

“Why did you delay in coming here?” Troi asked.

“Those are the three questions you want to ask me?”

“Yes.”

“I was busy.”

“Remember, I asked for complete answers. Can you tell me more?”

“How about I made it clear that I don’t see the value in talking to you.”

“You’re treating this like a chore. Something unpleasant. Why don’t I promise to steer clear of the topic of Star Base 325 or Peterson or your mother? Would that be okay?”

“For now, right?”

“Okay, look, don’t come back. If this is too hard for you, Kris, I don’t want you here. I believe I’m your friend. We share this Betatal link. But, we have shared more. I would rather remain your friend than be the ship’s counselor and force you to come here.”

“It appears as if you’re upset with me.”

“Did you get that from your Betatal?”

“I am in human.”

“Good. And, no, I’m not upset with you. But, you are clearly struggling and if there’s a choice between being your friend and being your counselor, I’ll take friend.”

“I believe you’re not supposed to choose ‘friend’ in this scenario. Isn’t it your duty to force me into counseling over trying to be my friend?”

“Your situation is unlike any other. You are not a typical crew member. And, our unique relationship makes it even more complicated.”

“I’m always going to be the exception, aren’t I?”

“In a way, you’re one hundred percent correct. Perhaps you should consider accepting it, Kris, all of it. You are special. You are a species of one. You have admitted you don’t even know everything about yourself. How you tick. How you actually work. Beverly, Geordi, Data, they can’t figure you out, either. Just accept it and move past it. Come back here when you want to. When you feel you need to? All right?”

Kris headed to the door, but she stopped. She said, “Being unique doesn’t mean I want to make things difficult.” She faced Troi, who remained on the couch. “I guess it’s fair to say I have trouble with change. And, being around...others.”

Troi smiled. “Have a good night, Kris.”

Kris headed to the holodeck, then abruptly changed her mind. She walked onto a turbolift, and a minute later she walked into her quarters...

...where she faced Guinan, who sat comfortably on a chair. “I wondered when you would show up,” Guinan said with casual tone.

Kris crossed her arms and paced to the window, she looked out at the stars, her quarters faced away from the star base. *They want me here. I want to pilot the Enterprise. Troi wants to be my friend. Picard wants to be my father. I want... What? To feel it. Why can't I feel it? While still being... comfortable? What is my comfort? Here? With them?*

Guinan remained where she was, maintaining her business-like posture. She expected to be in charge right now. "We need to talk. Now that you're where you're supposed to be, I can outline..."

"Stop," interrupted Kris.

"Kris, what I have to say..."

"I said stop. What you have said will be said to all of them, Guinan."

"That's not possible. They are far from ready..."

"They're involved, aren't they?"

"Very much so, yet on the periphery, and I'm not at all sure about how they..."

"Stop," Kris interrupted yet again. A blue glow appeared around Guinan. Her eyes bulged as she immediately understood what was happening. "No, Kris, do not do this," she spat, it sounded like a growl. "You and I need to do this ourselves..."

“No,” said Kris calmly. She hit a button on her comm. “Captain Picard.” She waited, then heard, “Yes, Kris.”

“Guinan is in my quarters. I think you and the others should be present.”

Picard didn't hesitate, “We're on our way,” he replied.

Guinan was not about to give in. “Kris, don't do this. You don't understand...”

“You're correct, I don't. They don't. You are going to tell us. All of us.”

“I can't...”

“Then, you're going to remain on this ship until you do.”

“Will you please stop interrupting me? Kris, I'm begging you not to do this.”

“You want me here, Guinan, with them on this ship. I am part of this crew and with these officers. Just like you said I needed to be. They have a right to be as involved as I am.”

Guinan continued to plead, yet Kris stopped responding. She had made her decision, she had chosen them, not her. Them, not her mother. Them, not the Federation Councils or the Federation President. Not anyone official within the government of the Federation. If Guinan wanted her to be with them, she was going to deal with them and her. Together.

A knock was heard at the door.

“Open,” said Kris.

Picard stood in the doorway. He wasted no time walking into Kris’s quarters. He was followed by Riker, Mr. Data, Dr. Crusher, Geordi, Mr. Worf, and Counselor Troi. They filed in and formed a semi-circle in front of Guinan, Picard took his position in front of the group.

Picard looked at Kris. “Thank you, Kris.”

“All of you belong here.” She looked at Guinan. “They belong here.”

Picard noticed the blue glow around Guinan and quickly figured out what it meant. “Kris, release her, please.”

“If I release her, she’ll leave, and we won’t get any answers.”

Picard directed his gaze at Guinan but replied to Kris. “Guinan and I have known each other for a long time. I trust she won’t leave.”

Guinan shook her head. “If I tell you too much too soon, Jean Luc, it could put you and your crew in jeopardy. Especially Kris.”

“Guinan, you have been there for me in the past. You know me. You know my crew. Trust us.”

Guinan and Picard stared at each other for several long moments.

“Kris,” said Guinan, “please release me.”

The blue glow around Guinan disappeared.

“Can everyone please sit?” she asked. Kris, Picard, and the others found seats. Guinan sat down in the closest chair.

Kris looked at the officers. She said, “Guinan has informed me that there are only two Ancients left, me and an Ancient named Regor. She stated that this Regor, if he still exists, will someday, somehow do something catastrophic. She’s not sure if Regor is still alive and, if he is, she has no proof...”

“I have some proof,” said Guinan.

“Which is?” said Kris.

“I will have to explain some things first, from the beginning,” said Guinan, yet she didn’t continue. She suddenly appeared to be lost in thought.

Kris was done letting her off the hook. “You implied I was made a specific way for a reason. Regor is the reason?” she asked.

“Yes,” said Guinan.

“Because he’s an Ancient?” asked Picard.

“That’s not the beginning.” Guinan took a deep breath. Kris was afraid she was about to disappear or give yet another excuse for not explaining what was going on.

She didn’t. Guinan said, “The Ramos universe has always contained the beings you know as Ramos. I am a Ramos. Yet, we also have... higher beings. More skilled. Stronger

abilities. My abilities equaled that of Q and any of the Continuum. The Continuum is considered our cousins. The higher beings are called Ancients. Ancients are above Ramos and Continuum. However, there have always been fewer of them than us. Less than two hundred Ancients at their peak.

“The Ancients were good. They weren’t our Gods, but they were. They were our mentors, our teachers, our friends. Until, they turned. They went bad. And quite suddenly.”

“For a long time, we couldn’t predict how or when an Ancient would go bad. It just happened. We couldn’t figure out why they turned on us. We medically tested them over and over, the ones who would let us, the ones who hadn’t yet turned, but we couldn’t figure out the transition. How an Ancient would be fine, and then that same Ancient wouldn’t be fine.

“When they turned, the things they did were horrible. They killed so many of us before we even knew what had happened. They destroyed planets. Star systems. Half of our population.

“These bad Ancients when to other universes and did unspeakable things. We had to do something drastic. When they changed, all they wanted was to destroy.

“Similar to trying to destroy a being from the Continuum, like Q, it takes three Ramos to destroy an Ancient. We had to act, and we had to do it fast or we were going to be wiped out. We began to destroy them. At first, we tried to destroy the ones we thought had crossed over. We are a fair-minded species. We didn’t think it was fair to murder them. We

still hoped that the change either wouldn't happen or wouldn't be as devastating if it did. We kept trying to cure them. We never gave up.

“Eventually, we had to destroy them just before we thought the change would occur. We were finally able to recognize the signs. If we had waited, we would have died. It was that simple.

“This lasted for a millennia or two until there were only a handful of Ancients left. Regor was one of them. Regor had never shown the signs of turning. He seemed fine. He was watched quite carefully. He helped us to hunt down and destroy the remaining ones that had just turned.

“He had us convinced that this turning was not going to happen to him. He claimed he was immune. We tested him but, didn't find any a link to the sickness, virus, what it was that was making our Ancients turn. We believed Regor was okay.

“Regor visited the Continuum. We had a good relationship with them back then and he went to discuss some boundary issue between our two universes.

“Turned out, Regor had fooled all of us. He had turned, but he had learned how to mask it. He killed several members of the Continuum. They managed to drive him away. He disappeared.

“Of course, they were furious. Stunned. Mostly because we hadn't informed the Continuum that our Ancients were turning, that most were either dead or very dangerous. We told

them we thought Regor was okay. They didn't believe us. Yet, they teamed up with us to hunt down Regor.

"It was around this time that there was only one other Ancient still alive, Liz Rogan—that was her humanoid name. She was my friend. Liz began to fear for her life. Even if I thought she hadn't turned, the Ramos now had proof that all of the Ancients must be destroyed.

"Out of fear, she did something that no other Ancient had thought of at this point. She began to study this affliction. She began to study herself, instead of us studying an Ancient. She wanted to find a way to stop it. She wanted to live, without turning into a monster."

"But, she had to hide. I helped her. I lied to my fellow Ramos, telling them I didn't know where she was. What I was doing was risky, especially since we had failed so poorly with Regor. But, I couldn't destroy her on my own, I was only one, and I didn't want to.

"Liz was determined to find out how Regor fooled us. After extensive research, she thought she had the answer. She thought Regor was what you humans would call Patient Zero. It all began with him.

"She thought Regor had a slightly different gene in one specific strand of his DNA. The others didn't have this anomaly—until Regor gave it to them. He had poisoned the other Ancients."

Guinan paused, long enough to allow Picard to look at Riker and Crusher. He glanced at Kris, but she did not look back at him, she was staring at the floor.

“She believed Regor wanted the others to be like him. He wanted the Ancients to turn bad, to kill, and to destroy. Because he was that way. It was lonely to be the only one. He hid it and controlled his impulses for a very long time. He wanted the Ancients to be true Gods, above the Ramos beings, above the Continuum, above any being that ever existed.

“Liz could not figure out how he infected the others, but she believed he did. She not only feared the Ramos trying to kill her, but also that Regor would come after her. I tried to convince her that the Ramos would protect her now that we finally had some answers. Once Regor was found, and hopefully destroyed, she could be saved because she hadn’t been infected.

“It took a long time to find Regor. The Continuum found him. They informed us that they had destroyed him, finally achieving their revenge. We asked for proof. They said he was gone and that we should trust them. I needed the proof so that my friend could return from hiding. They refused.”

Guinan stopped, like she had needed a short mental break.

“Is that the reason why Q hated so you much?” Picard asked.

Guinan nodded. “The relationship between Ramos and the Continuum had been permanently broken by Regor. Kris’s

mom didn't believe the Continuum had destroyed Regor. They claimed that three members of the Continuum could destroy an Ancient like three Ramos could. It wasn't true.

"Liz and I agreed that he was probably still alive, and he was planning something catastrophic. She went on the offensive and left her hiding place to search for Regor. She found no traces for a long time. Then, she tried something. I guess she was desperate. She reproduced the gene and altered her DNA. She hoped this would be the way to find him.

"This was where Liz and I disagreed. I tried to stop her. But, she was stubborn. Once it was done, there was no going back. She continued to look for him. After some time, she thought she had found traces of him in certain locations. Ironically, these were places the Continuum claimed they had already looked. She confronted the Continuum without our knowledge. She said they admitted they didn't have proof that Regor had been destroyed. They could not produce a body or any evidence.

"At this point, Liz convinced me to talk to the other Ramos to explain that Regor was still alive and that he was very dangerous, more so than any of the other Ancients combined. She wanted me to tell them that she might be similar to him now, even though she believed she hadn't turned. The DNA she used on herself had been synthesized. She thought she was okay, yet the other Ramos didn't believe her.

"They sent me back to try to convince her to turn herself in. If she did that, she knew it meant her death. I refused to leave

until we came up with some kind of compromise. I was gone a long time.

“Sometime after I left, Regor found Liz. Regor knew that she had discovered his secret. Liz knew he was there to kill her.

“They battled. Liz said it was fierce, and during most of it she was on the defensive. She said Regor had been surprised by her strength. Liz knew this extra strength had come from the synthetic gene that she had given herself. This unexpected edge allowed her to escape, barely.

“Once she felt safe, she realized she had scratched Regor’s body and some of his blood was on her. This sample was significant because it was unlike the other ones he had donated. This sample was fresh and recent, and Regor was no longer masking his true self. It made all the difference when she finally tested it.”

Guinan looked at Kris, her gaze unchanged.

“Your mother discovered why the gene in Regor was so different. Why that gene was unlike any genes in the other Ancients. It was a humanoid gene. A very complex one. So complex that no single humanoid could ever have it. This gene was composed of markers from five different humanoid species.”

Guinan stopped again.

The room was still, no one dared make a sound. All eyes except Kris's were locked onto Guinan. They all knew what was coming next.

“Human, Vulcan, Betazoid, Altaran, and Muztarif. Markers from each of those species were in that one gene. Liz realized “she” was not enough. She could never stop Regor on her own. Nor could any three Ramos, even if she was among the three. She needed a weapon to destroy him. One that could attack that gene, because it was that gene that had allowed him to lie to us for so long, to medically fool us. It had given him some kind of extra power above all of the other Ancients. Regor had turned long before any of us had realized it. He had spent several millennia lying to us while he created allies. Luckily, he had failed with most of those alliances. He, apparently, doesn't play well with others. All that time, however, he knew we couldn't destroy him.

“Kris is that weapon. The one weapon that could, potentially, destroy Regor. Her Ramos doesn't possess that gene...”

“The ship has it,” interrupted Geordi.

“It does,” said Guinan. “Let me caution you all. A lot of Liz's work was unproven.”

“If Kris is the weapon, why not give her the gene?” asked Picard.

“Because it didn't work. Liz had the synthesized gene and it didn't work. She had to try something else. A

combination, if you will. Something that could attack him on several fronts, if it were necessary. See, Liz created Kris the way she did because she believed that was the formula that could destroy him. Kris might be able to do it on her own. But, Liz created a backup plan. Support. One that didn't come from Ramos because she believed this gene with its humanoid elements was the key. She thought a backup plan had to come from the humanoid species. The gene in Regor is...supernatural isn't the right word. Nor is Godlike."

"It is biological," said Mr. Data.

"It is," Guinan agreed. "It was definitely not synthetically made like Liz's. Liz's theory is that Regor didn't know he had this gene for a very long time. At some point, he not only discovered the gene but also somehow activated it. He discovered that it was a source of power that went beyond being an average Ancient. He then learned to hide its existence and use it only when he needed. He kept all of this secret while trying to turn other Ancients into another Regor in order to create his own advanced army."

"Ancients are already so advanced, why make them more so?" asked Crusher.

Guinan shrugged. "We don't know. Our guess was Regor become power hungry. He wanted to control the other Ancients, and if he couldn't control them, letting us kill them worked for him. Liz could never quite figure out how Regor uses this gene or how he hid it from us.

“She did, however, break down it down and study it. There was enough of the gene in her blood sample to give her a picture of its composition. She then studied the five humanoid species in the gene. Why those five? This unique combination in this one gene gave Regor advanced powers. Why?”

“She never figured out why those five, did she?” asked Picard.

“Not completely. But, enough to develop two plans. One being Kris, the most direct way to combat him. The literal way, the logical way. The backup plan was more ethereal, it had to attack the front that Liz knew existed, but she couldn’t quite figure out. It was this the higher power that Regor used from the gene that was spiritual, psychological, emotional, and, yes, even Godlike. It was all of those things, and yet something never seen before.

“Kris is the five species plus Ramos. The backup plan needed to be a connection to Kris that would elevate her beyond that synthetic gene, the one that didn’t work inside of Liz. The gene in the ship’s core gives a biological link to Kris’s Ramos that allows her to use an actual ship. A substantive weapon, if you will. One that Liz felt might be useful. The five of you that link to Kris’s five humanoid species are completion of the backup plan.”

“How?” asked Troi. “How can we boost Kris? She was created with more Vulcan than a typical Vulcan. More Muztarif than a Muztarif. What could we add to that?”

“I’m not sure. This part was all Liz, and I have very little proof of the backup plan. How it is supposed to work. Liz had her reasons, though. I wish she were here to explain them. I do know that all of those six components, you five plus the ship, are useless without you, Picard. The real human biological connection. You provide the spark to it all.”

“Theoretically?” said Picard. “The ‘how’ part that I’m assuming you can’t answer.”

“True, I can’t,” said Guinan.

“You said that I’m supposed to be a part of this, but you didn’t know how,” said Geordi. “Why am I here? Am I supposed to be?”

“I’m not sure. Liz never mentioned how you specifically connected to Kris, yet she wanted you there when she transferred her Ancient to Kris. She insisted on it but didn’t explain her reason to me.”

“There is so much conjecture here,” said Picard. “You and Liz Rogan spent, what, a millennia on plans devised to stop a rogue Ancient who may or may not be plotting to destroy universes? These plans included developing and creating a brand new being. They also involved a very elaborate backup plan. Yet, so much of this is simply a guess.”

Guinan considered her respond for a few moments. She quietly said, “Yes.”

“If I may ask, it seems that most of what you believe came from Liz Rogan and only Liz Rogan. Even her story about

Regor finding her and almost destroying her. Guinan, are you sure you believed her? You never doubted her?" asked Picard.

"I believed her," Guinan said without pause.

"Who is Damian?" asked Picard.

"Damian is what he said he is. Damian needed assistance. He had a planet in his universe that was damaged, and he could not find a solution to that problem," said Guinan.

"Kris was the only person who could help him?" asked Dr. Crusher.

"I can't do what she did," said Guinan. "Ancients have powers to adjust planets. They can destroy, and, yes, build planets. I was not sure that Kris had those powers. I told that to Damian."

"You told him about me?" asked Kris. "He set up this elaborate kidnapping plan in order to coerce my assistance? He could have just asked."

"Damian is... a unique individual. His universe exists on another dimension, as you discovered. There are others like it, most are inaccessible to you. The only way this ship could have traveled in that dimension was because of Kris and her Ramos. And, before you ask, I did not put a planet into jeopardy in order to trick you into doing something like that." Guinan looked at Picard. "Jean Luc, you are correct. I am unsure about a lot of this. I am trying to find answers. I have been trying to find them for a very long time. What I didn't want is to reveal all of this too early. You're not ready. Kris isn't ready."

“Stop speaking for me,” Kris said in a whisper. She spoke to the floor, not to Guinan. “I know I was made in a lab. I know I am like no other being.” Kris glared at Guinan, she stood and hovered over her. “I now understand that I was allowed to leave the moon in order to grow up on my own, wasn’t I? I was supposed to go through certain experiences without assistance in order to train me. Is that correct?”

Guinan took a deep breath, then she shook her head. She said, “I don’t know if your mother wanted those specific experiences, Kris. There was a part of Liz that... resented Star Fleet. She held a grudge. I don’t know exactly how that factored in...”

“I do,” said Kris. “I was a tease, a carrot. I was dangled in front of them because of my mother’s hatred toward Star Fleet. She offered me to them to keep them busy. If they were focused on me, she could complete her plans. You Ramos weren’t really after her. Star Fleet was.”

“I really don’t think...” said Guinan.

Kris cut her off. “What else would it be? It was always about her. All of it.” Kris’s loud voice echoed in the room. “Are you one hundred percent certain that my mother didn’t ‘turn’ as you called it? She had that synthetic gene. It didn’t do anything to her at all?”

“I’m not sure...”

“Of course, you’re not. Do you really know anything, Guinan? Do you think this second-hand information is helpful?”

This is what you had to keep from me? I should have been told all of this years ago so I could make my own decisions. Not be a pawn in some plan.”

“Kris, I admit I don’t have all the answers. Most of this was your mother’s doing. I have offered all of the information I have. All of the answers I have. I’m sorry, Kris. I truly am.”

“It’s not good enough,” said Kris. She wandered to the back of the room.

Picard stood in front of Guinan. “I need your assurance that you will continue to talk to us. No more secrets. No more keeping us in the dark.”

“I’ll try, I promise.”

He shook his head. “I don’t know if I believe any of this, Guinan, but one thing I know for sure is that Kris is here. She exists, whatever the reasons for creating her. There is no going back. Whatever is happening out there, most of it is not under our control. Including this Regor. Guinan, I am a captain of a Federation star ship and Kris and these officers are members of my crew. You can continue your research, warn us of this impending doom, but until you have something concrete, what are we supposed to do?”

Guinan stood and faced Picard. “Nothing.” She smoothed her garments. “If I have an update, I will contact you. Just... be careful, Picard.”

“I always try to be careful,” said Picard. “Thank you for confiding in us. I would ask one thing... If you could find out

why we are connected. How exactly. What it means. If there's a higher purpose for it, then my staff and I can be better prepared."

"I will." Guinan looked at Kris, who refused to look at her. Her back was turned, she stared out the window at the passing stars.

Guinan frowned and disappeared.

"May I speak to Kris alone?" asked Troi.

Picard nodded, he looked at the others, and they immediately headed to the door and filed out one by one. Picard was last to go. He glanced at Kris while hesitating in the doorway. He didn't say anything to her, just stared at her for a moment. Then, he left.

Troi waited, she knew better than to approach Kris or try to talk to her. She sensed what was coming. She knew it needed to happen. It was long overdue.

Kris turned. She leaned against the wall and slowly slid to the floor. Her hand covered her mouth. She shut her eyes. The tears began slowly, then burst into something primal. Her body shook. Her face reddened quickly.

Troi went to her. She sat on her knees in front of Kris. She placed her hands on Kris's shoulders and held her. She thought an embrace would be too much contact for her. But, she hoped a slight touch would be meaningful. She had to let Kris to do this. She needed it. Desperately.

Troi knew this was a pivotal moment with Kris. She wouldn't leave her alone, even if Kris asked. By the mere fact that Kris was still in the room told Troi that Kris didn't want to be alone. She needed a friend. She needed someone to help her.

* * *

Kris cried—hard—for twenty minutes.

Troi let her go, she saw no reason to try to calm her. She wanted Kris to let it all out. Troi wondered if Kris had ever cried like this in her whole life.

She thought not.

When her crying slowed, Kris began to get control of herself. She took several deep breaths and leaned her head against the wall.

Troi's hands remained on Kris's shoulders and Kris didn't protest.

"Thank you for remaining here, Kris," Troi said in a whisper.

"There was no reason to go anywhere else," Kris said, her voice cracked. She cleared her throat, surprised by the sound of her own voice. "Toward the end, I kept thinking...Imagine if my mother or Guinan had told me all of that when I was still on

the moon. I might have stayed. Instead, my mother let me go. Did she know what was going to happen?"

Troi removed her hands and sat in front of Kris. "I don't think we'll ever know for certain, Kris."

"Maybe she thought it would do me some good, to be locked up by Star Fleet. Guinan was correct about her resentment toward them. My mother would send me there so I could divert them. I wouldn't put it past her."

"Is that why you think she might have turned bad?"

"It's possible."

"Kris, why did you want all of us here?"

"You're all a part of this. I don't know how, or even why, but my mother did something to connect all of you and this ship to me."

"Is that the only reason? You could have met privately with Guinan and then conveyed all of that to us. Instead, you insisted we be present."

Kris didn't respond. *I know what she's getting at. But, it's not like that...* "Guinan has been chasing after me for weeks..." Kris stopped. *I wanted witnesses. I wanted to not be... alone.* "I'm not sure," she said quickly.

"You can say it, Kris."

Kris shook her head. "I..." Kris looked away. To her surprise, tears again welled in her eyes. She tried hard to not look back at Troi.

"You're tired of being alone. Is that it?"

Kris sat still for several moments. Finally, she shrugged.

"Can't you say it?" asked Troi.

"I don't know." Kris looked at Troi. "Maybe." Kris took a deep breath. "Do you know what bothered me the most? What bothers me?"

"What?"

"They thought of me as a weapon. Guinan used that word. When I had a chance to destroy Q, I didn't want to do it. It felt wrong to destroy. Guinan expects me to be this weapon. When I'm needed to destroy Regor, if that ever happens, if it were to come to that, what happens if I can't kill this Regor?"

"I don't know. Let's hope that opportunity never comes."

Troi got to her feet. She held an open hand down to Kris.

"Will you come with me?"

Kris looked up at Troi. "Where?"

"It's a surprise." Troi smiled.

Kris didn't feel like smiling. She didn't feel like moving. Yet, she also wasn't in the mood for an argument. She gave in and got to her feet.

Troi led the way out of the quarters.

They ended up in Ten Forward. While still standing in the doorway, Kris said, "I don't often come here, you know."

"Maybe that'll change, after I introduce you to something."

Troi led Kris to an empty table. When a waiter showed up, Troi ordered two hot fudge sundaes. After the waiter left, Kris said, "What are we eating?"

"You've never heard of a hot fudge sundae?"

"I eat only food cubes that are specifically designed to feed all five of my humanoid species'."

"Well, that's why you might come back here after you try one of these."

The waiter returned with two hot fudge sundaes. He placed one in front of Troi, the other in front of Kris. Troi picked up her spoon and tested a bite.

Kris just stared at her sundae.

"Kris, you need to..."

"I know how to use a utensil, Counselor," Kris said while apparently studying the dessert. "I'm assuming that you

believe that this creation will taste so good that I will want to return for more?"

"Exactly."

"What nutritional value does this present?"

"None. It's for fun. For every once in a while. I find it's especially helpful when I'm emotionally down. It makes me feel better."

"A creation with no nutritional value is helpful when you're upset?"

"Yes," she said, then ate another bite. "Try it, Kris."

Kris picked up her spoon. She scooped a sample that included ice cream and hot fudge. She put the spoon into her mouth carefully. She didn't swallow right away, instead she let the "creation" sit in her mouth for a few moments. Tasting it.

Troi watched her with a smile on her face.

"Well?"

Kris finally swallowed. She looked at Troi. "It is different."

"Different good or different bad?"

"Tasty. Creamy. I would like more."

"There it is," Troi said and ate more of her sundae. She knew she didn't have to say anything else, the hot fudge sundae was doing its job, distracting Kris, if only for a short time.

Making her feel good for a little bit. It was new to Kris and Troi was happy to see Kris eating more and more of it.

Troi knew there weren't a lot of hot fudge sundaes in Kris's future, but, on this day, one hot fudge sundae was warranted.

Chapter Five

Days later, Kris's life began to ease into a somewhat comfortable routine. She piloted the Enterprise and worked in engineering. She visited the holodeck to run in Altaran, or to be alone.

She still preferred to be alone, whether on the holodeck or in her quarters, where she was finally comfortable. She avoided most socializing opportunities.

She had promised Picard that she wouldn't leave the Enterprise. Three times, however, the Enterprise was in orbit around Class M planets. During these missions, Picard allowed Kris to visit the surface to run in Altaran away from any indigenous peoples.

Kris began to consistently meet with Troi. She refused to call it therapy or even talking—she called it a “sitdown.”

Troi didn't mind, she was happy that Kris was making this effort.

Troi wasn't too pleased, though, that Kris wanted to meet in Ten Forward. Troi allowed it, because she wanted Kris to be comfortable, she understood this had to happen on Kris's terms.

Only once did they order hot fudge sundaes. Usually, they didn't eat, just talked. Sometimes, they sat quietly. Kris

asked Troi if it would be all right if she could just be quiet at times to try to organize her thoughts. As long as it made Kris comfortable, Troi was okay with it.

After a few weeks, Troi convinced Kris to change locations. In order to do this, Troi had to convince her that she was receiving therapy from Troi.

By this time, Kris was comfortable talking with Troi. To Troi's surprise, Kris told her that talking to her once or twice a week made her feel more comfortable on the Enterprise. She felt at ease with Troi and was no longer afraid to talk.

When Kris began to get comfortable talking to Troi, she suggested they move their sessions to Troi's quarters, where she regularly talks with crew members. Continuing to meet in Ten Forward didn't make her look professional.

Kris met with Troi for two weeks in her quarters. By this time, Troi knew there was one topic that Kris never brought up. Troi wanted to try to broach this very delicate issue. It was time to try.

"Kris, what did you feel when you were in Vulcan while you were on Star Base 325?"

"Counselor, you know that in Vulcan, feelings are suppressed."

"Is that why you chose Vulcan when Admiral Peterson raped you?"

Kris hesitated. *There is it*, she thought. To Troi, she said, “I don’t consider what Peterson did to be what you call rape.”

“We consider it rape. Star Fleet is investigating Admiral Peterson’s actions. Captain Picard asked me to ask you if you testify.”

“About what?”

“Rape, Kris.”

Kris shook her head. “What if I don’t see it that way?”

“Would it prevent you from testifying? Why can’t you simply tell Star Fleet what he did to you?”

“I don’t want anything to do with the officials from Star Fleet.”

“You can record your testimony to me.”

“My testimony won’t help with this label, Counselor.”

“It was rape, Kris.”

“Explain how to me.”

“Did you want him to have sex with you?”

“I wanted to get off of Star Base 325. I was willing to do anything to do that.”

“Did he force himself on you? Meaning, would you have been more comfortable had he *not* done that to you multiple times? Was it quid pro quo?”

“He implied that I could secure my transfer to a star ship...”

“Not the Enterprise?”

“Not at first.”

“His quid pro quo changed? That’s more than an implication. That’s planning. That’s using his position to curry ‘favors’.” Did Peterson say raping you was in exchange for a star ship assignment?”

“Counselor, this is quibbling...”

“It is not, Kris.” Troi had raised her voice. She took a moment to compose herself, even though she was not about to back down. “Why were you in Vulcan? Why did you choose Vulcan, the species with suppressed feelings? Which I don’t quite believe.”

“What?”

“A Vulcan knows when they’re being forced into a sexual act. There’s knowledge there, which is a hallmark of a Vulcan.”

Kris rose to her feet, but didn’t leave, and didn’t disappear. “I want to stop this discussion.”

Troi stood and got close to Kris. She knew she had built up the trust to do so. She put a hand on Kris’s arm. “Were you raped, Kris?”

“I...,” Kris began, then stopped. “I don’t know.” Kris’s face looked flushed. Thoughts were swirling through her head. *Was I? Why does it matter so much to her?*

Troi nodded. “Kris,” she said. “That’s an acknowledgement. You don’t know because you *didn’t* know. You didn’t understand what was happening to you. You wanted to escape, to get out. You were a prisoner offered a carrot. If you do this, you’ll get out. You had no one to help explain what it really was, Kris. No one to help you. And, you were only, what, fourteen?”

“Roughly.” Kris ran her fingers through her hair. “Is this important, Counselor?”

“It is. Very. Not for some Star Fleet investigation. For you. So you can understand, fully, what he did to you. Kris, you need to give someone your permission. Always. That’s the first thing that you have to understand. Whether you were doing it for your own reasons or not, he had no moral or legal or ethical right to force you to do that in exchange for anything. He was in the wrong, Kris. He took advantage of you and that is punishable.”

“He’s dead.”

“Fine, then acknowledged. The Federation needs to acknowledge that it happened. Even if rape is rare within our system, the acknowledgement would be huge. It’s important, Kris. It’s a part of what Star Fleet, as a whole, did to you. They’re prepared to accept it.”

Kris nodded. “Can I go now?”

Troi smiled. “Sure.”

Kris headed to the door. She turned back. “I’ll try again next time. Is that okay?”

“You’re doing great, Kris. Really.”

Kris left and went directly to the holodeck. She reproduced the planet Hoth on holodeck six. Most of its surface was thick with lush greenery, even the open spaces had green grasses. If she were running on a simulated planet, the more vegetation, the more benefits to Kris’s Altaran. It wasn’t the real thing, but it was better than nothing.

While she ran, Kris’s mind worked out the problem, *Was I raped?* Technically, she had to admit that Captain Picard, Troi, and the others felt that she was raped. They insisted on calling it that. It was vitally important to these humanoids.

At the time, it hadn’t occurred to Kris to call it anything. She was focused on one thing—getting off the star base. It was simply an event that had occurred.

Was it wrong, what Peterson did to me? If it were wrong, does that affect me?

Kris’s legs pumped harder. *What if it didn’t happen? What if Peterson just oversaw my training and then assigned me to the Enterprise? What if he didn’t... take advantage of me?*

Kris increased her speed. Her body flew down paths and through meadows, she was running so hard she couldn't have noticed all of the sights as she passed, not that she was looking at them. *Was it okay? Did I not want it? Did I suffer some injury? Did I go into Vulcan in order to keep my mind at some kind of distance, as my body was being taken advantage of? Did Peterson rape me?*

Kris covered twenty miles faster than she had ever run. When she finally stopped, her breathes came rapidly. She walked around, gaining control.

When she left the holodeck, she got changed and reported for her first shift. Picard had agreed that (on most days) Kris could do double shifts, one at the Conn, the other in engineering. Kris's metabolism functioned at a higher level than most of the human crew. She didn't require as much rest. And, Picard knew that Kris was happiest when she was working.

After her shift in engineering, it was morning.

Kris found Captain Picard in his ready room. "Is it important that Star Fleet knows what Peterson did to me on Star Base 325?" she asked the captain, who sat at his desk.

"I believe so," he said.

"Why?"

"So, it never happens again," he replied. "It should have never occurred in the first place. Peterson, Argo, Treemond, they are being punished. The full council continues to investigate.

The president is outraged. I am finally satisfied that they are taking this very, very seriously.”

“You weren’t?”

“I was bothered. Depressed about it all, really. That and Peterson. Peterson got away with it, Kris. Understanding how he did will help Star Fleet install stronger protocols to ensure that something like that will never be repeated. You have to understand, Kris, a guard might have known what was happening inside your quarters. Or, Peterson’s assistant. This is being investigated to the fullest extent possible.”

“I’m not sure I can speak to them,” said Kris.

“What about giving a statement to Council Troi?”

“If I talk to her, I don’t have to directly testify to Star Fleet?”

“I believe that will be acceptable,” said Picard. “Thank you, Kris.”

Kris nodded. She went to her quarters and made an appointment with Troi. She rested for a few hours, then reported to Troi’s quarters.

After Kris and Troi were seated, Kris said, “I do not know how to begin.”

“Well,” said Troi. “First, for the record, I must state that this is being recorded as testimony that will be sent to Star Fleet for their investigation into the actions of Admiral James

Peterson while he was posted on Star Base 325. The time period is between Star Date 61547 and 61552.”

“And?”

“And, you tell me what happened.”

“Each time?”

“Just the first time, Kris. We’ll start there.”

Kris did not speak for a minute. She was gathering her thoughts and memories. She decided to go into Vulcan, since she was in Vulcan at the time with Peterson.

Troi noticed. “Kris, can you do this in Human?”

Kris was confused. “Why?”

“Because I feel it would be more beneficial. You were in Vulcan as a way of distancing yourself. I don’t want that distance here.”

“You would like me to be emotional,” Kris said, it was not a question.

“I would like you to try to recollect the events in Human, Kris. Can you do that?”

Kris frowned, then finally agreed with a nod. She changed into human. She, again, prepared herself. She decided to begin at the first mention of what Peterson had wanted. She described the moment she met him and how he told her he was taking over her training. She was to be a Star Fleet officer.

A few days passed.

Kris felt better than she had the whole time she was on 325. One day, after a long day of training, Peterson walked her to her quarters. He went inside her quarters with her. They discussed her training. Then, he asked her to go into her bedroom with him. He said she was going to have to pay him back.

“He had sex with you?” said Troi.

“Yes,” said Kris.

Troi again asked why Kris chose to be in Vulcan when Peterson had sex with her, she said she had already been in Vulcan while training, so she remained in Vulcan.

Kris said that when Peterson was finished, he left her quarters. Kris took a shower. She said she didn't remember feeling any emotion regarding what had just happened in the bedroom.

“You were still in Vulcan?”

“I was.”

“How did you feel the next time you were in human? Or Betazoid? Or Muztarif?”

“I felt no residual feelings related to that event.”

“Did it happen exactly the same way each time? At the end of a training day, Peterson would walk you to your quarters, go inside your quarters and then inside your bedroom, and, once

there, he would tell you to have sex with him? You would be in Vulcan so you stayed in Vulcan? Each time was the same?"

"Not each time. There were times with wasn't in Vulcan."

"But, you would switch into Vulcan before... Peterson began?"

Kris nodded.

"Why, Kris?"

"To be consistent."

Troi frowned.

Kris shook her head. "Do you want a different answer?"

"I want the answer to be accurate. Why, when Peterson brought you into your quarters and began to rape you, yet again, did you change from Human to Vulcan?"

"What if I don't know, Counselor? What if... I just did it."

"Was it one hundred percent for 'consistency'?"

"Routine. Because I had... he expected it." Kris looked away, her gaze suddenly looked distant, like she was remembering something important. "He said it."

"He wanted you in Vulcan?"

“If I wasn’t in Vulcan, he ordered me to go into Vulcan.”

Troi didn’t respond. Kris didn’t speak. “He understood what it meant when you were in Vulcan, Kris. He thought it meant protection.”

“His protection?” Kris asked quietly.

“Perhaps. Vulcans are disconnected from their emotions. If questioned, you would respond that you were in Vulcan and therefore didn’t feel...”

Troi stopped. The enormity of how awful all of it was had stopped her.

“We can stop here,” she said.

Kris ignored her. “Are you saying that if one time I had remained in Human, for example, I would have had an emotional response? My experience would have been different? What you call rape?”

“It’s possible,” said Troi.

Troi leaned forward and put a hand on Kris’s knee. “We really can stop now.”

“Can you stop the recording?”

Troi nodded. “Computer, stop recording,” she said.

“Acknowledged,” responded the female-sounding computer voice. “Recording stopped.”

To Troi's surprise, Kris said, "Can I go over it again?"

Troi nodded. "Of course." She knew what this was called, "a breakthrough." One that she thought would never happen. A difficult one, perhaps the most challenging one she'd ever worked on. Troi felt relief, not just for herself. Mostly for Kris. This manufactured being who felt she didn't deserve to belong anywhere or to feel real feelings, just had her first-ever break through.

* * *

Kris piloted the Enterprise at the Conn station, with Mr. Data at OPS next to her. Behind them, Picard was in his seat, flanked by Riker on one side, Troi on the other.

Dr. Crusher entered the bridge and sat next to Troi.

"Three fatalities. Eight more reported ill," she reported to Picard.

"Mr. Worf," Picard said to the Klingon who was at his station above and behind him, "contact the Tellians and inform them we are three minutes away."

"Yes, sir," said Mr. Worf as his fingers worked.

"Have they identified the source yet?" Riker asked Crusher.

“Not yet.”

“Sir,” said Mr. Data. “Long range sensors have detected a location on Tellian that appears to contain high concentrates of zenon, slittren, and prellium. It is an isolated area.”

“Those substances should not be present on this planet, sir,” added Kris.

“Tellian is Class H. Their atmosphere produces a methane gas in small quantities. Short term exposure is possible, yet long term exposure can be harmful to the Tellians. The Tellians did not originate on Tellian. They were nomadic Isthians who discovered it and formed forty-one colonies. They now call themselves Tellians. The short-term exposure to the atmosphere does not harm the Tellians nor would it harm any humanoids. They produce their own food in the fertile soil yet process it within their large domed structures. Any harmful residue is filtered out. The food is then eatable. The harmful zenon, slittren, and prellium elements are not native to Tellian.”

“Not the most ideal place to live, if you ask me,” said Riker.

“We need to find the source of the contaminant,” said Picard.

“Captain, long range sensors show the concentration of zenon, slittren, and prellium originate from a small structure located two hundred meters from the main compound,” said Mr. Data.

“Can you get a picture, Mr. Data?” asked Picard.

Data worked on his panel for a few moments. He shook his head. "Interference, Captain."

"Keep trying," said Picard. "Opinions."

"Is this object the source of the contamination?" asked Crusher.

"I will need more information to be certain," said Data.

"If it is the source, it needs to be isolated immediately. I'll need the most critical patients up here," said Crusher.

"They've requested to be treated on the planet, which is their right, doctor," said Picard.

Dr. Crusher frowned. She stood up and said, "I'll get my teams ready to go to the surface. Can the most critical patients all be in one place, at least?" she asked.

"That's being arranged," said Picard.

Crusher nodded and hustled off the bridge.

"We are now in orbit around Tellian, sir," said Mr. Data.

"Captain, in order to properly assess the situation, I would like to suggest Mr. Data and I transport to the surface to investigate," said Kris. She had swiveled in her chair to face Picard.

He hesitated.

Kris decided to elaborate. "Sir, I will in Ramos.

Additionally, if this structure is the source, I can surround it with Ramos in order to contain the toxins."

Picard did not hesitate. A few months ago, he would have. He was not trusting Kris. Now, she was not only one of his command crew, but they had a solid understanding. She had to be safe, too. The Tellians were in a very dangerous situation. He had to act fast.

"Do it the old-fashioned way," said Picard.

Mr. Data and Kris stood and headed to the turbolift. Their stations were immediately replaced.

Inside the turbolift, Mr. Data said, "Transporter Room Three."

Is that what the captain meant by 'the old-fashioned way'?"

"It is," said Mr. Data.

It took Mr. Data and Kris forty-five seconds from the turbolift to appear on the planet. Mr. Data hit his communicator, "Transport successful. Initiating investigation of the source."

"Continue," said Picard's voice.

Mr. Data activated his tricorder. After a few seconds, he nodded in the direction of a small knoll. Kris and Data climbed the knoll.

At the top, they looked around at rust-colored fields below. They saw what looked like a large cylinder. It was on its side, being held in place by some type of stand.

Mr. Data's fingers worked on his tricorder. "I read large amounts of zenon, slittren, and prellium emanating from that structure," said Data. He hit his communicator. "We have confirmed the source, Captain. It is a cylindrical object approximately two meters in length. The object has a base of unknown composition. The zenon, slittren, and prellium toxins are entering the breathable air from the source."

"Kris," said Picard.

Kris knew what he wanted. She walked down the hill and stood in front of the object.

She stared at it, she stunned by what she was seeing.

A moment later, she encased the object within her blue protection of Ramos. She hit her communicator. "The toxins have been contained," she said. "Captain, can you have Mr. LaForge and Dr. Crusher join you on the bridge?"

"Why?" asked Picard, his voice sharp over her communicator.

"I need the seven of you to see this object. So, I may explain it."

On the bridge, Picard didn't quite know how to answer Kris. *It must be important if she's asking*, thought Picard. "You know what this object is?"

Kris's voice came over the speakers. "I believe so. I do not know everything about the object itself. Captain, please."

That was all Picard needed to hear. "Mr. LaForge, Dr. Crusher to the bridge."

Dr. Crusher's voice responded almost immediately. "We're busy getting prepared."

"Your teams can handle the preparations, doctor, but you need to delay sending them down. I need you on the bridge," *Why does Beverly always need to be told things twice?* he thought.

Picard glanced at Troi. "Kris is worried, yet also intrigued," she said to Picard.

"I could have told him that for myself, Counselor," Troi heard in her ears. She stifled a smile. She had forgotten that in Ramos (and in Betazoid) the two of them had the ability to share thoughts. She had also forgotten to put up her wall. In Ramos, Kris's Betatal was very strong and could pick up the slightest mention of anything that had to do with her. *Sorry, Kris,* she thought.

While Picard waited, Mr. Data and Mr. Worf established a picture of the object. It was on the front viewing screen when Crusher and LaForge joined them.

Picard faced the viewer. He saw Kris and Data flanking the cylindrical object. "Well?" he said.

Kris pointed to five symbols etched into the base of the object, pointing to one at a time. Each symbol had an exact match on the housing of the cylinder. As Kris pointed to a symbol, she said one word per symbol. “Vulcan. Human. Betazoid. Altaran. Muztarif.”

Kris faced the screen. “Both the base and the cylinder display these very specific symbols.”

The Vulcan symbol depicted the Vulcan hand greeting.

The Human symbol depicted a “peace” symbol from Earth circa nineteen hundred and sixty-five.

The Betazoid symbol was a colorful brain created by the Betazoid High Council to depict their specific brain talents, especially those of a Betatal.

The Altaran symbol depicted a tall tree with wide, thick branches.

And, the Muztarif symbol was an open mouth with two squinty eyes. There was no nose.

Picard glanced behind him at Riker, Worf, Troi, Crusher, and Mr. LaForge. He looked back at the screen and said, “What does that mean?”

“This object houses the technology that was used to build me,” said Kris.

Mr. Data’s head tilted, and the bridge was quiet as this information was absorbed.

Mr. Data asked, “Why does the housing unit emit the harmful elements?”

“I am not one hundred percent sure, Mr. Data. As far as I recall, the technology was on the moon when I left. My mother had mentioned many times the need to find what she called ‘a safe place’ to hide it. She expressed that it would be difficult to hide.”

“Kris, can you access the technology?” asked Picard.

Kris studied the cylinder as Mr. Data took more readings. She touched the cylinder and the base.

Finally, Kris faced the viewer. “Captain, I am in Ramos. Even in Ramos, I am unable to open the container. I believe there is a lock, of sorts.”

“What does that mean?”

Kris thought about her answer for a moment. “Knowing my mother, she would not have allowed the process of access to be simple. Even for me. She had been almost paranoid when it came to the technology. Therefore, I believe she fashioned a receptacle that is complicated. There is a seriousness to her desire to hide the technology. Additionally, she would have found it... fun,” said Kris.

“And, you’re sure it’s in there?” asked Riker.

“I... feel it, Commander,” said Kris. “Captain, I am assuming you would not want me to attempt to open it here? I

would not put it past my mother to put..." She stopped and looked at Mr. Data.

He finished the sentence for her, with his usual seriousness. "...booby traps."

Picard frowned. "Is the technology itself dangerous?"

"Negative. However, besides potential traps, the elements have already been proven fatal to inhabitants on this planetoid. I would not like to risk more fatalities."

"What are you suggesting, Kris?" asked Picard, even though he already knew the answer.

"I would like to open it. I might be the only one capable of doing so. And, I believe I cannot do it here. Mr. Data can confirmed the elements are coming from the object. Sir, the object is emitting the harmful elements in a very direction, a beam that points into the atmosphere."

"I'm not liking where this is headed," mumbled Riker.

Mr. Data checked his tricorder. "Confirmed, Captain. The beam of harmful elements are pointing into space."

"Is the object telling us where we need to go?" asked Picard, none too pleased to be asking the question in the first place.

"I believe so," said Kris. "The direction of the beam plus the three elements themselves are very specific and they obviously do not belong here. They may be indicating the origin

of the object. I believe this locked housing is a complicated way to hide the technology, one my mother would approve.”

“Mr. Data, the harmful elements, where do they originate?” asked Picard.

Mr. Data did not answer right away. He was processing (thinking). “There is one possibility. A small system on the far end of the Manderian galaxy.”

“Manderian? Another unexplored galaxy,” said Riker.

“That is correct, Commander,” said Data. “I can confirm using the ship’s computers.”

Picard nodded to Geordi, who hustled to the bank of computers behind Mr. Worf.

“Captain, my mother had mentioned the Manderian system a few times,” said Kris.

“Elaborate,” ordered Picard.

“She claimed to know a being from the Manderian galaxy. ‘Hibbonox,’ she called the being. A few times when she returned from a journey, she had said she had visited her friend, Hibbonox.”

“Sir, it would take the Enterprise, under Ramos power, four days, nine hours, and three minutes to reach the Manderian galaxy,” said Mr. Data.

“We’re going there?” asked Mr. Worf.

Data looked at Kris. "I believe Mr. Data understands what is needed to open the structure. You do as well, Captain."

Captain Picard did not respond. *I'm very tired of traipsing around the galaxy because of Liz Rogan and her unproven plans*, he thought.

He turned to face the back of the bridge. "Mr. LaForge?"

Geordi stepped forward and stood next to Mr. Worf. "They element are from the Manderian galaxy all right."

"What about the matter at hand?" asked Dr. Crusher.

Picard nodded, this time Crusher was right. "Is it protected, Kris? Can the medical teams beam down?"

"Yes, sir," said Kris. "I will remain near it in order to keep the toxins contained."

Picard turned to Crusher. "Get you teams down there," he ordered.

Dr. Crusher did not need to be told twice this time. She hustled off the bridge.

Picard turned to Mr. Worf. "Mr. Worf, assemble security teams. I want to keep the peace as we treat the patients. And, I want to keep everyone away from that object."

"Yes, sir," said Mr. Worf. He immediately headed to the turbolift and disappeared.

Picard looked at Riker, then back at Kris. “Can you keep that safe on the Enterprise?”

Kris nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“There’s no other way to do this?” asked Picard.

Before Kris could answer, Riker said, “Can’t you travel with it yourself?”

“I can transport other beings with me, Commander. However, I do not believe I can transport this object. Additionally, I feel you and the others, and the Enterprise may again be needed,” said Kris. “It is my feeling that this will work out in that manner.”

“Your mother again?” said Riker before sighing. “We’ve been needed a lot lately.”

Picard nodded. “We have to wait until the medical teams get established. Dr. Crusher will have to be satisfied that they can be left for a week or two.” He looked at Riker. “We’ll go and retrieve our medical and security personnel when we’re done with...whatever that is.”

“And, what that has in store for us,” added Riker.

* * *

Captain Picard ordered a shuttle bay to be cleared. Kris moved the object into a shuttle craft that she had prepared with Ramos and piloted the craft and object into the cleared bay. Round-the-clock security was posted at the hallway that leads into the bay.

Kris had removed the object from the shuttle craft and decided she would remain with it for the duration. She promised Picard to make sure the object was always protected by her Ramos.

It took Dr. Crusher and her team sixteen hours to stabilize the patients on the planet and set up a medical ward. When she was satisfied that her team had control over the situation, Crusher returned to the ship. The Enterprise left orbit twelve minutes later en route to the Manderian system.

Troi visited Kris in the shuttle bay. After she sat down, Kris said, "I knew you would come."

"As long as it's a good surprise," Troi said and sat down. "Are you all right, Kris?"

"I am maintaining the Ramos protection around the object, Counselor."

"Without any negative issues on your humanoid forms?"

"I am able to go into my humanoid forms while maintaining this protection."

"I didn't realize that. Would you mind me asking how you can do that?"

“If you wish to fully understand, I cannot technically explain how I am able to do it. I do not specifically know. I just do it. I extend my Ramos around the object and go into a humanoid form.”

“You’ve tried this before?”

“I understood that protecting this object in Ramos for four days and nine hours would harm my humanoid forms. I ‘felt’ that I could maintain the Ramos while changing. I conducted an experiment while the object was still on the planet. It worked. My humanoid forms only have a miniscule variation.”

“Your Ramos humanoid hybrid is different than just being in your regular humanoid form?”

“It appears so. My humanoid forms are in a medically satisfying state. It does...feel different. Not harmful, just different.”

Kris appeased Troi by changing into Betazoid.

This made Troi smile. “Yes, you seem find,” she said.

Can you still hear me? Kris thought.

Troi nodded. She thought, *I can.*

Kris then blocked Troi from her Betatal self. Troi put up her block. This was their normal way to be around each other now, unless one of them had an emergency.

“You are here to make sure that my humanoid forms are all right?” said Kris.

“I came to visit you. It would be Beverly’s job to check on your health.”

“I understand now how I must try to avoid overtaxing my humanoid forms.”

“Kris, can this technology help you understand yourself better? Could it even explain why you can protect something in Ramos while you’re in a humanoid form? How you switch from each species? You’ve never technically known those answers.”

Kris thought about this question, she was fairly certain she knew the answer. “I do not believe so. Perhaps with extensive study of the technology.”

“How your internal organs change? How your appearance changes?”

“Of course.”

“Do you want to study it, Kris?”

“I’m not sure. It’s interesting that the Enterprise happened to be the ship to find it.”

Troi’s smile was the only reply Kris needed.

“We have now entered the Manderian system,” said Mr. Data.

“Scan, Mr. Data,” said Picard.

Data’s fingers flew across his board. “The system contains one small sun and over two hundred planetoid bodies, only four habitable. I have detected the elements zenon, slittren, and prellium.”

“Well, at least we’re in the right place,” said Riker as he leaned forward, his hands on his knees.

“Sir, a small craft is approaching,” said Mr. Data.

“Identify,” ordered Picard.

“It is a one-person vessel. Minimal power. No weapons.”

“Mr. Worf try to contact the vessel,” he said to Mr. Worf without looking back at him. “On screen, Mr. Data,”

A moment later, a small, round ship appeared on the screen.

“I have a Mr. Hibbonox,” said Mr. Worf.

Picard turned and nodded to Mr. Worf. He hesitated a second, then said, “Mr. Hibbonox. I am Captain Jean Luc Picard of the Federation starship Enterprise.”

“Yes, yes, about time, I say,” said a cheerful, male voice. On the screen, a rotund humanoid appeared. He was

squished into a very small piloting space in his small craft. His round body matching the cylindrical quality of the ship itself. "I am Hibbonox. My friends call me Hibby. Yet, I don't think I have any friends, so call me what you wish, I say."

Picard rolled his shoulders ever-so-slightly. *Is this going to be like dealing with the Ferengi or Muztarif?* he thought. His outward appearance did not change. "Mr. Hibbonox..."

"No, no, I say 'Mister' won't do. There was a fella a long time ago who wanted to call me that. Said it made me more honorable, I say. It didn't. I was just a young one at the time, and it made me feel beyond my years, I say. Do you know what I mean, Picard of Federation?"

It is, thought Picard. "Hibbonox," he said with an even voice. "You said 'about time'?"

"You want to unlock the damn thing, don't you, I say? Well, see, I'm glad that you do, and I have been waiting a long time. Almost a month, I say. See, I lost it, and that's not good..." Hibbonox stopped to hit a few buttons on his control panel.

Picard glanced at Riker, who knew exactly what Picard was thinking.

"...I can't have her mad at me. She said to keep it here. And, next thing I knew, I couldn't find it. Where the devil was it, I say?" Hibbonox wiped his brow with what appeared to be an ordinary rag.

"On a planet in a different system," said Riker.

“Oohhh, too far, I say. Yet, here I am. And, here you are. Means only two things, she said. Well, one thing, really. But, in this case two. One being that it got lost, but now it’s not, I say. The other possibility, well the only one for Miss Liz, you know her, right?”

“Yes,” said Picard. He didn’t want to elaborate at this time. He desperately wanted to move this along at a faster pace.

“Well, Miss Liz said that only... Well, I say, is the owner here?” Hibbonox again wiped his brow.

“Kris Rogan is with the object in one of our shuttle bays,” explained Picard.

“Well, that is just... Well, ideal, wouldn’t you say?”

Picard actually didn’t quite know what to say at this point. He was rescued by Kris, who contacted him on his communicator. “Yes, Kris.”

“Now that we are here, I believe Hibbonox might need to be in the shuttle bay, sir. Along with the rest of you,” said Kris’s voice on the loudspeaker.

Picard nodded, he glanced at Riker, then back at the screen. “Can you pilot your ship into Shuttle Bay Five?”

“Five? How will I find five among the other numbers?” He again wiped his brow.

“It will be the one with the door open,” said Picard.

Riker stepped forward. “Are your internal controls functioning properly?”

“Oh, yes. I was dreadfully nervous, you see, that it was lost. It takes my body quite a while to return to normal levels after such a fright. If my search had gone any longer, my nerves would have never recovered. I promised Miss Liz not to lose it. Oh, she’s a friend. I have one.” He smiled brightly.

“Where have you been searching?” asked Riker with a glint in his eye.

“Oh, all around. Here. In this system. I don’t travel often. Never out of my system, I say. Now, as long as you’ve found it and the Kris Rogan has it, then my nerves will return to normal in, oh, a few days. I hope.” He hit a few buttons on his panel. “Piloting to the open bay now.”

Picard gave a signal to Mr. Worf to cut the feed to the screen, and the image of Hibbonox disappeared. He frowned.

“I’m not looking forward to this,” he said. He hit his communicator. “Kris, Hibbonox will be entering the bay momentarily. Please have it and yourself prepared.”

“Understood, Captain,” said Kris’s voice.

“Dr. Crusher and Mr. LaForge to Shuttle Bay Five.” He nodded headed to the turbolift followed by Troi, Data, Riker, and Mr. Worf.

Hibbonox piloted his craft into Shuttle Bay Five, his landing a little wobbly but without incident. He parked his craft

next to Federation craft Kris had used to bring the object to the Enterprise. There was plenty of room away from the two crafts.

Kris stood next to the object. She was joined by Picard, Riker, Worf, Data, and Troi. A moment later, Dr. Crusher and Geordi joined them.

Riker gestured to Hibbonox's craft. "Is he joining us?"

Before anyone could answer, a door to Hibbonox's craft opened. What looked like a slide followed, it extended from inside the craft to the floor of the bay. Hibbonox had to squeeze himself in sections to get his bulk through the door. He then laid his body at the top of the slide and rolled to the floor. He had trouble getting himself to a standing position, so Crusher and Geordi hustled to him and helped him to his feet. He spent several moments brushing himself off and wiping his brow with the rag.

Riker smiled at Troi and rolled his eyes, she gently nudged him in the ribs.

Hibbonox looked over his audience. "You are all the Kris Rogan?" he asked.

Kris stepped forward. "I am," she said.

"Ah, the daughter of Miss Liz?" he said.

"I am," said Kris. She glanced at Picard, then back at Hibbonox. "My mother is deceased."

“Miss Liz? She said that might happen. Well, in my society we have short lives. And, leaving on the Second Journey is a good thing. We believe there’s a cue for a rebirth, I say. This belief is very popular among my kind...”

“Hibbonox,” interrupted Picard, who had had just about enough of him, “We transported this object here to, hopefully, open it.”

“Well, of course you did. I think you can call me Hibby,” he smiled, then glanced to his immediate left. There stood Mr. Worf who looked quite menacing as he towered over him. Sweat broke out on his forehead. He said, “You call me Hibbonox, not Hibby.”

Mr. Worf growled and was about to respond but Picard beat him to it. “Hibby, can you assist us in opening the object?”

Hibbonox considered this question for a long moment, looking at each person in front of him, except for Mr. Worf, he purposely avoided eye contact with Worf. “Oh, I say you don’t understand, do you, I say?” he said a bit too cheerfully.

“We don’t need you,” said Kris. She looked at the cylinder and its base. “We just needed the space.” It was immediately apparent that what Kris had said was true. There now appeared, next to each symbol on the cylinder, what looked like an indentation for a hand. Two underneath each symbol and four on top of the cylinder. They had not been there before.

Kris had also figured out something else. She let her mind remove the Ramos, even though she herself remained in

Ramos. She nodded at Mr. Data, who quickly went to a panel on the wall and pressed a few buttons. "The object is no longer emitting the harmful elements," he said.

"Of course not," said Hibbonox, his loud voice echoed in the bay. "It wouldn't now that it's home again," he smiled. When he glanced at Worf, his smile quickly disappeared. It was replaced with sweat, he was afraid to move, so he let the sweat dribble down his cheek.

Kris studied the hand indentations. The ones on the left all seemed to be the same size, the ones on the right varied in size. She looked at Mr. Data. "Data, would you mind?"

Mr. Data understood immediately what Kris wanted. He approached the object and put his hand in the indentation to the right and underneath the Vulcan symbol. Kris put her hand into the left indentation. Both matched their hands perfectly and a "clicked" was heard.

Mr. Data stepped back. Kris nodded to Riker, who stepped forward. He put his hand into the much larger hand indentation to the right and underneath the Muztarif symbol. Another perfect match and another click.

Dr. Crusher put her hand next to Kris underneath the Human symbol. Worf put his underneath the Altaran symbol. And, Troi and Kris's hands fit in the ones underneath the Betazoid symbol.

When they were finished, the cylinder still appeared to be locked.

Kris looked at the set of four on the top of the cylinder. She was curious to see if Geordi was truly a part of this. “Geordi, can you try?”

Geordi stepped forward. He put both of his hands into the set of hand indentations on the right, Kris placed both of her hands on the set on the left. His didn't quite fit in the right hand indentations.

Nothing happened.

Geordi frowned, “I'm still feeling left out,” he said.

Picard stepped forward. His hands perfectly fit into the indentations on the right. Kris put her hands in the set on the left.

The top of the cylinder opened.

Picard stepped back, but Kris remained. She knew she didn't need to be in Ramos anymore, nor did she ever really think that there were ‘booby traps,’ at least not by this stage. She remained in Ramos because it felt good to be in Ramos. Her Ramos felt instantly attached to what was inside the cylinder.

The technology used to create her.

There was silence in the bay as Kris reached inside the cylinder and pulled out a rectangular container. It had eight slots on the face and a top part that opened.

Kris, however, did not open it.

Hibbonox waddled forward to get a better view. “Let's see what's inside.” He smiled brightly at Troi, and said, “I love

presents. Surprise ones, I say. They're the best." He glanced at Worf and again lost his smile. He hit behind Troi, three steps away from the Klingon.

Dr. Crusher stepped forward. "Is that it, Kris?" she said.

"This contains the technology used to create me. I do not need to look inside," said Kris.

Dr. Crusher beamed. "Kris, this is so great. I can study this and...figure you out."

Kris stared at the container, the essence of her. The technology used to build her. Ancient Ramos technology that very few beings even knew about. *Crusher wouldn't know what to do with this*, she thought. *Mr. Data might be able to assist. I know some of it. But...*

Kris looked at Hibbonox. "What did my mother say about destroying this?"

Hibbonox looked wounded. "Oh, destroy. I am not sure, I say... She discussed lots of stuff. Oh, yes, I say, Miss Liz did say what Kris Rogan can do with it. I remember that Miss Liz gave choices to what Kris Rogan...Can I see inside it?"

"It only contains computer files and formulas. That is all."

Hibbonox raised his hands in mock surrender. "I simply believe presents should be opened," he chuckled. Mr. Worf stepped into his line of sight. The giggles disappeared and he

stepped further behind Troi, who gave Mr. Worf a “cut it out” look.

Mr. Worf was very pleased with himself, he stepped back but kept his focus on Hibbonox.

Picard realized he had to tone it down for dealing with Hibbonox, Mr. Worf was scaring him silly. With a gentle voice, he said, “Hibby, was one of Kris Rogan’s choices destroying the contents?”

Hibbonox nodded, too afraid to speak.

“How?” asked Picard.

Hibbonox scrunched his face, looking puzzled.

“In Ramos?” asked Kris.

Hibbonox thought about this for a moment. “Destroy? In Ramos? Yes, that was what Miss Liz said about destroying the object, I say. For Kris Rogan to destroy, she must take it to Ramos.”

“Hang on,” said Crusher. She looked at Kris. “Why would want to destroy it, Kris?”

“Because I do not wish it to be used again,” said Kris.

“Fine, but let’s study it first. For you. For your health,” said Crusher, her volume increasing. She looked at Picard, begging his assistance with her glance.

Picard looked at Kris. "Is destroying it what you want?" he asked.

Kris nodded. "This technology needs to be destroyed." She looked at Dr. Crusher. "I understand what you are saying, doctor, but I will not allow one person to study it or even view the contents. If you did, you would be vulnerable."

"I can keep it to myself, Kris."

"You would have to create records..."

"That I would keep safe."

"You cannot possibly keep them safe, doctor," said Kris.

"Doctor," said Picard in his I-need-to-reason-with-Beverly voice. "This is not your decision."

"She needs to be talked out of this, Jean Luc. You cannot simply destroy that technology. What if something happened to Kris that I couldn't treat, and we had the answer in our hands?"

"I understand, but I believe Kris also has other considerations," said Picard.

Dr. Crusher shook her head. "Kris, I understand how you feel about Star Fleet. This isn't about Star Fleet..."

"It is, doctor. They want this. Very badly. It is not theirs. I will choose what happens to it. I choose to make sure another...me...is never created again. I believe this is what my mother would have wanted."

“What if you were able to make another you?” asked Geordi. “If this Regor is for real, then two of you...” He stopped, realizing the ridiculousness of what he was saying. “Sorry, Kris. I think we’re all overly impressed by you. How you came to be. That technology...is unlike anything most of us will ever see. It’s enticing. But, you’re right. It’s too dangerous.”

“Geordi,” said Crusher.

“I’m sorry, Beverly, she’s right. If Kris wants it destroyed, that might be better for everyone. We should support her, in however that needs to be done,” said Geordi.

Dr. Crusher draped her arms across her chest. She wasn’t ready to give up her fight but paused to find another direction for her argument. “Kris, are you sure your mother didn’t leave you anything within that technology? Shouldn’t you, at least, examine it on your own?”

This argument was strong. *She may be right*, thought Kris. *Except...I wasn’t there when it was used, I was, but not really. I want to be able to make my own decisions. Whatever happens in the future, I’m done with this technology.* To the group, she said, “I did not develop this technology. I know very little about it. The technology found me. I could feel it when it was enclosed within the object and I was near enough. Now that it’s out of the enclosure, it feels like a part of me. A part that is not beneficial. It feels like a useless part of me. A weight. I feel I would be better off without this weight. I cannot explain it any better than that, doctor. The universes should not have to deal

with this weight. I'm making this decision, doctor. I am asking you to accept it."

They all looked at Crusher. She hated this decision.

"Doctor, this is Kris's decision," said Picard in a quiet voice.

Dr. Crusher took a deep breath. She had to let it go. She had grown to respect Kris and like her. She just hoped, one day, Kris didn't regret it. She nodded; her arguments finally exhausted.

"Captain, I fear that I cannot travel with this. I would ask a favor..."

Kris stopped abruptly because a being from Ramos suddenly appeared at the rear of the bay. Another appeared. Then another. Three.

Kris did not know them, but she knew what three of them meant.

Kris, still in Ramos, wasted no time. She enclosed the Enterprise officers into her Ramos protection. She also enclosed Hibbonox.

A moment later, Kris had an idea. She kicked Hibbonox out of her protection. *If my mother knew and trusted Hibbonox to secure the technology, these beings would not harm him. It may prove helpful.*

Picard reacted quickly. He hit his communicator, “Security to Shuttle Bay Five.”

It took less than a second for the posted security officers to enter the bay, phasers drawn. Picard nodded to the three Ramos beings. The security officers pointed their weapons.

The three unknown Ramos beings appeared unfazed by their weapons. They looked at Kris, who stood in front of the officers and within the blue bubble.

Kris understood. Guinan would not be appearing, she was on her own to keep these three Ramos beings from destroying her.

One of the Ramos beings took a few steps closer to Hibbonox. “Oh, hello,” he said with a shaky voice. He rubbed his sweaty palms but dropped his rag. He stepped closer to Kris, but could only get so close, the blue bubble stopped him. “Mind if I....” He gestured to the blue bubble.

“You don’t need it,” she said.

“I...Well, see, they’re looking at me like...”

“Quiet,” Kris said sharply to Hibbonox.

There was a silence in the bay. Four more security officers arrived with weapons drawn. The Ramos beings ignored them, too. The Enterprise officers stood behind Kris and within the blue bubble, yet Picard had inched his way next to Kris. As he did, Hibbonox crouched on the ground, ironically very close to Mr. Worf. They made eye contact. Mr. Worf made a subtle

hand gesture to communicate to Hibbonox to remain calm, he would protect him after all.

“What is your business here?” asked Picard.

“That,” said the Ramos being who had stepped forward.

“What are your names?” asked Kris.

“Unimportant,” said the Ramos being.

Something was niggling at the back of Kris’s mind. Something felt new to her. She could strongly feel the seven beings around. She thought about her situation. She was on the Enterprise with Picard, Troi, Crusher, Riker, Worf, Data, and Geordi LaForge. Guinan didn’t know how Geordi fit in, but she claimed he did.

Kris realized the niggling was power. More power. More than just being an Ancient. And, it was because of them and the ship. She had decided to leave Hibbonox out because... he didn’t belong in. He wasn’t needed. She suddenly knew what to do.

While maintaining the Ramos blue bubble, she went into Betazoid. Troi knew it but forced herself not to react. She and the rest of the Enterprise crew had been in many tense situations in the past. She knew how to maintain her cool.

Deanna, while I talk to the Ramos beings, communicate with the others that I’m going to need them. They are remaining calm no matter what I do. I believe you can do this with a look

or a gesture since you know each other very well. Can you do this?

Without nodding, Troi thought, *Of course.*

Kris went back into Ramos.

Kris knew she could take care of this type of communication with Picard. He was next to her and she knew he would “get it.” How she knew this was an analysis for another day.

She glanced at Picard, then down at the technology. She was sure that the blue bubble protection would allow him to hold the technology without it damaging him. She was pretty sure, anyway.

Kris held out the technology while maintaining eye contact with Picard. “I do not need this anymore. Perhaps they do. If it is back inside the object, it will be safe for transport. Then, all of us can rest easy that we came together to recover it and keep it safe.”

Picard’s face displayed an odd mixture of apprehension and understanding mixed with a touch of dread, he knew what Kris wanted him to do. He’s wasn’t all the keen to hold the technology. Yet, he knew Kris wasn’t giving it to them. She was about to do something to defend it. That something most likely involved them.

He took it from Kris, like that handoff of a delicate vase.

“Please put it back, Captain,” said Kris.

As Picard took the technology back to the object, Troi had already gestured to Data and Riker. Crusher knew something was about to happen. Riker communicated to Geordi and Mr. Worf, who gave a hand gesture to his security guards that meant “be prepared to engage yet let us take the lead.”

Kris faced the three Ramos beings, the other two had moved closer to their buddy. “An Ancient created this technology. I believe only an Ancient can use it.”

“Remove the protection,” said the lead Ramos being.

After hearing those words, Kris understood something else. They were afraid to attack her while she was in her Ramos. Did other Ancients possess this ability to protect, or was it unique to her?

What was unique was the way Kris was about to try to get these Ramos beings off the ship. *Do the Ramos beings know it takes Picard and me to open it?*

Picard had placed the technology inside the container. The top automatically closed.

“Remove the barrier,” repeated the lead Ramos.

“Gladly,” said Kris.

She didn’t have to look at Hibbonox or the security officers to know that they were all bracing themselves. Hibbonox buried his head under his arms, which made him truly look like a large ball.

Kris felt in her mind for Picard, Riker, Data, Worf, Crusher, Troi, and Geordi. As she linked her mind with each of them, it felt powerful. A little more with each officer. Even Geordi. Yes, he belonged. Even if he didn't know how yet, Geordi was supposed to be here.

Then, it happened, Kris felt an eighth link, one she did not have to reach for...The Enterprise.

The three Ramos beings did not notice anything, at first.

Then, they did. Or, Kris thought they did because all three took a step back.

Kris released the blue bubble.

The lead Ramos raised a hand, then lowered it. The other two beings stepped back more, but the lead remained in position. He stared at Kris.

"How is this possible?" he asked. He was fighting hard to not react to Kris and this new power. He would not back away like his comrades. But, this was unexpected. Intriguing. Dangerous. And, to him, quite impossible.

Kris took a step forward. "You are not taking the technology. You are leaving. Now."

Impulsively, one of the other Ramos beings fired her energy at Kris. It hit her on the side, but she didn't flinch.

"Stop," Kris said to the security officers who were ready to return fire. "Do not return fire." *The other two Ramos know*

that all three of them shoot, they can't kill me. They may be able to eventually penetrate my protection, but not with this extra power. Whatever this extra power is, three Ramos cannot kill me. And, they're scared of it.

Kris remained calm. "I own the technology. You do not. You will not take it. You are not welcome here. I will give you one more chance to leave. Or, I will destroy you." Kris knew her words were stronger than her feelings. *Will they figure out that I really cannot kill them or any being?*

The room was silent. Kris never broke eye contact on the lead Ramos. Picard had made his way back to Kris's side. He said, "Get off my ship. Now."

After another moment, the two other Ramos beings disappeared.

The lead Ramos hesitated, but only for another moment. He disappeared.

Kris released the link she had created with the officers. Mr. Worf looked at his security officers, and barked, "Stand down."

Picard said, "Mr. Worf, conduct a thorough search of the ship. Make sure they're gone."

"Yes, sir," said Mr. Worf. He nodded to the guards and they hustled out.

Riker and the others exhaled. Picard glanced at the object; the top was closed. He felt better that the technology was

back in the enclosure. He looked at Kris. “The sooner we rid of that, the better.”

“Agreed. I would like to discuss this development with Guinan.”

“Perhaps at some point....”

Picard’s communicator interrupted him. “Yes,” he said after activating it.

“Sir, Roger Ewell needs to speak with you. It’s urgent,” said a Communications Lieutenant.

“I’m a little busy...,” he stopped. “Tell him I’ll be right there.” Picard frowned.

“What’s that about?” asked Riker.

Picard gestured to the object. “I can take a guess,” he said. “Let’s meet in the observation lounge in ten minutes.” He looked at Kris. “You, too.”

Kris nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Picard hustled away.

Dr. Crusher helped Hibbonox to his feet. “Are you okay?” she asked gently.

“I am, I say. I am. A bit...Oh, dear,” Hibbonox checked his pockets for his rag, but could not locate it. Crusher retrieved it. She grasped it by a corner, not willing to touch too much of it. She handed it to Hibbonox who immediately wiped the sweat

rolling down his face. "I dare say it will now take me...two months for my nerves to recover, I say."

"Would you like to go, or we can get you some quarters where you can rest?"

"Oh, I'm much better off on my own planet."

"Hibbonox," said Kris. "I'm obliged to ask...the object originated in this system. I own what's inside, however, if you want the cylinder and base...."

"Oh, no," said Hibbonox. "Your mother made it, I say. I don't want it. Hard to keep track of, you see. No, but thank you. It's been really nothing but trouble for me." He wiped his face again and wobbled to the ramp at his ship. "If a few of you wouldn't mind giving me a push?"

Crusher smiled at Geordi and Data. They helped Hibbonox waddle up the ramp, roll into a ball, and squeeze himself back into his ship. Before closing the door, Geordi said, "I'll give you a signal when you can leave. It was nice meeting you, Hibby."

"Oh, indeed. Very enlightening. I... I think I'm done with space travel." He smiled. Geordi helped him close the door.

"I'll go and clear his ship for takeoff," Geordi said and rushed off.

Riker looked at Kris. "You avoided something pretty big, right?" he asked.

“Three Ramos beings can destroy an Ancient. Or, that’s what I thought.”

“Kris?” said Troi.

“I’ll elaborate at the meeting,” she said. She checked the object to make sure the technology was secure. She put her hand on top of the cylinder. It felt good, not just because she knew it was secure. Her fingers felt warm. She had been very connected with the technology when it was in her hands. She desperately wanted to hold it again. *My technology*, she thought.

They hustled off the bay, with Kris looking back at the object. *I’ll protect you. You’re all mine.*

* * *

Picard rushed into his ready room. He sat down and hit a button on his panel. “Picard here.”

Roger Ewell’s face shown on the screen. “Jean Luc?”

“Roger,” said Picard with only a slight wariness. Picard and Roger had been friends for a long time. He was hoping this phone call was mere coincidence, yet he knew better. Anything that had to do with Kris was a new normal, even relationships with old friends. “How can I help you?”

Ewell appeared relaxed. “Jean Luc, we received a report from your medical team on Tellian. Some kind of poisoning there. The source was discovered, I hope?”

“It was.” Picard leaned back in his chair, mirroring the relaxed posture of his friend. Yet, he suddenly felt anything but relaxed. *This is not a friendly call*, he thought. *What is Ewell up to?* “I had yet to make my report, Roger. I don’t think Dr. Crusher authorized her personnel to report to Star Fleet.” *So, how did Star Fleet find out about Tellian?*

“You’re wondering how we found out? It was the prefect of the largest colony there. He felt ‘obligated’ to provide ‘information related to highly hazardous materials’.”

Ewell is acting strange. What’s going on, Roger? he thought but dared not ask his friend. “Yes, the materials were hazardous. The contaminant has been contained. The area is safe, and the inhabitants are still being treated by our medical personnel.”

“So, I heard from this prefect. He also reported that an Enterprise shuttle craft removed an object from the planet?”

“The source of the contaminant. It was an object that had drifted to Tellian from the Manderian system. It turns out that three elements from that system are dangerous to the Tellians.”

“An object? Do you think this object would have any other significance to Star Fleet?”

Roger is leading me down a path. Follow it. “We transported the object to the Manderian system.”

“Did they render it safe?”

“We are trying to determine that.” *A small, white lie. Yet, it is needed for some reason.*

“Good. This object was the cause of death of several natives of Tellian and Star Fleet would like to investigate. If it could be safe and no one in that system claims to own it, and no other rightful owner can be discovered, we want you to bring it in for inspection.”

There it is. He knows it is Kris's technology. He's trying to tell me that indirectly. Someone is listening or pressuring him. This would be like Roger. He's warning me.

“Jean Luc,” said Ewell. He leaned forward in his seat; his relaxed posture gone. “This prefect implied that the object seemed to be very important. I must inform you that Star Fleet eagerly expects this object here at 325. After you clear it, of course.”

He's on my side but probably fighting a losing battle regarding the technology. They know Kris's technology has been discovered. How did they find out? I'll have to figure that out later. Right now, I have to play along. Roger knows the technology should not be in Federation hands. He's agreeing with me, in the only way he can at the moment.

“Of course. We are in negotiations with a leader in this system by the name of Hibbonox.” He hesitated. *He's not much*

of a leader, he thought. “This Hibbonox is instructing us on how to detox the object. We will bring it in when we are finished.”

“As soon as possible, Captain,” said Ewell. The switch to formal titles allowed them both to acknowledge that each understood what was really being said here.

“Understood,” said Picard. He turned off his monitor, knowing that it was good thing to cut off this conversation quickly. It allowed his friend to get out from under this deception.

Picard left his ready room. He walked quickly to the observation lounge and went inside. All of his officers, except Geordi, were waiting for him. As Picard sat down, Geordi entered and took a seat.

“Hibbonox’s ship just left, sir,” Geordi reported. “His takeoff was a little wobbly, but he’s safely on his way to his home planet.”

“Did you thank him for us, Mr. LaForge?” said Picard.

“I did. He said it was his pleasure to assist Miss Liz and Kris Rogan,” Geordi said. He shrugged. “I guess he was good with everything.”

Picard looked at Kris. “Could they have destroyed you?”

“I initially thought so. Three Ramos could eventually penetrate my protection. Then, it occurred to me to link all of you, and link the ship. Those links gave me more power than a regular Ancient. They knew it. Perhaps not at first, but it was the

reason why they left. I believe they would have killed me, if they could have.”

“To get the technology?” asked Riker.

Kris nodded. “Apparently. As I mentioned to the captain, I need to talk with Guinan. I do not understand why beings from Ramos would be interested in my technology.”

“Is there any way to contact her? I’d like that information as well,” said Picard.

Kris said, “I don’t think so. I would go and search, but if I did, I would be too far away from the object to keep its protection in place.”

“You again have it secured?”

“Affirmative.”

Picard took a deep breath. “Well, if I was understanding things correctly before we got interrupted, we need to take the Enterprise to Ramos to destroy the technology. Our trip to Ramos might be a bit hazardous, as we just discovered. There appears to be a few Ramos who are objectionable. They apparently want this technology.”

“Badly,” said Riker.

“Additionally, there is another new wrinkle.” Picard reported his conversation with Ewell to the group, adding that he knew his friend was attempting to protect him and Kris. Ewell was on their side.

“Who was this prefect?” asked Riker. He looked at Crusher and Worf.

“I dealt with their healer,” said Dr. Crusher. “I coordinated with a high official by the name of Tresp. He did not call himself ‘prefect’.”

Picard frowned. “Could the Ramos be manipulating this situation? They want the technology.”

“But, what does that have to do with the Federation also wanting it?” asked Geordi.

Mr. Data said, “Star Fleet would want it away from Kris. Perhaps, having someone report to Star Fleet that the technology had been found is their assurance that they can obtain it.”

“In case they couldn’t get it away from Kris?” asked Troi.

Picard looked at Kris. She was looking at a tricorder. It had a picture of the object. “Kris?”

Kris looked up from the tricorder. “I am making sure the technology is safe,” she said then quickly put the tricorder on the table. “Ramos have been manipulating humanoids for millennium. Unlike Q, they have done it subtly and only when necessary to assist in maintaining their own stability. Without confirmation, I can only speculate that these Ramos beings are members of a group of unknown size that want to keep the technology for some reason.”

“But, why?” asked Geordi.

“Unknown,” said Kris. “I believe Guinan can answer these questions.”

“We can’t wait around for her to show up and you can’t leave to find her. Opinions,” said Picard.

“We have to get the technology to Ramos while appeasing Star Fleet,” said Riker. “You never told them that you managed to open the object, right?”

“I did not. We would need to deliver just the object.” He looked at Geordi. “Mr. LaForge contact Hibbonox before he’s out of range. Ask him if the object is safe once we leave his system. If it returns to being toxic in our universe, ask him how we can remedy that.”

“If we can’t, we tell that to Star Fleet,” said Riker.

Picard nodded to Geordi. He stood and left.

“Kris, what happened when that one Ramos shot you, or whatever she did?” asked Dr. Crusher.

“I was unaffected,” said Kris.

“In Ramos,” said Troi.

Kris looked at Troi, understanding where she was going with the question. She looked back at the doctor. “My humanoid species are fine, doctor.”

“We had a deal, Kris,” said Dr. Crusher.

“All right,” said Picard. “After we talk with Hibbonox, let’s figure out how to appease Star Fleet while getting the technology to Ramos without getting into another tussle with, at least, three agitators.”

“Kris,” said Mr. Data, “Can you destroy the technology?”

Kris had picked up the tricorder and was again staring at the object. She looked up, and said, “Of course, Mr. Data. I can destroy it once I’m in the Ramos system.”

Troi stared at Kris. She glanced at Dr. Crusher and Picard. They all silently communicated with each their concerns.

“Kris, you go with Dr. Crusher.”

This time, Kris looked up from her tricorder immediately. “There is no need.”

“That’s an order,” said Picard. “You two can go now.”

Kris frowned. She stood and left with Dr. Crusher.

In Sick Bay, Dr. Crusher had to examine a distracted Kris. She insisted on watching the object on her tricorder in order to “maintain its safety.” Crusher checked Kris in all of her humanoid species. In Human, Betazoid, and Muztarif, she found a bruise where the Ramos energy had hit her. She removed and repaired the bruise. After that, Kris’s humanoids forms all checked out.

Kris left sick bay and returned to Shuttle Bay Five.

The moment she was back in front of the object, she felt an enormous amount of relief. Her need to be near it was beginning to choke her. Whatever this was, it was quickly getting worse. An urge to be close to her technology. Hers. The essence of how she came to be.

She was about to hit her communicator and ask Picard to come to the bay in order to open up the cylinder to “make sure the technology was still there and unharmed” when she stopped herself.

Stop it, she thought. It has to be destroyed. There's no good having it around anymore.

She touched the cylinder. That longing immediately returned. She grabbed a chair and sat down directly in front of the object. She would remain there all night long.

* * *

“Captain, the starship Equinox is hailing,” said Mr. Worf.

Geordi had talked with Hibbonox about the toxicity of the object and how to make it harmless to humanoids once it was away from his space. He had given Geordie a formula that would counteract the elements, he was pretty sure.

Geordi and Data spent all night building a portable device that would “spray” the counteracting elements that would render it safe.

They took the spraying device to Shuttle Bay Five where they found Kris sitting in front of the object. Geordi had to say her name twice to get her attention.

Kris let them direct the beam of elements at the object. When they were finished, they ran tests. The object was cleared of all three of the harmful elements.

When Geordi and Data were done, and just to be on the safe side, Kris again wrapped the device in a blue bubble. She said she wanted to be sure that the object wouldn't harm anyone on the ship. Geordi and Data tried to convince her that their tests indicated it was now safe. But, Kris insisted.

When Mr. Data reported to Picard that the object was free from the harmful zenon, slittren, and prellium elements, Picard ordered the Enterprise to leave the Manderian system.

That was six hours ago. The Enterprise was two days away from the Ramos border.

Picard stood, and looked back at Mr. Worf. “On screen.”

The face of another Star Fleet captain appeared on the screen. The man's skin was dark, his head was bald, and his frame was skinny. He seemed like a man with a lot of energy and his smile appeared genuine. “Captain Picard. Captain Denald Sturgis.”

“Captain, I haven’t had the pleasure.”

“Me neither. You have the flagship, after all. Nice to finally meet you. Captain, why I’m calling. Star Fleet sent me to intercept you. You have something that needs to be transported to 325, and I’m here to take it off your hands.” His grin widened.

Picard’s back stiffened. Riker stood up a little straighter but remained in his seat. Troi unlaced her legs and glanced at Riker. They all understood exactly what was happening here.

“There’s really no need, Captain,” said Picard.

“Sorry, Captain. Orders.” That smile was plastered on Sturgis’s face. It was beginning to irritate Picard.

“I have not received those orders.”

“Sir, a communication from Roger Ewell,” said Mr. Worf.

“There they are. A little late.”

Did the man sleep with a smile on his face? thought Picard. “On speaker, Mr. Worf.”

Picard hesitated, then said, “Counselor Ewell. I am talking with Captain Sturgis of the Equinox.”

“Yes, Captain,” said the voice of Roger Ewell, “it’s about that hazardous object we were discussing earlier. Our teams here want to take a look at it, if you cleared it, which I

assume you have since you're back from the Manderian system."

"It has been cleared. We were successfully instructed on how to remove the toxins."

"Good. Those toxins caused a lot of damage on Tellian. We need a full investigation. The Equinox is headed your way, so they'll take it over. I need you to go to Altara."

"Altara?" Picard's eyebrows scrunched ever so slightly. He was surprised, yet he figured there was as reason it was Altara. *Ewell is again leading me.*

"We need a new treaty between two of the factions. Happens on that planet every few years. They actually enjoy fighting there. Occasionally, they take the challenging and rhetoric a bit too far."

Picard nodded. Ewell's longish and unnecessary description of a new mission gave him the time to puzzle it out. He thought, *the planet Altara kept the Enterprise within striking distance of the Ramos universe. Ewell knows this. Somehow, he knows we need to remain near the Ramos system.*

Picard smiled back at Sturgis. *A dose of his own medicine. That is one good fake smile.* "Captain Sturgis, how long until you can rendezvous?"

"Four hours, with some change," said the smiling Captain.

"Good. We'll gladly see it off. Thank you, Captain."

Picard nodded to Worf and the image of Captain Sturgis disappeared. Picard was glad to be rid of that smile.

“Counselor Ewell, thank you for your assistance. We will reroute to Altara as soon as the object is handed over to the Equinox,” he said.

“Goodbye, Captain,” said the voice of Ewell.

Picard again turned to Worf, but this time used a finger to mock a slash across his throat, indicating that Worf needed to quickly end the communication. He did.

Picard sat down in his chair. “Now what?”

Ten minutes later, a plan had been hatched in the observation lounge.

Geordi said, “We can do it at Warp Four, with Kris’s assistance.”

Picard looked at Kris. “Would it work, Kris?”

Kris was again staring at the picture of the object on his tricorder. She did not look up; her eyes were locked onto the image.

“Kris?” said Picard louder.

She looked at Picard. “What?”

“Launching your Ramos-protected shuttle craft at warp four. Can it be done safely?”

Kris thought for a moment, then nodded. She looked back at the picture.

“Kris?”

Reluctantly, Kris pulled her eyes away from the image. “I said it can be done. Launch me in the shuttle craft when we are next to Ramos space. I will fly the craft into Ramos and destroy.”

“Destroy the technology?”

“That’s what I said.”

“No, you actually didn’t.”

“That’s what I meant. Are we done here?”

“You can return the shuttle bay,” said Picard.

They waited while Kris stood and left.

Picard rubbed his face. “Another problem. Doctor?”

“I don’t know,” said Dr. Crusher. “All I found was a bruise where that Ramos shot hit her. It was a minor contusion. Nothing major. I took care of it. Everything else checked out.”

“She’s obsessed with the technology,” said Troi. “She said she felt it even before it was released. Then, once it was released, she had an even greater connection to it.”

“She doesn’t want to destroy it now?”

“I’m not sure she can,” said Troi.

“Elaborate,” said Picard, even though he knew what was coming.

“If she’s obsessed with the technology to the point where it is now controlling her, if that’s happened, I don’t think she can destroy it.”

“You think it’s controlling her?”

“Look at her. She can’t take her eyes off of it. She hasn’t left the bay except to come here. And, she hasn’t gone into a humanoid form for two days.”

“That’s not good,” said Dr. Crusher.

“We’re four hours away from rendezvous with the Equinox. The shuttle craft has to launch before then. Mr. Data, when can the shuttle craft launch?”

“The Enterprise will be in close proximity to Ramos space in two hours, fourteen minutes, and twelve...”

“We don’t need the seconds, Mr. Data,” said Picard with a slight irritation in his tone, he was doing his usual job of cutting off Data when he went too far with the informational details.

Picard leaned back in her chair. “Ewell knows we want to go to Ramos space. I’m not sure how, perhaps another divine intervention? He assigned us a mission that will keep us near the Ramos border, and I believe he assigned Altara as a signal of sorts that he knows we’re up to something regarding the technology. He approves but can’t officially side with us.”

“We need to go to Altara after meeting with the Equinox?” said Riker.

“Yes. Ewell is assuming we’re not going to give the Equinox exactly what the Federation wants,” said Picard. “We only specified an object, not something inside an object.”

“Which is the point,” said Crusher with a playful glint in her eye.

“Kris cannot go unaccompanied into Ramos space. Counselor Troi, Dr. Crusher, and Mr. Data are with me on the shuttle craft.” He looked at Riker. “Commander, you meet with the Equinox.”

“How should I explain your absence to Captain Sturgis?”

“The smiling Captain?” said Picard with an unusual sting of sarcasm. “Say I’m unavailable. I’m working on a new treaty for the Altarans. Hand over the object as quickly as you can. He won’t object.”

“Are you sure Roger Ewell is on our side?” asked Troi.

“We’ve discussed Kris before. He supports her. He’s given me leeway when it comes to anything Kris-related. Most importantly, he does not want this technology in the hands of Star Fleet. We’re in agreement on this point.”

“He’s being pressured?” asked Riker.

“I believe so.” Picard looked at Troi and Crusher. “Stay near Kris. Mr. Data can help out. Kris is making me nervous. I need to feel sure of her, and right now I don’t.”

* * *

Kris remained in Shuttle Bay Five for the next two hours, eight minutes. With six minutes remaining in their window to launch the shuttle craft from warp four using her Ramos, Troi and Crusher had to get Kris moving. It was not easy.

“Is the shuttle craft ready, Kris?” said Troi for the third time.

“I said, yes, Councilor,” Kris’s voice had an edge to it.

“Then, let’s move inside. We need to launch soon,” said Crusher. They had already explained the need for getting inside the craft. “We only have four or five minutes left in the launch window, Kris.”

Kris turned and looked at them, it was the first time she had taken her eyes off of the object since they had joined her two hours earlier. “I need to remove the technology.” Her voice was flat. It sounded controlled, not Vulcan controlled but something else. The others knew Kris was not herself. “The base and cylinder need to remain.”

Troi and Crusher both knew this, their glances at each other held looks of dread.

Picard and Data entered. Picard joined Kris in front of the object. He was all business, even though he had received continuous reports from Troi and Crusher about Kris's current state of mind.

"Let's get it out of there, Kris," said Picard with a calm tone. His glance at Troi and Crusher said, "Be ready for anything."

Picard placed his hands in the hand indentations on top of the cylinder. Kris put her hands in the ones meant for her. The cylinder opened.

Kris reached inside and removed the object. She held it like a newborn baby. She looked at it lovingly. *I will always take care of you*, she thought.

"Mr. Data, take the technology from Kris and put it into the shuttle craft," said Picard.

Mr. Data stepped forward. Kris took a step back and pulled the technology closer to her body.

Picard's nerves jumped up a notch. "Kris," he said, continuing to use a calming voice, "You and I need to make sure the object is closed. We cannot hand it off to the Equinox like this."

Kris managed to look at the object, the cylinder's top was still open. It took thirty seconds of hard thinking to

convince herself that Picard was correct. *The ruse is to give the empty object to the star ship. That way, they think they're getting the technology. Meanwhile, we keep it. I keep it. I never give it up. Ever. Except...I have to help Picard close the cylinder.*

She looked at Mr. Data. With an obvious effort, she said, "You will take it inside the shuttle craft, Mr. Data? You will be careful with it?"

"Affirmative," said Data.

Picard and the others watched as Kris, almost painstakingly, handed over the technology to Data. Mr. Data wasted no time, he walked to the shuttle craft and climbed inside.

"Kris? The object?" said Picard.

Kris gave one last glance at the shuttle craft before joining Picard. They placed their hands inside their respective hand indentations. The lid closed.

"Well, that part was relatively easy," said Picard as he removed his hands. "Shall we go?"

Kris was already heading onto the shuttle craft.

Picard looked at Troi and Crusher. "This should be interesting," he said, dripping with sarcasm.

When Picard, Troi, and Crusher entered the shuttle craft, they immediately saw Kris, who was sitting in the back section

of the larger model of shuttle craft cradling the technology on her lap.

The plan was to have Kris and Data pilot the craft out of the bay. Picard had to get Kris to focus on the launch. They needed her to pilot with her Ramos to launch the shuttle craft while the Enterprise was in warp speed. That way, the Equinox, or any other “spies” who might be watching, wouldn’t realize that they had removed the technology from the ship.

“Kris, we need to leave,” said Picard.

Kris’s body was rocking slightly as if to rock a baby to sleep. She didn’t respond to Picard.

Picard got closer to Kris. He touched her shoulder. “Kris, you need to pilot the craft now.”

Kris looked up at Picard. *Pilot the shuttle craft? Yes, the plan. Leave the Enterprise while in warp. My Ramos. Yes.* Kris stood. She clutched the technology close to her body.

She quietly made her way to the pilot’s seat, to the right of Mr. Data.

In this larger shuttle craft, there was no barrier between the piloting controls and the additional space behind. There were no sleeping quarters, just one head. This larger shuttle craft was generally used to transport equipment that was deemed unsafe in the transporter.

The cases varied, but one time the shuttle craft had been used to transport equipment to a Denevan planet. The Denevans

insisted. They feared that the transporter elements would damage their sensitive equipment.

Another time this craft had been used was by Kris when she transported the object to the Enterprise. She had wanted to have the object as close to her as possible in order to maintain the Ramos protection. Picard now felt this was fortuitous, he didn't have a barrier in front of him. This way he could keep an eye on Kris.

Kris cradled the technology in her lap as she worked the controls.

The bay door opened. Since the Enterprise was in warp four, the stars appeared as if they were flying past the ship.

Picard hit a button. "Shuttle craft to Riker. We are ready for launch."

"We're ready here, Captain. Good luck."

Riker's communication ended. "Kris," Picard said to Kris's back, "is your Ramos in place?"

Kris nodded, but did not verbally respond or even look at Picard.

Picard frowned at Troi and Crusher. They were all worried.

The shuttle craft pitched forward and slid into space. It was momentarily jarring for the riders on board, they had just jumped off of a moving ship. But, Kris and Data quickly

stabilized the craft. It sat in space without moving. The warp four launch had been successful.

“Heading two three point six, Mr. Data,” said Picard. “Engage.”

Kris and Data established the coordinates and the shuttle craft moved forward. Picard did not confirm the launch with Riker. The plan had been radio silence at this point.

Picard knew they would be entering Ramos space in nine minutes at a speed of warp two, the highest warp the larger shuttle craft could go. Not even Kris could get a shuttle craft to fly faster. These engines were limited in their capacity and Picard did not wish to push it. They were stuck in this shuttle craft all alone in space for the next few hours.

The plan at this point was to enter Ramos space, eject the technology so that Kris could destroy it, and then return to their universe, straddling the border between the two universes until the Enterprise could return to pick them up.

As usual, the wildcard was Kris. Her actions toward the technology were increasingly worrisome to Picard and the others. She was now stroking the technology that sat in her lap. Picard could see a faint blue color just outside the windows which relieved some of his stress, it meant the Ramos protection was still in effect. Not that it was necessary now, but once they were in Ramos...

Picard decided an intervention of sorts was needed. “Kris, could you join us back here?”

Kris's shoulders tilted slightly. She did not move. Mr. Data looked at her. "I have the controls, Kris. I can pilot the craft."

Still, Kris didn't move.

Troi stood and walked behind Kris. "Kris, we want to talk to you," she said to Kris's back.

Kris stood, still clutching the technology. "You can't have it," she said.

"I don't want to take the technology from you, Kris. We want to talk to you." Troi was using a very soft, calming voice. Her councilor voice.

Kris complied. She left her Conn seat and sat next to Dr. Crusher. Her hands gripped the technology even tighter.

Troi sat next to her. "Kris, can you go into Betazoid for a minute?"

"Why?"

"To make sure it's okay," said Troi.

"It's fine. My humanoid species are all fine."

"You haven't been in any of them for two days, Kris," said Dr. Crusher.

Kris did not respond.

"Kris, I want to communicate with you in Betatal. It's important," said Troi.

Kris still did not respond. Troi glanced at Picard. "Are you afraid to go into one of your humanoid species, Kris?"

Kris exhaled. "Not afraid."

"Can you, Kris?" asked Dr. Crusher.

Kris remained quiet.

The shuttle craft was quiet and still.

A moment later, Troi jerked in her seat. She remained seat and gestured for Crusher and Picard to stay where they were. "Kris is in Betatal. It's a little more intense now," she said through gritted teeth.

"It is?" Kris said quietly.

Yes, Kris, thought Troi in her Betatal link to Kris. This is not how it usually feels for me, Kris. It is much stronger. Don't you feel it?

Kris did not respond right away. Finally, Troi heard her thoughts. *I do not know what is happening to me.*

Is the technology controlling you, Kris?

It is possible. I no longer want to destroy it.

We came here to destroy it, Kris.

I know.

You're still in here, Kris. This is the real you I'm talking to. Not the Kris being controlled by the technology.

I'm not sure what to do. How to break this hold. I want the technology now. I love it and want to protect it. It makes me feel whole.

Troi glanced at Crusher and Picard. They understood that Troi was “talking” to Kris in their Betatal. Picard made a small circle with his hand—a “keep her talking” gesture. Troi nodded slightly.

Kris, you feel very strongly that the technology should be destroyed so that no one else could use it. So it couldn't be used to make a being that could be used for destructive purposes.

I don't remember any of that.

Kris, we are minutes away from entering Ramos space. Can you remain in Betazoid and still destroy the technology?

I would have to be in Ramos. My Ancient has to do it.

Kris, do you trust me?

Kris hesitated. *I do not remember.*

Picard and Crusher became more worried when Troi took a deep breath.

“Mr. Data, how long until the Ramos border?”

“Forty-three seconds, sir,” said Mr. Data.

Picard nodded at Troi, she didn't have much time. *Kris, we are also at the Ramos border...*

I heard them, Councilor.

Is the ship secure for entering Ramos space?

I need to be in Ramos.

Okay. Will you go into Ramos, but continue to trust me? You do trust me, Kris. We've talked at length. I'm not trying to hurt you, Kris. I'm only trying to help you. Will you trust me and listen to me when you return to Ramos?

Why?

Because I can talk you through it. If you listen to me, after you go into Ramos, you help the ship go into Ramos space, eject the technology into space, and...

I will not!

Kris stood and bolted to her station. She held the technology in her lap and went back into Ramos. She checked their heading, they were twenty seconds from the Ramos border. She attempted to reverse course, but the controls were locked.

“Mr. Data, unlock the controls,” said Kris as she worked furiously to do it herself. She was an advanced being, a Ramos Ancient, millennia “above” these puny humanoids. She should be able to do this herself. Yet, what did Mr. Data do? How did he...”

Kris glared at Mr. Data, her eyes filled with rage. “What did you do?”

“Locked the controls,” said a calm Mr. Data.

“That’s impossible,” Kris said while continuing to work furiously.

“I helped them,” said a voice from behind her. Kris swiveled in her chair and faced Guinan. “You’re not yourself, Kris. You need to destroy the technology.”

“We are entering Ramos space,” announced Mr. Data.

“No,” said Kris. “I won’t do it.”

“Kris, listen to me,” said Troi, who had moved closer to her. “This is what the real Kris wanted to do. Trust me, Kris. Listen to my words.”

“Kris, the three Ramos who tried to take the technology are back. They’re members of a small Ramos faction that want to steal it. They tried to kill you for it, and they’ll try again now. I think they’re working for Regor. They diverted me, set a trap for me to keep me away. Kris, the best thing you can do is destroy this technology.”

“No,” raged Kris. With her Ramos mind, she shoved Mr. Data and pinned him against the wall.

She stood, still holding the technology, and used her mind to push Guinan backwards and Troi to the floor. She pinned Picard and Crusher to their chairs.

“I will not do it,” she screamed.

She bear-hugged the technology. “This is me. I am here, in here, this is me inside of here. You want to destroy me.”

“Kris, not you. The technology that could very well cause a lot of problems for the Ramos universe and the humanoid universes. Your mother understood this, Kris,” said Picard.

Kris rushed to Picard. She held the technology in one hand and grabbed Picard with the other. She stood him up and shoved him against a wall. She grasped his throat and squeezed. “Don’t you mention her.”

Kris’s eyes were red, her voice cracked. She pressed harder into Picard’s throat. Picard reached up with both hands, trying to free her grip, it was no use. He tried to punch her arm away in a defensive move, but Kris was too strong. She held an impenetrable death grip on Picard’s throat.

The others couldn’t move to help him.

Picard wanted to talk to her, he thought he could get through to her, if only he could speak. It was impossible with Kris tightening her grip even more, cutting off his oxygen. His face began to redden.

“Kris,” said Troi, she had to work hard to keep her voice even and controlled, “you don’t want to do this. You trust us. You trust Captain Picard.”

“He’s trying to use my mother against me. He hated her.”

“Kris, no matter how he feels about your mother, she’s not here right now. You’re making your own decisions without her. She enclosed the technology in an object for only you to

find and open. She wanted you to find it and make your own decision about what to do with it. You did that, Kris.”

“I changed my mind,” said Kris through clenched teeth.

“Kris,” said Guinan, “they’re here.”

Kris turned her head to look out the front window of the craft. The images of the three Ramos beings appeared. “It is just a projection. They are attempting to scare me.” Luckily for Picard, this distraction made Kris loosen her grip slightly, enough for Picard to take a few breaths. Dr. Crusher was temporarily relieved to see his chest rise and fall a few times.

“They’re really there, Kris. You know that. They’re...” Guinan gasped when two more Ramos images appeared. “Kris, you have to act. Now. Eject the technology and destroy it. Kris, there’s five of them. Whatever you did to stop three of them won’t work with five.”

“We’re not all here, Kris. You don’t have Riker and Geordi and Worf,” added Troi.

“Kris,” squeaked Picard. It was enough to get Kris’s attention. She turned rage-filled eyes back to Picard. The hand holding the technology was shaking she was holding it so hard.

Picard didn’t need to say anything else. He was at her mercy. His daughter. Literally holding his life in her hand. This was her choice. Guinan’s face was full of dread. She could feel the five Ramos beings about to strike. They were out of time. Dr. Crusher’s eyes darted from the Ramos beings to Picard. She

was ready to step in to save his life at a moment's notice, when she was able to finally move.

Mr. Data remained pinned against the wall. Except, with all of the focus off of him, he suddenly realized his hand was next to a relatively useful button.

He was about to press it when Troi quietly said, "Please, Kris. We're your family. Captain Picard is your father. Don't you remember?"

Kris's mouth quivered. She looked at the technology in her arms, then back into Picard's eyes. *I. Don't. Know. What. To. Do.*

She bore into Picard's eyes. She noticed something; she had his eyes. His eyes were his mother's eyes. Liz Rogan had made her human species (and most of her outward appearance) in the similar image of Picard's mother. It was meant as an inside joke, Kris's mother doing the laughing at Picard, who had rebuffed her romantic attempts. She was looking into her own eyes.

Picard's eyes.

Mr. Data hit the button and the ship jerked in the exact moment that the attack came from the five Ramos beings. The movement of the craft was enough to allow the Ramos attack to be nothing more than a graze. It was not enough to harm Kris. It was, however, enough to push her to the floor. Picard also collapsed, he grabbed his throat and took a few full breaths.

Kris managed to hang onto the technology. On the floor, she looked around the shuttle craft at Data, Crusher, Troi, Guinan, and finally to Picard. *What am I doing?*

She reached up to a disposal unit and shoved the technology inside. She closed the cover and hit the “eject” button.

“Get down,” she yelled. Crusher hit the floor. Mr. Data crouched down from his position. Picard, now somewhat recovered, dove onto Troi to help protect her.

Only Guinan remained standing. She refused to cower in front of these fools. “Not this time,” she said. She looked at Kris. “Use me,” she ordered.

Kris wanted an explanation, but after a moment’s thought realized she didn’t need one. She wrapped her Ramos around Guinan, which meant she could use Guinan’s Ramos power, creating a being almost as powerful as the one she had created in the shuttle bay. Kris knew this was necessary. She had to fend off the five Ramos beings while destroying the technology at the same time. She had to do all of it...right now.

Kris summoned all of her powers. She focused on the technology that was now floating in Ramos space. The five Ramos beings suddenly realized it was there, too. The leader attempted to grab it at the same moment Kris instructed her Ramos to “shatter” the technology.

The technology blew apart in a fiery ball, one that took with it the Ramos leader. The leader and the technology were destroyed together.

The explosion sent the shuttle craft hurtling. The humanoids had to grab whatever they could reach in order to hang on. Guinan was quite steady, only needing to grab the top of a chair in front of her to remain on her feet. Kris was not affected.

Slowly, Kris's mind steadied the craft. She didn't want to suddenly stop it for fear of doing even more damage. The craft came to a stop, it had managed to travel a surprising distance.

Kris stared out the front window. So did Guinan. They both knew this wasn't over yet.

After a few tense moments, the images of the remaining four Ramos appeared. "You have destroyed one of us," said one of the four, apparently the new leader.

"It was unintentional," said Guinan. "You attacked, we defended."

"We are still four," said the new leader.

"You feel it. You cannot win," said Guinan.

The four images remained. They were deciding what to do. Finally, one by one, each disappeared.

The officers got to their feet, Troi and Crusher making sure they were whole. Crusher went to Picard and looked at his neck. "I want to check you out."

Picard nodded, but then said, "In a moment." His voice was raspy. He looked at Kris. They all looked at Kris. "Are you all right?"

Kris didn't move at first. Then, she nodded. She looked at Guinan. "Why?" she asked quietly.

"This time, I don't know, Kris. Really. Your mother wanted you to make the decision about the technology. That's all I know. I don't know why you reacted to it the way you did."

"Guinan," croaked Picard. "What's going to happen?"

"I need to go and...smooth things over. It won't be easy. This faction is small, even smaller now, but I need to prove that they're working with Regor before their numbers grow again."

"You have no proof," said Crusher. She said what Picard was thinking. He was glad she said it, to save his voice.

"I realize none of you believe me." She looked directly at Kris. "Tell me what happened in the Enterprise shuttle bay."

Kris took a deep breath. "I used the seven of them and the ship. I got a lot more power. It surprised the three Ramos. They thought three was enough."

"So this time they brought two more. Five, and it still wasn't enough." Guinan shook her head. "Maybe all of you will

start to trust me now. I may not have all of the solid proof I need, but this is getting serious. There's something happening that involves a real threat. Regor. And, that threat is only going to get worse. All of you need to be better prepared. Including myself. This time they were able to segregate me. I can't let that happen again. I need to be smarter. So do all of you," said Guinan.

Then, she disappeared.

Kris sat down. She closed her eyes, quietly taking deep breaths.

Dr. Crusher went to a panel and removed a medical tricorder and a medical kit. She pointed at a chair. Picard sat down.

Mr. Data began to access any damage to the craft. "Minor damage to the port thrusters and the Clennodon coil, sir. There's a small breach in a front panel, I have sealed it off and am initiating repairs."

"Estimated repair time, Mr. Data," said Picard, as Crusher worked on his throat. She would have preferred him *not* talking while she was repairing the minor throat damage and bruises on his neck.

"Eleven minutes, sir," said Mr. Data.

Troi sat across from Kris, allowing her some space and not talking to her yet. Troi felt Kris needed some time with her own thoughts for a little bit.

The next three minutes in the shuttle craft were relatively quiet. Mr. Data repaired the ship while Crusher finished with Picard. When she was done, she declared him fine.

A smile crept across Troi's face as she suddenly realized something. "Kris, you're still here."

Kris looked up at Troi.

"What?"

"You haven't disappeared." Troi felt now was the time to get a little closer to Kris. She moved to the seat next to her. "You're still with us."

Kris shrugged. "Where would I go? We're still in Ramos space."

"True. But, in the past, that might not have mattered." Troi was still smiling.

Kris dropped her head. Her hands rested in her lap. A tiny piece of her felt something was missing from that lap. "I really got affected," she said quietly.

Troi put a hand on her shoulder. "Friends forgive, Kris."

Kris looked up. She locked eyes with Picard. "I almost..." She shook her head. "What was I doing? How could I..." She stopped and took a deep breath.

Picard sat down on the other side of Kris. "You weren't yourself," he said. His voice now sounded normal. "Yes, you almost... but you didn't. You stopped."

“Your eyes. They were your mother’s?”

Picard’s lip cracked a small smile. He always produced a smile whenever he thought of his mother. It was rare, but he enjoyed the memory of her. “Yes,” he said. “And yours.”

“Captain,” said Mr. Data. “The ship has been mostly repaired.”

“Mostly?”

“I would need Kris’s assistance with her Ramos in order to complete the repairs.”

Picard patted Kris’s knee. “Can you get us back to our own universe?” he asked.

“I would need to be court martialled. I took over a Star Fleet vessel, took over the crew, and attempted to kill a captain.”

Picard allowed his smile to grow. *Taking responsibility, like mother would do.* “Kris, you were not yourself. You defended me when your mother used me to kill Peterson. You said I was innocent because I was being controlled by her. You were being controlled by the technology.”

“I can still feel it.” Kris looked at the others realizing what she just said might sound alarming. “Not like it was before. Like...a hint. A ghost. It’s no longer controlling me.”

“That’s good to hear,” said Crusher.

Kris’s eyes scrunched. “How did Mr. Data lock the controls? How did he know it would be needed?”

“We didn’t know it would be needed. Guinan came to me an hour before our departure. She told me what had happened to her, and I explained what was going on with you. She suggested a backup plan. She gave Mr. Data some ‘captured’ Ancient energy...”

“‘Captured’?”

“For a rainy day. It wasn’t much but it was enough to stall you. She thought, given enough time, you would have figured out how to override it. Fortunately, you didn’t have that time.”

“I will have to discuss this ‘capturing’ of Ancient energy when I see her next.”

“She didn’t say it was your energy,” said Picard with a glint in his eye. “It was your mothers.”

Kris noticed the hint of playfulness on his face. He was tired, but relieved, and was trying to lighten the mood. “Can you help Mr. Data, Kris?” said Picard using his Captain Voice.

Kris stood and went to the front controls. She sat down.

Mr. Data and Kris took four minutes to complete the repairs of the shuttle craft. They input a heading that would take them out of Ramos space in sixteen minutes. “The explosion pushed us further into Ramos space,” explained Mr. Data.

“Just our luck,” said Picard as he sat behind Kris. “Engage, Mr. Data. And, let’s all hope that they’re no second Ramos attacks within the next sixteen minutes.”

There wasn't.

Picard and the others felt a great sense of relief once they were back in their own universe. Picard ordered a heading in the direction of Altara, knowing that the Enterprise would pick them up long before they would reach the planet because of the slow crawl of warp two.

Troi talked Picard into getting something to eat. They sat in the back seats of the craft.

Crusher approached Kris. She tapped her on the shoulder. "I've waited long enough," she said.

Kris swiveled in her chair. "Doctor?"

"You haven't been in a humanoid form in two days," she said, hoping that that was enough for Kris to catch on that she wanted to medically check out Kris's humanoid species.

"I was in Betazoid with the Councilor. Two days is not that long, doctor."

"You were attacked by the...how many of them were there."

"Five," said Mr. Data. Crusher smiled at him.

"Come on, Kris. Don't make me order you."

"Shouldn't you order me, doctor?"

“Kris,” said Picard from the back of the craft, “let her look you over. She won’t let it go and she’ll nag me about it. Just do it.” Picard took a bite of his sandwich.

Kris reluctantly stood and moved to a seat along the wall. Crusher glanced at Picard, “Nag?”

Picard leaned closer to Troi. He whispered, “I’m going to regret that.”

Troi smiled and nodded but didn’t need to respond. It was true.

Kris checked out fine, with the exception of a need for sleep, especially for her Human, Betazoid, and Muztarif. Crusher unlocked one of the hidden fold-down beds and ordered her to rest. Picard added an additional order for Kris not be in Muztarif, for now. All she did when she was in Muztarif while Crusher checked her out was giggle. Picard realized that with all they’d been through and within this tiny space he was not going to be able to tolerate Kris in Muztarif.

Kris fell asleep. Troi and Crusher also rested in the three remaining beds available. Four hours later, Crusher ordered Picard to lie down in her bed.

He didn’t want to, but also didn’t want to argue with her. He laid down for two hours, but couldn’t fall asleep, something was bothering him.

He got up. Kris was back at her post next to Mr. Data, and Troi was sitting off the side. Crusher saw the look on his face. “What’s the matter?”

“Mr. Data,” said Picard, ignoring Beverly for the moment. “When was the estimated time of rendezvous with the Enterprise?”

“Our initial plan estimate was forty-two minutes ago,” said Mr. Data. “We allowed a one-hour variance due to unknown factors.”

“That’s what’s the matter,” said Picard to Crusher. “Contact them.”

Mr. Data tried. He said, “No response.”

“Keep trying.”

Troi joined them. “What could it mean?”

Picard did not answer immediately, he didn’t have an answer. “Any ideas?”

While continuing to try to hail the Enterprise, Mr. Data said, “Something might have happened to the Enterprise. They were supposed to hand off the object, then return for us.”

“Before going to Altara,” said Dr. Crusher.

“Altara?” said Kris. “The Enterprise is going to Altara?” Now that Kris was back to her old self, this thought intrigued her. *Maybe I can get Mr. Worf to tree jump with me*, she thought. In the next moment, a great sense of relief filled her. She was back to normal. The connection with the technology was completely gone. She really did want to tree jump with Mr. Worf, her Altaran companion.

“It was Ewell’s idea. I’m thinking maybe Guinan had something to do with that as well,” said Picard. “Altara kept the Enterprise in this sector, plus it was Ewell’s way to communicate with me that he favored what we were doing. Or, at least, I’m fairly certain. Mr. Data, how is our fuel?”

Mr. Data checked his instruments. “We are in no danger; however, we cannot make it all the way to Altara.”

Picard stared at Kris. An idea came to him. “Can you go check on the Enterprise for me?”

Kris stood. “Of course.”

But, Kris did not disappear. “You trust me to go, Captain?”

Picard nodded, and did not hesitate. “I do. I need to know what’s going on with my ship. And, you’re the one person who can find out for me.”

With that endorsement, Kris disappeared.

She reappeared on the Enterprise.

Riker was on Altara, so Kris gave a brief description of events to Geordi, who was in charge of the bridge. Geordi explained that the Enterprise had been ordered to go immediately to Altara. Roger Ewell had personally given the order, saying Captain Picard would understand.

Apparently, the situation on Altara had turned into an emergency when the two factions, who were in dispute, had had

a violent encounter. These factions were the two oldest ones on Altara, they had been in dispute many times over the centuries.

One Altaran had died from the violence and the Federation was now seriously worried. The Altarans were warlike, yet the Federation wanted the violence to cease as soon as possible.

Kris went to the planet and found Riker. He dismissed himself from the talks and conferred with Kris, who caught him up—albeit without a huge amount of detail—about what happened with the technology. Riker understood that the Captain and the others were unharmed, just in a bit of a pickle by being left on a shuttle with limited fuel. He said he was unable to refuse this order, since that meant exposing the whereabouts of Picard and the others. He asked Kris to return to the shuttle to get orders from the captain. Riker told Kris to inform the captain that he had leaders of two the factions finally sitting down and talking to each other. Progress had been made, yet he wouldn't mind Picard's input. He was a seasoned negotiator.

Kris had been gone ten minutes. Picard had paced for all of those ten minutes. Dr. Crusher asked him to sit down, but only the one time. She got a very stern glare from Picard. She knew not to ask twice.

After Kris reappeared, she told Picard everything that Geordi and Riker had said to her. She said, "I can take you, Captain."

Captain Picard did not hesitate. He looked at Troi and Crusher. "I think Mr. Data can handle piloting the shuttle," he said.

"I would think Beverly might be needed, sir, in case there are injuries. I could stay with Data." Troi had been quicker than Crusher, and she knew it.

"Fine. Kris, after you take me, return for Dr. Crusher." His look at Crusher had a twinkle in his eyes. "Counselor Troi will remain here with Mr. Data. She was none-too-pleased.

Picard looked at Mr. Data. "Kris and I will come up with a way to get you back," he said.

"We are in no danger, Captain. We have plenty of fuel and all systems are at optimum level."

"I'll send Kris back to maintain communications until you're within range. There still might some hostile Ramos beings out there."

"I'm confident we'll be fine," said Troi.

Kris held out her hand and Picard took it.

Then, they disappeared.

They reappeared on the bridge of the Enterprise. Picard frowned at Kris, "Next time make our arrival less dramatic," he said to Kris.

Kris frowned, then disappeared.

Geordi shrugged. “A new way to fly, captain,” he said. Geordi was in the I-would-love-to-fly-that-way camp.

“Not one we’re going to utilize unless necessary,” replied Picard.

A moment later, Kris returned. She was alone.

“I transported Dr. Crusher to sick bay. She is safe and coordinating with her staff.”

“Thank you,” said Picard. To Geordi, he said, “Mr. LaForge, coordinate with Kris. I’m thinking you and her can pilot another S Class shuttle to Data and Troi. Tow them back.”

“Can you take them fuel ‘your way’, Kris?” said Geordi.

Kris thought about this for a moment. “I do not believe so. It is not that it would be dangerous to me. But, I believe the structure of the elements in the fuel would lose elasticity. This is only a guess. When I get a chance, I should conduct some tests.”

“Might come in handy someday,” said Geordi.

“Not now. You two get going.”

Picard watched as Geordi and Kris left the bridge.

Picard issued a few orders to his crew, including getting a detailed update from Mr. Worf regarding the outbreaks of violence between the factions and security on the planet. Mr. Worf said that a truce was in place and the factions had not engaged in any skirmishes for the last six hours.

The captain put Mr. Worf in charge of the bridge. He transported to the surface. He found Riker, who quickly updated him on the Altaran negotiations.

An hour later, Kris and Geordi were on their way to rendezvous with Troi and Data while Riker and Picard solidified a new treaty between the two factions. Kris had visited the other shuttle to check on Troi and Data and update them on the situation on Altara and the plan to meet them. Kris explained she that could use Ramos on both vessels in order to get them back on the Enterprise quicker.

The next day, the shuttle was back, and the truce was signed. Neither faction celebrated the signing. Altarans did not believe in celebrating a peace treaty. They didn't like to admit it, but they were happier when they were fighting. They did not necessary endorse the violence that had broken out, and they did mourn the loss of a faction warrior. But, still, peace was boring.

Picard gave Kris and Mr. Worf permission to go to the planet for some Altaran R n R. Picard knew that Kris's Altaran needed to visit real vegetation. And, Altara was the number one place for Kris's Altaran to recharge. Mr. Worf was pleased when Kris requested he accompany her. He wanted another shot at trying to shoot a bow and arrow from a high tree ledge.

Once on Altara, Kris and Worf got selected to in a war game with a faction that was not involved in the recent violence. They spent a day tree climbing, leaping, running, and generally enjoying themselves. They celebrated with their faction. They were honored as "guest victors."

When they returned to the Enterprise, Picard had the ship return to Tellian to pick up their wayward medical officers.

The next day, the medical offices from Tellian were back on the Enterprise. Dr. Crusher had joined the away team to make sure the illnesses there were under control, then beamed back with her team. Her first comment when leaving the transporter pad was, “I prefer beaming down.”

After the Enterprise left Tellian, Picard got a call from Roger Ewell. Roger said that Star Base 325 had received the object and were studying it. Ewell said the science team was excited not only because of the origin of the object, but they detected that the cylinder part was hollow inside. They assumed that their scanners could not fully detect what might be inside.

Picard wished them luck. He added that his “very unique new commander was doing well.” They both promised to try to get together as soon as possible. They had some catching up to do.

Troi and Kris finally had a chance to talk, post-technology take-over. Kris told Troi that she didn’t remember a lot of what she had said or done while under control of the technology. She had apologized to her fellow senior officers, even though Picard had told her it was unnecessary.

She was worried about two things. “Guinan,” said Kris.

Troi understood. She said, “She may be right?”

“I used the seven of you and the Enterprise to increase my power. None of you suffered any ill effects. Nor did the Enterprise. It felt natural to do it.”

“How do you feel about that, Kris?”

Kris shifted in her chair. “If Guinan is right, then I was made for one purpose.”

“We’ve discussed this. You still have a life.”

“Yet, I also have a mission. And, I may have just complicated that mission.”

“How?”

“I was responsible for the death of a Ramos being.”

“One that was trying to kill you and steal the technology? Guinan said that this faction supports this Regor.”

“Which means that apparently this Regor exists.”

Kris was quiet. Troi decided to let the silence reign for a few moments.

“Kris, are you okay?”

Kris took a deep breath. “Whatever happens, I know I’m not alone. It’s a new feeling that I cannot deny. I feel protective of all of you. And, whatever I was when the technology affected me, that wasn’t me. I’m beginning to figure that part out. Oh, and don’t tell Mr. Worf this, but he’s a terrible tree climber.” She smiled.

Chapter Six

Picard was meeting with his senior officers in the observation lounge.

“Lastly, Star Fleet would like us to honor another new Federation member. We will go to the planet Kettar after we finish up here. The Kettarians are throwing a ball and I expect all of you to attend, in full dress uniform,” Picard said. He made eye contact with each of his officers, knowing that most of them didn’t care for their dress uniforms.

“That’s an order,” Picard added with a slight smirk.

Two days later, the Enterprise was in orbit around Kettar. Most of the senior officers had already beamed down to a great hall where they were greeted by Jula Makkla, the highest official on Kettar. She was short and stocky with one long, thick hair that ran from her forehead and up her head and back down all the way to the middle of her back. Yet, Jula was very personable. With Kettar being the newest member of the Federation—they had achieved warp drive two years earlier—Jula was the most prominent candidate to be elected to the Federation Council. (Every Federation member had a representative in the Federation Council.)

The ball was just getting started. A small orchestra was off to the side playing native musical pieces. The music was mellow and smoothing.

The male senior officers—Riker, Geordi, Worf, and Mr. Data—were wearing their dress uniforms. Riker, along with Mr. Worf were uncomfortable in these garments. They preferred their day uniforms. Neither Geordi nor Data seemed to mind.

Troi and Crusher, on the other hand, had been given a wardrobe option. They could wear their own dress uniforms or they could be clothed by the Kettar in native female garments.

Once they saw what the Kettarian females considered fashionable to wear to a formal gathering, both the ladies chose to wear Kettar dresses. Troi's was blue, Crusher's was yellow. The dresses and matching shoes were modest, yet the ladies basked in the glory of wearing something besides a uniform. They enjoyed the very rare opportunity to play dress up.

"The greatest honor on our planet is to not only attend a Wuroow, our special gala, but to Sphiksa, or dance as you call it, with your own child," Julia said to Picard and his officers. She sipped her alcoholic drink. Alcohol was available on Kettar, yet its effects were mild. "Our special gala comes only once a cycle. We look forward to it all year so we can Sphiksa with our offspring."

"Will the childless get an opportunity to dance?" asked Riker.

"Of course," said Julia with a giggle. She sipped her drink again. "The Sphiksa dance, the offspring dance, opens the gala. After that, it's free dance."

“Good. Then, I got all dressed up for a good reason,” said Riker, he winked at Troi and then added, “May I reserve a second dance?”

She smiled in return. “I’ll consider it,” she replied with a wink.

Suddenly, Crusher elbowed Troi. She gestured across the room. Troi looked, then quickly tapped Riker on the shoulder. She gestured in the same direction, with her mouth open. Geordi looked and saw what they were looking at. Data, Mr. Worf, and off to the side, Captain Picard all did the same.

Something had grabbed their attention.

Not something.

Someone.

Kris had entered the hall, and almost all eyes had turned in her direction.

She was dressed in a gorgeous gown that perfectly accented her body. It was light green in color, matching her eyes. Her shoes were modest, which only complimented her dress even more.

She looked stunning, and everyone in the hall knew it.

Troi and Crusher looked at each other. They weren’t jealous by any means, yet they both silently and with a dour undertone, acknowledged to each other how Kris had suddenly stolen the show.

“Wow,” said Riker, which made Troi shoot him a look. He smiled, “What?”

“She looks good,” said Geordi.

He also immediately regretted his words as he turned to find Captain Picard next to him. They stared at each other, then Picard held out his drink to Geordi and said, “Hold this.”

Geordi took the drink.

They all watched as the captain crossed the room and stopped in front of Kris.

Picard couldn't contain a smile as he held out his hand to her. “The opening dance on this planet is very specific. It is a dance for parents and their children. I would be honored.”

Kris hesitated. She had come to this gala per Picard's order, and had even agreed to put on this silly costume. She couldn't wait to get it off. As if Riker and Worf were uncomfortable, Kris had never put on such a garment in her entire life. However, she knew she shouldn't embarrass her captain.

She placed her hand in Picard's, he led her to the dance floor.

Before they took their first step, Julia interrupted them. “Excuse me, Captain, perhaps you are unaware that this is the traditional Sphiksa, the opening dance which is meant for parents and their child.”

“I am aware,” said Picard, and he began to lead Kris in the dance.

Jula was not satisfied. She was afraid the captain had failed to understand this important moment. He would about to ruin it for everyone.

She rushed to Riker, knowing he was second-in-commander. “Excuse me, pardon me, good sir. I must protest your captain. He does not seem to understand that this dance is only meant for parents with their children.”

“I think he understands,” said Riker with a smile. “He’s dancing with his daughter.”

Jula looked at Picard dancing with Kris. “Oh, I was unaware.”

“That’s okay,” said Riker.

Jula shrugged and returned to her hostess duties and danced with her son.

The senior members of the Enterprise watched Picard and Kris dance. Troi and Crusher, again, tried to hide any trace of jealousy (they had managed it earlier, but it was getting harder). Crusher said, “She can dance, too?”

“She practiced on the holodeck last night,” said Troi.

They watched the smooth-looking father/daughter dance. It was impressive. Enough so that others were also

noticing them. Picard and Kris had become the highlight of the dance.

When the dance was over, Kris nodded to Picard. She smiled, "Can I leave now?"

"I would prefer if you stayed a bit longer," he replied.

Troi and Riker appeared next to them, locked in a dancing embrace. "You look lovely, Kris," said Riker. His eyes sparkled, Troi did not like it one bit. She smiled at Kris, said, "You really do, Kris," then she literally twisted Riker's arm, forcing him to lead her away. Riker's laughter was loud.

"The Counselor seems odd to me," said Kris.

"Playful. It's an off night. Just forgive her," said Picard. He looked behind Kris at Geordi. He held out his hand to Kris. "May I?"

Picard nodded and backed up as Kris placed her hand in Geordi's hand and they began to dance.

Dr. Crusher ran right into Picard, she held out her hand. He took it. They began to dance. There was no way Jean Luc was going to escape a dance or two with Beverly.

The rest of the evening was relaxed and pleasant. The senior members of the Enterprise had a good time. They enjoyed the respite. They had earned it.

Picard was in his ready room. The Enterprise had just finished a geological assignment in the Delta system. They were headed to a semi-important conference on Tellar.

Picard heard his buzzer. "Come," he said.

Kris walked in. "Captain, I just received a message from Ga 'Shain, the submissive Lewtropic who helped raise me. The message was short and cryptic, yet he said he needed my help. He said he had been separated from Ga 'Reth." He said he was on the planet, Kanaan, in the Delta Quadrant.

Picard gestured to the chair in front of him. Kris reluctantly sat down.

"What exactly does that mean? I don't know a whole lot about Lewtropics," he asked.

"Lewtropics always come in pairs, either two males or two females. They are not twins. They are not typically even birthed from the same female, yet they are bonded within hours of birth. It is a complicated ceremony to pair Lewtropics, however, if they are not paired within a few days of life, a single Lewtropic will die. They are considered one being in two bodies, yet with completely opposite personalities. One is dominant, the other submissive, yet they are physically, emotionally, and permanently connected. They must remain in their pair. A prolonged physical separation means death. If one dies, the other one dies soon after. If they stay together, they have Vulcan-like lifespans, even though there are very few of

them left. They are a dying breed. Typically, the dominant Lewtropic is science-oriented, highly intelligent, and disconnected from social situations. The submissive is much less intelligent, carefree, and emotionally and socially needy. No one really knows how Lewtropics even managed to exist with their very limited breeding process. There has never been an exact count of the number of Lewtropics because they are also very nomadic.”

“How long can they be separated?”

“Two weeks, three at most.”

Picard leaned back in his chair. “We’re quite a distance from Kanaan.”

“Yes.” Kris felt that answer would be enough for Picard. He should let her go to Kanaan to assess what was happening with Ga’ Shain.

“May I accompany you?”

Kris did not expect that question. “How would you explain your absence?”

“Riker can stand in at the conference. It’s a good one, but not all that important. Besides, I believe I could costume myself. And, if needed, you could shield me. In your Ramos way.”

“Captain, aren’t you obliged to try to not go on too many away missions?”

“True. I could send Riker.”

“Why do you want to come, Captain?”

“Because Ga’ Shain seems important to you.”

Kris nodded. “He... Ga’ Reth is very business-like and not at all pleasant. My mother either wasn’t around or, well, wasn’t into ‘mothering’ all that much. Ga’ Shain is my friend.”

“Then, I’d like to help. If he’s important to you, he’s important to me.”

* * *

Picard informed Riker and the rest of his senior officers of his plans.

Ten minutes later, he met Kris back in his ready room. He was wearing an outfit that was appropriate for a middle-aged Kanaan merchant. The garments were loosely fitting and comfortable.

He needed to take precautions by “fitting in” because Kanaan was not yet a member of the Federation. They were on the watch-and-wait list since they appeared to be only a decade or so away from achieving warp drive. When that happened, the Federation would arrange First Contact. Until that time, Picard and Kris had to dress and act appropriately. This was another

reason Picard wanted to accompany Kris. She had to make sure no protocols were breached.

Kris was dressed in a Kanaan outfit as well. One befitting a student. If needed, Picard and Kris agreed to call each other father and daughter. It wouldn't be a lie.

“Are you ready?” asked Picard.

“Why here, Captain?”

“I'd rather have your version of travel be more private.”

“You're not fond of me ‘popping in and out’?”

“Those sound like my exact words.”

“They were. I am ready.” Kris took Picard's hand and they disappeared.

They reappeared in a deserted garden on Kanaan. Kris had chosen this location because it was only fifty meters from the approximate origin of the signal she had received from Ga' Shain. Kris understood what Picard meant by privately appearing and disappearing. “It's a good idea for me to travel out of sight. I understand the need,” said Kris.

“Good. Where do we go?”

Kris checked her tricorder. She nodded to a direction and they walked out of the garden.

A minute later, Kris knocked on a door. Kris and Picard waited, yet no one came to answer it. Kris tried the handle, the door was locked. She glanced at Picard who nodded.

Kris turned into Altaran and forced the doorknob to turn. Then, she quickly turned into Human, since the humanoids on Kanaan somewhat resembled Earth Humans, and would certainly question her if her skin looked green.

Kris pushed the door open.

Picard glanced to his right and left. There were some Kanaans around, but it appeared as if none of them were bothering to look their way. Picard followed Kris inside.

They stood inside a small, windowless, barren room. It had one door to their right. There was a panel on the left wall. Kris examined the panel while Picard checked out the door.

“Locked,” he said.

Kris went into Ramos. “This panel has a ‘protection’ on it. Similar to my Ramos, but not Ramos. I cannot penetrate it. I would assume there’s something inside that someone wants to protect.”

“That’s a good assumption. Now what?” asked Picard.

Kris checked her tricorder. “Allowing for a point oh-six-five error, the signal could have originated from this panel.”

Picard stood behind Kris. “Is it a communication device?”

“Unknown. I cannot see or sense anything from inside the panel.”

Kris looked around. She went to the door that Picard said was locked. She turned into Altaran and forced open the door. It appeared to be a small empty closet. Kris examined the closet. She discovered a green button hidden above the inside doorframe. “Captain, would you join me, please?”

Captain Picard stood next to Kris. She put her Ramos protection around Picard. “The others would not be happy with me if I let something happen to you,” she said.

“I wouldn’t all that happy, either.”

Kris pressed the button and a yellow light beamed from the top of the door. It shined on the wall across from them, the one with the panel.

“It that hazardous?”

“It appears to be just a light. I see no harmful energy”. Kris waved her hand in front of the light, which blocked the ray from hitting the wall. Kris did it again. Then again.

“Do you see something?”

Kris nodded. “When I block the light, the energy around the panel shimmers slightly.”

“What does that mean?”

Kris thought about it. “Would you mind?” she asked.

Picard knew what she was asking, and he wasn't necessarily happy about it. He frowned and asked, "I'm safe, right?"

"I believe so," said Kris.

"That answer does not fill me with confidence," he said. He watched Kris walk back to the panel. At her signal, Picard put his blue-tinted hand in front of the light.

Kris again examined the panel. She found a small latch and touched it. The panel opened.

Kris studied it, then said to Picard, "It appears to be some kind of communication device. This may be the source of Ga' Shain's message."

"But, where is Ga' Shain?" he asked. "Kris, may I remove my hand?"

Kris looked down the wall. She again noticed a slight shimmer along the smooth surface of the wall. Kris marked the shimmer with her hand, then looked back across the room. "Release your hand."

"Are you sure? You're standing right where the light hits the wall."

Kris nodded to Picard. He removed his hand just as Kris pressed against the wall. A hidden panel moved, exposing a hidden room.

Kris backed up as Picard came to her side. They looked at each other.

Kris led the way inside an even smaller room, again windowless. This one had a much shorter ceiling and white walls. Four dull bulbs sat in the upper corners and emitted a tiny amount of light.

Picard's eyes took longer to adjust to the dimly lit room than Kris's.

The room was not empty.

Huddled in a corner on the ground was a plump-looking male. His knees were pressed against his body, his arms wrapped around his knees, his forehead rested on his kneecaps. It was the submissive Lewtropic half called Ga' Shain.

Kris knelt in front of Ga' Shain. "Ga' Shain, it's Kris."

Ga' Shain pulled his knees even closer to his body.

"Ga' Shain, you know me. You raised me. You and Ga' Reth."

Ga' Shain still did not respond.

Kris gently placed her hand on Ga' Shain's shoulder. She went into Betazoid. She tried to calm him for two minutes. Ga' Shain still did not respond.

Kris glanced at Picard, and said, "Pardon me for this, Captain. I know you're not fond of my Muztarif." Kris sat down in front of Ga' Shain and went into Muztarif.

She “conjured” a small green “ball.” Then, a red one, and a purple one. She juggled the balls in one hand for a moment, then the balls appeared to move on their own. Kris guided the green ball into the purple one. The purple one disappeared. In its place were two blue balls. Every time she “steered” a ball into one, some disappeared, others took their place. Picard could not figure out this Muztarif game.

Picard could make no sense of this game, yet he remembered seeing it on Muztarif. This was a very unique and popular game on the game-playing planet.

Slowly, Ga’ Shain raised his head and began to watch Kris play the Muztarif game. Picard could tell he was following it, and that he knew how to play.

Eventually, when Kris had a handful of six red balls, Ga’ Shain smiled. “You always win.”

“I had a lot of practice,” said Kris. She made the six red balls disappear. “Practice is good. We love practice. Play and practice.”

“Muztarif. I wish I could go sometime,” said Ga’ Shain.

“I promise to take you someday,” said Kris. “There’s more games than you can imagine. And, food and sport. A bit of work, but that’s just because a bit is sometimes needed. Muztarif is the best, bestest place of all time.”

Kris heard Picard clear his throat behind her. It was his signal that perhaps this had been enough Muztarif to snap Ga’ Shain out of his funk, or whatever it was.

Kris went into Vulcan. “Ga’ Shain, what happened? Where is Ga’ Reth?”

“I need. Soon. Ga’ Reth.”

“I know you do. Where is he?”

“He’s dominant. He’s missing from me.” Ga’ Shain’s body began to rock.

“I’m going to find him for you, Ga’ Shain. You need to help me,” she said. Her attention was suddenly diverted. She jumped to her feet and went into Ramos.

“What is it?”

“I can... feel something is wrong. I do not know what.”

The dim bulbs in the four corners of the room exploded with bright light. Blinding. Picard shielded his eyes and Ga’ Shain ducked his head between his knees.

“Kris, what is it?”

A loud buzzing suddenly filled the room. The noise was deafening.

Picard closed his eyes and plugged his ears.

Ga’ Shain pressed his head tightly between his knees and increased his rocking motion.

Kris heard a noise at the door and realized it was closing. Picard was still wrapped in her Ramos. She wrapped Ga’ Shain in her Ramos and picked him up off the floor.

The door suddenly jerked, it was almost closed.

Kris had an idea, she extended her Ramos and used it to hold the door open.

It worked. She forced the door to widen by making her blue Ramos energy extend outward.

There was now enough room to get through the door. Kris practically carried Ga' Shain through, with Picard right on her heels.

In the outer room, Kris released her Ramos from the door. It slammed shut.

Kris made Ga' Shain stand on his feet. He was a bit shaky, but unharmed.

Picard was also unharmed. He said, "Perhaps we should go back to the ship now. Take Ga' Shain, I'll wait here."

Kris made sure Ga' Shain was reasonably steady on his feet. She looked at Picard. "I will take you first, Captain."

"No, Kris, that's an order. Take Ga' Shain."

Kris went to Picard and grabbed his arm.

They disappeared.

They reappeared in Picard's ready room. Kris let go of Picard's arm. "Sorry, Captain, it is more imperative to get you off first. I will right back."

Kris disappeared before Picard had a chance to chew her out for disobeying a direct order.

Picard shook his head. He hit his communicator.
“Commander Riker, status.”

“You’re back. We’re an hour out from the conference,” said Riker’s voice.

Kris reappeared with Ga’ Shain. She had her arms wrapped around his wide middle.

“Riker and Dr. Crusher to my ready room,” said Picard as Kris helped Ga’ Shain to a seat. Kris went into Human, knowing that Picard had very little tolerance for her Muztarif.

Riker entered from the bridge only a few moments later.
“You found him?”

“This is Ga’ Shain, one half of a Lewtropic pair,” said Picard.

Riker bent down, knowing that sometimes his height was a bit intimidating. “Hello Ga’ Shain,” he said, but got no response. Riker straightened.

Dr. Crusher strode into the ready room without knocking. She carried a medical kit. She had been briefed that if Kris and Picard found Ga’ Shain, he would probably need medical attention. She couldn’t stop whatever would kill Ga’ Shain if he failed to reunite with Ga’ Reth, but she had studied the limited information on Lewtropics she could find. She thought she could, perhaps, extend his life a bit longer.

Riker backed away as Crusher opened the kit and removed a medical tricorder. She smiled at Ga' Shain. "You must be Ga' Shain," she said pleasantly. "I'm guessing you're not feeling too well."

Ga' Shain shook his head. "Missing," he said.

"You're dominant?"

Ga' Shain again nodded. "Will die without."

"Not if I can help it," she said while continuing to take readings with her tricorder.

"Doctor, can you help?" said Picard.

"I can't stop what would happen if he doesn't get reunited with his partner, but I think I can give him some more time," she said. She put away her tricorder. "He's roughly a week separated."

"Is that about right, Ga' Shain?" asked Kris.

Ga' Shain nodded, but did not elaborate.

Kris knelt next to him. "Ga' Shain, you're going to have to tell me what happened."

Ga' Shain shook his head.

"It's difficult to be apart?"

He nodded.

"And, you've never been apart?"

He shook his head.

“Did someone take Ga’ Reth?”

Ga’ Shain hesitated. He was thinking. He even tilted his head like Mr. Data, yet Ga’ Shain’s thinking was hard work. “Ga’ Reth take Ga’ Shain to Kanaan. Says we live there. Ga’ Reth work for man. They work for weeks until job completed. Ga’ Reth not pleased with end of job because says work sloppy. Data incomplete. But, man insists no more work. Job done.”

“Was the man from Kanaan?”

“Said yes, but Ga’ Reth suspicious. Man not like others on Kanaan. Man from different part of Kanaan and new to this part. Job was important to friends and family back home. Ga’ Reth says man is decent to him, but still makes Ga’ Reth uncomfortable.”

“Ga’ Reth’s not exactly a people-person, Ga’ Shain. He doesn’t have strong social skills.”

“Good at work.”

“True. What happened when the job was finished?”

“Man said another job. Come with him. Two or three days where he came from.”

“Why did the man need to do this work in this specific area of Kanaan?” asked Picard.

“Man said materials located in this place, not at home place. Work done, but more needed when man took completed

project back. Ga' Reth said no to man. Said did not like work. Man got angry. Took Ga' Reth. Left. Ga' Shain where Kris find Ga' Shain."

Ga' Shain pinned his arms against his body and shivered like he was suddenly cold. "Never separated. Six hours longest time. On moon with Kris."

"The time Ga' Reth took a ship to the other side of the moon to collect samples."

Ga' Shain nodded. "Man take Ga' Reth. Ga' Shain alone."

"How did you contact me?"

"No contact. Not Ga' Shain."

Kris looked up at Picard, who glanced at Riker and Crusher. "How did the man take Ga' Reth, Ga' Shain? Did they travel like you did with Kris to get here?"

"Man took Ga' Reth out of room, away from Ga' Shain. Not see how travel."

Picard gestured to Dr. Crusher. "Doctor, please take him to sick bay."

Kris put a hand on Ga' Shain's shoulder. "Ga' Shain, can you go with Dr. Crusher? I'll join you in a few minutes."

Ga' Shain looked into Kris's eyes. "You come?"

"I will come. Promise."

Kris helped Ga' Shain to his feet and Dr. Crusher walked him out of the room.

"Someone contacted me, Captain."

"Could it have been this other half, Ga' Reth?"

"The source was that room and it was recent," said Kris. "Ga' Shain's memory is not all that reliable, worse now that he's been separated from Ga' Reth."

"We don't know how long that message took to get to you, Kris. Perhaps he got a message off before he was taken," said Picard.

"Then, why did the message say he was Ga' Shain?"

"Was your relationship with Ga' Shain different than the one with Ga' Reth? Would you have responded so quickly to a similar request from the dominant?"

"I was not very fond of Ga' Reth. He was never very pleasant. Ga' Shain was nice to me. And fun. A companion. There is some truth to that, I suppose. Still, helping Ga' Reth means helping Ga' Shain. I would have reacted the same."

"You need to talk to Ga' Shain again. We need more information out of him," said Picard.

"He doesn't have much time, does he?" said Riker.

"Commander, send our apologies to the organizers of the conference," said Picard. "We're going to pursue finding Ga' Reth."

“No offense, but where are we going?” asked Riker.

Picard nodded at Kris. “Hopefully, Kris will find out something. In the meantime, we’ll start heading to Kanaan. Kris, after you speak with Ga’ Shain, go back and start to poke around a bit until we arrive. That’s unless you find out something. We’re at your disposal.”

“Thank you, Captain.” Kris felt a bit awkward, yet she didn’t quite know why. Apparently, it was evident on her face.

“I consider this a priority, Kris. A rare species needs our help. We’re going to do all that we can to reunite these Lewtropsics.”

* * *

Kris sat next to Ga’ Shain in sick bay.

Dr. Crusher had given him an extensive physical. She had concluded that his vital systems were definitely registering a decline. Her tests also revealed there was very little she could do to stop this decline. She spent an hour trying to, which was against all the information she had read that said once a Lewtropic was separated, each Lewtropic began a slow march to death. Crusher was not one to give up so easily.

She gave Ga' Shain a few boosters. She also gave him a sedative so he could sleep. The numbers for Ga' Shain's vital systems had improved, but the improvement was miniscule.

Kris said, "You are feeling well?" She was in Vulcan. She decided to talk to him in a business-like manner. She needed a sense of disconnection from him because she knew Ga' Shain was easily affected by emotions, not only his own emotions, but those of others. Now that Ga' Shain was rested and stable, Kris was afraid he might focus on her emotional state if she were in Human, Betazoid, or especially Muztarif. She was very worried about Ga' Shain. And, she had to admit, because they came as a pair, she was also worried about Ga' Reth as well.

"I feel better," he said.

The door opened and Troi strode in. She had asked Kris if she could join her when she spoke with Ga' Shain. Troi immediately noticed that Kris was in Vulcan. She thought this was an odd choice, yet she didn't mention it.

Troi sat in a seat across from Ga' Shain. "Hello, may I join you two?"

As she sat, Ga' Shain looked at her. They smiled at each other. Ga' Shain immediately liked Troi. Her smile was genuine, not that Ga' Shain could tell the difference. He liked a warm, welcoming smile. When someone approached him in this manner, he felt relaxed and accepted. He had been duped in the past by sly con artists, yet Ga' Reth had always been there to protect him.

Ga' Reth was not here now, nor did Ga' Shain need protecting from Troi.

"Pretty female Human can sit with Ga' Shain and Kris," he said.

"I'm half Human, half Betazoid," said Troi without a hint of annoyance. She was used to explaining her heritage.

Kris 's body was slanted toward Ga' Shain, she sat rigid, yet tried to appear as relaxed as possible for a Vulcan.

"Ga' Shain, Counselor Troi is here to help me talk to you. I need to find out what else you remember about the man and Ga' Reth. What were they working on?"

"Kris knows this submissive has trouble understanding Ga' Reth's." Ga' Shain did seem more relaxed. His speech was less clipped. He was more like himself. He still felt somewhat stressed since he was wringing his hands.

Kris touched his hands. She said, "Kris also knows that what you just said is Ga' Reth's opinion. Kris remembers Ga' Shain can remember things, when he thinks hard."

This made Ga' Reth smile. "Kris was with Ga' Reth for a long time. Then, Kris left."

"I did," said Kris. While in Vulcan, she could not tell a lie. She could, however, get him to focus on the topic. "Ga' Shain, where did you and Ga' Reth sleep."

“Ga’ Reth does not require a lot of sleep. One or two hours, then up. Ga’ Shain likes more.”

“I know it. Captain Picard and I did not see any beds.”

“Beds in room where Kris found Ga’ Shain.”

Kris lifted one of her eyebrows, quite a Vulcan mannerism. “Remember the moon, Ga’ Shain lived in a large domed space created by my mother.”

“Liz Rogan good to us.”

“Yes, I believe she was. We had a lab and equipment so Ga’ Reth could do his work. Ga’ Reth needed these things to do his work with me.”

Troi noted Kris’s very careful words, she said “with me,” not “on me.” She did not interrupt Kris’s questioning, though.

“Where did Ga’ Reth do his work with the man?” asked Kris. “Was there a lab or another room with equipment?”

“Bigger room had equipment,” he said.

Troi said, “Perhaps all of the equipment and the beds were removed before Captain Picard and Kris arrived?”

Ga’ Shain shook his head. “Still there.”

“Are you sure, Ga’ Shain? We only saw one small panel on a wall. We found a light ray device inside the closet, but it was empty.”

Ga' Shain said, "Closet full. Ga' Shain's job to keep closet organized and clean."

Kris glanced at Troi, then looked back at Ga' Shain. "So, there was equipment like the equipment Ga' Reth used on the moon?"

Ga' Shain nodded. "Lots," he said. "Saw after Kris removed Ga' Shain from room with beds and dresser and Ga' Shain's books. Ga' Shain's misses his books."

"I'll get you more books, Ga' Shain. You saw the small panel on the wall?"

"Saw all equipment." Ga' Shain looked at Kris, apparently studying her face for a few moments. "Man said he bring good equipment for Ga' Reth. Man said equipment the best. Not from Kanaan. Man said got from somewhere else."

"Somewhere else on the planet?"

Ga' Shain's eyebrows pinched inward. This was Ga' Shain's "thinking hard" face. "Man said once Rigel. Ga' Shain ask because Ga' Reth and Ga' Shain visit planet Rigel one time. Many years before Kris. Ga' Shain remembers planet with beautiful colors and sweet smells. Man got angry with Ga' Shain for asking about Rigel, Ga' Reth had to protect. Only time man got mad at Ga' Shain."

"Did the man have a name?" asked Troi.

Ga' Shain seemed thrown by the question for a moment. Then, he said, "Ga' Reth call man Paa. Ga' Reth not used name

too many times and Ga' Reth say to Ga' Shain do not call him that. Call him Man or Kanaan man. One-time Ga' Shain call Kanaan Man and hear Ga' Reth say man not Kanaan. Ga' Shain knows when not to question Ga' Reth. Ga' Shain forgot to ask again. Ga' Shain forgets easily.”

Kris nodded. She said, “Does Ga' Shain remember anything else?”

“Ga' Shain cannot help more,” he said.

“Ga' Shain did well. You helped Kris,” said Kris. She switched from Vulcan to Muztarif. She summoned the colorful balls in her hand and grinned at Ga' Shain. “Ga' Shain's reward for helping Kris. Kris so, so, so, happy with Ga' Shain. Kris wants to play with Ga' Shain. Play now?” She squeaked.

Troi smiled at the sudden playfulness and the now obvious close bond between the two. She now understood why Kris had to talk to Ga' Shain in Vulcan, to keep some distance so they both could focus. Troi loved it when Kris was in her Muztarif. She could now see how much Kris cared about Ga' Shain, and vice versa. They were brother and sister. It was a bit jarring having Kris go from Vulcan to Muztarif, one extreme to the other, yet she understood the need for Kris to emotionally connect to Ga' Shain, in the moment and in general. This was the end of the interview; Kris wasn't going to get anything more out of Ga' Shain.

Troi wanted the two to have this time to themselves. She stood and quietly snuck away to the sounds of Kris's playful

Muztarif saying “green ball jumps, red one crash into green, look how quick it is,” and Ga’ Shain’s soft laughter.

She went directly to Picard’s ready room to give her report. There were two words of importance—Rigel and Paa.

Kris left Ga’ Shain an hour later. She had been chased away by Dr. Crusher who had to remind Ga’ Shain that he was tired and should rest. Once reminded, Ga’ Shain fell asleep right away.

Kris joined Captain Picard and the other in the observation lounge.

“Can we say the man’s name was Paa?” he asked Kris.

Kris was in Human. When it wasn’t necessary for her to be in another species, she had been making more of an effort to be in Human when she was with the entire group. “I believe so. Ga’ Shain was never good with names. He’s always had trouble with his memory, yet he tells the truth and is an innocent. Ga’ Reth may have spoken the man’s name and told Ga’ Shain to not use it. It is possible. I feel lucky that he remembered it at all.”

“Do we go to Rigel?” asked Riker.

“Mr. Data, how long to Kanaan?”

“One day, six hours and...” he stopped. “And some change,” he said.

Riker, Geordi, Crusher, and Troi grinned. They loved it when Data had to curtail himself in this manner because he sometimes annoyed Picard.

Picard looked at Kris. "Well?"

Kris considered the problem. "I would like to return to Kanaan. I can save us some time by going there myself. Ga' Shain insisted the equipment and beds were there when we found him."

"How do you explain that, Kris?" said Geordi.

"I'm not sure, but I'm working on a theory. Me," said Kris. "Why was this particular Lewtropic pair chosen? Because they connect to me. Ga' Reth was kidnapped and a message was sent to me. This cannot be a coincidence."

"Similar to when Damian took me?" said Troi.

"Possibly. I am not ready to admit that what Guinan has been telling us is one hundred percent correct. Yes, this cannot be a coincidence. For example, this Paa must have known that I would, to use an idiom, come running to save Ga' Shain. He may have truly needed Ga' Reth's technical ability, however, Ga' Reth would never purposely separate himself from Ga' Shain. A second example is how my Ramos behaved in this room. Something was off. I could do some things, yet I couldn't do other things."

"You opened the panel after you figured out how to use your Ramos," said Picard.

“It wasn’t dangerous to you?” asked Crusher.

“It was not. It was simply something that I could not easily penetrate. Not at first.” Kris frowned. “Another reason for bringing the ship to Kanaan is to use ship’s sensors to look for Ga’ Reth on the planet. They have a very specific signature.”

“That would eliminate Ga’ Reth being on Kanaan,” said Picard.

“Then, he’s on Rigel?” asked Riker.

“Unless we find evidence to the contrary, Rigel would be the next place to look,” said Kris.

“Kris, go and examine that room again. Hopefully, you’ll find some more to pieces this puzzle.”

Ten minutes later, Kris, dressed exactly the way she had when she visited Kanaan with Picard and disappeared from her quarters. This time, she reappeared in the outer room. The room still appeared to be empty, except for the panel on the wall. The door to the closet was closed. The door to the smaller room was visible. *Ga’ Shain said there was no closet.*

Kris went to the closet. She used her Ramos to open the door. She again examined the empty closet. She pressed the button above the inside of the door. The light shown again on the opposite wall.

Kris stepped out of the closet and used her Ramos—instead of Picard’s hand—to block the light.

It magically all appeared.

Each space along the wall was suddenly lined with large and complicated pieces of equipment. A center console appeared to be the controls. The lights overhead were bright halogens.

Kris checked the closet; it was loaded with smaller pieces of equipment and supplies.

Kris went to the small panel that was the only thing attached to the wall. She pressed a button and the smaller room where they had found Ga' Shain opened.

Inside, there were bunk beds, a small amour, a wash basin, and a table with foodstuffs.

Kris returned to the larger room and examined the equipment. There were buttons and screens and switches, not unlike Federation-style equipment. Kris tried to activate the equipment but could not. At the end of one panel were symbols that Kris did not recognize.

She decided to try to activate each panel, switch, whatever she could. None of it worked. With her mind, she removed the blue Ramos that was covering the light.

The equipment disappeared. The room was again empty—with the exception of the panel.

She covered the light again with Ramos, and the room returned to being full. She had no doubt that the beds and other things inside the smaller room and closet also reappeared.

Kris opened the front door and walked outside the building. She looked down the paved street from her right to her left. All along the street were buildings similar to the one Kris had been inside.

She noticed several Kanaan citizens milling around in front of shops and what appeared to be an establishment for food.

She went into her human species and walked down the street. She asked the first Kanaan citizen she came across, “What is located in that building over there?”

The citizen looked. “Which building?”

Kris pointed. “The smaller one. The one without an awning,” said Kris.

The Kanaan citizen beamed and even chuckled a little. “Am I on camera? Is this a joke put on by that travel show? What’s it called, ‘Trick the Tourist’?”

“I do not understand. I am inquiring about that building...”

“That’s an empty lot. Joke’s on you, friend,” he laughed some more before walking away. After a few strides, he turned and shouted, “I do not give my permission to air that, friend. Understand?”

Kris nodded. She looked back at the building. To her, it was not an empty lot. Kris walked up and down the street and asked four more Kanaan citizens about the building. All of them

told her it was an empty lot. Only one other person thought she was playing some kind of joke on them. She assured them she was not.

Kris returned to the building and took readings. When she was finished, she returned to the Enterprise to report her findings.

“None of them could see the building?” asked Geordi.

“That is correct,” said Kris.

“The equipment looked similar in nature to equipment used by the Federation with the exception of these unidentified symbols?” asked Mr. Data.

Kris activated a monitor. A visual of the symbols appeared on the screen. All of the Enterprise senior officers took a moment to study the image.

Finally, Picard said, “Anything Mr. Data?”

“These symbols are not in my data base,” he replied.

“We’ll run them through the Enterprise computers,” added Geordi.

“Dr. Crusher how is Ga’ Shain?” said Picard.

“He gets tired easily. I have to remind that he’s tired. His vital organs continue to deteriorate. I’ve been able to slow it, but I will not be able to stop it.”

“Mr. Data, how long until Kanaan?”

“Three hours, sir,” said Mr. Data.

After they arrived at Kanaan, Kris beamed down with an away team that consisted of Riker, Data, and Geordi. They all wore appropriate garments and beamed down into the same garden area that Kris had originally shown up with Picard. They made their way to the building.

Kris stood in front of the door. She turned and looked at the puzzled faces behind her. “What is it?” she asked.

“It’s an empty lot,” said Geordi.

Kris went into Ramos and touched the door handle. Riker, Geordi, and even Mr. Data took a step back as they were shocked to suddenly be able to see a smallish yet real-looking brick building, minus an awning, in front of them. The empty lot was gone.

“Neat trick,” said Geordi.

Kris led them inside. Again, there appeared to be hardly anything in the room until Kris used her Ramos to cover the beam of light from the closet. Geordi and the others were equally impressed.

The away team spent an hour examining the equipment. Neither Data nor Geordi could activate any of it. When they were finished, they returned to the Enterprise.

Kris stood in front of Picard in his ready room. “I believe we have received as much information as we are going to get from Kanaan, sir.”

“Agreed.” He hit a button on a panel. “Mr. Data, warp eight to Rigel. Engage when ready.”

“Yes, sir,” said Mr. Data.

“Do you think we’ll find Ga’ Reth at Rigel?” said Picard.

“I do not,” said Kris, surprising herself. She hadn’t yet thought about what they may or may not find at their next stop. Yet, she was in Vulcan and the truth just spilled out. “Captain, this is beginning to feel like a game.”

Picard agreed. “Unfortunately, since Mr. Data and Geordi couldn’t get information on those symbols, all we have to go on is Rigel and the name Paa.”

“Captain, since I can go to Rigel now and...” She stopped.

Picard understood she was anxious to help her friend. His life was at stake.

He really couldn’t find a reason to deny her. This was yet again one of those times when allowing Kris to travel “her way” seemed appropriate. He said, “I want to remind you that we are doing this together, Kris. Rigel is only ten hours away. We will continue in that direction, unless you find definitive proof that Ga’ Reth is not there.”

Kris stood. She was about to leave when she looked at Picard. “I understand that I am part of a team, Captain. I am not doing this alone. Thank you for helping me.”

“Thank you for saying it, Kris.”

She left and went to her quarters where she spent twenty minutes studying the planet Rigel. The people of Rigel were an advanced species and had been a Federation member for many decades. They were apparently known for their lack of a sense of humor. They were a serious-minded people.

When Kris arrived on Rigel, she did not need a native garment since she knew that Rigel often had Federation visitors.

She spoke with a few natives, but none recognized the symbols she showed them on her tablet. Nor had any heard of the name “Paa.” Most thought the name silly. One even got offended.

Kris was about to leave, but instead sat on a bench. It was mid-day in the largest city on Rigel. Two million people lived in this sprawling metropolis. It seemed to Kris that many of them were outside.

As she “people watched,” something struck her about the citizens of this planet. They seemed to be a serious people. Their vocal tones were even. Their facial muscles not all that expressive. It seemed as if they never smiled.

They never smile, thought Kris.

Kris rushed to a private spot and disappeared.

She reappeared on the Enterprise.

She rushed out of her quarters and found Picard, Riker, and Troi on the bridge. Mr. Data was in engineering with Geordi, but Mr. Worf was on duty.

“Captain, the Rigelians do not smile. They display very little emotion,” she reported.

Picard leaned back in his chair. “And that means what?”

“Mr. Data,” she said.

Picard glanced first at Riker, then at Troi. Troi leaned forward in her chair. “Kris, you need to explain a bit more.”

“I believe I need to bring Mr. Data to Rigel. Or, he needs to be on Rigel with me.”

Kris went on to explain her experience on Rigel. “This would be... an experiment, I suppose. However, I have a feeling...” She stopped and smiled at Troi. “I do have them, you know.”

“I know you do, Kris.”

Picard hit a button on his panel. “Mr. Data, meet me in my ready room.”

A minute later, Picard was explaining to Mr. Data about how he was needed to go to Rigel with Kris. Mr. Data agreed that the experiment seemed valid. They disappeared moments later.

On Rigel, Kris asked Mr. Data to stop a few citizens and show them the symbols on the tablet and ask them about Paa.

They were successful on the very first citizen Mr. Data stopped. The citizen said, “Paa is a solicitor in the Brenning District. A mile and one quarter to the east. That symbol is his company logo. The more advanced a solicitor, the fancier the logos.” The male citizen had spoken in a monotone void of any hand gestures and his facial expression had remained neutral. He was very Vulcan-like.

Kris and Data found a private corner and disappeared. They reappeared in the Brenning District. Data asked the location of a solicitor named Paa. They were directed to a tall, glass building. Paa’s office was located on the top floor. Data suggested they travel by the lift inside the building and not the way Kris travels. Even though seeing a Federation officer or two on Rigel was normal, he felt it was better to not draw too much attention to themselves.

At the top floor, they spoke to another male Rigelian who directed them to a large, lavish office. The room was an explosion of furniture and bookcases and screens hung on the walls. Even the large desk had multiple devices. This room provided a sensory overload.

Mr. Data and Kris faced a tall, well-dressed female Rigelian.

“Are you Paa?” said Kris.

“I am,” said Paa.

They asked Paa about Kanaan and the Lewtropics. “I am sorry I cannot help you,” she said.

“What do you do here?” said Kris.

“A solicitor. My clients own most of the mines here and on our two moons. The mines produce rare elements that Rigel sells for a very decent profit.”

Mr. Data noticed a shiny purple stone on her desk. He picked it up.

“That one is from our moon, Smomoron. It is a Betatal. It is very profitable.”

Kris glanced at Mr. Data, then back at Paa. “You call it a Betatal?”

“Indeed. There is one planet in particular that loves to purchase our Betatal. The planet is called Gromin and it’s located on the far end of our solar system.”

“Paa, do you negotiate with a specific buyer on Gromin?”

“Of course, I do. There are a few minor buyers, but Dean Anna T is my major buyer.”

Kris stared at Mr. Data.

Back on the Enterprise, Picard assembled his senior officers after hearing from Kris and Mr. Data about the jewel, Betatal, and the buyer, Dean Anna T, located on Gromin.

All three relayed this information to the others in the observation room.

Troi frowned and said, "I guess I'm going to Gromin."

"Captain, it's pretty clear we are being led by someone. Played with." said Riker.

"Should I say that it could be Regor?" said Kris.

No one was willing to answer her. Picard took a deep breath. "Look, we have no other leads. We need to get Ga' Reth back."

"Agreed. Ga' Shain is getting worse," reported Dr. Crusher. "His heart is beginning to fail. I tried giving him another round of boosters, they were ineffective. He has very little energy. He's not going to last more than five or six days, a week at most."

Kris stood. "I would like to go with Counselor Troi now."

Picard hesitated. He needed to make sure they were all on the same page. "I agree that this does appear to be some kind of game, one we are now committed to."

"Mr. Worf," Picard said to his Klingon security officer, "I want your security ready for anything. Extend your scanners, check for any anomaly. Follow through on anything that's reported, even something that appears trivial. I feel the further we go down this rabbit hole, the more dangerous."

He looked back at Kris. "Go."

Kris and Troi left the room. They went to Troi's quarters where they looked up Gromin. They discovered that, even though Gromin had a limited ability to travel in space, having Federation officers was not all that common. Both Troi and Kris quickly changed into appropriate Gromin garments, which, for females on Gromin, amounted to dresses similar to the ones they had worn to the Kettar ball.

Once on Gromin, it took them three hours to locate a gem dealer by the name of Dean Anna T. He was not only difficult to locate, he was untrusting. He refused to answer any questions from strangers.

"Women leave me be. You be pests," he said.

"Mr. Anna T," said Troi, but was stopped by a Dean Anna T hand wave.

"T, Anna," he said. "How do you not know that all Gromin's are first called by their letters, then their middle names? Just called me Dean. You'll get that wrong, too."

"Dean," said Troi, trying to keep her cool in front of this rude Gromin. "The Betatal gems that originate from Smomoron, why do you like them so much?"

"Why do you think? They make me money. I resell them. Tush mon, can't you women leave me alone?" he said. He rushed past Kris, knocking into her shoulder in the process.

Kris immediately decided that a different approach was needed with this Gromin fellow. She changed into Altaran and grabbed his arm. She shoved Dean Anna T against a wall. He

tried to resist, but Kris was much stronger. He tried to scream, but Kris put a hand over his mouth.

Troi not only caught on quickly but relished in Kris's rough treatment of this awful man. Besides, she was fairly sure Kris wouldn't kill him. Mostly sure, anyway.

Troi got close to Dean's face. In a whisper, she said, "We need answers from you."

Kris removed her hand from his mouth. "Women do not behave like this. Who are you?"

"Perhaps we are women who prefer to be treated with respect, Mr. Dean Anna T. Now, about the gems. What do you know about them?"

"Those stupid Betatals? I don't know. I guess the green people like them. I turn them around and sell them to those slimmy fellas once a month."

"Green, slimmy fellas? From where?" said Kris.

"Tush mon, I don't know. Their ship arrives, I sell them Betatals, and they leave."

"You don't know where the ship goes? You don't even know the name of these beings?" said Troi. "You do business with them without much information?"

"Look, it's against our laws to resell, okay. Tush mon, you two women are the worst."

He tried to squirm out of Kris's grasp, yet Kris pinned the man's body even closer into the wall, enough to make him more uncomfortable but not enough to injure him. "Stop it, woman. That's all I know. That Altar ship comes with the green people and it leaves with the Betatal gems."

Kris looked at Troi. "Altar ship?"

"Those green slim buckets have a name on their ship. "Altar. The star ship." That's what it says on the side of the ship. That is all I know. Tush mon, you're strong."

Kris looked at Troi. She nodded and Kris released the man.

Kris felt the quicker they got out of here, the better. If all of the men on this planet were like Dean Anna T, they were not welcome here.

Kris heard Troi's voice in her head. *I have a plan. Let's go to the moon.*

Kris nodded and they disappeared right in front of Dean Anna T, leaving him with his mouth agape. *Did I just dream all of that? I must be going crazy.* His body was shaking, and he ran off.

On the moon, Smomoron, Troi spoke with a gem engineer. This man was pleasant and helpful. First, she reported that a buyer by the name of Dean Anna T on Gromin was illegally reselling the Betatal gems. Second, she asked if he knew of any beings who flew in a ship named "Altar. The Star Ship."

The engineer wrote up a report on the illegal sales. Then, he focused on the ship in question. He looked it up and then remembered that the owners wanted to buy gems directly from him. He explained he was not allowed to sell to them directly, it was against the law. They had stubbornly returned several more times, each time trying to buy directly from the mine.

He said the ship was from a planet called Five Altar Grim, a small planet in the next galaxy. The “green slimmy fellas,” he said, was an accurate description. He called them Nemods, a non-Federation member whose inhabitants become obsessed with jewels and trinkets and other non-essentials. They were known to take to their small spaceships and visit other planets in order to try to procure large quantities of their current obsessions as cheaply as possible. Troi said they sounded like Ferengi.

Apparently, their latest obsession was the gem, Betatal.

Kris and Troi thanked the engineer for his helpfulness.

Back on the Enterprise, Picard said, “Green people from a planet called Five Altar Grim?”

“Altaran. Mr. Worf,” replied Kris. “I need to take Worf to Five Altar Grim.”

Luckily, Five Altar Grim was only three hours away. This was fortunate because Mr. Worf flat out refused to travel with Kris “her way.”

“There is nothing wrong with a transporter,” he said.

Picard was on the verge of making it an order, yet he decided that he couldn't. First, it was a relatively short distance to Five Altar Grim. Second, he didn't think he could order Mr. Worf to travel with Kris "her way." He convinced Kris that if the Enterprise increased to warp ten, they could cut the travel time down to two hours, twenty minutes. That way, Mr. Worf could travel the way he preferred.

Picard had a third reason for injecting a bit of time into Kris's schedule. He wanted Kris to take a short break. He knew she was worried and was pushing herself.

Kris didn't want to, of course. She visited Ga' Shain, who could no longer sit up in bed. It depressed Kris to see her jovial friend in such a bad way. She ate a bit and tried to rest but couldn't.

When she met Mr. Worf in Transporter Room Six two hours later, she was surprised that she didn't feel anger toward him. His delay might end up being significant in Ga' Shain's death. However, she felt only respect for Mr. Worf, not anger.

"I appreciate your candor, Mr. Worf. Thank you for helping me," she said.

Mr. Worf almost growled because he loathed getting complimented. He didn't. Instead, he said, "I want to help you, Kris. We will find this Ga' Reth."

Kris nodded. Engineer O'Brian operated the controls. He said, "We're in orbit around Five Altar Grim, they're expecting you."

“Expecting us?” said Kris.

“Five Altar Grim just contacted the captain, it’s in their bylaws to accept each visitor.”

Kris frowned.

“Continue,” said Mr. Worf.

O’Brian set his controls, then beamed down Kris and Worf to Five Altar Grim.

A short, round, and (yes) green-tinted being, with bright orange hair, stepped forward as Kris and Mr. Worf appeared on a transporter pad. He bowed to the two and said, “I am Aman, leader of Nemon. Nice to meet you Commander Worf and Commander Kris Rogan from the Federation ship Enterprise. Captain Picard said you have questions? How may I help you?”

Kris and Worf walked off the transporter pad. Kris nodded at Mr. Worf. “You have a ship that buys a gem called Betatal.”

“We did. We no longer like them. Plus, we have so many now. We like licht stones now. Do you sell licht stones? They’re very pretty and we love them.”

“We do not,” said Mr. Worf.

“Could you tell us about licht stones?” asked Kris.

“Oh, they are beautiful and so funny.” Aman giggled and wrung his hands.

“Funny? A gem is funny?” said Kris.

“Why, we believe so. In our experience stones can be funny and pretty. As a matter of fact, licht stones are so special, they like to eat. Always hungry, those little buggers.”

“This is true? A hungry stone?” said Mr. Worf.

“It could be,” said a chuckling Aman.

“May we see one?” asked Mr. Worf.

“We don’t have any yet, Mr. Worf and Kris Rogan. I was hoping you had some to sell to us. If you’re from Plebus Three, you’d have plenty to sell us,” said Aman.

“If you don’t have any how can you...” Mr. Worf was interrupted by a tug on his uniform by Kris. She shook her head. To Aman, she said, “Thank you, Aman. We will return to our ship now.”

“Can you go to Plebus Three and get us some licht stone?” he asked.

“Unlikely that we can bring you some. I am sorry,” said Kris.

Kris and Mr. Worf returned to the transporter pad.

After they made their report to the captain, Riker understood it was his turn to go with Kris. A funny, pretty stone that loved to eat? Had to be Muzturif. They needed to go to Plebus Three to find the next clue in this bizarre game of games.

Plebus Three was two weeks away by regular travel. Luckily, Riker agreed to travel with Kris.

In Ramos, Kris transported Riker to Plebus Three. They appeared near a light stone mine.

Since there was no one in the vicinity, Kris and Riker wandered into the mine. Near the entrance was a barrel of ordinary-looking rock. Others were piled around in a rather haphazard way. They walked further into the mine.

Two hours later, they had walked the entire length of this tunneled-out branch. All they saw was a lot of brown, unimpressive rock.

They were back at the entrance. "This can't be right," said Riker. "We need to find someone who knows where the light stone is."

While in Ramos, stared at a pile of flat rocks that had been stacked next to the barrel of rock. She opened a pouch on her belt. She had filled the pouch with small pieces of bread before she left the Enterprise. She dropped a handful of the food on top of the rock.

Riker watched Kris lean down and touch the rock.

"Wow, look at that," he said.

They witnessed an abrupt transformation of the rock. It had suddenly lost its brown color and turned blue. After the blue, it then turned red, then purple. It remained a beautiful shade of purple with white streaks and flecks of crystal.

Then, the rock began to absorb the bread.

It ate the bread.

“That’s... different,” said Riker. He looked around.

“Where is everyone?” he asked. “Is this mine even active?”

“Unknown,” said Kris. She was feeding the rock more bread. It got absorbed as the color continued to change. It was now a bright amber with swirls of light blue and flecks of green.

“Okay, we found the licht stone. Now what?” asked Riker.

When Kris was out of bread, she continued to watch the rock. It was a bright green color. It turned white, and then a picture appeared on it. “Commander,” said Kris. “Look.”

The picture was an outline of a human-looking face. It became sharper as the moments ticked by. Eventually, the picture had red hair, and looked exactly like Dr. Crusher.

“Great. Beverly’s next. But where?” said Riker.

“I believe if we wait, the rock will tell us...” Kris was interrupted by several armed and angry-looking natives of Plebus Three.

“Who are you? What are you doing?” asked the biggest and fiercest-looking one.

Riker stood in front of Kris. “I’m Commander William Riker from the Federation Flagship Enterprise. We’re here...”

“No communication about a Federation visit,” said the leader. He signaled his buddies to surround the two. They all pointed phaser-like weapons at Kris and Riker.

“Yes, well, our ship is... out of range,” he said. “We’re not here to do anything...”

“Come with us. We must arrest,” said the leader.

Kris was attempting to maintain eye contact on the rock with Crusher’s picture. She thought they had to stall until the rock told them where to go.

The leader grabbed Riker by the arm. He managed to make eye contact with Kris.

With a nod from Riker, Kris pushed the leader away from Riker with her Ramos and engulfed the two of them, and the licht stone, into her Ramos protection.

The leader signaled his men. They fired.

It did nothing. No phaser hit broke through Kris’s protection. All it did was make Riker crouch as if he were ducking. “Good thing that works,” he said while slowly straightening to his full height.

“What is happening?” asked the leader as he looked at his men. They were stunned that their two captives weren’t sprawled on the ground dead.

Kris saw the picture of a planet. “Commander,” she said, ignoring the men.

They stared at the picture, which took its time coming into focus.

The leader removed a communication device from his pocket and was making a panicked report to his superiors. He reported that he needed more men. He said there was an attack by pirates who were trying to trick them with magic. He said the magic would only last for a few minutes, but more men would insure the death of the intruders.

Now that it was clear, Kris and Riker were trying to identify the planet.

“Do you recognize it, Commander?”

Riker shook his head. “I don’t.”

Kris removed her tricorder and recorded the picture.

“We should probably get out of here,” said Riker.

Kris nodded. They disappeared just as a slew of armed men showed up.

They reported to Picard and all of the senior officers assembled in the observation lounge. Mr. Data analyzed the picture. “This is the Class G planet OoDall. It is a desert planet. Uninhabited. There is early life, but it is under-developed. The atmosphere is thin yet breathable for humans.”

Picard looked at Dr. Crusher. “It’s your turn, doctor.”

She frowned. Dr. Crusher was in the Worf camp, she did not like to travel “Kris’s way,” yet she also knew that Ga’ Shain

was dying quickly now. All of his body functions were beginning to shut down. It would take the Enterprise two days at Ramos warp ten to get to OoDall, so Crusher bit the bullet and went with Kris.

They decided to leave straight from the observation lounge.

“Hopefully, we’re near the end of this treasure hunt,” said Picard.

“Treasure hunt?” asked Kris.

“I’ll explain it later. Come back as soon as possible,” he said.

Dr. Crusher held out her hand to Kris. A moment later, they reappeared on OoDall.

This area of the planet had numerous short hills with some vegetation, but the quality was an uninspiring brush. It looked like a whole lot of bleak as far as the eye could see.

“I guess I drew the short straw,” said Crusher.

Kris tilted her head at Crusher. Crusher said, “I didn’t get a very impressive location. Are we even in the right spot? And, what are we looking for?”

Crushed hugged her body, not because she was cold, but because she wanted to get back to the Enterprise. She wanted to get this traveling “Kris’s way” over with and wanted to get back to Ga’ Shain. This treasure hunt where Kris was, yet again,

paired with one of her humanoid senior officer counterparts was getting a little tiring. They all thought they were done with this with Q. Getting such a bland, boring assignment also didn't inspire her.

Crusher and Kris walked around, not sure what they were looking for.

Suddenly, Crusher pulled out her medical tricorder. She leaned down and began to examine a large dark spot on the ground. From her crouched position, she looked up at Kris. "Blood."

"There shouldn't be blood here, doctor."

"I know it."

Crusher took a sample of the blood. Kris transported her directly back to sick bay, then returned to OaDall. Kris had to check the entire planet and fast. In Ramos, she could travel above it. With her Betatal Betazoid, she could detect any living thing, especially one(s) that registered any intelligence at all. The planet had some very basic life, approximately similar to an amoeba on Earth.

It took Kris over an hour to traverse the small planet. She went directly back to sick bay where Dr. Crusher informed her that she had analyzed the blood. "It's Human."

Kris thought for a moment, then said, "Captain Picard's?"

“First, Ga’ Shain is discovered on Kanaan after Kris receives a message. He then remembers the planet Rigel and the name Paa. Kris is able to discover the equipment used by Ga’ Reth and Paa and a symbol. On Rigel, Kris cannot get any information on the symbol until she brings along Mr. Data because the people there are Vulcan-like. They found out from the solicitor Paa about a gem called Betatal and a buyer on Gromin named Dean Anna T. Dean Anna T turns out to be a scoundrel, yet Counselor Troi and Kris find the next clues on the moon Smomoron, the location of the largest mine of Betatal gems. They find the largest buyer of these gems, the green-colored Nemods from Five Altar Grim. This leads Kris and Mr. Worf to visit Five Altar Grim where the Nemod leader describes their latest fancy... the light stone which he describes as funny and pleasant. And, also hungry.”

“That last part turned out to be true,” said Riker.

“Kris and Riker go to Plebus Three, the home of the light stone. There, a stone displays the face of Dr. Crusher and the barren planet of OaDall. Where...”

Picard stopped.

Crusher finished his sentence. “We find your blood.”

“I am again feeling a little left out, by the way,” said Geordi. Troi patted his arm.

Kris glanced at Geordi. *He has been left out*, she thought.

“Are we any closer to finding Ga’ Reth?” asked Riker.

Picard looked at Kris. “Kris?”

“Your blood originated on Earth, did it not?”

Picard nodded. “I’m not sure...”

A communication interrupted them. “Dr. Crusher?”

She hit her communicator. “Yes.”

“Ga’ Shain just went critical. But, I think you need to see something,” said Nurse Brown.

Dr. Crusher looked at Picard. He said, “Let’s all go.”

In sick bay, Nurse Brown, a pretty dark-haired woman from the Mars colony, showed Dr. Crusher a drawing on Ga’ Shain’s hand. She said, “It just appeared. It wasn’t there before.”

Dr. Crusher showed the open palm to the others. The picture looked crude, like a child tried to draw the picture of a country on a map.

Picard said, “That’s France. On Earth. My home country.” He looked at Kris. “Let’s go now. I don’t think he has much time left.”

Kris looked at her seven companions. “Geordi belongs somehow. This game has to have a trick,” she said.

“It was my blood, Kris. That’s a picture of France. My home country.”

Kris went into Ramos. She touched Geordi. He assumed the blueish tint of her Ramos. She reached down and looked at the back of Ga’ Shain’s hand. The picture had changed. Germany.

“That’s Germany. I was born there,” said Geordi.

“Take us both,” said Picard.

It was a decent suggestion, but Kris wasn’t sure it was the right thing to do. “Whoever is doing this wants us to make a mistake at the end. It’s all been too easy.”

“Easy? We were shot at,” said Riker.

Kris looked at Dr. Crusher. “Examine the blood sample again.”

“Kris, I don’t think...”

Kris interrupted her. “Please, doctor.”

Dr. Crusher took two minutes to re-analyze the blood sample from Oodall. She looked a bit pale when she returned with the results. “It’s now Geordi’s blood. I have no idea how that’s even possible.”

“Because whoever is doing this wants us to fail. It’s a test, one I’m supposed to lose. To wound me somehow. Ga’ Shain is important to me...” Kris stopped, then she smiled. “The Lewtropsics can’t die because I’ll need them. That’s why this is

happening. I will need them someday. It's a test, but also a message. I can't let them die," said Kris. She looked at Geordi. "We need to hurry, Geordi."

"I'm ready when you are," he said. After a nod from Captain Picard, Kris took Geordi's hand, and they disappeared.

They reappeared on Earth in a small town near the German-Polish border. The name of the town was Cottbus. The hometown of Geordi LaForge.

Geordi didn't have to look around, he didn't have to breathe in the smells that were forever ingrained in him, nor did he have to kick off his shoes and run through the grass in Goethepark. He knew this place. He grinned broadly; he knew immediately where he was. "Home," he said.

"I'm sorry you don't have time to get reacquainted, Geordi. I need to figure out where Ga' Reth is. What place was most special to you?" said Kris.

Geordi considered the question for a long moment. "Geez, Kris, it could be anywhere. I used to swim in the Spree River, we went to football matches at The New Stadium of Friendship. Heck, I got my first upper level degree at Brandenburg University of Technology."

"Geordi, where did you live?"

Half an hour later, Kris and Geordi were walking down a street called Ostrower Damm. Even though Geordi knew he was here on serious business—there were lives at stake—he was talking animatedly about his childhood home. "Our street was

right along the Spree, that's why we'd swim there so often. It was practically our backyard. My best friend was from Madlow, a town south of here."

Kris smiled and quietly listened. She liked listening to Geordi and his memories. He had a happy childhood, a real childhood. It wasn't envy, it was just a simple pleasure to listen to him.

"The house is just down there," Geordi said as he pointed down the street.

There were a few people out, but the cool, overcast day kept most folks inside.

Kris provided her own memory. "I used to lie on my bed on Star Base 325. I made up this character who lived on a planet without space travel. I named her Bemon. Bemon had to walk everywhere because her family didn't have a transportation vehicle. I don't remember why not. That wasn't the point. In my mind, I'd be Bemon and I'd be walking along streets like this one. I'd walk around cities. In rural areas. I'd walk everywhere. Whenever and wherever I wanted I would walk and never get tired. The places were decent, like this street. The rural areas were beautiful. Everyday I'd imagine a different walk, I'd take Bemon out of a house just like one of these, and just walk."

"Funny, that's exactly what I did on free days. That's what we called the days when we didn't have school. I never made a plan on those days. I'd just step out of my house and go wherever I wanted."

Geordi looked at the house in front of him. A modest, two-story ranch-type of house. The style was “old,” circa the 21st century. Many families in this area held onto their centuries-old family traditions. Yet, everything about this house was modern, from the latest in renewable energy to the furnishings to any and all safety features.

Not that there was anything wrong with the house itself. Geordi, however, shook his head. He was suddenly embarrassed. “Oh, that’s right. My house was torn down. I completely forgot. That’s not the house I was raised in. It’s the same lot, but a new house. Do you think it makes a difference?”

“Let’s find out,” said Kris.

They headed to the front door.

They stopped and looked at each other. Oddly, Kris’s mouth broke into a bit of grin, even though she was in Ramos. Geordi couldn’t help but smile back at her. “What is it?” he said.

“I kind of want to knock,” she said.

Geordi shrugged. “What the heck?” He stifled a giggle, then knocked at the door that had replaced his own childhood door.

Nothing happened.

Kris and Geordi waited. Kris was about to change into Altaran and force the door open, or take Geordi inside with her Ramos, when the door began to shrink.

The long sides were pushing in, the top was moving down, and the bottom upwards.

Kris and Geordi backed up and watched the rectangular door get smaller and smaller. Then, the house itself began to shrink in a similar manner. The sides pushed in, the roof down, and the foundation up. They stood in the street watching the entire property being swallowed into itself.

Kris wanted to do something but had no idea what to do. She looked at Geordi, he shrugged.

Just when Kris realized she needed to do something—Ga’ Reth might be inside the house—the house began to rebuild and reshape itself. The facade changed right in front of them—a new door, siding, windows, even landscaping.

Kris and Geordi watched in awe as a “new” house replaced the “old” house.

Finally, it was done. All was quiet. Kris and Geordi looked around the street. It appeared as if no one in the neighborhood noticed, or even cared. No neighbors were out, nothing stirred. This bizarre house swap seemed to have affected no one in this enclave.

“Kris,” said Geordi, his mouth hung open. “It’s my childhood home now.”

“Really?”

All Geordi could do was nod.

Kris and Geordi walked to the new door. Kris tried the handle, it turned. They glanced at each other, silently communicating that their next move was to go inside.

Kris led the way.

They stood in the foyer of the house. Geordi's mouth was still hanging open as he looked around. "It's all the same. Just like it was the last time I was here."

"You do realize this is not real," said Kris.

While still examining the front room, Geordi said, "You're killing my buzz, Kris." He looked at some pictures on a wall. "My Little League teams. Wow, we this year. I forgot how cool that was." Geordi was lost in childhood memories.

Kris was stuck, what was their next move?

Geordi was still off to another place in his mind. "I wonder if my baseball cards are still there."

"Where? In a bedroom?"

"Well, yeah, most of my collection. But, I hid the good cards."

"I don't understand what that means," said Kris.

"I have four siblings. We were always getting into each other's stuff. I had to hide my good cards. The one's worth something."

Kris crinkled her eyebrows. "I thought Earth long ago stopped using any form of currency?"

"I'm not talking about money, Kris. Bragging rights. You have to keep your baseball cards in pristine shape. You can't have your little sister drawing on them."

"I did not know that." Kris considered what Geordi was saying. "You had a secret hiding place?"

Geordi nodded. "In the attic."

They stared at each other.

To get to the attic, Kris and Geordi had to walk upstairs to a long bedroom on the second floor. Geordi opened a walk-in closet. To the left side of the closet was another door. Geordi opened the door to reveal stairs that led up to a large, partially furnished attic.

"Where were your beanball cards?"

"Baseball," Geordi corrected her. He shrugged and headed to one end of the attic. He knelt below a round window and tapped on the end of a wooden floor slat. It popped up.

Geordi reached into the space beneath the slat and pulled out a box. "Here they are," he said, he wore a huge smile on this face.

The room and everything changed.

The attic changed into...the bridge of the Enterprise.

Except, not exactly.

To Kris and Geordi, the bridge looked like could be underwater. But, not quite. The air looked like it was shimmering. Worse, it was slowly breaking apart, molecule by molecule.

Picard, Troi, Riker, Crusher, Mr. Data, and Mr. Worf were all present. Unlike floating in water, their feet were firmly on the floor, yet each one was enclosed in some kind of cocoon.

The cocoon around each officer was also beginning to come apart, molecularly speaking.

Geordi with his visor and Kris in Ramos could both clearly see the elements of air and cocoons breaking apart.

If the two met—the stripping of the air on the bridge and the dispersal of the safety cocoon around the officers—any life would die. The senior officers of the Enterprise would die.

The officers of the Enterprise were not alone on the bridge. Strapped to Captain Picard's chair was Ga' Reth. Thin bands of some of kind energy held him in the chair. He slumped; without the bands he would easily fall to the floor.

His bands were not coming apart, however. He was simply tied to the chair.

Kris tried to get to Ga' Reth, but she couldn't get close to him. Whenever she tried, it was like she was running into a solid wall of...a bubble, water, something elastic. Whatever it was jolted her backwards each time she tried to get to Ga' Reth.

She tried to get to Picard and Troi, and the same thing happened.

“I can’t get to them. I’m in Ramos and I can’t get to them,” she said. Her voice sounded strange, loud yet muffled, like she was talking underwater.

“I’m not sure what I can do,” said Geordi, sounding similar to Kris. “What’s happening, Kris?”

They watched the air being picked apart, it equaled the picking apart of the cocoons.

It appeared as if the humans inside the cocoons could tell what was happening to them yet could not move. Only their eyes, which darted back and forth. Panicked.

Again, Kris didn’t know what to do.

Suddenly, letters appeared in front of Kris and Geordi, words written in the air itself.

“Give me food, and I will live. Give me water, and I will die. What am I?”

Kris and Geordi read the words quietly. Kris was flabbergasted. Yet, Geordi quickly understood. Animatedly, he said, “It’s a riddle.”

“A... what?”

“A puzzle. Brain teaser. ‘Give me food, and I will live. Give me water, and I will die. What am I?’ He thought. “Fire!”

The words floating in the air disappeared.

More words took their place.

Geordi read them out loud. “Until I am measured, I am not known, yet how you miss me when I have flown. What am I?

“Time,” said Kris, finally catching on.

“Yes,” said Geordi.

The next words read, “When I’m used, I’m useless, once offered, soon rejected. In desperation oft expressed, the intended not protected.”

After Geordi read the riddle out loud, they both thought about it.

Kris looked at Crusher and Troi, their eyes were wide. The breaking apart of the air on the bridge was intensifying.

Yet, the bands of energy around Ga’ Reth were loosening. *Was it Ga’ Reth in exchange for the senior officers?* Kris hated this thought and didn’t believe it. All along this treasure hunt, Kris felt it was only a game. Their first game. And, a test. A way for her and...Regor...to feel each other out.

Yes, it was Regor. It has to be.

If they answered these riddles correctly... Kris and Geordi had to hurry, and they had to be right.

“A poor alibi,” said Geordi.

The words disappeared.

Another band of energy fell away from Ga' Reth. He was in bad shape, though. He didn't appear to be conscious. A few more bands and he'd fall to the floor.

The next riddle read, "When I turn around once, what is out will not get in. When I turn around again, what is in will not get out. What am I?"

Geordi didn't hesitate. "A key," he yelled excitedly, like he was winning a prize at a carnival.

The words disappeared again.

They were not replaced...for several moments.

After the next riddle appeared, Geordi read the words, "As a whole, I am both safe and secure. Behead me, and I become a place of meeting. Behead me again, and I am the partner of ready. Restore me, and I become the domain of beasts. What am I?"

Geordi scratched his head. "Oh, geez."

They both read it again.

Kris mumbled, "Remind me someday to mention that these riddle things are quite annoying."

Geordi didn't respond, he was too focused. Riddles were his thing. He'd always loved any kind of brain teaser or riddle. The more complicated the better. These were relatively easy ones. Even this one, he just had to read it a few times and...

“Stable,” he shouted.

The words disappeared.

Kris and Geordi waited for the next riddle.

Moments passed, yet the next riddle didn’t come.

Ga’ Reth was being held up by one strand of energy.

The cocoons around the senior officers were almost too thin to safely contain them anymore.

And, the air on the bridge...was almost in molecular pieces.

We should be done, but we’re not, thought Kris. *What more could he want?*

“Stable,” she whispered, then looked at Geordi.

“What’s the most stable gas?”

“Why?”

She pointed to the air. “The air is coming apart. But, not apart, it’s changing. The elements are changing.”

Geordi studied the air. “The air is losing helium.”

“Not losing.”

“The microscopic amount of helium in our air is becoming liquid helium. If it completes the transition...”

“They’ll die,” finished Kris.

Both Kris and Geordi were stumped. *He wants us to figure this out. I know it. This isn't big enough for Regor. He wants a challenge. He wants to make sure I'm up to the challenge.*

The eyes of the officers began to redden—lack of oxygen—they were choking.

Ga' Reth's last strand fell apart, he fell in a lump onto the floor.

The liquid oxygen transition was almost complete.

Kris looked at Geordi. "What's a riddle about helium?"

"What?"

"One of these riddles. Do you know one that is about helium?"

Geordi thought for a moment. "It's really dumb..."

"Say it," Kris yelled. "Now."

Geordi took a quick breath. He closed his eyes, and said, "What did the scientist say when he discovered two atoms of helium?"

Kris looked at Picard, she saw his chest rise and fall.

Words appeared in the air. "HE."

Suddenly, the bridge of the Enterprise returned to normal.

The cocoons around the officers disappeared and the liquid helium returned to normal helium, which meant the air on the bridge returned to normal.

The officers collapsed to the floor, each taking deep breaths.

Kris rushed to Picard. He waved her away and croaked, “Ga’ Reth.”

Kris nodded and rushed to Ga’ Reth. She went into Altaran to pick him up. Then, she went back into Ramos and disappeared.

She reappeared in sick bay. She rushed Ga’ Reth to Ga’ Shain, who laid motionless on a bed.

Even though space was limited, she went back into Altaran, and managed to squeeze Ga’ Reth on the bed right next to Ga’ Shain. She placed one hand on each of them and waited.

There was nothing more she could do.

The door to sick bay opened. Picard and Dr. Crusher staggered in.

Kris went to them, she had to grab Crusher, who still wasn’t steady on her feet. “There’s not anything you can do, doctor.”

“There has to be something,” she croaked.

Kris shook her head. “Either they survive, together, or they don’t.”

Two doctors took Crusher and Picard to the side to check them out and give them boosters. Kris told Dr. Springer that the other senior officers might need to be checked out as well.

Apparently, the rest of the crew of the Enterprise did not participate in the liquid helium fiasco. None of them were even aware what had happened.

Picard and Kris waited in sick bay for twenty minutes while Dr. Crusher and her team monitored the Lewtropic pair who were huddled together in the bed.

Picard didn't talk to Kris. He understood that downloading what had happened on Earth as well as the liquid helium fiasco could wait. This was too important to Kris.

Abruptly, both Lewtropics woke and climbed out of the bed one at a time, once they figured out how to disentangle each other.

They stood in front of Kris as if reporting for duty.

Kris smiled at Ga' Shain. "Now I can finally take you to Muztarif," she said.

"I do not believe that is necessary. I have no desire to visit such a place," said Ga' Shain. His voice had no inflection. His posture was ramrod straight; his hands laced behind his back. And, his eyes no longer sparkled like a curious toddler.

Without knowing exactly what was going on, Kris knew something was wrong.

“Ga’ Shain?” said Kris, while studying his face.

Ga’ Shain nodded. “Yes, Kris,” he said in a very serious-sounding voice.

Kris looked at Ga’ Reth. “Ga’ Reth, what is happening?”

Ga’ Reth didn’t move or speak for several long moments. Then, he shrugged.

Then, he giggled. When he finished, he said, “Kris wants to know too much, I think. Except, maybe, Kris can now play with Ga’ Reth the way Kris used to play with Ga’ Shain. Ga’ Reth wants to learn the game with the colorful balls. Can Kris teach that one to Ga’ Reth? Please?”

Kris looked from Ga’ Reth to Ga’ Shain and back again. Her heart broke.

They had switched.

“Kris, what’s happened?” asked Picard.

She looked at Picard and Dr. Crusher. Quietly, she said, “They switched.”

“Switched? Crusher looked confused.

“The dominant is now the submissive. The submissive, the dominant.”

Understanding dawned on both Picard and Crusher's faces. They looked at each other. Crusher said, "Maybe I can do something," knowing there was nothing she could do.

Picard touched Kris's arm. "Are you all right?"

Kris nodded; she couldn't speak. *The only good thing I had...Is now gone.* She turned and walked out of sick bay.

* * *

Kris spent two days mostly by herself. She only appeared twice was the debriefing. The senior crew members met and discussed all that had transpired.

Kris explained everything she needed to explain. She was detailed. She showed no emotion, even though she was in Human.

Then, she left.

The only other time she had spoken to someone was when Troi visited her on the holodeck. Kris told her she didn't feel like talking.

Troi decided to give her some time to herself.

Dr. Crusher released the Lewtropsics were released from sick bay. She couldn't find anything physically wrong with them.

Kris was in her quarters. She heard a knock at the door, and said, "Come."

Geordi walked in. "Hi Kris," he said. "The Captain wanted me to tell you that the Lewtrops are ready to leave. We're in orbit at Septis Three."

"Is that where they want to go?"

"Ga' Shain said it's as good a place as any. He says he needs to do a lot of studying."

"He has obtained some of the knowledge from Ga' Reth, but that's sound about right. He needs to catch up to Ga' Reth's level of intelligence. Ga' Reth is...was extremely intelligent."

"What happened to all the intelligence in Ga' Reth?"

"It's gone. Most of it left him when they switched."

"Did you know they were going to switch?"

"No. It was quite unexpected." Kris noticed something in Geordi's hand. "What is that?"

Geordi held it up. "I don't have as many as the captain, but I have a few." He smiled, then showed her the old-fashioned Earth book. "It's a book."

"The captain showed me one once," said Kris.

Geordi held it out to Kris. She smiled at the title and read it out loud. “The Best Brain Teasers.” The both laughed. Kris took the book to examine it.

“I want you to have it,” he said.

“I can’t take this,” she said, and tried to hand the book back to Geordi. He held up his hands.

“You need the practice,” he said, he was grinning.

“Thank you,” she said.

There was an awkward moment while Kris put the book down. “I guess I have to go to the transporter room.”

“I guess you’re not looking forward to it.” Geordi’s smile was gone. He went to the door, it opened, but Geordi waited for Kris. “Let’s go together.”

Kris nodded and walked out with Geordi.

They took a turbolift to Transporter Room Six. Captain Picard, Dr. Crusher, and the Lewtropsics were already there. Geordi, Picard, and Crusher moved away to give Kris some privacy with Ga’ Shain and Ga’ Reth.

For the briefest of moments, she looked first at Ga’ Shain and had forgotten they switched. She was about to say something to him but stopped. That’s the moment she remembered. *They switched.*

She looked at Ga’ Reth. She didn’t know what to say to him, either.

She smiled at Ga' Reth and got a pleasant grin in return. Kris couldn't recall a time she had ever seen Ga' Reth smile. It looked strange on him.

She looked at Ga' Shain. She wanted a smile from him, not Ga' Reth. She knew she wasn't going to get one.

"Will you stay here for long?" she said to Ga' Shain.

"Septis Three has an excellent library," said Ga' Shain with an unfamiliar tone. His voice had no inflection, no quality to it. It sounded Vulcan-like. It sounded wrong to Kris's ear, but she had to find a way to accept the fact that Ga' Shain was no longer Ga' Shain.

"Good luck to you both," she said.

She watched the Lewtropics step onto the transporter pad. Mr. Data was at the controls. He pushed a few buttons and the next thing Kris knew, the Lewtropics were gone.

Kris stared at the empty transporter pad.

"Kris," said Picard. She turned to face him. "Are you all right?"

She nodded. She wasn't all right but didn't want to say it.

"Will you follow me to my ready room?"

Kris didn't want to, but she did it anyway. She quietly walked next to Picard to his ready room. Inside, he sat on the couch, not his usual seat at his desk.

Picard gestured for Kris to sit next to him.

Kris remained standing. "Captain, the effort... your effort to... You don't have to," she said.

"I want to," he said quietly. "Kris, please sit down. I want to hear about how Ga' Shain used to be when you were on the moon. I want to hear about your time there. Even the old Ga' Reth. Please tell me."

Kris frowned. She sat at the other end of the couch. She closed her eyes. "I don't want to think about how it used to be. How they used to be."

"Kris, the only effort I'm trying to make is to hear how it was for you. Here about times that, perhaps, you enjoyed when you were on the moon. Ga' Shain was your friend. I'm guessing you did something fun with him at some point."

"Fun?" she said. She shook her head.

"Come on, there had to have been one thing. Hide and seek?"

"What..." Kris stopped. She smiled and looked away from Picard.

"You know the game, don't you?"

Kris nodded. "Ga' Shain and I... You're right, there was some fun."

"With Ga' Shain?"

“Only with Ga’ Shain.”

“Tell me more. Tell me as much as you remember.”

“You’re sure?”

Picard nodded. “I don’t know what will become of us, Kris. This father and daughter...thing. It’s taken me by surprise. I’m making an effort because I want to. You don’t have to return the favor. I’m just trying to learn more about you. With your permission.”

“I don’t trust easily. I have some social shortcomings, I’m afraid.”

“I’m not asking you to trust me, just talk to me about yourself. Whatever you feel comfortable telling me. Is that too hard?”

Kris smiled. “No,” she said. “The moon? I guess you can say that Ga’ Shain and I knew every hiding place in our shelter. One time...”

Kris talked about the “fun” times on the moon with Ga’ Shain, and Picard listened.

They talked for longer than Kris would have thought possible. Kris did most of the talking. It was healing. It was what she needed. To talk about her time on the moon, the fun times with her old friend, Ga’ Shain. Only the good times. There were few, but there were some.

Picard did the listening, commenting sparingly. Without knowing it, they got closer than ever to becoming a real father-daughter. Closer than either them ever thought possible.