

STARDATE 2376.06.11

USS PERSEUS GALAXY CLASS

LT COMMANDER JARIT DEL'S OFFICE

"Jarit Del!" a cheerful voice greeted when the subspace channel opened with a chirp. The woman who appeared on his screen had a smile that crinkled her eyes and the spots on her cheekbones. "How nice to see you. Uh oh, I see the gray has set in since we last met!" Doctor Jabeem Vier's voice was teasing and somewhat too familiar for a professional contact.

"Vier," Jarit answered warmly, mirroring her expression with a smile of his own before reaching up to smooth back his hair, fingers raking through the black strands peppered here and there with white. "Yes, Korin is fond of pointing them out as they appear. How have you been, Doctor?"

"I've been well! Very busy. Lots of plates spinning, as they like to say around here. What about yourself? How are the two of you doing?"

"We are... well." There was an audible hesitation in his answer, the sort that came with an unspoken understanding that he was telling the truth, yet also simplifying the situation to be polite. She knew of his husband's death during the Dominion war— it was a matter of public record after all. "These last few years on the Perseus have been good to us. Captain Takar is a capable and patient commander."

"I'm very glad to hear that," Vier responded with a compassionate tone. "You do look well, in spite of my teasing. It's good that you were assigned to a position that gave you an environment to heal." She gave a wry, self-aware smile. "I suppose you weren't delighted to get my message."

"Infuriatingly curious would be a more accurate description," Jarit chuckled. "I can't say we're looking for a change of pace, no, but dammit Vier, you know I love a mystery. So tell me why you need me for this assignment."

"Because you're perfect for the job!" Vier said with an innocent affect. "There's a number of opportunities on the ship for you, Del! First of all to develop new therapies. It's no secret -- I don't have to tell you-- the war has left us with a lot of soldiers dealing with things they can't

unsee. Starfleet and the Federation both have an interest in finding better solutions to caring for veterans and for improving life on Starships. The Sagan is going to have TWO holodecks even though the crew are packed in. Plus, you get to work with kids! If this student program works out it might be expanded to other ships and facilities. And also..."

As she spoke, Jarit nodded and smiled, his reactions measured and calm. It was easy to see why he was a successful ships' counselor— his control over his own emotions, the way he held himself, all of it was open, welcoming, easy to approach.

She glanced down at the computer console and tapped in a series of blips, double checked it. The LCARS display shifted its colors, notifying Del of the heightened security applied to the connection.

"Also, I made an android that needs a psychologist."

Even as he waited for her to confirm the security of their connection, he didn't seem overtly anxious. However, when Vier dropped the word 'android', Jarit's eyes widened noticeably. His voice dropped and he leaned closer to the com screen. "An android?" he echoed. "I haven't heard anything about this!" A beat. "Just how high is the security clearance on this, Vier?"

"Pretty damn high," Vier replied with a grin and a twinkle in her eye that Del had seen on many a passionate scientist during his many lifetimes. "It's incredible, Del. The bioneural gel pack technology is changing every corner of the fields of computers and engineering. We're on the edge of the sort of technological revolution our galaxy hasn't seen in centuries. It's a new age for space travel -- and for artificial intelligence. Del, we've made an android with a /bioneural/ matrix. The speed of processes the gel provides allows for us to expand on so much more than the past generations of AI. But he's FAR more than a computer. He's practically more like you and I than he is like a computer. He /FEELS/, Del. He feels and thinks and learns differently than any artificial intelligence Starfleet has ever encountered."

"'He', huh?" Jarit echoed, rubbing thoughtfully at his chin. "Is that you anthropomorphizing your project, or is the android's identity that solidified already? How long has it been conscious?" A bubbling excitement was already rising in him— Olet hadn't been in the robotic field but she'd always been interested in AI and had kept up on the latest scientific papers in the subject. Though Jarit's own passion for the topic had always been more subdued, already his mind was racing, spinning with the possibilities. An AI who could feel was rare. Very rare.

"Oh, he is truly his own person, believe me," Vier said with a chuckle and a shake of her head. There was a tone in her voice that Jarit could easily identify -- a fondness beyond that of a scientist and their project. It was likely she didn't show that glimmer to her colleagues and higher-ups -- at least if she was sensible. "We were using gender neutral pronouns for him. Until he decided one day what his gender was. He's two and a half now. And he's gone through developmental stages like a child in fast-forward. He's designed completely different than

Soong's androids who were made to access a constant stream of information. He can be fed information from a network if he wants it and then keeps all that he's fed eidetically. But he's not fully tapped into a steady stream that he can pluck data out of. He was /made/ to feel and learn and grow. To free up enough resources to build a /true/ sense of self, we had to eliminate the noise of the ether of pure information."

"Fascinating," Jarit breathed. "What humanoid equivalent developmental stage is his in now? And why move him from Earth R&D to a starship?"

"It's a little difficult to pin down what his emotional and developmental age is, to be honest," Vier said with a hint of regret that her answer was less precise than she'd like. "I experience him as a teen at this point in time. Just a... naive teen. His progress hasn't been linear and it hasn't exactly been predictable, as I'm sure you might imagine. But we've reached a plateau in our research and HIS development. He was designed to, ideally, seek to become the best version of himself. He can't do that here, in a lab with the company of a handful of scientists. He's like a bird that was born and raised in a cage. We can't expect him to grow into a real person in this environment. He needs a social structure and friends and mentors and opportunities to face odds and build memories. A high security starship doing routine research activities is the perfect next step for him. We can have him prepared with an ensign level science education within six months."

"Interesting... so what you're saying is, it's time for him to move out of his parents' house and get some real world experience. And you think this new ship is going to be the place to do it. Vier... this is all... incredible. Olet would be proud of you for what sounds like an incredible feat of engineering. But I have to ask, Jabeem... what is the goal of your project? What does Starfleet want with a bioneural gel android? If he's meant to be some sort of weapon..." He shook his head, frowning faintly. A lot of new R&D projects had been greenlit during and after the Dominion war, and even though it was over, Del was certain there was plenty of resources still being funneled into such projects. It made the skin at the back of Jarit's neck prickle.

Vier gave a rueful smile and a small sigh that conveyed a deeper heaviness, of an existential weight. "This is the plight that faces every scientist pushing the limits of research and technology. No matter how pure one's intentions might be, it's impossible to foresee how our creations might somehow be used. But as far as my own motivations and the ultimate goal of this specific project? To explore the limits of just how much humanity a synthetic life form can experience. And to explore our relationship with technology and what it could be. We use computers as tools but what if they were also our companions, our partners? What if they had the will not just to do as we say but to have motivations just like us, to truly care about themselves and their allies?"

The EMH project has taught us so much about the way that artificial and organic sentience can work together and it has laid a foundation for a deeper relationship with our technology. Ultimately, a bioneuralgel android cadet could be an engineer's computer AND an assistant who

has their back. As far as his personal power, CHUCK is outwardly built like a 17 year old with strength only marginally above a human's. Do I think he himself could be used for some dark ends? No. But dabbling in any unknown sciences requires shouldering a responsibility for what the future might look like."

Jarit was quiet, listening intently to the doctor's answer. When she finished, he nodded, and said nothing for a moment, lifting his entwined fingers to his mouth in thought. Then, "Thank you, Vier, for answering me with candor and without trying to... deny the realities of a career in science." He paused, lips parted, considering his next words. "If I take this position —and let me be transparent with you now— if, during the course of this mission, I were to encounter any evidence that Starfleet has less-than-scientific intentions for this android, I won't be comfortable continuing. Knowing that... do you still want me for the job?"

"I do, Del. I WANT someone like you in my corner. I want this to be a team strictly interested in Chuck's philanthropic possibilities. But I also need someone monitoring his progress that understands exactly what's at stake. He's unlike anything we've ever encountered and we can't even hope to be able to reasonably anticipate where his development will lead." There was a distinct heaviness in her voice and lining her face as she conveyed this. And there were words unsaid that Del was able to discern: the implication of what could be required if the android's development took a dangerous turn.

"I'm... glad to hear you say that," Del answered, letting out a short sigh, though his face stayed somewhat shuttered, professional. His hands dropped back to the tabletop and he nodded, thoughtful. "I believe I could well-represent your intentions in this project. And frankly," he paused, cracked a small smile, "I'm a damn good counselor."

Vier laughed. "Of course you are. We wouldn't be having this conversation if you weren't among the best in your field. So tell me you're in. I can tell you're in. Six months from now."

"It's more or less the chance of a lifetime. Of seven lifetimes," he admitted with a nod, swiveling in his chair to look at the stars outside his office window. There was a good chance it would be difficult on Korin— transferring to a new, much smaller ship. Fewer other children to interact with. "Don't mistake me, I want the job. But I have to talk to my child first. It's only fair that I give him the chance to feel included in planning our future. You've been a parent before, I hope you understand."

"Of course, of course. I expected as much. You can tempt him with getting lots of holodeck time, if it helps!"

"I have to admit, getting holodeck time on a Galaxy class starship is next to impossible, so that is certainly an appealing perk," Jarit chuckled. "So, tell me, what is your role in this mission? Will you be my superior officer?"

"Ah..." Jabeem paused here with mouth open, glancing aside. "About that. I actually will remain here in San Francisco. There's too much for me to take care of at R+D."

Jarit seemed surprised, but his expression turned quickly to one of understanding. "That's why it's so important that you get people you can trust on this project. Because you won't be there."

"You're not wrong," Vier agreed. "But like you said, this is him leaving the nest. The experiment data would be tainted if any of his original development team was there to hold his hand through the experience of stepping out into the world."

"It makes sense," Jarit agreed. "Perhaps I was just hoping to see another spotted face in person. It's been a while since we've spent time with other Trill." He smiled a little sadly, but gave a shake of his head, embarrassed at his own sentimentality. "Well, Doctor, I suppose we should revisit this conversation after I have a talk with Korin. Just one more thing before I let you go. Why 'Chuck'?"

"It wasn't my choice. It's one of those acronyms Starfleet is so fond of." Vier said, with a shrug. "We'll see each other when you show up at Planitia. I'll be escorting Chuck to the launch. For now, contact me as soon as you have the chance to talk to Korin."

Jarit offered a huff of amused understanding. Starfleet did love their acronyms. "I will contact you again tomorrow, if that works for you, Doctor. Thank you for the opportunity and for recommending me for this project. I look forward to speaking with you further. It was good to talk to you again, Vier."

Vier offered him a warm, friendly smile and the channel closed.