



# The Family Will Go On

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*There will be no more Picards.*

The thought came to his mind unbidden, as it had so often during the past several weeks. He remembered where he'd been when he said those words aloud. He remembered the family album he'd been looking at. He remembered how he'd wished things had been different, and the wishing still weighed upon him without respite or reprieve.

Picard put a thumb on either side of his temples as if to squeeze the thought from his skull, trying to remember the focusing techniques that he had learned once upon a time. It may or may not have worked, he was fairly certain he was doing it wrong, but within a moment the silent protest was interrupted with an insistent *beep* from his computer console.

*1 new message. Ready to view?*

If his thoughts were difficult to bear, the real world was becoming impossible. Over the last several weeks, it had been harder and harder for Picard to focus on his current duties. Overseeing the construction of a starship was no small task. He'd tried to focus on the various equipment requisitions, give the engineering assignments the time they were due, oversee installations, catch up on the piling stack of reports to send up the command chain, review crew assignments...that's what this message was, a list of his new senior officers; he could tell because of the admiral's office who'd sent it.

*Beep.*

*1 new message. Ready to view?*

He knew the message was going to tell him everything was going to be different now. The *Enterprise-D* had crashed six months ago, and it was inevitable after the loss of a starship that crews scattered across various new postings and opportunities. Picard had been through it before on the *Stargazer*, and it was only natural. He struggled to remind himself of that, to be

happy for them as they moved on. He knew that Riker deserved a starship of his own, that Data could do wonders at the Daystrom institute, perhaps, or that Beverly could opt to return to Starfleet Medical, LaForge would have a post of his choosing, and the same thing for Worf and Troi. All of them deserved to choose their own fates and grab the best opportunity they could find. He knew he shouldn't begrudge them, or Starfleet, for it. But, breaking in a new crop of officers on a brand-new starship, the thought starting it all over...he just couldn't handle it today. Not today.

He slapped the console off with more force than was necessary and sprang up to his feet. He shook his hands and made a distinctly un-captain-like shiver of the rest of his arms and his legs. He couldn't sit any more, so he strode swiftly over to the worn-looking couch that sat in the opposite corner from his makeshift desk in this small makeshift office.

On the couch was a meticulously sorted array of rock-climbing equipment: ropes, carabiners, hooks, a pair of suits, a tricorder and the like. Picard touched each piece intently and carefully, counting them in his head for what was probably the thousandth time. It was all there. More than they needed, surely, but Picard wouldn't have it any other way. He'd always been an over-preparer. It all lay there, waiting to be used. The feel of the equipment gave him gooseflesh and made his stomach float up into his chest.

He looked up from the couch and the equipment and out the large rectangular window they sat below. The window gave a sweeping view of the starship whose construction Picard was currently overseeing in the Utopia Planitia Orbital Shipyards. The next ship that would bear the name *Enterprise* was straight ahead, unfinished, with massive bare beams gleaming in the starlight: the Sovereign-class *Enterprise-E*. It was to be Picard's second *Enterprise*.

Picard knew the view was why he'd been given this small room in the ancillary complex of the shipyards, so he could gaze upon his construction project, the ship that would soon be his. He found, however, he only had eyes for the dusty, red planet Mars peeking out from behind all the machinery. He only had eyes for where he'd be going with Jason.

“We'll get her finished soon enough, sir.”

The voice nearly made Picard jump out of his uniform, and he turned to see the intruder. A disheveled head of receding blonde hair and a nervous lop-sided grin greeted him. In such unfamiliar surroundings, it was the one recognizable face.

“Mister Barclay,” Picard droned, “shouldn't you be knocking?”

“I would have sir,” the engineer replied with a slight shuffle of his weight, “but, but you don't actually have a...”

He trailed off and made a gesture to the doorframe he was standing in. It contained no closing door. Utopia Planitia saved all of its new fineries for the ships it built. The ancillary spaces like offices for incoming captains got whatever was left over or could be salvaged up from the decommissions pile, including door-less doorways, apparently.

“Are those for, um, your trip down to the surface?” Barclay gestured to the climbing equipment. “Your climbing trip with Jason Vigo?”

Picard's eyebrows lifted at the question.

“How do you know about that?”

Reg's cheeks reddened a little bit.

“Oh, I wasn't snooping, Captain. I'd seen that you added him to the access list for today when I was going over scheduling this morning.” Barclay's grin grew somewhat sheepish and he added, “And the requisition for the climbing gear.”

Barclay was nothing if not obsessively thorough. He was right, of course: the climbing equipment was for Picard and Jason to use down on Mars. It was for a trip they'd planned together, the first time they'd be seeing each other since they'd met.

Jason Vigo was the son of Miranda Vigo, and the memory of meeting Jason always brought Picard back to her. Their love affair had been brief but intense. He'd left her behind to return to the *Stargazer* about twenty years ago, which was just about how old Jason was now. An old nemesis of Picard's, Daimon Bok, had used that math to make it appear as though Jason was Jean-Luc's son. He'd been convincing, too, Picard had believed the deception.

Jason had made such an impression when he'd first come aboard: brash, young, and fully-grown with independence. Neither man had known what to do with the other stranger, but the crisis had forced them together and that proximity had generated its own tentative closeness. When it was eventually discovered that Jason was not, in fact, Picard's flesh and blood, Picard had found himself with a surprising sense of loss. He'd stumbled upon something he never knew he wanted, and it was hard to suddenly lose it. Jason had clearly felt something similar. An impression, a small connection, had been made and they'd each pledged to keep in touch with the other.

Thinking about the year that followed, Picard wished that he'd held up his end of the bargain better, but Jason had struggled to reach out as well. There had been a message here, and a chat there, but nothing beyond a casual 'how are you?' It hadn't been until after the destruction of the *Enterprise-D* on Viridian III and the news that Picard's nephew and brother had died tragically in a fire that Jason had truly reached out.

Picard had been touched by the long and heartfelt message. He'd read it more times than he dared to count, and over the past six months they'd talked about getting together. Both had an

interest in rock climbing, and it had been a contributing factor to the closeness they'd discovered, however small. When Jason had learned of Picard's station on Mars, he'd suggested that's what they do together. He was already travelling there. It was a perfect opportunity. Jason had suggested the Red Cliffs of Echus Chasma, which were remote, but just within transporter range of the orbital station. Picard had jumped to agree.

*The family must go on, Jean-Luc!*

Ever since the trip had been scheduled with Jason, Picard found himself unable to focus on anything else. The ship outside his windows, the new crew assignments, even Reg standing waiting in his door-less doorway were chased away from his mind by the thought of spending time with the young man he'd once thought to be his son.

*Reg.*

Picard glanced at his officer, unsure of how long he'd been standing in silence. Barclay glanced aside furtively, which surely meant it had been painfully long.

“Was there something you wanted, Mister Barclay?”

“Oh! Yes, sir!” Barclay fumbled a small cylinder from his pocket, almost dropped it in his haste, and then held it up triumphantly. “We're finishing up the installation of the central core on the Enterprise, and we're ready for your voice imprint.”

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Picard rolled the tiny cylinder in his hand impatiently. It was about finger-length, and perhaps more valuable than any other piece of equipment that would ever be installed onto this new starship. It was like a key, really; a key that unlocked everything, and Picard couldn't wait to slide it into its new home, get back to his office to wait for Jason, and be done with it.

Its new home sat dead ahead, a meter high trashcan shaped cylinder in the center of the Central Core Access Room on the *Enterprise-E*. A swarm of Barclay's engineers surrounded it as they made delicate connections here and there. The central processing core, often simply called the 'central core,' was much like the cerebral cortex of the human brain; virtually all higher computer functions were routed through it. Deep inside it was a tiny hundred-year self-contained antimatter reactor, creating a small faster-than-light warp field that allowed for the computer's incredible calculating speeds and, from the outside looking in, its breathtaking intelligence. The security access key allowed that intelligence to be accessed, and once it was placed inside, the real work of integrating the new computer could begin.

In his hand, the key felt too small. It and the central core were each a tenth of the size they'd been the first time he'd done this on the *Stargazer*, and still a good half the size they'd been on the *Enterprise-D*. It seemed impossible that they could perform their functions, being so small. Progress was always pushing forward, getting smaller and smarter, and he knew that was supposed to be a good thing...

"Are we quite ready Mister Barclay?"

"That about does it," Reg said, taking a step back and wiping his brow. The central core now sat, finally, where it should be. "Apologies for the delay."

"May we proceed?"

Barclay nodded excitedly. "I think so. Yes."

Picard held the key out for Barclay to take and got a confused look in return. It was tradition for the captain of a new ship to put it in himself.

"Please," Picard prodded him, "you may do the honors."

Barclay took the key with a nervous reverence and walked ever so slowly toward the core. Picard resisted the urge to tell him to hurry up. Tradition told him, however, that this moment, the first awakening of the brain of a new starship, was something to be venerated and treated with belabored ritual. Engineers, for all their empirical physics and geometry, could be such mystics when it came to their machinery.

The key slid delicately inside.

There were no lights on the exterior of the larger cylinder, but a telltale hum rose after a moment. All the engineers in the room, Barclay included, inhaled in anticipation and looked to Picard.

“Ready for voiceprint activation.”

The computer voice was smooth, perfectly measured and distinctly feminine, as all Federation AIs were. Picard's voice caught in his throat for a moment, and he wondered if she'd been able to sense his hesitation. Silliness. She was only a computer.

“Picard, Jean-Luc. Activation code alpha-seven-seven-theta.”

The words didn't matter, even though he had them memorized. The computer could hear his voice, analyze his speech to verify his identity, and it would respond to no one else.

“Activation accepted, Captain Picard. Security unlocked for programming.”

Barclay applauded spontaneously, beaming with pride. A couple of his other engineers joined in and Picard followed suit, out of instinct. He glanced around the small room looking for a chronometer, wondering what time it was, wondering how far away Jason was.

“Congratulations,” said a voice from behind the celebration. Picard turned, and as if he had conjured him from the ephemera of his thoughts, there was Jason leaning in the doorway. He

looked exactly as Picard had imagined, a half-smile broken across his rakish young face. “I hope I’m not interrupting,” he said, shifting his weight.

“Oh, no!” Picard quickly responded, stepping towards him with a large smile. “We’re just finishing.”

His step forward had been longer than he’d anticipated, and suddenly the two men were inside an embrace. Picard squeezed Jason’s shoulders with his own, and then stepped back to get a better look at his guest.

“It’s good to see you, Jason.”

“It’s good to see you too, Captain.”

Jason, at the mention of Picard’s formal title, glanced around at the engineering crew who were all standing by and smiling graciously. It was plain that he was nervous. Picard cleared his throat.

“Alright gentlemen,” he said, “I believe that concludes our business for the day?”

“It’s unlocked and ready to start integration,” Barclay nodded. “I’m willing to-”

“Tomorrow,” Picard said, cutting him off with a firm smile. “You can all start programming *tomorrow*.”

For once, Reg picked up the verbal queue.

“Of course. Let’s pack up,” he said to his team. Then he turned to Jason, and stuck out his hand, which Jason took. “It’s nice to meet you. Have a wonderful climb down below.”

Reg pumped the shake a bit too hard and a bit too long, but then he released and moved off. He’d come a long way. Two or three years ago Reg may have tried to bend Jason’s ear on the holoprogram he was writing, or the plasma tube he’d cleaned, or how there was a nasty Rigelian flu to watch out for on Starbase 23. His sessions with the good counselor had done him well.

“Are you ready?” Picard said, turning to Jason again. “I have all our equipment waiting in the transporter room.”

“Actually,” he replied, clearing his throat and looking around again, “I was hoping you could give me a tour of the ship.”

Jason's nervousness made Picard relax. He could focus on making Jason feel comfortable rather than dwelling on himself. It was something to do.

“Of course,” he said, patting him on the shoulder and leading him out of the computer control room. “Though, I should warn you...there's not much to see yet.”

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It was true; there really wasn't much to see on the *Enterprise-E*. Only the central decks of the saucer and primary hulls even had atmosphere. This was to facilitate work on the most complicated innards of the infant starship while the outer hull was finished. It would then be hauled to Earth for the final, more impressive stages of construction. Still, one could get a feel of the size of the new *Sovereign-class* line just from striding through the bare corridors that did exist. The space dwarfed even that of the expansive comfort of the *Galaxy-class* line.

“It's impressive,” Jason said as a particularly long stretch of corridor lay before them.

“It is,” Picard agreed. “The *Sovereign-class* was designed for autonomy during particularly deep space missions.”

“*Sovereign-class*, as in take the kingdom with you wherever you go?”

“I certainly wouldn't consider the Federation a kingdom...or myself a king.”

“Well, the name fits the ship. And you.” Jason then shook his head. “I don't know how you Starfleeters do it, that much time away from home. My mother never would have let me join up, even if I'd wanted to.”

Picard smiled.

“My mother too, and my father for that matter. He adamantly opposed my life in Starfleet.”

“A land-lubber?”

Picard looked up at the beams marking each section of corridor that they walked under and thought of his father. “He was very much about tradition, duty...duty to one's family, one's family business. The Picard vineyard has been in the family for hundreds of years, see.”

“That isn't what you wanted?”

He could see Maurice Picard's face: stern, round, and framed on either side with the last remaining telltale wisps of grey Picard hair. “His concerns were different than mine. I wanted the stars, and he wanted the family tradition to continue. My brother Robert was much closer to him than I was. They both talked a lot about the ‘family line.’”

“Sounds a lot like my mother.” Picard looked at Jason with eyebrows upraised, questioningly. “Oh, yes. The Vigo's have always been colonists and philanthropists. Making homes of the frontiers, building schools.” Jason bit the side of his lip and shook his head, looking away. “I'm not sure I've lived up to family tradition either.”

“You know, my father was very much enamored of your mother.” Jason looked back over to him, and Picard nodded with a smile. “Miranda and I first met on Earth. Right before I shipped out on my first deep space command, in fact.”

Picard could still remember standing on the porch of his parents' house, watching her walk away. She'd wanted to visit LaBarre almost as soon as she'd met him. She'd completely charmed his parents, just liked she'd charmed everyone she met, and been wholly enamored with the French countryside. It was one of the last things they'd done together. His father had been

standing next to him as she disappeared down the long tree-lined driveway, his round face quiet and very still.

“I’d always wanted my own ship when I was young,” Picard said.

“And now you have one, another very impressive one.” He shook his head. “It’s your world up here, it’s certainly not mine.”

“Space travel doesn’t interest you?”

“I’m afraid I’m a land-lubber like your father and brother.”

After a few meters of mutual silence, they found themselves in the area of the transporter room.

“Shall we beam down to the surface?” Picard asked as he saw the door swing into their view. “We’ve seen about as much as can be seen right now, I’m afraid.”

“We’re not leaving anyone behind up here?” Jason said, looking back and forth down the corridors.

Picard shook his head. “I’m sure the engineering team has been gone for a while now.”

Jason nodded. He still seemed tense. To be expected, Picard supposed; they hadn’t seen each other in so long. Surely it was natural for there to be some period of adjustment. The important thing was that Jason was *here*, nervousness or not.

They reached the sliding doors, which whooshed aside, and the soft hum of the idle transporters greeted their ears. The large duffel with their suits, ropes and other supplies had been carefully set aside, just as Picard had arranged. He and Jason opened it and started unpacking the gear, taking a final inventory and checking things over.

“Your knots are good,” said Jason, holding a carabiner and rope up to the light before setting it aside. Picard looked at him, but the younger man was looking away.

“You know Jason,” Picard started, “Your letter meant a great deal to me, the one you sent after the funeral.”

Jason continued to unload the gear inside the pack, setting each piece aside with organized care.

“I’m not sure if I ever said thank you for that.”

Jason and Picard each reached at the same time for the two EV suits that had been neatly folded into the bag. Picard let his grasp give way to Jason's, and Jason picked his up and walked over to the opposite side of the room to hang it and check it over. This put their backs to each other.

“I’m afraid I’ve never made much time for family,” he continued, sorting through the remaining equipment in the duffel. “I left it to my brother to carry that burden. And you're right, life in Starfleet certainly comes at a price. But now, with Robert and Rene gone...”

Picard sighed and shook his head ruefully, stopping what he was doing. Behind him was silence.

“Jason,” he said, “I know you're not my son. I know that. But I've found myself looking forward very, very much to spending time with you. I suppose that's all I'm trying to say.”

Picard turned to see what Jason was doing, sure that his confession had only made him feel even more awkward, more nervous.

Jason was holding a phaser.

He pointed it at Picard. “Don't move.”

Picard couldn't have, even if he'd wanted to, the shock was so great.

“Now take off your comm badge and put it on the floor.”

Picard complied as if he were on automatic pilot.

Jason fired, and the industrial carpet puffed with smoke as the comm badge sparked and fizzled. Without the phaser wavering from Picard for a microsecond, Jason then backed himself over to the transporter controls. He tapped into the keypad.

“What are you doing?” Picard's mind was reeling in an attempt to process what in holy hell could be happening. A distinct *bleep-beep-beep* came back on the transporter. He'd signaled someone.

“Jason...?” Picard got a half step of progress towards him before the phaser snapped forward, a hairsbreadth away from being fired.

“Don't!”

Picard locked eyes with Jason and knew he meant it.

“*What are you doing?*”

“I said don't move.”

He keyed in more commands to the console, and the hum in the room rose sharply as the buffers spun up to receive a transporter pattern. *Two* patterns as it turned out, and on their respective transporter pads two imposing figures materialized, both dressed in full EV suits. After the beams had finished assembling their molecules whole, they each took off their helmets with a hiss and Picard got a look at them.

The first was a burly, muscled, tower of a human easily a head and shoulder taller than Picard or Jason. The second was a slightly less tall, but equally imposing Nausicaan. The latter looked immediately at Picard and sneered.

“That was too easy,” he said gleefully, his expression as close to a grin as the vicious-looking species could muster. He stepped off the transporter pad and turned his gaze to Jason. “Is it ready?”

Jason nodded, his jaw muscles flexing. “Security unlocked. I saw it myself.”

A chill settled over Picard.

“I am Captain Picard of the starship-”

“We know who you are.” The Nausicaan snapped his attention back to their prisoner.

“Then you have me at a disadvantage.”

The Nausicaan took a menacing step forward, the sneer widening. “That was the idea.”

Picard put on his best poker face. “Your presence on this vessel is unauthorized. I have to insist that you leave immediately.”

The Nausicaan laughed. As if he were waiting for a cue, the so-far-silent giant human lumbered down off the platform toward Picard. A dagger glinted in the low light, unsheathed expertly from his ragged mercenary tunic belt.

“Wait!” Jason called out. His phaser aim on Picard had never wavered. The large human, the Brute, stopped and looked from Jason to the Nausicaan questioningly. “We should keep him with us until we have it,” Jason reasoned. “In case we run into trouble.”

Picard knew they wouldn't. The ship was empty for the next several hours. Their timing couldn't have been more perfect, or disastrous.

“Move.” The command came from the Brute, his voice deep and quiet. He waved his dagger in the direction of the transporter room exit. Picard did as he was told and locked eyes with Jason. Jason gave him a small shake of his head, and Picard saw a glimmer of desperation in the gesture: *don't try anything*.

They marched Picard ahead of them, and the Brute poked him this way and that, directing him through the ship as if they knew their way around.

“Where are we going?”

He knew he needed to get as much information as possible. Information was essential. The problem was, Picard had a sinking feeling he knew *exactly* where they were going.

The tip of the Brute's knife was the only answer he got for his question.

They were inside the Central Processing Access room moments later, confirming Picard's growing feeling of dread: they were after the central core.

The Nausicaan told Jason to guard Picard with the phaser and pulled the Brute over to begin disconnecting their trash-can-sized prize. The Nausicaan was clearly in charge, and Picard was now one-on-one for a few moments with Jason.

“Jason,” he hissed as quietly as he could. Jason silently shook his head, and his wordless expression pleaded with Picard to stop talking. Surely this was some sort of mistake. “You don't want to do this. Who are these people?”

A snapping sound from behind them made both men jump. The Nausicaan and the Brute were struggling with the core.

“Are you in some kind of trouble?” Picard dared to whisper more insistently over the grunts of the other two captors. “Let me help you!”

A phaser beam whined over Picard's shoulder and erupted into flames on the naked bulkhead directly behind. This time it was the Brute and Nausicaan's turn to jump in surprise.

“What are you doing?!” the Nausicaan yelled back at Jason.

“An accident,” he lied to his comrade, but his message to Picard was crystal clear: stop talking.

Moments later, the Brute and Nausicaan were grunting and cursing as they hauled the central core clear from its housing. They set it gingerly on the floor, and Jason took his aim off Picard to walk over and slide out the security key. He held it up for the Nausicaan to see.

“Freshly voice imprinted and unlocked, just like I said.”

The Nausicaan grinned his nasty-looking sneer.

“I cannot let you do this,” Picard said to the trio. His voice was tight, low, and as commanding as he could muster.

Jason slipped the security key into one of his pockets and the Nausicaan laughed again.

“Let's go,” Jason said.

“You're carrying the pack,” the Nausicaan said to the Brute, and the large man knelt down to pick up the core. The opening appeared in a microsecond. *Take every opportunity to attack.*

Picard launched himself upon the Brute, jumping to the back of the man's shoulders. His goal was to grapple at his face, the eyes ideally, but he missed and found himself grabbing his neck instead. This put him low enough for the Brute to throw an elbow into the side of Picard's head and then shake him off with a violent shrug.

Picard hit the ground, and scrambled to his feet in time to see the Brute turn back to face him. His dagger was out again and raised high, ready to strike. Before he could bring it down, before Picard could try to defend himself or contemplate his end, a tight beam of phased energy Picard knew had been set to kill just moments earlier slammed into his chest. He was flung violently backward and crumpled with a thud against the far bulkhead.

His vision darkened as he tried to remain conscious. He dimly saw Jason lower his arm from a firing position, and then there was nothing.

\* \* \*

*He shot me.*

Picard lifted his thousand-ton eyelids and realized he was still alive. Stunned, but still alive. He blinked, looked around, and saw he was alone. He was still in the Central Processing Access room on the *Enterprise*, but Jason, his co-conspirators, and the central core were gone. Everything was eerily quiet, and Picard felt a slight panic realizing he had no idea how long he'd been unconscious. His hand went instinctively to his left breast for his comm badge, but his fingers tapped nothing but fabric. He'd forgotten Jason had destroyed it. There would be no alerting station security from here; he'd have to move.

He got up off the floor unsteadily, and his legs wobbled, but no shooting pain sent him crashing back onto the floor, which he took as a good sign. He rolled his head about his neck and flexed his arms and fingers; he was in working order. He steadied himself against a bulkhead as he took a few tentative steps and then waited for his equilibrium to return.

*They'd have headed to the transporter room.*

By the time he stumbled all the way to the transporter room, his hands were shaking and his vision was telescoping. He entered through the doors completely unprepared to fend off any attack should he find the thieves waiting, but the room was just as empty as the rest of the ship. They were already gone. Vertigo gripped his senses and he had to take himself down to a knee. He took a breath in, then a breath out.

*Think, Picard.*

They'd beamed on the ship, so it stood to reason they'd beamed off it. But where? Did they have a ship? Picard wracked his memory for anything that might clue him into their escape route, and he seized upon a detail: their suits. They'd been wearing EV suits. The most logical place requiring EV suits in transporter range was Mars. Had they beamed down there? He could check the transporter logs.

He stood again, this time with slightly more ease, and he walked over to the transporter controls. He scanned them. A moment later and he was looking at the coordinates for the Red Cliffs of Echus Chasma.

Of course. Jason had been checking over his suit before he'd beamed the others aboard. He knew he'd be needing it.

Two options now presented themselves: he could beam down to the shipyard, let them know the core had been taken, and find help. Or he could beam down directly to where Jason and the others had gone. It was one or the other, he had no comm badge and there was no computer to run communications on the infant *Enterprise*. Whatever he did had to be done in person, and he knew the clock was ticking. If they'd beamed to the planet, they must have a ship or some other means of escape hidden somewhere, and they were heading for it right now.

Which was the right choice? Panic rose from the indecision, and Picard suddenly wondered if he'd become too soft over the last seven years, too dependent on his crew to sit down around the conference table, help him weigh his options, and give their advice. What if he had lost his edge? What if he couldn't do this, any of this, without them?

He'd have to. He *was* alone. There was no one on this ship to come to his rescue, and he realized that Jason, his co-conspirators, and the central core could all be on a ship light-years away before Picard ever stepped off a transporter pad on Utopia Planitia. His only chance was to follow them down to Mars.

"Damn it."

The vigilante plan presented a whole new challenge: there was no atmosphere down there. Picard would also need an EV suit to go after them; something this unfinished ship could not supply him. Scanning the transporter room, he saw his duffel bag still sitting on the side table

right where he'd left it. He strode over to it as quickly as he could, and immediately saw the second EV suit was still crumpled inside. Adrenaline rushed into his body. The mercenaries must have been in a hurry if they'd left it behind for him to find. Either that, or they didn't believe Picard had a chance to catch them.

He had the suit on within five deft movements. As he pulled out the helmet from the duffel, he noticed almost all of the climbing equipment was gone. Almost. What were left were the redundant sets that Picard had packed for his own peace of mind. Again, what struck him as important was that the rest had been *taken*.

Picard gathered up the equipment on a gut instinct and strode to the transporter controls. His movements were energized and succinct as the adrenaline pushed away the lingering effects of the stun. He punched in the last-used coordinates from the transporter log, and jogged over to the pad that had lit up. Clutching the climbing equipment in one hand, and slipping his helmet into place with the other, Picard felt the tingle of the energizing beam start to tease at his atoms. The helmet clicked itself shut with a tiny hiss just as the transporter room disappeared in a wash of white and transporter blue.

*I'm coming to get you,* was his last thought before he turned into pure energy.

\* \* \*

The Red Cliffs of Echus Chasma stretched up above Picard so high they seemed to scrape the sky itself, and Picard was instantly glad he'd grabbed the climbing equipment. Nothing else but the stars could be seen above the towering cliffs, and in the angled sunlight of Mars' late morning, they seemed to glow. It was an odd sight, seeing the stars faintly dotting the apex of the sky with the sun beating on his back, but Picard knew was a product of Mars' sparse atmosphere.

The thin wisps of carbon dioxide weren't quite thick enough to fully shroud all of the heavens with a scrim of dusty brown daylight.

A small dot amidst all the grandeur, Picard could clearly see Jason and his two companions climbing steadily upwards. They were free climbing with the Brute in the lead, setting anchors. The other two used the ropes that trailed behind him, picking up them up and the anchors as they moved past them. They were moving intimidatingly fast, and they easily had an hour head start.

“Picard to mercenary group.” He doubted that his suit's comm could travel as far up the cliff as he surmised they were, but he had to try. “Jason. Can you hear me? You are ordered to halt and surrender immediately.” His reply was only the gentle skittering of Martian dust against his faceplate.

Picard tapped one of his suit pant's pockets and was relieved to feel a palm-sized square device dutifully tucked inside. He'd packed a tricorder in each suit himself, but in his haste, he hadn't checked to see if it was still there before beaming down. They hadn't taken it. It was another indication that Jason and the other two thieves were more pressed for time than they had any to try and stop him. It would be his only advantage.

Opening the device, he could feel it vibrate in his hands. He started a sensor sweep, looking for where they might be headed, or if there were others waiting to join them. For a moment, he thought he'd read something on the Echus Plateau far above, but then the device showed static and tried unsuccessfully to reset itself. Picard frowned. A damping field? Perhaps, but unlikely. No, he surmised, it must be something natural about the area, something in the rocks. He took several paces toward the cliffs and a quick readout of their mineral compositions revealed several magnetic elements that were sufficient to block low-level scans.

*No wonder he picked here to climb.*

Realization washed over Picard as the extent of Jason's deception finally sunk in. *Everything* had been planned: the climb to mask his escape, his letter to Picard to get himself on board, even the *day* he was coming coinciding with the computer installation. He'd used Picard wholly and completely. More painful than the frigid understanding was the heat of shame that accompanied it; he should have seen it coming. He'd opened the door for the thieves to walk right in. It was his voice on that security key that left the core vulnerable and worth stealing. It had been his guest who had stolen it. This was his fault.

His tricorder warbled again in futility, and Picard was just about to hurl it up against the rocky cliff-face when another option occurred to him. *Use what you have.*

Picard stopped and looked at the small device. Perhaps the tricorder couldn't provide him with insight as to what lay ahead, but maybe, just maybe, it could get a homing signal back to the Utopia Planitia Shipyards...and if someone went looking for him, they just might be able to find him. He made the necessary commands and stowed it back into his pocket. For now, he was on his own, and there was no time to waste. Jason was right up above him, still within reach.

\* \* \*

The difficult thing about climbing on Mars was the suit: it was bulky and so very heavy in comparison to one's own skin and some light, tight clothing. Since the latter is what any climber climbed in 99% of the time, it was no wonder that Picard found himself completely alone other than his quarry on the perfectly vertical Red Cliffs of Echus Chasma. It was no tourist trap, and people rarely, if ever, climbed here.

The only thing that made climbing bearable, or even possible was that Mars had a fraction of the gravity found on the M-Class planets that climbers most often stuck to. It was about a quarter of Earth's gravity, Federation Standard, and what Picard was used to.

Picard was able to find purchase with his gloves and boots, each studded with tritanium spikes to sink into the rock, and then launch himself upward to the next hold a meter, two meters, sometimes even three meters away. He'd then sink in another anchor into the rock and look for his next series of holds.

This style of free climbing wasn't something Picard was particularly well versed in, so he'd spent some time during his off-hours on Utopia Planitia to practice on the holodeck. He was glad he had, because as he looked up almost directly at the midday sun, he was winded, sweating, fatigued, and his quarry were still but a pinprick above him.

“Picard to mercenary group.” His breath was labored, which robbed it of some authority. “Turn around and surrender immediately.”

No answer.

They hadn't seemed to stop at all, even with the added weight of the core they were carrying. The Brute was relentless; he'd been working furiously every time Picard had looked up. Where had Jason ever met such a large person? Or a Nausicaan for that matter?

Picard drove an anchor into the dust cliff face and then tested it with a yank to make sure it was solid. It was, so Picard took a moment to release his other hand and his two legs, and he dangled in his harness for a moment. Even if the Brute didn't require rest, Picard did.

Jason had probably met his companions during one of his frequent scrapes with the local authorities on Camor V. Picard remembered when he'd learned of the young man's “record,” and the pang of guilt and responsibility that had shot through him. He'd wondered how things could

have been different if he'd been a part of his life. Picard also remembered that while none of those “scrapes” had been too serious, it had certainly given Jason the opportunity to fall in with the wrong crowd. Stealing a Starfleet computer core, however, was far beyond the petty theft and trespassing Picard had seen on Jason's record. He was putting himself into an entirely new class of criminal.

Picard tapped a button on the side of his helmet and a small tube sprang forward as instructed, just in front of his mouth. He pressed his lips forward and took a healthy sip of water. He'd been climbing for two hours and this was the first break he'd taken.

Where had Jason met these two? What did they have over him to make him do such a seriously dangerous thing as steal a computer core. The damage that could be done with a Starfleet central processing core was almost unimaginable: launch weapons systems of mass destruction, coordinate a fleet of ships, hell, it could run an entire *planet*. How had this happened? Why hadn't Jason asked for help?

The responsibility and failure made Picard angry. Jason was a grown man and he'd made his choice. He wasn't Picard's responsibility. He wasn't even his own family.

The water was still wet on his lips as he hung in his harness and rotated himself outward to face the plain down below. The sun seemed too small here on Mars, but it still lit up the dusty expanse like a furnace. The thin atmosphere left the view unimpeded, and Picard could see to the edges of the horizon right up to the stars in all directions. It was vast, clear, and awe-inspiring. It was the kind of view that shared with someone affirms the wonder and awe of the cosmos, but seen alone made one feel small, insignificant, and afraid.

Against the fiery valley, he saw his father standing on his porch, watching Miranda Vigo walk away. Responsibility and failure radiated from him like shimmering heat waves. He looked

utterly defeated, sad, and very, very old. Picard grasped again for the rock face as much to climb away from that image as he did to climb towards Jason.

\* \* \*

The rock came out of nowhere. Picard had been focusing on his cramping hands and thinking that the decision to beam down alone was a mistake. If he'd beamed down to the shipyard on the surface, a shuttlepod and its microfusion engines might be powering this pursuit instead of his own aching biceps and quads.

The blow struck Picard's helmet and he tumbled from the cliff face. He reached the limit of his rope and the anchor he'd just put into the rock did its job and held. He slammed into the rock wall a split second later with his flat back. It knocked the wind out of his lungs and his vision darkened for one precarious moment before he was able to take a new breath and his sight returned.

Another crash and skitter of pebbles hit within a meter of where he was getting his bearings, and Picard realized it wasn't an isolated incident or an accident. He looked up above him. Jason's trio was still there, still far ahead of him up the cliff face. Picard squinted and saw a slight movement from the group. He flattened himself as close to the rocks as he could as another projectile was hurled down at him a second later.

“Jason! What are you doing? Stop!”

A fall from this height, about halfway up the towering wall, would kill him. He had no way to defend himself. All he could do was press himself with his boots and hands as flat as he could and watch as another projectile hurtled down past him, missing by mere centimeters.

There was more activity amongst the trio, and Picard tensed, ready to try and dodge the next rock he knew was coming. Sure enough, something flew past him a moment later, but it

wasn't a rock. Picard craned his neck to catch sight of it as it plummeted down to the ground far below him. It was the phaser Jason had been holding. Picard looked twice to make sure, and there was no doubt. It didn't make sense. Why had they thrown their only weapon at him?

\* \* \*

A half hour later, Picard didn't have an answer for why his quarry had ditched their only weapon, but he did have an answer for why they'd been so anxious to get Picard off the cliff face. Picard no longer had to look for handholds or set his own anchors because the rope line that they'd been using was now right in front of him.

They were very clearly panicked for time; rather than leave their pursuer to climb his own route up the cliff by removing their ropes and anchors as they went, they opted to move faster and just leave them all behind. They were gambling on their head start being large enough to keep them ahead, and it was a gamble that Picard intended to make backfire.

He'd made virtually no ground on them to this point in the climb. A quick glance estimated they were less than an hour from the top of the cliff and he was still barely past the halfway point. However, with a rope line to climb, he knew he could ascend three or four times faster. He just might be able to overtake them. There was a chance.

He clipped into the new rope line and grabbed with two aching hands. Picard gritted his teeth and ambled his protesting limbs into motion.

Step.

Climb.

Step.

Climb.

He resisted the urge to call out, to taunt them with his newfound confidence.

Step.

Climb.

*Keep climbing Picard.*

Step.

*Don't stop moving.*

Climb.

An image of Jason sprang into his mind. He was selling his stolen computer core to a monstrous, evil-looking alien who cackled maniacally at the terrible power he held in his hands.

Step.

The computer core caught on fire, and suddenly it was the *Enterprise* falling across the Viridian sky, *his Enterprise*, flames scorching at its hull and windows. Robert and Rene were in those flames.

Climb.

He was watching Miranda Vigo walk away. His father turned to him with that terrible, sad face. *The family must go on, Jean-Luc*, he said.

Step.

Climb.

Step.

Climb.

He couldn't stop moving.

\* \* \*

“Stop, Jason!”

One of the three suited figures turned around and Picard knew he was now, finally, in suit-to-suit comm range. The trio of thieves was only a handhold away from the lip of the plateau, and Picard was only twenty meters behind. If their faceplates hadn't been covered in dust, he'd have been able to make out their faces, they were that close.

“Jason, listen to me,” Picard breathed into his helmet mic between gasps for air, “You must stop. I told Starfleet where we are. They're coming.”

It was a desperate lie, one which Picard figured Jason probably realized, but short of his own body, it was the only thing he had left to hurl in their direction.

“Jason, please! Don't do this!”

The Brute disappeared over the edge, and the second figure followed. The third figure that had turned around at Picard's plea remained for one moment longer, before it too was hauled over the edge.

Picard swore to himself and tried to double his climbing efforts. His arms and legs were so far gone as to be completely numb. He was stumbling and slipping more than he was actually climbing, but he kept his eyes on the lip of the cliff where they'd disappeared. It couldn't be over. He wouldn't accept it. He continued even after he saw a large billowing of orange dust, which he knew must be the firing of ship thrusters. He was so close. He couldn't stop.

His hand found the top of the cliff, then his other hand. He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth and put everything he had left into one big last push. He strained and grunted and cursed, hoping to get himself over the edge. Instead, vertigo caught him, he swan dived backwards, and he fell.

Downward he fell in darkness, for he dared not open his eyes to see the impending doom waiting for him so many thousand meters below. His faceplate roared with the sudden wind, and

he knew his own ropes had betrayed him. He felt no saving tug from them, and he knew there would be none. He'd hit the bottom of this great cliff, he'd stay there unmoving for eternity, and Picard knew he deserved it.

He was back on his parent's porch next to his silent father, and he knew now that silence was one that understood any further effort was futile. He knew Jean-Luc was leaving for good back to Starfleet; there was nothing that could be done to change his mind. No matter how much he wanted him to marry that lovely girl, stay home and raise a family, he was leaving. Jean-Luc thought there was still time, that there would always be time. He thought that his brother was taking care of the family legacy anyway, those are *Robert's* interests, not his, but it was already too late to change his mind. The family was ending. There would be no more Picards.

Picard wanted to tell his father that he was sorry, that he was wrong, that it had all been a mistake, but it was too late for that too. His father was long gone. His brother was gone. His nephew was gone. His ship was gone, even his crew was gone, and he was old. Too old for anything, except the silence of the end. The ground, surely, would be there soon and he would die on this alien world where the stars always shone.

Picard knew he deserved it all.

He'd chosen it.

A roaring blast of dust to his faceplate forced his eyes back open and rust-brown was everywhere. His aching hands were clutched tightly around a fistful of Martian dust, the same dust that was swirling around him violently.

As he staggered back up to his feet, he saw the yellow fire from a pair of atmospheric thrusters, and a weatherworn medium-sized craft lifted off forty meters from where he was standing. He haltingly realized that somehow in his disorientation, he'd fallen *forward* onto the

plateau, the top of Echus Chasma, and not the other direction to plummet to his death. The ship that was kicking up the maelstrom surrounding him hovered for a brief moment just off the ground, and then with another roar, it took off up into the sky. Picard watched it go and realized that he had nothing left to feel. Everything now was what it was. There was nothing left that could be done.

“I should have known,” crackled a voice inside his helmet.

Picard nearly yelled out, the transmission startled him so completely. He looked up towards the receding ship, thinking perhaps someone was transmitting from there, gloating, but it was already out of sight.

Out of the slowly settling dust cloud, Jason Vigo walked towards the stooped, exhausted older man. He held his two hands up towards the sky in surrender. Picard blinked. Was he another figment of his imagination?

“I thought maybe the climbing would give me a chance,” Jason said, pointing a gloved finger towards the edge of the cliff, “but I should have remembered these are your worlds out here, not mine.”

Jason stopped right in front of Picard and it was only then that he believed Jason was really there, that he'd stayed behind while his friends left.

Picard knew he was waiting for him to say something.

“Jason Vigo...you are under arrest.”

Picard's voice was so cracked and worn he thought perhaps Jason would simply laugh. Instead, he nodded his head and then looked up to the sky at the last remaining wisps of booster fuel from the ship that had left him behind.

“I wonder if your guys will catch them,” he said, and then he looked out along the plateau beyond Picard. “They should be arriving here just about now, yes?”

Exhaustion felt like a truth serum, and Picard was about to tell Jason it was a lie, that he was really out here all by himself with no one to come to his rescue, and no one to pursue after his escaped friends. Jason tapped Picard's side suit pocket before he had the chance.

“I should have thought to take the tricorders,” he said, and he shook his head. “We intercepted security comm traffic twenty minutes from the summit.”

So, that's why they'd ditched their rope lines behind them. Security was coming after all? Picard felt the tricorder pressing against his exhausted leg, slightly warm. He'd completely forgot it was there, sending out its tiny call for help.

Picard felt Jason move past him, and the young man stepped right up to the edge of the cliff. Picard instinctively made a move to stop him from doing something foolish, but Jason simply sat down instead.

In the clearing cloud of grit, the Martian sun was setting. Golden rays were spreading across the rust-red valley below. If before it had been lit up like a furnace, now it was a bed of smoldering embers, glowing with a shimmering light. Three small dots glinted against the coals, three Starfleet shuttlecraft speedily making their way towards them: the cavalry. Jason had been telling the truth. Picard sat down next to his prisoner.

“I realized I didn't want to go through with it anyway, so I told them I wasn't coming,” Jason confessed, and Picard could see the fiery valley reflected in his pupils. “But, I know that doesn't really matter.”

He was right.

“I'm hoping they'll take into consideration I stayed behind.”

“Your friends got away with a Starfleet computer core,” Picard rasped.

“Yes,” he said, gazing outward with a nod of his head. “Yes they did.” He reached into a pocket somewhere on his suit and dropped a small cylinder into Picard's lap. “But it won't be much use to them without this, will it?”

Picard picked up the security key, the tiny cylinder he'd voice imprinted so many hours earlier. He held it in his hand preciously.

“I didn't tell them about that. I imagine they'll be upset.”

Jason had come back to him. He'd done the right thing.

“I really did want to come on this trip, Jean-Luc.” Jason's voice wavered, but he kept his eyes steadfastly forward. “I want you to know that. And that I'm...”

The pause hung in the light Martian air, unfinished in the face of the setting sun. The two sat on their perch in silence as the glow on the valley below slowly receded. The stars above began to light up the heavens, and the trio of shuttlecraft was upon them. As they roared overhead, Picard's hand found Jason's, and he squeezed it tightly in the last moment the two of them would share together for a very, very long time.

\* \* \*

“The minerals in the cliffs would have completely masked their ship if it hadn't been for your tricorder signal.” Barclay was huffing and puffing to keep up with his captain, who was practically tearing down the hallway with a fresh, unbridled energy. “They could have gone into orbit from there and warped away, and we never would have seen them. You really saved the day, sir.”

“I did what any of the crew would have done in my position,” Picard answered, not taking his eyes off the three padds he was digesting as he moved, there was so much to catch up

on. He handed one of the padds to Reg, who took a couple running steps to catch up and snatch it away. “That includes you, mister Barclay.”

“If you say so, sir.”

It had been Barclay, Picard had learned after turning Jason over to station security, who had found his homing signal. He'd been on the comms scanning for anything, and he'd picked it out from all the interference. The news still swelled Picard with pride.

The two stopped at the end of the hallway where Picard's office waited. Jason had provided security the heading of the Nausicaan and the Brute's ship, and because Picard and Jason had been found so quickly, Starfleet had been able to intercept the mercenary craft within minutes. The core was located intact, locked out, and now currently sat on the floor of the new *Enterprise's* Central Processing Access room where it belonged.

“I want that central core back up-”

“-And running by morning,” Barclay finished, offering to take the two remaining padds.

“I was going to say before the end of the week.”

“Just doing what any of the crew would do for their captain, Captain.”

Barlcay's smile was wide and full.

“Well, get to it,” Picard said in response, and handed the other two padds over. “I have quite a bit of work to do myself.”

Barlcay caught Picard's eye with a twinkle in his own. The fumbling engineer's smile grew another millimeter, and then he turned heel and walked off to go and fix Picard's new ship.

Picard stepped into his office and looked out his window. The ship skeleton was right where he'd left it, but it now dwarfed the planet below and he could see nothing else. It looked unfinished, and waiting.

*Beep.*

The sound had come from behind him, at his small desk. He walked over to it, and on his computer console was the same message and question that had been there before, patiently paused for a response.

*I new message. Ready to view?*

He sat down, took a deep breath, and let it out slowly.

His finger tapped *yes*.

The senior crew assignments popped up and they were a series of faces he knew better than his own: William T. Riker. Data. Deanna Troi. Beverly Crusher. Worf. Geordi LaForge. All of them had signed on to once again serve aboard the starship *Enterprise* under the command of Captain Jean-Luc Picard.

His chest tightened as he looked at the faces of those six people, and he felt like a fool. His family had been with him, he realized, this whole time. And not just waiting here on his computer console, they'd been with him for the past eight years through more crises and trials than he could ever count. They'd been there counseling him, supporting him, learning with him, fighting, laughing, and crying. They'd never left him; he'd just forgotten to look.

Picard wondered if he was keeping it "together" as he sat there, and he decided he really didn't care. It was all right there in front of him in the six faces of his crew, everything he'd ever wanted and would ever want, waiting for the next adventure.

*The family will go on.*