THE SKY'S THE LIMIT SEQUEL TO THE BEST LAID PLANS

by mabb5

Summary

FIVE CARD STUD, NOTHING WILD AND THE SKY IS THE LIMIT is the sequel to THE BEST LAID PLANS. It picks up with Picard as a wanted man, believed to be a Maquis traitor. His travelling companion is Ro Laren. And his friends include the Klingons. Meanwhile Beverly & company do their best to prove Picard innocent, even as they cope with trials of their own. Eventually, after lots of sex and violence, everyone ends up in the right beds.

Notes

Please note that this is the unexpurgated version compared to what was posted on fanfiction.net. The love scenes are uncut. And the language and the torture (hurt/comfort) scenes are also a bit more graphic.

Any comments would be appreciated.
“FIVE CARD STUD, NOTHING WILD, AND THE SKY’S THE LIMIT”

Guinan puttered around the garden. She was impressed by its beauty and variety. Hummingbirds flitted. Butterflies darted. Wonderful perfumes filled the air. Some creature was making annoying chirping noises under a bush. Guinan could stand it in small doses.

“Must be the neighbors,” she muttered, as she reached over to pull up a thistle. “Somebody’s been pulling my plants, and we all know it hasn’t been Beverly. She hasn’t been here for months.”

She slowly stood up, looking at the sun that was still high overhead. “When is that girl going to get here?” she asked the local chattering Caldosian version of a grey squirrel with a blue tail. The squirrel didn’t answer. Guinan reached into a pocket and pulled out raw peanut. “Here you go. But if you want another one, you’d better tell me who’s been plucking my special herbs as if they were weeds. This old lady needs her special herbs…”

Guinan stopped grumbling when she heard the shimmering sound of a transporter. She ambled toward the cottage pulling off her targ-skin gloves.

Beverly was exhausted. She dropped her duty bag and knap sack, and shut her eyes, trying not to notice that Jean-Luc was no longer sitting in his favorite wing back arm chair by the fireplace.

How quickly she had become used to having him around…

“Hi, Kiddo. How ya doin’?”

Beverly opened one eye. Then opened the other one, not quite sure that she was seeing what she thought she was seeing.

Guinan stood in the doorway, framed by bright light. Then Beverly realized the source of illumination might be fabric trim. The El Aurian was wearing her usual sartorial mystery statement, along with a somewhat tall hat with fluttering tendrils. What made this outfit really eye-catching, was the number of different tartans that were sewn together.

“Stuart plaid?” was the first thing she babbled, as she gazed at the hat.


Beverly’s knees were weak as she sank down on the ivory Queen Ann upholstered wing back arm chair.

“I’ve made an eggplant dish I’ve been dieing to try for ages. Bubble and squeak. Lots of things. I’ve been here for days and have not had much to do but clean up around here, garden and cook. You have enough to feed an army in the freezer. Or yourself.”

Beverly’s jaw was still dropped.

“Your nosy neighbor, Ruby MacPherson came over. We had a nice chat. I gave her some of my private recipe brownies…” Guinan abruptly turned around and looked out the door toward the north garden cobblestone wall. “So that’s who’s been taking my special herbs.”

“Guinan?” It wasn’t a question. It was a weak plea. For comfort.
It only took a second for Guinan to quickly enfold Beverly in her arms. “Let it all out, honey. Let it all out…” Guinan rocked her friend back and forth, as if she were the universal mother.

For the first time, since the Barton was attacked, and Jean-Luc had left, and everything had gone to hell, Beverly’s rigid control collapsed. She cried.

A long time later, when Beverly’s tears were diminishing, Guinan whispered, “I’ve made some tea. Do you want some?” Beverly nodded. “You’d better,” she harrumphed handing Beverly another handkerchief. “I’m down to my last hankie.”

A moment later she stuck a mug in Beverly’s hands. Beverly sniffed. It smelled like apricots. A sip confirmed that it was apricot brandy mixed with a little tea. “Are you trying to get me drunk?”

“Might help.”

Beverly put the mug down. A look of regret crossed over her face. “I…”

Guinan interrupted her. “So you are pregnant.”

“How could you possibly… I’ve only just learned… I’ve told no one!”

“I always know about such things. Just a talent I’ve acquired along the way.” She hugged Beverly again. “Drink the tea. There’s nothing in there that will harm you or your babies. I threw in some herbs that will help.”

“What?” Beverly picked up the mug and took another sip. Then she sputtered, “Babies? I’m barely five weeks pregnant. Not even the best at Starfleet medical can make that determination without running all sorts of tests…”

“Which you did…”

Beverly shook her head. “Didn’t have the time. I just realized yesterday…”

“No matter. Now you know.” Guinan patted Beverly’s hand. “I told you, I have a talent.” She smiled reassuringly at the lady. “I’m sensing two babies.”

“Sensing?”

“Never been wrong.”

“What are you. Q?” She was just making a jest.

“Sort of a cousin.”

Beverly sputtered again. “You’re joking!”

“Nope. Ask Q the next time you see him. He doesn’t like having me around when he’s meddling.”

Beverly quickly grasped at straws. “Everything that’s happened. Did Q do this to Jean-Luc?”

Regret crossed over Guinan’s face. Q’s meddling would have been such a simple solution to their problems. “No. Q’s had no hand in it. He’s been observing now and then, but he cannot interfere.”

“But, wasn’t Q at the wake for the Enterprise?”

“And Geordi’s wedding too. But other than learning how to dance the hokie pokie, he has been
keeping his word. Right now, Q is being discreet.”

“Impossible.”

“Don’t I know it. I’ve already lost my bet in the intergalactic pool over how long he’ll be able to control himself.”

Beverly mouthed to herself, “Intergalactic pool?”

Guinan heard anyway. “Q’s meddling propensities are rather well known throughout the galaxies.”

She pulled up a rose needlepoint chair to sit next to Beverly. “But never mind all that.” She patted Beverly’s arm. “You just tell me what you need, and were you really planning on getting pregnant at Jean-Luc’s age…”

She ignored Guinan’s nosiness for tears threatened as she answered the important question. What she needed was, “Jean-Luc.”

“Some day. I’m working on that.” She knew it wasn’t the answer that Beverly wanted.
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Lwaxana angrily stomped about her least-favorite decorated bedroom in her house. It was such a simple, plain suite of rooms. Burled woods, cool color tones, straight lines, sueded fabrics, not a gilded curlicue in sight. It’s only unquestionable asset was its view. It overlooked her favorite garden with a private entrance to the cascading pools. This room was the antithesis of her taste - and to every other room in her Ambassadresses’ palatial manor.

She also loved it. She paused in her stomping to momentarily touch a small Rigelian burled wood rectangular desk. There’d been reasons as to why she’d never redecorated. It was because once this had been Ian’s favorite bedroom. And though she never could bring herself to sleep in it after his death, she just couldn’t change anything about the room either.

She had not been that surprised when Worf had chosen this suite of rooms for his own. Even Deanna knew that her bedroom was not a suitable place for a warrior when he needed only to sleep.

Her fingers curled around a model spaceship perched on the desk that her husband had never finished painting. Her determination to protect Ian’s daughter was regaining strength.

“You just have to go, don’t you!”

Worf ignored his mother-in-law.

“Duty, duty, duty! That is all that you care about!” she wailed. “How could you leave me…us… at a time like this?”

“Leave you?” he grunted.

“You know how Deanna is when I am trying to take care of her. And now that you’re going, I’ll have no one to help convince her to listen to reason!”

Worf grunted, but nodded his head, accepting Lwaxana’s observation about the stubbornness of his wife. He’d noticed Deanna’s willfulness a long time ago.

“You’re her mother. She will obey you,” he pronounced.

Lwaxana look at her son-in-law momentarily wondering if he was talking about the same woman. Even Worf knew that it was only wishful thinking on his part. “I could take her with me.”

“By the holy chalice of Rixx, no!” she gasped. “You’re going into that natural zone, and I won’t have my daughter and my grandson anywhere near such danger!”

“But it’s all right for me to go?” Worf sternly asked.
“Heaven’s yes. Worf, you’re a warrior. You need to fight…” She warily eyed him up and down, “…or else something vital might fall off…”

Worf’s expression didn’t change. But he was amused. He could still count on one hand the number of times his mother-in-law had called him by his proper name. The number was growing.

“Keep Deanna here,” he ordered.

“Deanna isn’t foolish enough…” Her voice trailed off. She began to suspect that her son-in-law did know Deanna better than she did. The young Deanna that had given up Lt. Riker so many years ago, would never have thought to leave Betazed. But this new Deanna had taken a Klingon as a husband. She was perfectly capable of leaving the safety of Betazed to go after her husband. “All right. Deanna will try to think of ways to go after you…”

Worf spoke up. “But she has to stay here. The doctors were insistent that she stay until the second trimester.” Worf briefly thought of what the doctors had told them. That in spite of her strength, Deanna’s body was going to have a problematic time during the early stage of her pregnancy. And if, in order to save Deanna and their unborn son, sacrificing his life would have helped, Worf would have done it without hesitation.

He grunted again. “Deanna knows where I am going, the medical facilities are not designed to handle human/Betazoid pregnancies with possible complications.”

Lwaxana was coming to understand her son-in-law a bit more… “And that is why you chose the Cairo isn’t it, instead of one of the new galaxy class starships. And not just because it’s one of the ships that is patrolling the Neutral Zone in search of Picard. You chose the Cairo so that Deanna couldn’t come with you. You want to keep her safe too!”

He didn’t confirm the obvious.

She harrumphed, “Damn that Picard. The trouble he’s caused…”

Worf roared.

Lwaxana waved her hand, dismissing the noise. “I know he is worth it. Don’t get your Klingon hackles up. I was just venting…”

Lwaxana looked down on the bed - and noticed the way that Worf had packed his duty bag. “You don’t know anything about packing, Woofie.” She sat down and fingered a sash sticking out of a pocket. “Why, you wouldn’t believe the tricks that I could teach you. You’d never get another wrinkle. I’ve learned a lot traveling around the galaxies as an ambassadress…”

Worf roared again.

Lwaxana wiped a tear from her the corner of her eye. For a moment, she listened to the sounds of the flowering muktok tinkling in the garden as if they could give her strength to continue. Her voice was low. “I don’t want you to go either Worf. Can’t you do something…” she flailed her arms gesturing about, “…here?”

Worf just shook his head.

“I’ve already lost the husband that I truly loved to Starfleet. I don’t want to lose my daughter… Or you, too…,” she sniffled.

Worf stood over her and then reached down, picking her up into a large Klingon bear hug. When her
ribs were in danger of cracking, Lwaxana finally stopped sniffling into his shoulder.

“Yet you let Deanna join Starfleet…”

“She wanted to honor her Father. I thought she was going to stay someplace safe behind a desk,” Lwaxana shed a few more tears.

Worf chuckled. “Surely you knew better…”

“A mother can hope, can’t she…”

Worf hugged her again, then stepped back. “My mother likes you.” He didn’t have to add that this was a major achievement in his eyes.

“Of course she does.”

Worf shook his head. “You’re a Klingon at heart - when it comes to protecting your family.” Worf picked up his jacket. “Now, I must go and say goodbye to my wife.” He waited, then offered Lwaxana his arm. “You might as well come. You would not have left us in peace anyway.”

She picked up his duty bag. “Woofie, how can you say that? You know I am the soul of discretion…”

Worf rolled his eyes.
Klingon Board meetings

Chapter Summary

Picard finds life rather interesting. And Wesley rejoins Starfleet.

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Picard slowly inspected the room filled with the stench of oil smoke from the free-standing torchieres along the walls and the torches jutting out from the pillars. It was not a large room. And it had no airflow. It just was crowded with vociferous Klingons all waiting for Gowron to make an entrance.

In typical Klingon fashion, while they were waiting, members of this staff meeting were debating each other’s parentage, courage, ability to beget sons, and the other usual topics of conversation when Klingon warriors got together with too much time on their hands.

No one spoke to Picard.

Picard gave no sign of being annoyed by the commotions. Though he wished that something would be accomplished at this meeting. He was getting weary of Klingon conferences.

He felt a tap on his shoulder. Looking up, he warily watched a cadet youth place a tall, mustard colored pottery stein with a silver lid, in front of him.

“ShekhegheS!” was Picard’s greeting of respect as he rose, slightly bowing to Gowron.

Gowron looked expectantly at Picard.

“Progress?”
Picard pressed a button on his padd. A holographic chart of the DMZ appeared over the center of the table.

“Gowron, Warriors…,” Picard glanced about the table, “reports of being able to purchase photon torpedoes are found on almost every neutral free-trading planet along all the borders of the Zone - especially those that have major Maquis ties. The planets highlighted are where Quantum torpedoes are sold.”

“How many?” Captain Kurn spoke up.

“I haven’t been able to purchase one as of yet.”

“You’re not looking in the right place, Human,” a very loud voice announced.

It took Picard a moment to identify the speaker. “Captain Kromm, what information do you have?”

The captain of the new IKS Bortas rose from his chair and slammed his palms, face down upon the meeting table. “Suliban!” he roared.

It took Picard a moment to remember them. “Captain Archer of the Enterprise had contact with the Suliban. But that was in 2151.” And the Enterprise D encountered them. He silently recalled his meeting with Samuel Clemens.

Kromm interrupted Picard. “Suliban cell ships.” Kromm pointed at the hologram. “There!” He pointed at a star system near the border of the other side of the Neutral Zone, in Romulan space. “The Nequencia Alpha System,” he announced, as if daring Picard to contradict.

Picard said nothing for a moment. Then he imperceptibly nodded. “Yes, it is possible.” He worked on his padd for a moment. “There are two M class planets there that could be used as bases. And four moons.” He researched more data. “And considering the Suliban’s prior contact with the Klingon empire, it is feasible that they could be working with the Romulans.”

“We have never fought them in battle! There are no songs of our victory against them!” an admiral argued.

Picard shook his head slightly. “They are not honorable. They would use deceit rather than courage to win their battles. A Suliban cell ship tried to disrupt the time line, and go back and alter Klingon genetics, so that your race would die off.”

The roars were loud as the Klingon warriors tried to comprehend an enemy so scurrilous and cowardly.

Gowron again banged the hilt of his mevak against the table. The roaring stopped. “How do you know this, Picard. Who is this Captain Archer?”

“First captain of the NX-01 Enterprise. Earth knew very little about Klingons back then. Archer stopped the Suliban from altering the time line, not really knowing that it was the entire Klingon race he was saving.”

Muttered words of “To’ba, Hur’q!” and “Impossible!” could be heard in the dark. The Klingons found it hard to comprehend that at a time when Humans were the enemy, one would have saved their future. They started to question this fact.

Gowron raised his fist. “Are you doubting the words of my Arbiter of Succession?” He dared someone to accuse. The warriors stopped mumbling.
Gowron stared directly at Kromm. “How do you know of this?” He pointed at the star map with his knife.

“I was patrolling that section of the Zone. Heard a distress call. And went to investigate. Found a Vorlo smuggling ship, damaged, stranded in orbit about the third planet.”

Picard did nothing overt to indicate that he was suddenly interested in the news about the Vorlo ship. “The Adama.” His words were softly said but they did catch Kromm by surprise.

“By Fek’lhr’s shriveled balls, how do you know this?” Kromm was suddenly becoming impressed with this Human. There actually was a reason as to why Gowron was protecting Picard.

Picard barely smiled. “I’m familiar with smugglers.”

Kromm understood. “No honor.”

“Hija’! So?” Picard wanted the captain to continue on with the meeting.

“The captain of that vessel said that he’d sold his quantum torpedo to the Suliban. He said that they had more in their hold. When they discovered that the Vorlo’s torpedo didn’t work, they fired on his ship.”

“Where did a Vorlo ship get a quantum torpedo?” Gowron was slyly inquisitive.

“From me.” Picard did not smile in spite of the look on Gowron’s face at this piece of information. Though he doubted if it was unexpected news. “I’d disabled it before I traded it for some hostages.” Picard didn’t see any reason to explain all of his dealings with the Vorlo.

Gowron held out his hand. A Bekk stepped over to him and placed a tankard of ale in Gowron’s left hand. Gowron drank all of it before he spoke. “Kromm, go back to Nequencia Alpha and search all the planets and moons. See if you can discover more.” He turned toward Picard. “I shall demand an explanation from the Romulans.”

Picard shook his head, and leaned over to whisper to Gowron, “Not yet. What if the Suliban are working with only one of the Romulan factions?”

Gowron nodded in agreement. He would take Picard’s advice. He faced his trusted captains. “Go and find out if anyone else deals with the Suliban. Qapla’!”

Picard stayed seated. But only because Gowron had his right hand weighing down Picard’s left shoulder.

When the hall was empty except for Gowron’s private guards, Gowron simply said, “We eat.”

With that he stood up, and strode, leaving Picard to follow. Picard quickly caught up.

They walked down long underground corridors lit with flaming torches. There were dramatic shadows that could hide an assassin behind every gigantic pillar. After a while, the architectural design began to change. The ceiling dropped, and the floor was more polished. Spotlights focused on frescos of ancient battle scenes adorning the walls. Picard began to suspect that they were now entering into the Chancellor’s palace.

They kept on walking till they reached a huge double bronze door covered with detailed high relief sculptures of Fek’lhr being thrown into the hells of Gre’thor..
Gowron splayed his hand against a panel, and the doors swung open. Gowron’s guards stayed behind and stood at attention by the doors, as Picard went through it with Gowron. The doors closed.

In contrast to the sparse, harsh nature of most Klingon décor, Picard was surprised by what he saw. There were lit candelabra everywhere as well as recessed light sources. The room had an aura of almost sybaritic luxury. There was a visible comfortableness to the Carmine upholstered chairs and benches. There were wine ewers as well as ale kegs placed on a carved wood side table. Near a fire pit was a table laden with food. Some of it actually smelled appetizing.

Picard detected an exotic Bajoran lily perfume. Turning, he saw a rather buxom Nuvian woman waiting in a doorway, holding a stein. She came to Picard and offered it to him.

He took it. And smiled his thanks at her. In a detached way, he studied this surprising companion of a Klingon, for she was native to Risa.

Her dress was simple, very short, and made of blood colored silk. Her long dark hair just rippled down her back. Her arms had many bracelets. With her ivory colored skin, and intriguing, kelly green eyes, she was a strikingly beautiful woman.

He watched her as she silently went and poured Gowron a tankard of wine. A moment later, she reached over the fire pit, and lit a taper, then set the firewine ablaze. Then she brought it to Gowron.

“To finding the petaQ!” Gowron hoisted his tankard toward Picard. Picard did the same with his stein. And as he watched Gowron drink, he idly wondered just exactly how Klingons avoided extensive burns when drinking firewine…

Picard then drank his tea, once again questioning where the Earl Grey had come from. There must have been something in his expression.

Gowron chuckled, as he walked over to the chair closest to the fire pit. “Sit, Picard. And drink your tea. You are wondering, eh?”

“Yes, this is a rather unusual drink to be found here. I am rather appreciative of the gesture.”

Gowron heartily laughed. “Haven’t you heard, Picard? You’re a warrior hero. So what you drink must be a warrior’s drink. That Ferengi at DS9 is making a small fortune selling it.”

“Klingons like tea?”

Gowron’s laugh was louder. “No. But some warriors are trying to turn it into a new base for bloodwine.”

Picard shook his head in bemusement. And just hoped that his Number One or Woody Nakamura, never learned about this new Klingon warrior’s drink, for he’d never hear the end of it.

“Eat.” Gowron picked up a large fork with something squirming on the end of it. He looked over at his handmaiden. “Qia, bring some of my Berengerian wine for my friend, too.” He was still chuckling as he watched Picard inspect the dishes on the table. “Roast beef.” Picard didn’t bother hiding his surprise. Gowron added, “Klingons are not Vulcans, Picard. We eat the hunted meat of a thousand worlds.”

Picard speared a large piece of the bloody beef with the sharp blade of a qis. He put it on his wooden trencher. A moment later, Qia placed a large metal goblet of wine by his hand, as well as a loaf of just baked bread. It smelled very good.
Picard picked up another bowl. It was some sort Klingon stew. He really didn’t want to know what was in it. But he ladled a large portion onto the trencher. He ate the stew first. And was mildly surprised to discover that though it was spicy, and had a decidedly alcoholic ale-based broth, it was good. He ate all the stew sopping up the broth with crusty bread, before he tackled the rare beef. He tasted some of the wine, and decided that it was a decent purple, though he was not exactly sure of its origins. Still, it was a very good meal.

Gowron was eating everything within reach. He was obviously hungry.

A long while later, Gowron was ready to talk.

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The kiss was familiar. Her scent, her touch, her lips, her nibbling - he was well-acquainted with the lady. So he obliged her by kissing her back.

“You have to go,” she reminded him as she stepped back a small bit.

The man shook his head in regret.

“I’m needed. I know.” He didn’t need to ask if she needed him too. He could tell by the way she was still pressing herself against him. And then she wiggled.

She fingered the pips on his neck, then ran her hands over her husband’s duty jacket. It was an old style jacket of cropped black suede, even though he was wearing it over one of the newer Starfleet jump suits. She knew exactly where he’d gotten the inspiration for this jacket.

“Maybe you’d better not wear the ‘Picard’ jacket when you go to see her.”

“No, she’ll understand.”

“About us, too?” she mused. She knew he hadn’t been in communication with his Mother for quite a time now, and that their marriage would be just one of many surprises for the lady.

“I have to see my Mother. Guinan says that now is the time for me to come.”

“And we always must do as Guinan says,” she laughed. She broke out of the embrace, and then went to sit on the bed in their quarters at the Daystrom Institute. Her smile was mischievous as she looked at her husband. Then she looked about the room.

It was a typical married officer quarters in the old part of the station. Not exactly big, and in desperate need of some paint to cover the standard Starfleet grey walls. But the quarters did have some amenities, such as a large water shower, a small tub, and a top of the line replicator in the kitchenette.

“I think I am going to like being stationed here,” she added in a tone of voice as if to reassure her husband that she would be too busy to notice that he was gone.

“That’s one of your talents, Robin,” he agreed, as he took off his jacket, and packed it into a medium size duty bag. He then went to the closet and removed a quilted grey jacket. “Pretty much wherever you go is an adventure to you, and I’ve yet to meet people who don’t like having you or your rule book around.”

“You’ve been prejudiced in my favor for years.”
“Always, Robin. Always.” Then he kissed her again.

A long time later, she rolled over and whispered, her voice colored with suspicion. “You’re not planning on taking official transport, are you?”

“Whatever gave me away?” He reached down and started to pick up his pants that had been discarded rather hastily a short while ago. He wondered where she had shoved his duty bag.

“Your transport left an hour ago.”

“I’m going to be listed as catching civilian transportation.”

“For a master technician such as yourself, those records are much easier to fake - especially the short term flights.” She eyed him warily. “Unless you want me to fix it for you?”

“No, I’ll do it.”

“With a blink of an eye or are you going to wriggle your nose?”

Wesley grumbled. “I knew that I should have never told you about all those old twentieth century television shows. I am not a witch.”

She grinned as she handed him a sock that had ended up on her side of the bed. “Nope. You most definitely are not a witch. I think you’re actually called a warlock…A very powerful warlock.” Her drawn-out sigh was breathy at the thought of his physical powers.

“Robin, we’ve had this discussion before. Just because I have unusual powers, does not mean that they are hocus-pocus powers.”

“I’m sure that I’d believe the logical explanations of your supernatural abilities, that is if you ever bothered to mention having supernatural abilities to anyone in Starfleet Command.”

“Robin,” he warned, as he finished getting dressed. “You know there are reasons that I can’t yet discuss…”

She interrupted him. “Husband of mine, I like you just the way you are. Rule Number 32, Wes. If life hands you lemonade, don’t try to make lemons out of it. You’re my lemonade. And it’s a pretty good thing, husband of mine, you’re a wunderkind. Whenever you do something amazing, everyone knows it’s because you’re Wesley Crusher. And they don’t suspect a thing.”

“Amazing, huh? So you think I’m amazing…”

Her grin broadened. “Actually, what you do to me borders on the very amazing…” She lifted her arms toward him.

He groaned. But then he grinned, as he sat back down on the bed. And pulled Robin Lefler Crusher into one very adult kiss. Wesley Crusher had grown up.
Ro-mance

Chapter Summary

Ro says goodbye to Jean-Luc. And meet a Riker with another name.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is definitely adult. No minors

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Ro hid in the night’s shadows trying to catch her breath. She was angry, and not that she would admit it, just a little bit scared.

What the hell were two Cardies doing here?

It had all started innocently enough. She’d just gone into the No Name bar to get a drink…

It had been a long, tiring day. She and a few dozen other Maquis had been building a new clinic on Macias, one of the M class so-called dead worlds of the Dozarian system. However, with determination, desperation and lots of hard work, that planetary designation would one day be changed.

The Maquis had a fairly well established foothold here, since neither the Cardassians or the Romulans had ever paid much attention to this planet or its out-of-the-way solar system. The Ferengi had been operating a small outpost here with a trading post and a gaming establishment, for decades. What the Ferengi called this out world post was not pronounceable in polite society, so the planet was informally named after a Maquis martyr-hero, Macias. The outpost itself had been nicknamed “Dozer”, and it had stuck.

Many Bajorans immigrants had come here to settle. So many, that the last time Ro had visited, she’d helped build a school named after its benefactor, John Luke Galen. For it was with Picard’s money that she’d bought all the building supplies, equipment, technology, and books. She knew that Jean-Luc would always approve of having real books in class rooms.

But now, Ro had a problem. There were two Cardassians on her tail. They were dressed like free traders, but the way they moved said otherwise to Ro.

She’d spotted them when she’d gone into the bar to order an ale. They were in a corner, and when they saw her, she got the uneasy feeling that they were really waiting for her. When they rose up, she dashed out the front door, running down the dusty road toward the post buildings, around a corner and into the shadows. She pulled her phaser, and waited.

Long minutes passed. And nothing happened. What were those bastards up to?
After five minutes she stepped closer to the road. Nothing. Another few steps and nothing. She quickly turned around the corner. Then she ran smack dab into a chest - a very big and strong, well muscled, decidedly masculine chest. She looked up and wondered if she was hallucinating. Now she knew why the Cardassians had disappeared. Will Riker was in town.

“Riker,” she gasped, as she started to try to straighten herself out. He steadied her. And made no move to arrest her.

“Do I know you?” His voice sounded puzzled. Though he didn’t seem to mind holding her in his arms.

Ro was startled. Not quite sure what to do, she stood there. Then she thought to look around to see if there was anyone else with Riker. No one was in sight.

Riker smiled his lady killer smile #2, and asked, “I hate to drink alone. Care to join me, pretty lady?”

Ro nodded, still confused. He offered her his arm. Ro ignored it. But she did say, “Lead the way.” And they walked into the No Name bar.

A few moments later, a large Romulan ale was placed in front of Riker. And the ale that Ro had previously ordered before her dash out the front door, was returned to her. Riker tried his lady killer #1 grin on Ro. “So, where have we met before?”

Ro just stared at him, wondering if he was either undercover - which was a worrisome conjecture - or if he’d just simply lost his mind. She wasn’t sure if she should play along.

“My name’s Riker.”

“I know.”

“Thomas Riker.” He extended his hand.

Ro’s glass slipped through her fingers, plopped onto the table top, and splashed ale everywhere. The barkeep tossed her a towel.

Riker groaned even as he mopped up a few droplets on his sleeve. “You’re one of Will’s women. I should have known. The great curse of my life is that he always meets the pretty ones first.”

“I take it that you’re a relative?” was the only less inane thing that Ro could think of saying as she mopped up the sticky ale.

“You could say I’m his long lost brother.”

“Twin?”

“Something like that.” Tom grinned again. “So, are you ever going to tell me your name? Or should I guess?”

“It’s Ro. Ro Laren.”

“Suits you, Miz Ro.” He took a sip of his ale as he motioned to the barkeep for another glass for Ro. He was about to take another drink when he suddenly placed where he had heard her name before. “Not Kalita’s Ro Laren?”

“Kalita? How well do you know Kalita? I haven’t seen her in ages.”
He interrupted her. “I’d rather talk about the very pretty lady in my company. Kalita can wait.” He glanced about the bar, checking to see if anyone was really interested in their conversation. “Let’s go some place more private and talk.”

Ro stood up, drained her ale, decided that his suggestion made sense, and then said, “Follow me.”

Riker did.

She led him about a kilometer down the road to an open field. She tapped a bracelet on her arm, and then watched the Galen shimmer into view.

A low, appreciative whistle pierced the air. “What a beauty! This ship - she’s yours?” A door opened and a ramp unfurled down to the ground.

“After you,” Ro politely said, motioning with a swing of her arm.

Liking the way it was suddenly becoming a very intriguing evening, Riker climbed up the ramp into the bay of the ship, turned around to try a different boyish grin on Ro, and was met by a phaser blast instead. On the lowest setting. He crumpled to the deck.

Ro poked him with her boot. “Whoever you are, you’re no Will Riker…”

A few minutes later, the Galen was in a cloaked orbit around one of the two moons of Macias.

She’d checked his pulse, decided it was okay, cut the gravity on the ship, and then floated Riker into the small cabin that doubled as a brig.

When she’d first become the acting captain of the Galen, she’d enforced the cabin and added additional security elements. A girl never knew when a brig might come in handy.

She made sure the door was locked before she turned the gravity back on.

Then she went to the bridge where she tried to contact Kalita or Tamal. She’d first met them at the Juhraya Colony, when they’d convinced her to join the Maquis cause. Leaving the Enterprise behind had been one of the most difficult things that she’d ever done in her life. And even after she’d resolved certain ethical issues with Jean-Luc, she still had her regrets about some of her choices. But Kalita had helped her.

Waiting for a response, she glanced around the bridge, wishing that Jean-Luc was here. She’d only seen him once since he’d left Utopia Planetia. The Klingons were keeping him too busy. And with little progress being done on his mission if she were any judge.

She sighed. Jean-Luc…

The only time that she thought of him was when she wasn’t busy. So for the past four weeks, she’d tried to keep herself very occupied.

Oh, their reunion had been wonderful, for sure. But she’d sensed a change in Jean-Luc. He was different and she couldn’t quite place what it was.

She thought about their last time together…
…After she’d informed Jean-Luc of her devil’s bargain with Beverly, she’d sat back, straddling him, waiting for him to finish his cup of tea.

Jean-Luc took his good old time doing so. He knew that he should reconcile himself with Beverly’s decision, but Laren was making it very difficult for him. For she was pressing herself against him, letting him know that she wanted something more from him than talk. He supposed that she did have the right to expect such behavior from him. But he could not so easily put thoughts of Beverly aside. He needed time to think.

She abruptly rolled off of him.

“I suppose we should get some sleep,” she proposed.

“It’s been a quite long day, Ro.” There was a regretful element to his voice. “In the past fifty hours, I’ve gone from almost becoming an Admiral, to becoming one of the most wanted men by the Federation.”

“An admiral?”

“Yes, a Starfleet admiral.”

“What did you do to Starfleet to get that kind of punishment?”

Picard’s laugh still sounded a bit raw. “It’s a very complicated story, Ro. We’ll discuss it tomorrow.”

“No matter. You’ll always be the high and mighty starship captain to me…”

He watched as she slithered out of her red jumpsuit, still ignoring her blatant sexual offer.

Realizing that he was not about to do anything interesting to her now, she went into the bathroom, took a sonic shower, and a few minutes later returned, wearing a simple bronze colored cotton shift.

“Move over,” she commanded.

Picard surprisingly complied without protest.

She climbed into bed, her back towards him. And waited. He didn’t move a muscle.

So she closed her eyes, refused to wipe away a tear that was threatening to form, and went to sleep. Her adrenaline had been high at the thought of seeing him again. Now, it was gone. She crashed.

Picard lay there, not knowing whether to be grateful, or to curse. He did a little of both.

Some time during night, his arm curved over her waist, as he slept. Hours later he awoke, slowly becoming conscious of the warmth of his position next to Laren. They were spooning.

For a brief period, thoughts of Eline and the many years they’d slept like this, intruded.

It took a few moments, but eventually he moved off the other side of the bed and went into the bathroom. He took a shower, and then stopped to stare at himself in the mirror. He had some decisions to make. And how he would handle Ro would be chief amongst them.

He shaved, and then remorsefully acknowledged to himself that he had been stalling long enough. For procrastination was not one of his more common faults. It was time to do his duty, albeit a pleasurable one. He refused to acknowledge the regret reflected in his eyes.
He walked into their bedroom, naked.

He knelt by the bed, and leaned over her not wishing to startle her. He pressed a gentle kiss against her forehead.

She opened her eyes, disoriented for a second.

“Jean-Luc?” She raised her arms as if to entwine them about his neck. But she suddenly stopped as if she needed to ask his permission.

His answer was to press gentle kisses on every ridge of her nose.

“Jean-Luc?” She still didn’t quite know how to respond.

He caressed her cheek before he slid her earring off, placing it on the bed stand. He kissed her earlobe, nibbling. Eventually he got around to exploring the curve of her neck, as if he’d never discovered it before. She began to tremble.

He kissed a path toward his goal, sliding his tongue against her lips. She invited him in. His exploration was unhurried, as if only to remind himself of her taste.

It only took a few moments before he began to taste her rising passion. Still, his kisses were leisurely, stoking, requesting and not yet trying to enflame her fire.

She began to sense that somehow he was courting her. Her hands could only stroke his head.

Then he stopped her, capturing her wrists above her head. He lifted her up into a sitting position, swinging her legs over the side of the bed. With the other hand he tugged up her shift. She helped him. For a short time, he studied her, her nude body bathed in starlight from the port windows, as if trying to decide the best way to explore all the shadows that made up Laren.

She looked at him expectantly, waiting for him to slide into bed next to her.

But he didn’t. The only answer he gave to her unvoiced question, was to smile. And then he acted. He lowered her flat onto her back, then nudged himself between her legs.

“What…” He had never approached her like this. Not this way.

He only leaned over to place another kiss on her lips, lingering for a long moment, before he began to leave a trail of kisses down her body. Gentle kisses were placed against her neck before they turned into bites. Worshipful kisses were placed on her nipples, before they turned into demanding, hungry kisses as he suckled her breasts. He was fanning the heat between them into flame. Before it became too overwhelming, he stopped cold. Her breathing was ragged as she waited, failing to comprehend by how much things were different, but somehow instinctively knowing that something had changed in him.

He knelt on the deck. Hot lingual kisses - he pressed them against her thighs, then teased the sensitive spots behind her knees. His hands were roving over her flanks, lightly massaging the cheeks of her buttocks. Then he slowly positioned her bottom closer to the edge of the bed.

She could barely wonder. She was captivated.

He stood again, this time lifting up her left leg, resting it on his shoulder before he placed a path of kisses up her leg to her ankle, soothing then inciting the nerves as he went along, taking his time so that she could anticipate what he would do next. And then altering his actions to not do what she’d
been expecting.

She was trembling in a state of confusion, now. “Please…” It took all of her ability to focus into whispering that one word.

He stroked her foot, massaging it for a moment.

“Come here…,” she managed to whisper.

His response to her plea was again not the expected. He placed her foot against his cock.

She gasped.

He gasped too, when she wriggled her toes. For a few moments he enjoyed this contact for it was a lover’s game that he rarely did play.

Then he moved away. “My game, Laren,” he warned. “It's your turn.”

She resented the words that she could barely comprehend, but that emotion quickly vanished when he lightly touched her mons venus, spreading more fire there. Easily, his finger pumped in and out of her moistening channel while he tickled her with another fingertip between the pouting cleft of her outer lips. Upward the inquisitive digit taunted along the soft flesh, to cajole the tiny bud out from under its hood of skin. She groaned and twitched as the dual sensations of his mouth at her breast and his motioning fingers sent ardent waves of pleasure through her body. He felt her clench. And then withdrew his hand.

Then he proceeded to give her right leg the same thorough sensual torture as the left, pausing every now and then to agitate his fingers against her cleft, as if to remind her of things to come if she were patient.

She thought she was going to die if he didn’t stop stopping. This teasing was driving her crazy. “Jean-Luc….” This time his name was an agonized whisper, as she crossed over from needing to suffering. She ached too much. Her whole being begged for him

“Young, ma belle, soon,” he assured her as he moved closer to her, his hand pressed against her vulva as he briefly massaged her tender flesh, firmly circulating his palm against her curly hair. Then he was softly feathering his fingers over the inside of her thighs, barely touching her sensitive skin. There was a flare up within her wherever his hands touched.

He glided his fingers up the curves of her body, lingering here and there, as if he’d never touched her that way before. A brief touch on her breasts, followed by more suckling. Then nipping. She was ready to melt for him if only he’d let her.

“Your turn…,” he promised even as he seemed to be enjoying the ever-growing frustration he was creating within her.

“When…,” she muttered.

His answer was swift. He dropped to his knees, and this time, widely spread her thighs, burying his face between her legs.

She screamed at the first touch of his tongue. Keened with the second touch that explored just a bit deeper. And became silent with the third caress as he began to find wonderful things to do to her. He
explored every soft plane with his tongue. Her whole being was intently focused on where his
tongue was searching. He was finding nerve ends she didn’t know she even had.

Her legs were now positioned upon his shoulders. She was at her most vulnerable. And she was
trusting him with every broken moan. She couldn’t have taken a deep breath if she’d tried.

He was a master at this sort of loving. Her hands moved against his head, as if to force him deeper.
He raised his head slightly, studied her as if to judge her condition, and then went back to licking her.
She became so soft and so wet. Her musky scent was an aphrodisiac. Deeper he delved into her,
carefully controlling her motions, steadying her bucking as he continued to lavish her. Her body
shivered and shivered. He lashed at her softness even more.

Her moaning began in earnest. She was suddenly hyper-sensitive to everything he did - every tug,
every pull, every lick. And every intensified kiss.

“More…” she almost whispered.

He nipped at her, and then sucked, swirling his tongue against her sensitive nub, striving to bring
about her orgasm.

And she was lost. She flamed. She flared. She was falling over the edge into ecstasy… Falling…

It took many moments for her to come to a few of her senses and then realize that he now stood. He
was just watching her, as if she were the sight that he wished to behold. Her legs were splayed
against the deck. His hips blocked her limp torso to keep it from slipping off the bed. Still, he did not
move. He just watched her.

Waiting.

“Jean-Luc…”

He was tumescent against her mons, so she moved against him, offering him a lover’s eternal
invitation. He shook his head, denying her. “Your turn…,” he warned.

She then tried to lean forward, so that she could perhaps please him with her lips as he had just loved
her. He didn’t let her. Instead, he loomed over her, supporting himself upon the edge of the bed.

He was in command. Still.

“Laren…” He thrust forward an inch.

She wrapped her legs about his hips. She quivered as he entered. Big, hard, and swollen, his cock
filled her to the brim. He began to plunge into her with slow driving intensity; with controlled
movements that were calculated to drive her senseless. Long strokes, that left her body completely
before filling her again. She needed him more, every time he withdrew from her.

Her body’s response began to change, to match his rhythm, lifting up to meet him, encouraging him
to move even faster, harder, and deeper.

And then he stepped away.

She needed him back, as a muted oath formed on her lips. “Damn you…”

“Move over.” It was yet another command.

She quickly obeyed going away from the edge of the bed, waiting for him to join her on the bed so
that she could mount and ride him as had been their custom.

But instead of climbing next to her, he again opened her legs, stroked her vulva with gentle fingers before he slid between them, and then braced himself over her, their bodies barely touching. Yet he was in command of every brush of their skin against each other. Her body was slick now, waiting to be loved.

A different kind of shuddering started, as fear flared through Ro. She suddenly grasped what he was demanding of her. And how he wanted to fuck her.

“I can’t,” she confessed, as she strove to battle down the dangerous terrorizing demons from her past.

“You can, Laren.” He leaned closer to her ear and licked her ear lobe, then her neck, nuzzling the hollow of her throat. “You can, Laren. Place my cock in you now.” He gently bit her lobe, sending shivers throughout her nerve endings.

She turned her head back and forth in rejection.

“Trust me.”

Naked fear warred with desire.

“I am here for your, Laren. C’est pour toi que je suis là. Come, take me.”

He pressed gentle kisses against her closed eyelids, whispering soft nothings in French. “Je t’adore.”

She denied him.

He kissed her. A deep, French kiss, reminding her with his tongue, what he wanted to do with her body if she would but permit him. She hesitantly responded, as if her mind was forgetting her terrors.

He didn’t move. But he whispered again, “J’ai confiance en toi. - I trust you.”

She prayed that the only vision she would be hold was his face, and not some horrible image of a nightmare from her past. She bravely opened her eyes. Tears formed as she saw only him.

Still he didn’t move. He waited. “Trust me, Laren…” His voice was darkly hoarse now, as the strain of being so in control was finally taking its toll.

Hazel-grey eyes captured her shimmering brown-eyed gaze. He pressed an almost innocent kiss against her trembling lips.

She hesitated for the longest while. Then, almost with a movement she couldn’t control, her hand reached down to grasp him, to guide his manhood into her body. Her need outweighed her terror.

He gasped at the touch of her fingers. And then he smiled before kissing her; a deep kiss now. A hot kiss. He was reaching the end of his patience.

With her touch, he slowly moved forward, filling her. Then he stopped. And waited again.

“Whenever you wish to begin, ma belle.”

She remembered all the words ugly men had flung at her over the years. All the dirty, filthy, insulting, crude words that the Cardie bastards had said before they followed with brutal acts of rape against her body.
All the therapists in the Federation had never been able to remove all of the pain within her psyche.

But he could.

Those two words - ma belle - finally poured healing waters over her soul. She would never forget what had happened to her. But it didn’t matter any more. He was leading her from the darkness. Her desire for him was stronger than her fear.

She wrapped her legs around his hips. His body rocked against her. She now gloried in his possession.

He began pushing, now that he had all of her cooperation. Strong strokes, building strokes, luxurious strokes, demanding strokes. And then quick strokes. And she met every one, as wonder began to grow inside of her. He was giving her the gift of her freedom.

“Hurry…,” she begged.

“No…,” was his answer. He moved again, this time lifting her legs to rest on his shoulders And waited.

Anger rose at his denial of her wants. “Comfy?” she managed to ask as she was really growing tired of waiting. She retaliated and reached down and fingered his scrotum Then she tightened her internal muscles to strongly grip his manhood.

She thought she heard him chuckle as his siege of her body was encouraged. His demands changed. He began pounding against her. And for the first time, he was losing control. And taking her with him.

Her fingernails scraped against his shoulders, as she matched his movements. And then she came.

One final thrust and he joined her, achieving his own release in her completion. They collapsed against each other. But he didn’t leave her body. Not just yet.

She luxuriated in the feel of him, pressed against her. It had been too many years since she’s felt this kind of sensual pressure from a lover. Her fingers lazily numbered every vertebrae of his spine as if she was finding it hard to believe that she had done what she had just done. She had never thought that she would welcome a lover like this again.

They were quiet for a while; their breathing was almost in unison. Her senses were still reeling though she was trying to pull herself together. She had a feeling that she would need all of her reserves tonight. “What was…”

He chuckled before silencing her words with a kiss. “For your enlightenment, Laren, it’s called the ‘missionary position’.

She had enough energy left to swat his behind. Several times.

He chuckled again.

Something stirred.

And then he said something that reminded her of his power over her. “Your turn…”

He rolled, pulling her with him until they both were on their sides facing each other. One leg was between his legs. The other was draped over his thigh. It was a comfortable position.
“I don’t think I can…”

“Courage, ma belle…”

His response began with his fingers leisurely exploring the planes of her body again. His hands roamed everywhere, playing with her. Pushing and pulling, creating sensation after sensation.

“Why…”, she whispered.

He wouldn’t answer that question.

“Ma belle, do you want me to stop?”

“Oh, no…”

He laughed even as he brushed a thumb over her dusky brown nipple. It hardened. He substituted his tongue for his thumb, scraping it gently with his teeth. Then he abandoned it to go in search of her other breast. For a long time, he played with her breasts using both teeth and tongue. Tugging against her nipples, wondering in the feel of her velvet soft flesh, circling her aureoles with his fingers, feeling how hard her nipples were growing under his manipulations. He found such pleasure in arousing her.

The heat of his mouth burned into her body’s core. She was wanting again. And he was hard enough to assuage her needs.

Her hands were suddenly greedy as they traveled over his skin before she reached down to massage him, to pay him back for his sensual torture. She circled his thickness with her fingers. She was finding it amazing that this manliness of flesh and bone could bring such pleasure to her. She sat up placing soft licks along his manhood. His groans were his only response. Emboldened, she took his mushroom tip into her mouth, as she sought to please him as he’d touched her.

Her touch was too stimulating. He brought her lips back up to meet his. Then he quickly moved. He embedded himself within her. She welcomed him back.

This time, when he moved bringing her with him, it was to roll onto his back. She willingly followed, riding him astride, finding comfort in the familiar.

For a moment she considered him. He’d been so in control during their lovemaking, that she felt stirrings of resentment against it. She could play his game too.

She leaned over to kiss him; her hands exploring. . The she contracted her muscles, sharply. She was manipulating the thickness, the hardness of him. She felt him jerk in reaction. She bit his ear.

“Your turn…,” she warned.

She bucked. And she began to pump him. Her hips rose up and down, gyrating against his strength. She was going to drain him. His uncontrolled orgasm exploded within her, quick firing her own response.

She could barely breathe as she felt his pleasure. She was controlling him now, as much as he had dominated her. She closed her eyes as their pleasures coursed, mirroring each other..

Slowly she left his body, satiated.

“Tu es magnifique…”
She didn’t need a translator for that lover’s nothing.

He reached over and kissed her as if thanking her.

She didn’t understand everything that had happened between them, but something significant had changed in their relationship.

He trailed a hand over her feverish dampened body, as if to remember the feel of her skin.

“No more,” she begged suddenly too tired to do more than protest.

“Later,” he promised.

She rested on top of him, against his chest, wrapped in his arms. Still trying to make sense of everything that he had done. “Why?”

He didn’t misunderstand her question. “I always knew you were brave. I just needed you to remember it too…,” he murmured.

“Why?”

She was suddenly close to tears.

He kissed the threat of them away. “I wanted you to be fearless with me, Laren… The way you always should be.” He kissed her neck. “Because I trust you. I trust in you, ma belle…”

And then he drifted off into sleep.

For a while she tried to make sense of everything he had just done to her. But it was too much. She would think later. Right now, she was content to stay where she was. In his arms.

When he awoke, Ro Laren was no longer in his bed. He went to the bath and performed his ablutions. He quickly dressed in an olive colored shirt and pants. When he returned, he noticed that the sheets had been changed, the bed had been made. She had tidied up the cabin a bit.

“Laren?” he called out.

“In the galley.”

He walked over and stuck his head inside the small, well-equipped kitchen.

“Making a hassa leaf omelet,” she explained. “Put the toast on,” she ordered.

In quiet harmony, they fixed their breakfast. He was somewhat amused by this domestic side to Ro. She almost looked cute in her turquoise dress and navy blue apron. It seemed out of character - a side to Ro he hadn’t noticed before.

After they had eaten, Ro poured some more tea for Jean-Luc, and a second cup of strong, sweet coffee for herself. Picard leaned against the back of the booth to their dining nook. “It was good.”

She didn’t want to start babbling because he’d just complimented her. Instead she asked about her friends. They discussed many things from Deanna’s interesting marriage to Geordi’s wedding. And they still managed to avoid speaking about what had just happened.

And then he finished his tea.
“I have something to discuss with you, Laren.”

She put her coffee down. She didn’t want him to see her trembling hand. “How bad is it?”

His smile was reassuring. “It’s not what you are imagining, Laren.” He put down his cup, and stood, nodding his head toward the bridge. “Come.”

First she put their dishes in the cleaning unit. Then she followed him.

He sat down at the captain’s console, as if he’d never even considered any other chair for himself. From his jacket pocket he removed a data chip.

She suddenly remembered another chip that she’d received from him. “I never did thank you for your message, Jean-Luc. For letting me have access to your Nagus accounts.”

“I had no doubt that you would find a way to escape from the Cairo.”

“With your help.” He didn’t deny it. She took the position next to him. “I still don’t understand, though. Why did you put me through all that? I could have beamed directly over to the Galen. Why did you have me arrested? Why did you make me want to hate you?”

“Do you still hate me, Laren?”

“I haven’t quite made up my mind.”

He found her entertaining, but he did have more serious things to do than playing around with Laren.

She sensed the alteration in his attitude. It was time she learned what was really going on between them. It would only be much later that she would realize how he had dodged her original questions.

He studied her as if he was making a decision.

“What?” Her voice was wary now.

“I am placing my life in your hands Laren.”

“My hands?”

For a moment he indulged himself with playing the gallant, clasping her right hand, bringing it to his lips to press a warm kiss against her knuckles. Then he released her hand.

“What I am about to tell you is secret. It is vital that it be kept.”

“Of course.”

“Tell no one, Laren. Not even the people that we both trust.”

“Riker? Crusher?”

“No one.” Again, he studied her face, and this time he had found an acceptable answer. “Your word, Ro?”

“Yes. I agree.”

For a moment, he smiled at her as if he really and unequivocally did believe in her.

Her throat choked up, as unbidden jubilation rose to fill her soul. Ro finally knew what this request
really meant. He trusted her. Jean-Luc Picard really trusted her - again. He was giving her a third chance..

“Ro…” He had changed into Captain Picard in demeanor and attitude. “I am on a special mission that is absolutely vital to the safety and peace of the Federation, her allies - and the Maquis.”

“Saving the universe again?” She didn’t mean to be flippant, but she could barely contain her rising apprehension.

He understood Ro well enough now, to know why she had said it. He almost smiled. “Yes. Actually, I am following your suggestion.”

“To join the Maquis?”

His expression was self-deprecating. “No, Laren. I am actually here to solve the conflicts in the DMZ.”

“Yet, again,” she muttered under her breath.

He continued as if he hadn’t heard her. “I’m to negotiate an honorable peace and rewrite that fiasco of a Cardassian Treaty.”

“You’re here to bargain with the Cardassians, and the Romulans… and the Maquis?”

“Unofficially - behind the scenes. It’s one of my several missions. I am to try to at least bring all parties to the table, and then see if I can create a fair, acceptable treaty for everyone.”

“But what about the Federation accusing you of treason? Broadcasting to the universe that you’re a wanted man? A disgrace to your uniform? Offering a reward. Is it all a ruse?”

“It’s no ruse. I really am a wanted man.”

“But if you’re negotiations represent the Federation…”

“If I succeed, the Federation will officially recognize my efforts. If I don’t, then I will remain a hunted man for the rest of my life.”

“But surely your friends know better…”

“You would think so.” He rubbed his jaw, remembering. “Riker slugged me. So did Worf, come to think of it.”

She tried to envision that scene. And couldn’t.

“There are those who do believe I have betrayed my sacred oaths. If I am caught by Starfleet, I will be arrested and charged with treason. And I can expect no rescue or mercy from certain quarters.”

“So this is where it just gets complicated?”

“Just one of many complications, Ro. Only two people know the real reasons for my being in the Neutral zone as a condemned officer on the run.”

“Mr. Data, I presume?”

“Yes, and Rear Admiral Alynna Nechayev.”
That name surprised her. “What about Worf? I sort of heard that he enlisted the aid of the Klingon Empire to get you away from Earth.”

“Worf is involved, but he does not yet know my purpose.”

“He was just being Worf.” She sighed, wishing that she were capable of such blind loyalty. But it was her suspicious nature that had kept her alive so far.

“I will eventually have to clear my name. After I complete my missions.”

“Yes, that much I’ve already figured out. Someone in the Klingon Empire learned about your purchasing the Galen and created a ghost ship in order to frame you.”

“I already have a pretty good idea who was responsible for that. A discommended Klingon House seems to be responsible for that disguised ship.”

“Which House? Are they dead, yet? What’s Gowron doing about them?”

“Bloodthirsty wench,” he thought to himself, somewhat pleased by her attitude.

“Gowron is doing nothing for now.” On her skeptical look he added, “In order to get entrée to certain groups, it’s best that I be an outcast, a disgraced officer. When the time comes, the guilty will be served with Klingon justice for the innocents that they killed.” He did not disguise his desire for the vengeance to come.

“Computer, play visual.” Holographic images appeared of the attack against the Clara Barton, the three cargo ships, and a squad of space cadets that Will Riker had been training.

“Watch the battle, Ro.”

A few minutes later he froze the image. “What did you see, Ro?”

She considered his words, analyzing what she had observed. “Not the Maquis,” she bluntly stated as fact.

“Agreed. Why?”

“The brutality of it. Riker’s cadets - the three that were killed - their ships were disabled from the fire fights. Yet the attacking ships kept firing on them until they were destroyed even after they’d stopped being a threat.”

Picard nodded. “Go on.”

“The quantum torpedo that was used. It was aimed at the center of the saucer of the Barton and not at the warp drive. They didn’t want to disable the ship. They wanted to destroy it. A good thing that it was a ship with the upgraded shields.”

“I agree, Ro. The Maquis would have assaulted the ships in order to get the supplies. They need them. They wouldn’t have attacked to destroy what they need.”

“If not the Maquis, who, then?”

“I don’t know for sure.” He commanded the computer to continue, “The attacking ships beamed out cargo from the two supply ships, but then they dumped it outside the Badlands.”

“They spaced cargo?”
“And then they fired on it, destroying most of it.” He pointed at two lights moving on the display. “Two of Riker’s cadets, Bishop and Dunham, followed the attackers. They tracked the marauders into the Badlands until their ships ran out of fuel.”

“Shee ships. Not long range fighters.” Ro shook her head in amazement. “Talk about courage…”

“I agree.”

“What happened to them?” For being stranded in the Badlands, without fuel, was not a good way to die.

“The Bozeman found them in time.”

Ro was surprised. For she’d been on board the Enterprise when they had encountered a ninety-year-old starship lost in a temporal time loop. She was glad that Captain Bateson was still on active duty instead of having been forced to retire.

Picard added, “I believe when Will Riker becomes captain of the Enterprise E those two cadets will become part of her crew. I know that if I were still captain of the Enterprise, I would want them as part of my crew.”

“Unless they screw up like I did.”

For a second the Starfleet officer disappeared, as he shared the moment with Ro. He became all business again, as he continued. “Mr. Data deduced from the data that the cadets provided, that the attackers went through the demilitarized zone. They crossed over into Romulan territory.”

“And they weren’t challenged by any Romulan vessel?” Ro asked.

Picard paused the image. “Apparently not.” He continued with the display. “Ro, I’m not here by chance. Nechayev, Mr. Data, as well as myself, devised a plan to send me into the DMZ.”

She considered his words. “For more than just trying to broker a peace?”

“Right now, the greater danger is the source of the quantum torpedoes. How are the renegades getting them? Who is providing them - and funding them?”

Ro almost spoke out loud Don’t look at me… but thought better of it. “Who?”

“For some time, I’ve believed that there is a shadow faction within the Federation. And probably within Cardassia and Romulus as well as elsewhere. For whatever purpose, it unites people in power, whether they be politicians, businessmen, diplomats or even Starfleet personnel. Admiral Nechayev agrees with me about the probability of a shadow force behind certain recent events. Things happen that seem to benefit unconnected groups, and yet, there is an overall sense of cohesion to these disparate actions. Mr. Data has been examining everything, to find support for my suspicion of such planning.”

“Is it Section 31?”

“It’s possible that it is an offshoot of that clandestine group. They did have autonomous cells.”

From what little she knew of Section 31, anything was possible. “Any clues as to who is actually making the quantum torpedoes?”

“There’s a reason why you scored so well in your tactical classes, Ro. You readily realize the crux of
“the matter.” He nodded toward a screen. “Every manufacturer of the torpedo has records to prove that the zone’s quantum torpedoes were not made by them.”

“And yet we have them.”

“Exactly. So either there are some major difficulties with the manufacturing process, the security protocols, or one or all are producing the quantum torpedoes off the records.”

“How can that possibly be done?”

“Mr. Data is investigating.”

She thought of something. “Maybe there’s another plant, somewhere.”

“That possibility has already been considered. But so far, there is no concrete evidence to support it.” He stood and pointed toward the line of demarcation. “The only place where we cannot thoroughly investigate is the Romulan Empire.”

“A rogue Starfleet officer who has joined the Maquis with a fast ship has a better chance to reconnoiter than a Federation starship.”

“Yes. The torpedoes appear to be coming from inside the Federation going outward, and not coming inward through the Neutral Zone.”

“So what exactly is your mission?”

“To identify the traitors, Ro. To uncover this faction inside of Starfleet and the Federation. To stop them. To try to breach the rifts and grave suspicions that these machinations have generated. And then, if possible, to negotiate a workable diplomatic peace between all the parties.” As an afterthought, he added, “And of course, to restore my reputation.”

“Is that all?”

He scowled at her.

She ignored his look. She no longer quaked when he glared. “You set yourself up to be blamed?”

“Yes. Mr. Data suggested that we wait for something to happen, rather than try to create an incident ourselves. Once the attack occurred, I decided that now was the time to act.”

She eyed him. ”And?”

“Yes, Ro, I have been planning this for a while.”

“And what part do the Klingons play? Protection? Assistance?”

“Some of both, as long as Gowron in is power. Starfleet knows that the Klingons have offered me sanctuary. As long as I am protected by Gowron, I should be safe.”

Ro snorted in disbelief.

He ignored her. “Starfleet command probably will be able to track my whereabouts on occasion, but they won’t be able to get to me. Not easily, at any rate. Klingons can be rather formidable.”

He handed her another data chip from his pocket. “This is the contact information on how to reach Mr. Data or Nechayev.”
“Nechayev is expecting me to call her?” She was having trouble believing that possibility.

“Try to contact Mr. Data first. It would probably be the wiser course of action.”

“What if something happens to one or both of them. And they can’t testify to clear your name?”

“Then John Luke Picard, entrepreneur becomes the title of my new career.”

She was troubled by his selflessness.

“And what of Beverly?”

His voice betrayed no emotion at all when at last he answered her. “She cannot be involved. She must not be involved.”

There was a finality to his tone that surprised her. She knew that deep in his heart he still loved Beverly.

He was doing all this in spite of the fact that his future with Beverly was in grave jeopardy. Somehow she didn’t think that Beverly would have agreed with his decisions. She even wondered if he’d even told Beverly what he had done. And guessed that to be unlikely.

And then she finally came to understand everything that he really needed from her. He wasn’t just simply trusting her with his life. He was trusting her with his mission. A mission which was more essential to him than his very existence.

“I can’t imagine that Riker and company are not doing anything and everything to clear you name.”

“True. They are trying. Mr. Data will run interference, if necessary. If and when the time comes, I hope that they will be fully informed about everything one day. But not just yet. Right now, they have to fulfill Starfleet’s expectations of their behavior.’

“It’s a dangerous game you’re playing, Jean-Luc.”

“True. It’s a risky game that I am asking you to play, Laren.”

She didn’t need to be told this. But she was accepting the role she was to play. “So what do you want me to do?”

“First, I need to get to the Klingon home world without getting caught.”

“Easier said than done, Jean-Luc.” Ro began working her padd to figure out possible routes.

He stood as if to leave her alone.

“Jean-Luc, is there a time frame?”

He considered his answer. “Obviously, the sooner the better, but since I was rescued by a Klingon cargo vessel that turned into a smuggler’s ship under Starfleet Command’s very nose, I would expect Starfleet Command to anticipate my destination as Qo’noS.”

“They’re going to be gunning for you. You just ticked off quite a few people.”

“No doubt.”

She nodded. “I’ll find a back way in to the Empire that they won’t anticipate.”
“You are one of the few people that I believe can actually achieve that, Laren.”

Hours later, they agreed on the routes that they would try.

Then she chose to fix their dinner. Idly, she watched him stalking about the common area as if he were looking for something. Or some things.

“Figured out all the changes, yet?” she casually asked as she set the table.

He eyed the rust upholstery, the dark grey pillows, the bronze tint to some of the bulkhead walls. He didn’t say anything though. Teasing Ro about her unexpectedly domestic side was best left for another day. He nodded toward the weapon controls. “You’ve upgraded. I noted the major updates to the dorsal and ventral phaser arrays.”

“The very best that Ferengi money could buy. We’ve now got nine phaser arrays, not to mention the best sensors, and a bit more, here and there.” She reached under the conference table that doubled as a formal dining table. She pulled up a disruptor. “Old Bajoran Freedom Fighter trick, Jean-Luc. There are hidden weapons by every station, under every bed, etc.

“Good.” He glanced toward the corridor that led to the sleeping quarters. “You did turn the back quarters into a brig.”

“Just in case, Jean-Luc. It can be turned back into a cabin when we have guests. And the weapons in that room are cloaked. Programmed only to recognize either one of us in order to drop the shields.” She nodded about the room. “Most of the hand weapons are cloaked - biometric shields. And will only respond to our touch. Though you can order the computer to override the precaution if we have friends on board.”

“How many, and where?”

“I’ve sort of lost count. I’ll show you everything after we eat.”

She left him as he mulled over the extent of her new security precautions. Walking back into the galley, she checked on dinner. The ship had a top of the line replicator, but there were occasions when Ro just simply liked to cook.

He followed her, noted where the weapons were hidden in the kitchen, then sniffed. “It smells good. What is it?”

“Bouef Bourguignon.” She pronounced it correctly. She didn’t have to see his face to know that he was surprised.

“Go find a red,” she ordered.

“Red?”

“Isn’t that what you’re supposed to serve with beef? Granted it isn’t quite real beef, but it comes close.”

“Red wine?”

“In the left storage compartment. Under the crate of extra ship mines. Look on the floor.”

He shook his head as he went to search storage. When he returned, he had two bottles. And he was still shaking his head.
“Sirius Bordeaux? Château d’Angludet Margaux? And shoulder mounted cross polarized particle weapons?”

“There’s an old Ferengi saying about how one can never have too many weapons or too much wine.”

“Why wine?”

“I had a lot of time on my hands since I became both acting captain and crew of the Galen. I became interested in French wines. And at a stop at Ootzey, I mentioned my interest to DaiMon Behlk. A couple of days later, he told me he had some wine.”

“These bottles look genuine.”

“I’m not the best person to judge the contents, Jean-Luc. You are. I’ve only tried the Vin de pays.” She grinned. “It tasted pretty good to me.”

He considered her words. “And you were already anticipating my presence here to judge?”

“Let’s just say that I had a feeling you couldn’t keep yourself out of trouble.”

“That’s my line, Ro.” But he was smiling, as he opened up the Bordeaux. After pouring two glasses, and letting them breathe, he finally tasted the contents.

“Well?” She brought their dinner, placing salad and her beef creation onto the table.

“I think that you’ll like it.” He drank some more. “Did you buy this wine, Ro? If so, it’s a surprisingly good purchase.”

“The cases were a gift from Behlk.”

Picard hid his trepidation at this bit of news. “And what does DaiMon Behlk expect from us in return?”

“Actually, I’d just placed the order for the supplies to build the new school on Macias. It was a considerably large order.”

After take a few more sips of the wine, Jean-Luc got around to asking, “School?”


“You didn’t…”

“Already built, Johnny.” She hadn’t called him by that nickname in a very long time. “I’ve got plans for a medical clinic in the works too.” She paused, then asked, “That is, if I still can access the Bank of Nagus accounts.”

“I don’t think that a school and a clinic qualifies as an action against the Federation, Laren. As long as you use your good judgment, you can do as you wish.”

“To help the Maquis?” She just had to prod him.

“To help people, Laren. If someone who needs your help happens to be Maquis, it still is only the humane thing to do.”

“I think I’m beginning to see why Starfleet thinks you’ve betrayed them, Jean-Luc.” She sat down
and poured a vinaigrette over their greens then handed him his plate. She had to know. “Aren’t you going to ask about the weaponry purchases?”

“If you’d given any weapons to the Maquis, you would have mentioned it.”

“You certainly don’t sound like the hard-nose captain that used to terrify those of us below decks.”

“When I’m around you, Laren, that hard-nosed captain is never far from the surface. You do have that effect on me.” He ate a forkful of the salad. “Aged di Reggio Emilia Balsamic vinegar? Israeli virgin olive oil?”

“Behlk threw that stuff in too. He thought it would work with hasperet. It does.”

Picard shook his head in bemusement as he ate his dinner. He wondered why the Ferengi had learned so much about Terran foods…

“So, Johnny, tell me about how you learned so much about wine?”

“My family has been making wine at LaBarre, France for centuries. It’s what every Picard sire expected of his sons.”

“And did you?”

“For a time. Of course I learned the business. It was the only way I could convince my father to let me study everything else that I wanted to study.” He shook his head as he remembered everything about those arguments. “Matters weren’t helped by my older brother Robert, either.”

“How so?”

For a moment, he didn’t answer her. He was lost in the memories. “Robert was the perfect elder son. He was everything that my father wanted. In a son.”

“And?”

“I was not.”

“You wanted the stars.”

“My father considered my desire to be an insult to his family heritage. Robert, on the other hand, wanted the earth. Rene was different.” His voice trailed off.

“Rene?” her voice was soft as she prodded him.

“My nephew. He was like me. The stars were in his blood too.”

She’d noticed the way he spoke in the past tense.

“What happened?”

“A fire. They were both killed.” He finished off his glass, and then poured some more wine. “It happened right before the Enterprise crashed on Veridian III.”

“By the prophets…”

He acknowledged her concern. “I’m still coming to terms with it all.” His voice cracked as he added, “The only thing is, if I never make it back to Earth, there isn’t anyone who can continue the centuries
of my Picard family tradition.” Whispering, he added, “I never wanted to become the Comte de Holl - to ever inherit the title from my brother… Not over their bodies.”

Comte de Holl. She didn’t know what that was. But she did know very well the kind of grief he was feeling. “You never had any children?”

He briefly thought of Mirabor and Batai. “None that are living, Laren.”

She chose her next words carefully. “Do you want children?”

“It’s too late for me.” He pulled himself away from his sadness. He looked at Ro. “Do you want children?”

This was too dangerous a conversation for Ro Laren to be having with Picard. Her denial was automatic. “I’m not the motherly type.”

Picard didn’t quite believe her. And he actually would have agreed with her about dangerous conversations if she’d said anything about them aloud.

“Up for dessert?”

He poured more wine into her glass, before adding some to his own. “What goes with red wine?”

“My special Tuwaly pie.”

“I had it once on DS9.”

“Not like mine. It’s home-made with the Ro family special ingredients.”

After tasting the sponge cake like dish, he realized that the special ingredient was Bajoran fruit brandy. It was delicious.

After he cleaned off the table, and put the dishes away, he picked up the second opened bottle, and then went into the ready room where Ro was already working.

She didn’t say anything as she watched him pour more wine. “I’m working out what I’m going to be doing while you’re on Qo’noS.”

He sat next to her on the couch. “And?”

“I’m going into the weapons brokering business. I’ll start visiting all the more free-wheeling trading outposts, and see if anyone is interested in selling me quantum torpedoes.” She waited for him to protest. He didn’t. Not sure whether to be pleased that he was letting her be her own woman, or disappointed that he wasn’t going to object to her exposure to danger, she continued. “I may start on Thelka.”

“Won’t DaiMon Behlk find it suspicious that you’re now looking to buy more quantum torpedoes?”

“Possibly. But along with everyone else in the Zone, he’s bound to know by now that you’re a wanted man.” Before he could voice a protest, she added, “I’ll point out the greater profit margin for his business if you’re now interested in making a substantial profit instead of foolishly wasting your considerable talents on the Federation.”

“Be careful, Ro.”

“Don’t worry. I’m going to visit lots of outposts, and talk to every friend I know. If there’s a real
source in the Zone, I’ll find it.”

She picked up her wine glass and tasted it. “I rather like this…”, she glanced at the bottle, “Margaux.”

He put down his glass. “How long to the Klingon Home world?”

“We’ll be flying safe for at least thirty-eight hours on the course I’ve charted. After that, we’ll have to be very cautious.” She drank more wine. “And lucky.“

He raised his glass up in a toast. “Bon chance.”

She raised her glass up too.

“By the way, I’ve really upgraded the sensors. Equal to those that were on the Enterprise D.”

“I’d noticed.”

“Cost a lot.”

“I’m not complaining.”

He suddenly leaned in and kissed her firmly. “I knew that you would think of everything this ship needed, and then do it. I am appreciative.”

She broke away from him, troubled.

“You’re using me.”

“Meaning?”

“You’re different. You’ve changed from our time on the Adama.” An ugly suspicion suddenly seemed to be quite logical. Her anger started to flare. “I don’t need to be bribed with magnificent sex to help you, Jean-Luc. I’m willing to do anything to help the Maquis cause.”

For a second he looked at her in disbelief, though his ego did make note of her great sex remark. Then he started to laugh and laugh. It had been a long time since he’d heard something this funny.

His laughter did little to soothe her righteous ire.

“Oh, Laren…”

She really wanted to hit him but instead displayed rather remarkable restraint for her. She hid the part of her soul that was scared that her accusation was really based in the truth.

Shaking his head in amusement, he finally had enough breath to remark, “Ro, I haven’t laughed like that in a very long time You really don’t understand, do you?”

She shook her head, afraid that if she spoke, she’d lose her temper.

“Of course I’m different. We’re different. And it’s not because of some Machiavellian plan to have you betray the Maquis by addicting you to too much magnificent sex. I may be a French man, but I don’t believe that I am such a good lover that I can hold sway over your conscience.”

“Then what?”
“I already told you. I choose to be here. What happened on board the Vorlo ship was forced upon us by the situation. But here…” he motioned about the room, “…is where I want to be.”

“What of Beverly?”

He icily withdrew. “I made her promise to let me go if I didn’t return to her within a few months.”

“What you’re planning, Jean-Luc, could take years to accomplish - not months.”

“I know. And I would not ask her to wait forever.”

“If you’d asked either one of us that question - well I know I would be willing to wait.”

“I know. But so would Beverly. That is why I could not ask that question of either of you.”

She kissed him back, tasting the wine on his lips, suddenly thirsting for more. This time, their lovemaking was more varied. For one thing, after a quick encounter on the sofa, all their discarded clothing ended up on the floor. He didn’t dress afterwards. Ro suspected that Jean-Luc liked walking around naked.

Once, she’d embraced him by the port windows. He took charge, as usual, and she ended up standing, braced against the portal, facing the stars, as he took her from behind. It was crude, nearly violent, but very exciting. They gazed at the stars as their personal universe exploded with more physical delights.

Then it was her turn to command, as she pleasured him. He was seated in his captain’s chair. Naked, she knelt before him. He did not protest as her lips sucked his manhood. The she straddled him, and rode him until they both climaxed.

She also had the sneaking suspicion that she’d just fulfilled one of his major, unspoken fantasies.

For the next few hours, they concentrated on each other, as if both of them feared that this loving time together, would be their last time together for a very long time to come.

And in a corner, Q was finding their conversation and subsequent matings, to be very interesting…
Meanwhile back on Caldos...

Chapter Summary

Wes has a talk with his mother.

Chapter Notes

Yes, there are babies. But this is not a baby fic story. The pregnancies are actually part of the plot. Other than Riker ga-ga-gooing in one of the later chapters, I tried to avoid the treacly stuff. Not that there’s anything wrong with good baby fic, but this novel isn’t it.

=/=

“Mother?”

Beverly was napping in the shade of a tree, near a bank of heather. She’d been dreaming about babies.

“Mom?”

She opened her eyes. And then they filled with tears. “Wesley!” she whispered.

He hugged her and hugged her. Then he stepped back. She went after him and hugged him again.

“Let me look at you!”

And that was when she noticed that he was wearing a Starfleet uniform. Along with a set of pips proclaiming him to be a Lieutenant, Commander.

She could barely grasp the reality of it. “Starfleet?”

“You could say I’m back with a vengeance, Mother.” He grinned like a little boy with a lot of big secrets.

“But what? How? And why didn’t you tell me!”

He grasped his mother’s hand, and tugged her toward the cottage. “Let’s fix something to eat. I need to keep my strength up, with all that I have to tell you.”

He paused to look about the garden. “It hasn’t changed much, has it.”

“No, Mrs. MacPherson and Nana’s friends have been helping to keep this place up, when I am not here.”
“When I was a little kid, I really wanted to stay here with Nana.”

“I know, Wesley. But Nana and I both agreed that you needed to see the universe. And I just couldn’t bear the thought of leaving you behind, even if it was in the safe keeping of Nana.”

They walked into the cottage together.

“There’s plenty to eat. Guinan’s been cooking.”

“She told me.”

Beverly tried not to get her feelings ruffled at the thought that Wes had been in contact with Guinan, but not with his own mother.

He motioned toward the alcove table. “I’ll get something for us to eat, Mom.” He could tell by the expression on her face that she was surprised that he’d volunteered. “Tau Alpha taught me a lot when I was with him.” He moved about the kitchen as if he actually knew what he was doing. He made a mixed greens salad, and chopped up some toasted bread as croutons. Then Wes sat down next to his mother as he waited for the tea kettle and the soup to heat up.

He could tell by the expression on her face that she was surprised. “I can be self sufficient.”

“What other things did the Traveler teach?”

“I’m not quite human,” was not what Beverly expected to hear.

“He’s more than human,” a voice from the doorway, contradicted. Both looked at the speaker.

Guinan walked into the kitchen, and nodded at Beverly. “I’ve been keeping track of the Boy whenever I could, during his travels. Tau is a pure scientist and part-time philosopher. He’d sometime forget that Wesley needed to be reminded of his humanity, now and then.”

“Wesley, of course you’re human.”

“He’s human and then something else,” Guinan interjected. “His temporal manipulating abilities put him on an equal plane with a few other beings in the universe. Including the Q.”

Beverly opened her mouth to protest this character assassination.

Wes spoke up. “You could say I am sort of a distant cousin to the Q, Mom.”

“You’re nothing like Q!”

“I was gone a very long time, Mom. Actually, centuries. I’ve learned a bit.”

Beverly could only look at him with incredulity. “Centuries?” she mouthed.

“And he doesn’t look a day over twenty-five,” Guinan commented.

Beverly ignored her.

“Now I’m back, Mom. I rejoined Star Fleet four months ago.”

“You could say he sort of aced the exams,” Guinan added. “Number one in everything, and I do mean everything.”
“Yet, you didn’t come to see me? Call me?” Beverly couldn’t completely disguise her hurt feelings.

“I couldn’t. Once Starfleet understood my uh, special areas of expertise, they put me to work right away. I wasn’t allowed to contact you. Plus, I, uh, picked up a few more degrees. I’m a professor now, at both the Daystrom and the Academy.”

“And you were rather busy, Beverly, what with the ship crashing, your four pips, Jean-Luc and all that…”

Beverly glared at Guinan. None of this was an acceptable excuse for not contacting his mother.

“Mother, when I first came back, I wasn’t sure that I would be staying. If I had decided to leave, then I would have come sooner to see you sooner. But once I discerned my destiny’s path, I had to wait until the proper time for me to tell you.”

Guinan butted in. “We’d better let your Mother eat something before you tell her everything, Wes.”

“More?” Beverly was in danger of being overwhelmed.

“Lot’s more,” Guinan archly replied.

They laughed together as they ate the chicken dumpling soup. For Wesley started telling her about the some of the places he’d been, and the predicaments that had ensnared him, in galaxies so very far, far away. And how much he’d enjoyed the explorative life he had led.

But eventually, Beverly put down her Nana’s Crown Derby antique bone china teacup. In the “Old Imari” pattern. “Tell me the rest, Wesley.”

He cleared his throat before he explained, “I’m a Traveler, too, Mother - sort of a temporal agent. I am here to understand. I will teach. I’ll observe. But I can’t really change the way of the universe, Mother. I’ve come home because it is time for me to do so. There are things that I can only learn here.” Great warmth filled the smile that he gave his mother. “It’s time for me to get to know my Mother through the eyes of an adult. And as a Starship captain. I am very proud of you, Mom.”

“It’s only temporary, Wes. I’ve spent the past month supervising the repairs to the Barton. And taking care of the wounded. I’m beginning to realize that even though I can ably do both, I am a doctor first, and an officer, second. I shouldn’t be a captain of a starship.”

Instead of protesting this assessment Wesley accepted her decision. “You know what’s best for you. Are you going to return to the Barton?”

“I’m on leave for at least two weeks. I am needed there, but there are other issues. I probably will return. I really haven’t decided yet.”

Wesley carefully remarked, “Captain Picard’s defection to the Maquis is one of the major topics of conversation at the Academy.”

“Wesley…” She didn’t know how to ask him directly about his opinion of Picard’s actions since her son was now an active Starfleet officer.

Wes offered her an understanding smile. “Don’t think for a moment that I believe Captain Picard is a traitor, Mother. And I will do everything I can to help him. And you.” He looked at Guinan as if to ask permission to proceed. She didn’t move a muscle. Taking a deep breath, hoping that one day his mother would really understand, he continued. “But I cannot change the time line. What was, was, is and ever must be.”
Beverly didn’t quite grasp what he was telling her.

Guinan offered another explanation. “People like Wes and me, we can influence. We can guide. We can even shoot a phaser now and then. But we cannot overtly interfere. That’s why I was a barkeep on board the Enterprise, and not a line officer. Picard could heed my advice, but he didn’t have to follow it, and I couldn’t force him to do so.” She glanced over at Wesley. “Wes, on the other hand, was destined to become a Starfleet officer. He doesn’t break any of the rules now that he has become one. He’s doing what he’s supposed to do.”

“I don’t want this kind of life for you, Wes. I actually liked the idea that you were wandering the universe, following that different drummer, searching for your own universal truths. How did all of this happen?”

Wes glanced over to Guinan. She imperceptibly nodded. Guinan spoke now.

“You could say that Wesley’s brain is a bit more advanced than mere mortals, Beverly. One of those evolutionary leaps that happens every now and then. Whenever my kind encounters such a being, we try to help them, to train them to cope. Believe me, being too smart with powers that they don’t comprehend or control, can drive one mad. I didn’t want that to happen to Wes.”

“Mother, Q was the one that found me. He sensed what I was when we first met him at Farpoint. He’s the one that sent for Tau Alphan, The Traveler.”

“And for me,” Guinan added. “It just took me a little while to get to the Enterprise. Your joining the Enterprise was the best thing you could have ever done for your son, Beverly. It was the perfect environment for his growth, and with the right people to teach him.”

“And now I’m back, Mom. Human again. And I’ll stay that way for a very long while to come, too.” Wesley clasped his Mother’s hand. “I’m going to be living a more normal life now, Mom.”

She was trying to grasp the exact details of what her son had become. “What are you when you’re not human?”

“Usually I move about as pure energy. Fluctuating temporal changes causes serious damage to any solid flesh that moves through it.”

“Are you immortal?”

“No. As long as I am in human form, I can die.”

“Will you live a normal life span?” She wasn’t quite sure what she made of all this.

“Normal?” Guinan snorted. “I’ve been trying to define normal for a very long time. Haven’t managed to do it yet.”

Wesley added, “Actually, there’s something really human that I’ve done lately.”

“I’ll say,” Guinan mumbled under her breath.

“What?”

“I’m married to Robin Lefler. We eloped three weeks ago.”

Beverly didn’t see that one coming.
“Picard…”

“Yes, Chancellor…”

“Do you think the Suliban are behind this treachery?”

Picard mulled Gowron’s words. “It’s possible. But not by themselves.” He finished off his purple wine.

“My gut tells me Romulans.”

Picard considered it. “I think it’s an alliance between several factions. Romulans, Suliban, Cardassians, and the Federation.”

“No. I think they’re unwitting players in this mess. They are being used. All they want is to make homes for themselves. Their agendas are pretty straightforward. But every other bloc, no.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I must prove where the torpedoes are coming from. Trace them back to the source. And then find out who ordered their making in the first place.”

“And you don’t suspect me?”

“Ghobe.” Picard smiled. “Gowron, I have come to greatly appreciate Klingon honor. I wish there was more of your kind of honor in the universe.”

Gowron roared his approval. “Picard, if we can’t clear your name, I will defend you to the death.”

“Not that far, Gowron. I will accept my fate, whatever it may be.”


Picard motioned toward Qia to refill his goblet. He was not often in need of spirits, but tonight just
might be one of those nights.

Gowron added, “The flame haired doctor is welcome too. Klingon citizens do have multiple wives.”

Picard closed his eyes at this thought. “I’d rather live…,” he muttered to himself.

“You’ll be staying down here from now on Picard. Plenty of rooms.” Gowron pointed at Qia. “She has a sister if you are interested.”

“What has changed?” Not that being on board the new IKS Gorkon was intolerable, but Picard did not like sudden changes without consultation.

“Captain Klag had to go do something.” Gowron motioned for another wine. “There are two Starfleet ships in orbit about Qo’noS. Can’t get rid of them.”

“They’re searching for me.”

“Couldn’t risk them detecting you on board a ship.” He waved his arms. “This part of my palace is permanently cloaked. Not even my enemies know that it exists. Only way Starfleet finds you down here is if they do a room by room search. And I don’t think that anyone at Starfleet Command has the guts to risk that kind of interstellar incident. Especially against me.”

“Probably not.”

Gowron finished off his wine. “Even if you don’t mate with Qila, talk to both sisters. They are my shuVak, Picard. Best servants I’ve ever had.” He clunked down his goblet. “Best spies too - On Risa…”

Picard’s eyes widened as he began to comprehend the implications of a Klingon spy system on one of the more free-wheeling pleasure planets of the Federation.

Picard decided not to touch his third goblet of wine. He’d had enough to drink tonight. He went in search of an empty bed.

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Part of Deanna’s heart was sad. Worf was gone. Just talking to him through sub-space was simply not enough to fill the ache in her heart. Or all the space in her ambassador’s size bed.

But she couldn’t control her sense of joy. It was overwhelming.

There was a knock on her bedroom door to her pretty blue room. Her mother came in without waiting for permission to enter. She handed her daughter a mug of cocoa. Deanna didn’t drink it. She just placed in on her night table.

One look at Deanna’s face told Lwaxana all that she needed to know.

“It’s finally happened, hasn’t it, Little One?”

Deanna nodded, even as tears of happiness streamed down her face.

“Isn’t it wonderful, Daughter?”

“I never knew. I really never understood.”
“The telepathic bond between mother and child is one of the greatest gifts a Betazoid mother can have.” Lwaxana’s smile was all knowing. “You’ll have that connection the rest of your lives.” She patted Deanna’s tummy. “Give my grandson a few more weeks, and I’ll be part of the connection too.”

Deanna didn’t even mind this possibility at the moment. She was just so happy entwining her loving thoughts with the mind of her wondrous son.

She could hardly wait to tell Worf. The ‘connection’ had finally happened. For a few weeks she’d been worried that her son’s human genes would dominate over his Betazoid heritage.

She sat in bed for a while longer, beaming.

And then she thought of Will. As much as she loved Worf, there was a part of her heart that rejoiced in her connection to Will through his son. At least one of her long ago dreams had come true. She was carrying Will’s child.

Ro woke up with a pounding headache. Then realized that the pounding sound was coming from her brig on the Galen. Apparently Mr. Riker had awakened.

She checked her sub-space messages. There was one from Kalita. All it said was, “Tom is a friend…”

Her headache threatened again, as she considered the best way to release the caged male.

Deciding that food might soothe the savage Riker, she walked into the kitchen and ordered two raw steaks, eggs, biscuit mix, Kona coffee beans and raw bacon, for good measure. Her next decision was to slip into something very red and very tight - her catsuit. She checked to make sure that all of the outfit’s hidden weaponry was in place. After positioning the front zipper several inches lower than normal, she decided that she had more than enough cleavage showing to distract any male named ‘Riker’.

She walked the corridor, calling out, “I’m coming to unlock the door, Riker. Kalita called you a friend…”

“How the hell did you get out of the brig!” Even as she said it, she knew it was a stupid thing to say. Another phaser blast hit the top of the chaise lounge. Judging by the way it was searing the new rust upholstery that she had only picked out barely two weeks ago, she decided that his phaser was set on stun too. But then her temper started to rise. She was not going to let her new upholstery get shot up. It was the first time in her life she’d ever tried doing something as domestic as picking out color schemes, and she was not going to let some Riker wannabe ruin it.

“Miz Ro, I just escaped from prison. I managed to survive for two years of a life sentence before Kalita and some Bajoran friends were finally able to help me get out of that hellhole of a labor
“You should have told me that when we first met.”

“Generally speaking, when a guy says that he just got out of prison, and he’s in the presence of a pretty lady, and then he mentions that he’s been without a woman for more than two years, the pretty lady tends to turn tail and run.”

“You’ve been chatting up the wrong kind of women, Riker. I’d have told you that I’m always in the mood for meaningless fantastic sex…”

Riker laughed at this.

“Truce?” he called out from behind the door.

“Let’s toss our phasers onto the deck in front of us on the count of three.”

“One…,” he called out.

“Two…,” she answered.

“Three…,” they both said in unison. Phasers clattered against the deck.

She quickly stood, holding a smaller phaser in her left hand, just in case. She wasn’t completely surprised to see another phaser in his left hand as he stepped from behind the bulkhead.

He whistled when he saw her, thoroughly inspecting her up and down, noting every sexy detail of her jumpsuit. He looked at her with a real hunger as if he really was a man that had just spent over two years without a woman. Then he did something that did surprise her. He tossed his second phaser away. “You didn’t have to go to all that trouble and dress for me…”

Not by a twitch, did she reveal that she was somewhat flattered by his words. But she relaxed a little, and took her eyes off of him as she placed her small phaser back into an invisible pocket.

That was her big mistake.

It only took a second before she sensed that he was rushing toward her. She dropped, he missed, and she rolled away from him, hoping that his momentum would make him hit the starboard bulkhead wall. But he’d swiftly twisted and managed to grab her ankle, dragging her towards him.

Mentally cursing that she had been foolish enough to only be wearing her flats instead of her spiked, high heel short boots, Ro braced herself, grabbing onto the leg of the dining table.

Still clutching her ankle, he stood then flipped her. She twisted and kicked. But the blow only glanced off of him. He grabbed. And now both ankles were held captive. Writhing, she fought him every inch of the way as he started to pull her closer.

He countered by falling on top of her though he did support himself so that he wouldn’t crush her.

Her breath was taken away.

They tussled. He rolled. She rolled. He rolled. And now she was on top of him. But he had her in his clutches. And he wasn’t about to let her go.

She tried kicking him.
“Oww…”

He held her tighter.

“Damn you, you Rigellian ox! Let me go! You taHqeq!”

“Temper, temper!” he warned as he still persisted holding on to her.

For a moment she was calm, which was another uncharacteristic mistake.

“Beautiful…,” he whispered.

She then felt a response from him as a result of all of their struggling. He was becoming aroused. He was kin to Will Riker. Her response was to try to knee him where it would hurt the most.

“What a spitfire you are…”

“Cūlus aēnī!” she screeched.

Riker stopped trying to forge a more physical contact between them, for a moment. “Latin? Brass ass?”

“Brass ass hole!” She corrected him.

He couldn’t help it. He started to laugh. He duly noted that her breasts jiggled against his chest. He decided that she had a very nice jiggle.

“You speak Latin?”

“I learned on the Enterprise.” She paused in her attempts to knee him in his family jewels. “You speak Latin?”

“Yes. Learned back when I was trapped on Nervala IV. One of these days I’ll tell you over an ale.”

Ro relaxed a little bit against him keenly aware of what she was feeling. And sort of liking it.

“Just exactly who are you?”

His grip slackened, though he did keep his hands wrapped around her arms. They were also lightly brushing against the sides of her breasts.

“Long story. You could say that I am the long lost twin brother of Will Riker. But believe me, Will never liked having me around.”

Ro nodded into his chest. She found that statement easy to believe. “Why?”

Tom bestowed one of his better grins upon her. “Deanna likes my Night Bird better than Will’s version.”

That was something that she knew all about. “Will tried to play Night Bird at my wake. I think that I did wish I was dead when he attempted it.”

“You wake?”

“It’s a really long story.”

“So how’d you end up here?”
She decided that he was not really a danger to her. So she told him. “I lied to Captain Picard, betrayed the Federation, and joined the Maquis.”

“I did the same thing too, except that I joined the Maquis first. Then I lied to Starfleet. And then I lied to Captain Sisko. Had to steal the Defiant, you see. The Maquis needed her. Sounds like we really do have a lot in common.” His arms went slack. Ro rolled off of him.

“You could have told me all of this before you started blasting away.” She eyed her damaged couch.

“You blasted first,” he casually reminded her.

“Had to. One can never be too careful. Knew you weren’t Will. And I’d never heard of him having a brother before.” She shook her head, “Of course, I haven’t heard much Starfleet gossip lately.”

Tom stood up. He then reached over to Ro, offering her his hand in assistance. “Pax?” he suggested.

“Pax.” She took his hand.

He lifted her up, and pulled her straight into his arms. He dragged her closer, whispering against her lips, “About that meaningless fantastic sex…”

“I know a place in Ootzey where you can get sex pretty cheap…” She elbowed him, and when she saw the disappointment in his eyes, she added, “But I will make you breakfast.” He let her go.

“It’s been a very long time since a beautiful woman made me breakfast.”

Smiling to herself, she went into the galley. She’d graduated from pretty lady up to beautiful woman…

He ate everything she put in front of him, as if it were the best food he’d tasted in years. Considering what he’d said about a prison labor camp, maybe it was.

When he finally finished off his third cup of coffee, he leaned back, and looked about, reserving an especially admiring gleam in his eye for his hostess.

“You own this ship?”

“You could say I’m partners with some one.”

“He’s a fool for leaving you alone for even a minute.”

“What makes you think it’s a man?”

“When I hid waiting for you to come down the corridor, I noticed a few things in your quarters.”

Ro’s smile was blinding. “Snooping, eh? I don’t like snoops.”

“And I don’t like a man who’d leave a beautiful woman all alone in a danger zone…”

“I can take care of myself. Besides, we don’t have that kind of relationship.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“Okay. We sort of have that kind of relationship.”

“He’s married?”
“To his job… It’s complicated. He’s dedicated…”

“To someone other than you? Man’s a fool!”

She couldn’t help but smile at his words. “Let’s just say that I’m not the great love of his life.”

“What did I just say?”

She almost laughed. “What we have together is good. And right now, it is working.”

He knew she lied. “How long has he been gone?”

“Four weeks.” The words slipped out before she even thought about it.

“And the other woman?”

“To make life really complicated, she’s a friend of mine too. Right now…”

He interrupted her. “Don’t tell me you’re being totally civilized and sharing him.” Tom shook his head. “What has this guy got that I don’t got?”

She groaned, having a hard time to ignore his words, even as there was a wee part of her brain that was asking the same thing. “I can believe you were locked up for over two years. You’ve lost what little polish you may have once had.”

His jovial façade vanished. “After one week with the Cardies, they stripped away every vestige of my civilized genteel behavior.”

She stiffened. “Where were you locked up?”

“Lazon II.”

“Oh, god…”

His voice was grim, as he asked, “You know it?”

“I was there. Years ago. Gul Lemec gave me the grand tour of his prison systems.”

Riker’s expression was strange as he processed this bit of information. He knew too well what the Cardies did to female prisoners.

His voice was gentle; his concern genuine. He touched her hand. “But you survived, Ro. You’re here, now. With me. And that is a pretty good thing.”

He leaned over and hugged. She didn’t protest. Though she did notice that he wasn’t as broad shouldered as Will Riker He really had been in prison.

For a while he held her, comforting her. And even though she knew that Jean-Luc’s missions were justification for his absence, there was a part of her that was very lonely. And she was so tired of being alone.

“So, what are you doing on Macias?”

“Building a clinic for the settlers.”

“That’s why I was on Macias. I’d heard that there might be work.”
“I guess we could afford to pay your salary.” Her look was mischievous as she added, “All of us did volunteer, though.”

He groaned. “I’m not going to complain about my bad luck since I did meet you.” He looked about as if searching for something. “I’d settle for a real drink as payment.”

Ro laughed. And then realized that she was really beginning to like this laid back version of Will Riker. “I think I can find something. Wine or ale?”

“Ale, Miz Ro. The blue stuff, if you’ve got it.”

“I’ll go get it.”

He stopped her by holding her arm. “Tell me where it is. I’ll get it. You fixed breakfast. The least I can do is wait on you hand and foot.”

When he returned he placed the very large ale bottle and yard size beer glasses on the small table near the chaise lounge that he’d shot up earlier. He filled two glasses, and waited to see if she would come over to him. He handed her an ale as she did come. Then he sat down rather close, next to her.

She drank almost a third of her ale. “You can call me Ro,” she announced. She drank some more.

“Not Laren?”

“Not yet. You have to earn that privilege.”

“Well, you can call me Thomas. Or Tom. And you’ve already earned the privilege.”

“How’d I do that?”

“You got the drop on me. Can’t say that there are too many people still living that have ever done that.”

“Your ego was hurt.”

“That and a few other places on my anatomy, Ro. I hit the deck hard when you turned on the gravity.” He laughed again.

She was amazed that he had such an affable attitude. She recalled how it had been when she’d been around Will Riker. “You’re a lot like Will, you know.”

“I don’t think that I’d say that.”

“He’s always had a gregarious personality.”

“Well, that’s something with which I would agree. I’ve always tried to see the brighter side of life. Must have been all that never-ending Alaskan sun when I was a kid. I’ve always preferred the light. Ignored the dark.”

“Whereas I’ve been told that I revel in the universal Bajoran doom and gloom.”

He watched her as she drank some more ale. And then he made his move. “Think I could tempt you?”

“For what?”
“Ever since you mentioned meaningless fantastic sex, I haven’t been able to get you off my mind.”

She didn’t really want to admit it to herself, but she was enjoying flirting with this man. “You are quite incorrigible.”

“You’re quite right, Ro.” And then, before she could react, he pulled her back into his arms. And kissed her. Rather thoroughly.

Her mind was protesting his high-handedness. But her body remembered the Riker touch. Her nights with Will Riker had been rather eventful even if they’d both had lost their memories at the time. Her body knew him, and the pleasure he could provide.

She didn’t notice when he squeezed something in his hand, and then dropped a small crystal onto the floor. Moments later, he caressed her cheek, spreading a drop of something against her skin.

She thought it was just the moisture from his glass.

He released her and reached for his own blue ale.

She needed to take a few deep breaths before she could even start castigating him.

But he didn’t let her speak. Instead, he grabbed her hand, and placed it against his heart. “Feel how it beats for you.” He slowly moved her hand lower. For a second she was impressed; tempted. She pulled free.

She shook her head. And then suddenly wished that she hadn’t. For now, she was dizzy. She was barely aware of him leaning over her, bending down and then grasping the tassel on the zipper of her catsuit with his teeth. He tugged it down.

“No,” she protested. But he silenced her protest with passionate kiss.

She felt so strange. So on fire. When he opened up her catsuit, sliding the fabric off her shoulders, she didn’t protest. Then he lowered his head to her breast, and started kissing her nipple. She weakly ran her fingers through his hair, not even wondering why she was feeling such an urgent need. Her last conscious thought was if Jean-Luc could have other lovers, she could too…

The moment her eyes closed, he stopped kissing her. And when he was sure that she was unconscious, he abruptly stood up, and reached inside of his pocket for a comm badge. He tapped it.

“She’s knocked out.”

A few seconds later, the shimmering sound of a transporter could be heard. Kalita was beamed directly onto the bridge of the Galen.

“You know what you are going to tell her when she wakes up?”

“Oh, yes. I’m going to play at being the perfect gentleman.” He looked down at Ro, barely disguising his contempt for her. “She’s a fool. The way Picard’s using her. She must be in love with the man. She’s been doing his bidding ever since she started fucking him.”

Kalita sighed. “I still can’t believe that Ro would betray the Maquis and go back to Starfleet just because of a lover.”

“I don’t get it either. She was imprisoned on Lazon II. You’d think the last thing she’d do is help the Cardies - especially after what they’d done to her.”
Kalita moved around the room, placing bugs in every unlikely place she could find. “We’ll have to test the bug’s shields before we go. Can’t have Picard or Ro detecting them.”

Tom looked toward the bridge control panels.

“Too obvious, Tom. I don’t want anything to trigger an alarm. And knowing Ro, there are probably all sorts of preventive precautions with the computer systems.”

“I’ve already bugged the quarters.” Tom took a drink of his ale, before adding, “You were right, by the way. She wasn’t just going to let me waltz into her ship and take her to bed. I didn’t expect to get phasered and locked up in the brig, though.”

“How did you get out of the brig?” Kalita was curious because neither of them had anticipated how easy it would be for Tom to escape.

“You know, I’m not really sure. When I’d regained consciousness, I checked the room out to see what I could use to my advantage. Imagine my surprise when the force fields around the phasers let me to grab them. I even was able to command the door to open.”

“Will Riker.”

“What?”

“Picard must have set the sensors to accept Will Riker’s DNA. Obviously Picard is expecting to rendezvous with Commander Riker sooner or later. Further proof that Picard is a spy.”

“And since I started out life as Will Riker, I’ve got his identical DNA. Biometric security systems can’t tell the difference between the two of us.”

“When the time comes, you could control this ship. I’d be willing to bet that Picard has authorized Riker for access to everything on board.”

Tom laughed. “One of these days, I may pay my doppelganger a visit after he becomes captain of the Enterprise E. I could have a field day with that ship.”

Kalita shook her head. “Don’t let anyone realize what you can do. We don’t require the Enterprise right now. What we really need is to find out just exactly what Picard is doing in the DMZ.”

“And this whore is going to help us do just that.”

Kalita was sad to discover just how very much two years and six months in a Cardassian prison camp had changed Thomas Riker. And not for the better.
Love Finds Captain Jellico

Chapter Summary

Captain Jellico goes a'courtin'. And Data and Geordi are hot on the trial of new clues.

Captain Jellico was a happy man. He didn’t know it yet. For he’d been unhappy for so long that he’d just become accustomed to the lack of joy. He never even considered the possibility that he could change. It was the way he was. But nothing stays the same. Happiness had crept up and worked its way into his heart.

His senior staff had noticed. Those who had been with him a long time had observed the differences immediately. Now when he left his ready room, he no longer scowled at the bridge crew. He no longer was just doing his duty. He actually liked being on his bridge again, bringing to his duties an enthusiasm that he hadn’t felt in years. And his fervor was catching. His ship was running exactly the way he’d always wanted it to be run. The daily stats were actually getting impressive with their improvement.

It was good to be alive.

Some of the changes had to be due to his new Number One, acting full commander Worf. Jellico had been suspicious about the Klingon’s loyalty to Picard. But Jellico couldn’t fault the warrior. His bridge duties were faultlessly executed. He was also the strictest disciplinarian that Jellico had ever encountered. Yet he was a fair officer. And instead of resenting all the discipline that he demanded of the Cairo’s crew, they worked twice as hard to earn the Klingon’s praises.

Jellico hadn’t really wanted a vengeance bound Klingon on board his ship. But Starfleet had thought otherwise. And now, Jellico was willing to admit that for once, Starfleet had been right.

They still hadn’t located Picard. And from what Worf had discovered, odds were that Picard would never leave the protection of the Klingon Empire. Still, they were within reasonable enough distance from the Klingon Empire, that if Picard ever did decide to come out from hiding behind the Klingon’s coattails, Starfleet would be there to get him.

To further brighten his spirits, the Cairo was bringing about a change in the DMZ. Maquis raids and Ferengi pirate attacks in the sector that they’d been patrolling had dropped dramatically. The changeover of the Federation settlers from their homes to the new Cardassian controlled planets, was proceeding more smoothly than anyone had anticipated.

All in all, it was turning into a very successful tour. One that Starfleet command would notice.

Jellico paused and nodded at Worf sitting in his captain’s chair. “You have the Bridge, Mr. Worf.”

Jellico thought he heard a growled, “Yes, Sir”, as he left the bridge.

After the captain had left the bridge, Worf studied his padd, ignoring low voiced discussions about
him. While others on the bridge whispered about the transformation in their captain, Worf already decided that he knew why the captain had changed. Edward Jellico was in love.

As Jellico walked, he decided to go to the Holodeck where Nella was probably rehearsing. He was pleased to discover that she was alone.

She hadn’t noticed that he’d entered the room. So he stood there, leaning against the Holodeck wall, listening to her practice Rhapsody in Blue. He was enthralled by the music and by the pianist.

She finally noticed him, and was actually pleased to see him. Nella had first thought Jellico to be a pompous jackass when she’d met him; quick to judge especially when it came to the guilt of Captain Picard.

But after a few weeks, she came to realize that his awkward demeanor was merely his nervous way of coping with the challenge of being a starship captain. Nella influenced him. And once he stopped trying so hard, he relaxed. And so did his crew. Now they were functioning as a team, rather than as individuals fearful of their captain’s ire.

Nella actually liked Captain Jellico now. Almost every day they shared a luncheon in his ready room. They spent hours talking about everything and anything. He loved archaic Broadway and the great movie musicals. She loved classical music. And he was almost as conversant about operas and opera singers as she was. Only Mr. Data had more knowledge.

Once she’d actually heard Jellico sing, she organized an amateur musical society. Surprisingly, quite a few of the crew were willing to join. In a few days, there was going to be a musical revue.

He was a baritone. She was a soprano. And their duets together were rather good, even if she thought so herself.

“Come to rehearse, Edward?” she asked as she reached for actual sheet music of their duet, “If I Loved You” from Rodger and Hammerstein’s CAROUSEL.

Jellico was pleased that she was calling him by his first name, for he had asked her to call him Edward when they were off duty. She had not objected.

“Actually, I’m getting ready to prepare a report about the stellar cartography alterations for Starfleet. I thought that I’d better actually see the changes before I write about them to Command.”

“Of course, Captain.”

“I’m off duty, Nella.”

“Good, Edward. I really wasn’t in the mood to discuss all the boring technical details that I’d have to tell my Captain.”

The fact that he laughed at this statement would have shocked most of his crew. They’d long thought that boring technical details were what made their captain’s heart beat faster.

They started walking together toward the elevator and the stellar sciences deck.

“Then what would you like to discuss, Nella?”

“That renowned composer, Mr. Data, wants to come for a visit.”

Jellico was excited by this news. “He wants to join the Cairo?” Jellico also momentarily wondered
how his new Number One would handle becoming his Number Two officer. Little did he know that Worf would willingly step aside for Mr. Data.

“I don’t know what Mr. Data is planning. He’s coming as a civilian consultant. Apparently he doesn’t want to rejoin Starfleet just yet.”

“Why then, is he coming?”

“He is a close friend, Edward. My Aunt Carrie is very fond of him. As am I.”

For a moment, a spike of jealousy touched his heart.

As if she knew what he was feeling, Nella added, “He’s only a friend, Edward. A very dear friend. Nothing more.” She archly commented, “Once you get to know him, I hope that you’ll become friends too.”

“I don’t know if I could be friends with an android. I just want him to be my First Officer.”

“Mr. Data has emotions now, Edward. In many ways, he is very human. And humane.” She paused and placed her hand on his arm. “Give Mr. Data a chance. I think that you’ll come to value his friendship as much as I do.”

“I’ll… try.” It wasn’t often that Edward Jellico wasn’t quite sure how to handle a situation.

“Just a word of warning though.”

“What?”

“Mr. Data is not quite as good a poker player as you might think he’d be.”

It took Jellico a few moments for his mind to wrap itself around the concept of a poker playing android.

When they reached stellar cartography, Jellico was impressed with its reconfigurations. It wasn’t just a scientific resource, it was a work of art too.

Commander Daren’s designs had been implemented featuring astronomical detailing flanked by mythological interpretations of the same constellations from the viewpoint of many different worlds.

“Scientific, historical, mythological and allegorical, all in one felled swoop. I’m impressed, Nella. Very impressed.” Jellico climbed up to the observation platform, then turned around and offered Nella his hand. Nella did nothing when he didn’t let go of her hand.

They were surrounded by stars. And it was awe-inspiring. “A job well done, Nella.”

“Thank you, Edward.”

They were silent for a while, as they gazed about. Edward still held her hand.

“Edward, I think I should tell you something.”

“Anything, Nella.”

“I am fond of you, Edward.”

She didn’t have to hear him respond to know that she had said what he had been dying to hear.
“I, uh, am very fond of you too, Nella. Rather a lot.” It had been a long time since Jellico had courted anyone. And he hadn’t even considered any kind of romantic involvement since the death of his wife. So, he was rather rusty at the game of courtship, to put it mildly.

They were silent again, for a time. And they still were holding hands. But Nella had to break the spell. “You know I’m a widow? Laurie and I were childhood sweethearts on Evadne IV. We were married before I went to the Academy. He died flying in a valjean racing accident a few months later.”

“I’m sorry. I know what that kind of loss is like. I lost my wife, too. I focused on my career for years. I didn’t have time for a permanent entanglement. But then I met Deborah. I changed my mind about permanent relationships almost immediately after meeting her. We were married two weeks after our first date. We had a son - Franklin Paul. He’s now twelve going on twenty-five. I don’t get to see him as often as I would like. I one day hope to bring him on board the Cairo:”

“That would be good for him. Good for you too.” She said nothing for a while, then added, “After Laurie died, it was hard for me, to be so alone. For a while I kept searching for someone but I didn’t find anyone special. You know what life is like for a junior Starfleet officer. Too many posting changes, no time for close friendships. I compensated for my loneliness by pouring myself into my career and my music. I didn’t have time for personal complications.”

“I did something similar Nella.” He faced Nella, moving a bit closer. “Now, it’s been over ten years since Deborah passed. And I haven’t loved anyone since.”

She’d barely noted his use of the word love before he kissed her. It was but a light touch on the lips. But it was also in full view of the monitors where anyone on the ship would have seen them kissing if they were looking.

She stepped back. She was determined to continue. “I went for quite a few years before I finally connected with someone - a friend as well as a lover. He was a talented amateur flautist. Together, we played a couple of duets. He was also a Starfleet officer.”

“You’re a very beautiful, intelligent woman. Of course you found someone.”

Now he held both of her hands.

“The affair didn’t last very long. A couple of weeks. We both thought that we could combine work and a relationship. But he couldn’t.”

“He was a fool.”

“Yes, he was.” She took a deep breath, mentally crossed her fingers, then continued her confession. “His name was Jean-Luc Picard.”

Jellico froze. Then he lifted his hands from hers, pivoted, and walked out of stellar cartography, and did not look back.

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“You sure, Data?”
“Absopositively, Geordi.”

Geordi refrained from commenting about Data’s continuing exploration of idiomatic words and phrases.

Geordi paced around the private lab that Mr. Data had requested of the Daystrom. It was part of an enormous laboratory complex where Data had access to anything his little old android heart could desire. Data’s lab was special. Data had been working on creating the most secure, safe, shielded complex his android mind could devise. About the only being who could get in without permission was Q. And Data had even designed a warning system to alert him if Q Continuum energy levels ever were detected.

Geordi was clearly worried. “Romulan Senator Cretak? And retired Rear-Admiral Ross?”

“Factually speaking, Geordi, it is Senator Cretak’s son that is the connection to Admiral Ross.”

“And Ross is the connection to the ARV Companies that makes most of the Federation quantum torpedoes.”

Data had been checking out all torpedo manufacturing facilities. Geordi, on the other hand, started investigating the most obvious sources. Geordi had discovered the anomalies in production first, at the ARV factories.

“ARV has four plants in the Bajor system.” Geordi put down his padd. “Can you get a message to Captain Picard, Data?”

“Geordi, I…” Data found it difficult to lie to friends.

“Data, don’t. You think I don’t know what you are doing? It only took me an hour to figure out what Picard’s mission probably was. So, can you get a message to him? Let him know?”

“Geordi, if I were to admit anything, that is, if there were anything for me to admit, I could not do so. I am not allowed to do so. And I would not ever want to put you in a position where you could not honestly say that you know anything.”

“Yeah, I kinda figured that you’d be under orders.” Geordi laughed. “Just in case you do manage a random encounter with our mutual unnamed friend, let him know that I’ll do whatever he wants done.”

“I am positive that our mutual friend already knows that, Geordi.”
Chapter Summary

Guinan goes on the warpath. Data briefs Picard.

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“Here’s your ginger tea, Mother.”

A grateful Beverly took the steaming cup from her son. When she had Wesley, she’d rarely experienced morning sickness. But this time, it was almost every day. And not just in the morning either. Though there were all sorts of morning sickness cures, Beverly preferred the homeopathic ones. Ginger or pepper mint tea was high on her list of remedies for nausea. And matzah crackers, of course.

Wes sat down on the edge of the couch and watched his mother drink her tea. “Is there anything else I can do, Mom?” He had readily come to terms with a brother and sister on the way. He rather liked the idea.

He held his mother’s hand, just simply happy to be able to hold it. Then he sensed something.

“All idea where Guinan is?” he casually asked. “I’d like to take some of her special herbs back to UP with me. I’m pretty sure that Robin will like them.”

“Guinan went down to the village. And when, by the way, am I going to actually get to see your wife again?”

“As soon as I can arrange it, Mom.” Wesley stood and stretched. “I think I’ll go for a walk. I’ve got to head back to Utopia Planitia pretty soon, so I want to take one last look around the real Brigadoon.”

As soon as he’d walked out of the cottage, he started jogging toward the village. He had to find Guinan. He ran into her down the road.

“Guinan!”

Guinan studied Wes, then commented, “Okay, you sensed it too.”

“It can’t be what I think it is.”

“It is. Bev’s babies are going to be like you. Good thing you’re their older brother. You can guide them.”

“But still, the odds of Mother having twins with my gifts are astronomical.”

Guinan gazed off toward the sunset, thinking, before she uttered, “Yes, it is…”

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Jean-Luc Picard moaned. It had been a long time since he’d felt so relaxed. Qila wasn’t just a Klingon spy. She was also an excellent masseuse. And she was practicing her craft on a fairly frustrated ex-starship captain. For he’d taken up Gowron’s offer, and had decided to speak to the spy.

But Qila wasn’t that talkative, face to face. The only way she’d answer Jean-Luc’s questions was if she was working on him. After the first few minutes of her massage, Picard thought that he might be inclined to answer her questions. And then he understood why the Nuvians were such excellent spies. They could lull anyone into conversations with their magical fingers.

Life as Gowron’s palace guest was decidedly unusual. He had little access to the outside universe. No communication devices. No computer terminal. Just surprisingly good food, sybaritic pursuits, and a chance to learn more about Klingon culture and rituals than he’d ever really wanted to learn.

He did discover Gowron’s library. And for a time had immersed himself in Klingon opera, battle plays, and even poetry. It was very enlightening. And he was coming to really appreciate their culture. His Klingonese was improving too.

Gowron began to join him at night. Some times they played poker. Most of the time they talked about what kind of new DMZ they wanted to form. They were analyzing data, deciding their next moves, and how to uncover more information. Picard was busy.

Still in the darkness of the night, his thoughts turned to Beverly…

Qia appeared in the doorway to the almost Roman style suite of bathing pools. “Captain Picard, there is a communiqué for you. If you will follow me, I’ll show you where you can get it.”

Picard slipped into a robe, and followed. Minutes later he was waiting to be connected to Mr. Data.

“Captain, how are you?”

Picard broadly smiled. “It’s good to see you, Mr. Data. I take it you have some information?”

“Yes, Sir. Geordi has determined that the most likely source of the quantum torpedoes is on Bajor. ARV Companies. There is however, a problem.”

“Of course there is,” Picard almost muttered out loud. “And that is, Mr. Data?”

“There are four factories in the Bajoran system. One or all of them could be the source.”

“So the quantum torpedoes can be smuggled in either direction.”

“Mainly toward Cardassia or Romulus, Sir.”

“Do we know who may behind the smuggling of the torpedoes?”

“Admiral Ross.”

That was a name Picard was not expecting. “How sure are you?”

“Positive. He has been in communications with the son of Senator Cretak.”

“Of Romulus.”
“Yes, Sir.” Data sent an encoded message to Picard’s terminal. “You now have all of the information, Captain. And Admiral Nechayev has asked me to inform you that Admiral Nakamura had joined us.”

“Thank you, Mr. Data.”

“There is one other known connection - Gul Lemec. Starfleet Command believes that Lemec is part of the Obsidian Order.”

Cold fear raced down Picard’s spine. For he’d recognized the name. He was Gul Madred’s commanding officer. Picard would remember the name of the men who had tortured him until the day he died.

This mission of his was getting more complicated. More personal. And his concern was growing.

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“Q!!! Get your butt out here!”

Guinan was on the warpath. And there was no place in the universe where Q could hide from a wrathful El Aurian. Guinan stomped about Q’s lair, throwing everything she could get her hands on, picked from various walls, curios and cubby holes. Breenian crystal gilt vases to Q’s Hummel collection, were flung. Guinan was determined to flush him out.

Guinan also did not want to know why Q collected Hummels in his palace. But then, the whole palace was a bizarre group of rooms built on an isolated moon in orbit about a planet that nobody knew existed, except for the Q Continuum. And decorated in a manner that only this Q could love. He had lots of souvenirs. None of them were tasteful.

“I know you’re here someplace. Everybody has been giving you up!”

“No doubt it was your pleasant personality. Or did you threaten plagues?” He stepped out of the shadows.

“Don’t you dare try to change the subject! What game have you been playing?”

“Game? Moi? I don’t know what you mean.”

Guinan took a deep breath. “You know exactly what I mean! You know what you did!”

“Perhaps you’d better be more specific, Barkeep.” He suddenly stopped, having a stunned expression when he encountered his broken Hummels.

“Guinan! How could you! I was saving them to break them myself during my annual too cute to live day of destruction celebration! I hold it on Earth every May!”

She gave him her best version of the evil eye.

He’d never show it, but he did shiver in his boots.

“What did you do to Beverly?”

He was smart enough not to pretend that he didn’t know what Guinan was ranting about. Not that he could admit it. “Why whatever do you think I did to the long, red haired bitch. Does she still woof
"now and then?"

“She’s pregnant!”

“I am not the Father!”

“Phah!” was Guinan’s response. “You know that’s not what I meant. What did you do to Beverly to get her to become pregnant?”

“Why are you complaining? I gave Beverly and Jean-Luc their most secret wish. Children.”

“I knew Beverly could never have screwed up her own birth control. You interfered.”

“Of course I did. If I left it up to them, by the time they’d get around to thinking about babies, they both would be too old. Jean-Luc is no spring chicken, you know.” Q paused for a moment. “Good heavens, I finally found the appropriate moment to use that phrase! Or should I have called Jean-Luc a crow-less rooster?”

“Q!” Guinan warned.

“Of course, I interfered. It was my duty to do so!”

“Let me guess. The universe needs more bouncing baby Qs!”

“Of course we do.” Q grinned. “Can you imagine the look of Jean-Luc’s face when he finds out that his children are going to be related to me? I think that I’ll appoint myself the babies’ godfather.”

“Like you did with Wesley Crusher?”

“Guinan, you wound me!”

“You’ve been meddling for a very long time with Jean-Luc and Beverly, haven’t you? You knew Jean-Luc before Farpoint. Long before Farpoint!”

Q sniffed. “And what if I did?”

Guinan groaned. “How long have you been playing with Jean-Luc?”

“Actually, I started with Beverly.”

That did surprise Guinan. “Your explanation had better be good. Or else I’ll complain to your parole officer. You know what the Continuum threatened if you didn’t behave!”

“Tish Tosh! Everything I’ve done is for the good of the Continuum.”

“I think some might doubt that.”

“Well, I found Beverly to be a very interesting lady. She had unique attributes. I went to her wedding to muck it up. I discovered that she’d done it all by herself.”

“What do you mean?”

“She fell in love with her groom’s best friend. Guess who.”

“Even I know the answer to that!”

“Yes, but did you know that she mated with Jean-Luc? Did the dirty deed right before the
wedding?”

Guinan eyed him suspiciously. “You’re not trying to tell me…”

“Wesley is Jean-Luc’s son.”

Guinan plopped herself down in an overstuffed leather chair that happened to have devil mask arms as a design. And Vulcan bunny rabbit feet.

“I don’t even want to know how you did it.”

So of course he told her. “I placed them alone in an interesting situation. Then I spiked their drinks. Used an aphrodisiac. And then an amnesiac. They never knew what hit them. Beverly immediately got pregnant, but since I didn’t wish to upset her too much - at least not back then - I managed to fix things so that everything pointed to Jack Crusher as being the father.”

“You finagled the DNA.”

“Just took a click of the fingers. No one’s figured it out yet.” He crossed his fingers behind his back hoping that Guinan would never find out the complete truth about what he’d done to the Dancing Doctor and his pet Starfleet captain.

“Let’s hope Wes doesn’t find out for a very long time. I wouldn’t want to be you when he does.”

“Wesley is not the problem, Madam Ex-wife. It’s Beverly when she finds out. In case you hadn’t noticed, she’s the carrier of the ‘Q’ gene. I suspect that she has some untapped powers. I’ve been intending to explore the possibilities. Just haven’t gotten around to it - yet.”

Guinan rolled her eyes. “I think I’d better help her discover them.” Guinan suddenly thought of a flaw. “And what is Beverly going to think when she discovers how similar the babies’ DNA is to Wesley’s DNA? She’s going to connect the dots sooner or later.”

“I’ll do my best to make it later.”


“Don’t forget the Menage a Troi.”

“You can’t take credit for that one, Q. Riker did it all by himself.”

“I suppose so. The man needed no help from me in making his life exciting.”

“You set out to make Picard’s life miserable. And you most definitely succeeded.”

“Au contraire, Guinan. I set out to make Picard’s life interesting. I am sure that if you ask him, he’d finally admit that he is having loads of fun.”

“Loads? Yet you let the Enterprise crash.”

“Guinan! I did not do that! No, that was fate. I couldn’t stop the crash. However, I actually did save the lives of every one of Picard’s crew. Though why Riker let Deanna Troi drive, I will never know…”
It only took a few minutes for the rumors about Jellico and Daren quarreling to race around the Cairo. The crew was universally disappointed. The likelihood of Jellico turning back to his old miserable self, seemed like a sure thing.

Worf grunted in disgust as he listened to the gossip swirl about his duty station. He glanced over at the captain’s ready room door several times. Jellico had been holed up in there since whatever happened had happened. After considering what he should do for several hours, Worf left the bridge and approached Jellico’s door. He set off the door sensor. He waited. No response. Buzzed again. And finally gained admittance.

Jellico was sitting behind his desk, seemingly absorbed in the daily duty reports. He didn’t look up as Worf entered.

Worf stood there, waiting.

After a few minutes, Jellico acknowledged him. “What is it, Mr. Worf?” He still didn’t look at the Klingon.

“Apologize.”

That caught Jellico’s attention. “I beg your pardon?” Every word was spit out as if chiseled in ice.

“Permission to speak off the record, Captain?”

Jellico nodded, somewhat bemused that the Klingon had the temerity to continue.

“Do you remember Counselor Deanna Troi?”

Jellico was more wary now as he tried to figure out where the Klingon was going with all this. “Of course I remember Counselor Troi. Excellent therapist.”

“She and Will Riker were once lovers. She loved him even though he loved his career more than her.”

Jellico was still lost in space. “And your point being?”

“She is now my wife. She is carrying our child. She chose to live in our present and our future - and not dwell in the past.”

Jellico was flabbergasted. Even though he didn’t personally like Commander William T. Riker, he knew that Picard’s Number One was well-known as a lady’s man throughout the Federation and
many points beyond. He couldn’t figure out how Riker would let any woman that he desired slip away from him.

His first officer clearly had skills that were not common to the average Klingon. Jellico could not quite figure out how a Klingon warrior could woo the unquestionably sensual Betazoid counselor.

Worf leaned closer to the desk. “My father told me that the best way to handle a woman is to apologize - even if you’ve done nothing wrong. Bring flowers, or chocolate. Apologize again. Then grovel.”

“I can’t see you groveling, Worf.”

“Groveling is guile, Captain. It works. I won Deanna away from Will Riker by having it.” He stood straight up, expecting Jellico to figure out the obvious.

“And why do you presume that I need advice about love from a Klingon?”

Worf ignored the sarcasm. “I also know Commander Daren. She is a very brave, honorable, forthright woman. If she cares for you, then there must be very good reasons about why she does so. I respect her judgment.” Implied, but not stated was Worf’s admittance that he now respected Jellico too. Worf stepped back away from Jellico’s desk. “She is also my friend. I do not wish to see her hurt. By anyone.”

“Worf, my personal life is not fodder for gossip aboard my ship!”

“You are too late.”

Jellico was taken back by this statement. He’d honestly thought that he’d been very discreet when it came to courting Nella. “Dismissed.”

Jellico was having a difficult time trying to understand Worf’s motives in telling him all this. Yet, he’d also noted Worf’s silent declaration of respecting him as a captain. And as a man. Jellico knew that a Klingon’s respect for a human, was very hard to earn. And part of him was surprised.

Worf took a step back, pivoted, walked to the ready room door, then repeated, “Apologize.” He exited.

Jellico shook his head in disbelief. Love advice to the forlorn from a Klingon…

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She told herself she was through with men - especially Starfleet captains. They’d hurt her enough.

Nella hadn’t wanted to like Jellico. She’d come on board the Cairo to help save Picard. And not to get involved with another captain. But there was something about Jellico that had been appealing. He was a very, very good Starfleet captain, not a legendary one. He wasn’t destined to save the universe every other week. He actually seemed to need her, which was something that Picard never did. In short, Jellico was a normal, ordinary good man. He wasn’t cursed by the gods with the gifts of extraordinary talents like Picard was.

She idly sat at the desk in her quarters having let down her red hair, and was now twirling her long
hair into curls. She’d changed out of her uniform into a coral silk lounge suit.

She wondered where she should go from here. She didn’t want to have to request a transfer to another starship - again. She even thought that maybe she’d been a fool to turn down Data’s romantic overtures. Now Data was someone who would never disappoint her. He was honorable, logical and loyal to a fault. He didn’t have a bloody male ego!

She would have gone on mentally ranting against male captains if her doorbell hadn’t rung. Sighing, she stood then called out, “Enter.”

The one person she didn’t expect to see was Edward Jellico.

He stood at the threshold. And he was crushing a bouquet of cristaília in his hand. “May I come in?”

She had to think about it before she said, “Yes.”

“I apologize.”

He wore a sheepish expression as he took two steps over the threshold into the cabin.

“For what?” She hadn’t encountered a contrite side to Jellico before.

“For being the biggest, jealous, stupidest jackass in the universe.”

The knot in Nella’s stomach began to unfurl. Maybe there was hope for him. “I won’t disagree about that, Edward. You are a jackass fairly often.”

He took two steps closer. “Can you forgive me?”

“I may consider it.”

“Good.” He held out the flowers. Then he dropped them. He took four long strides across the room, pulled Nella into his arms, and kissed her. Thoroughly. She had underestimated him. Though she did think that the kiss was rather short when he released her.

“I may be an idiot, Nella, but I’m not a fool. Not like Picard. If you want me to go, I will. But I don’t want to leave. It was my stupid jealousy over Picard that caused me to act as I did. You caught me by surprise. I do apologize. I really regret what I did. It wasn’t fair of me.”

Nella looked down at the purple and yellow flowers now scattered over her carpet. “Aren’t you supposed to give me the flowers before we kiss?”

Flustered, he dropped to his knees and began to pick up the flowers.

She knelt down facing him, picked up a flower, and then dropped it herself. “Close enough,” she announced. Jellico found himself being pulled into her embrace. She passionately kissed him before she stood. Then she extended her hand to him.

He took it.

“You don’t have to be jealous over Picard. We’re only friends now. We said our formal goodbyes when you rescued him. Though he’d really left me years ago. In the future, the only time I’ll ever want Jean-Luc around is if I have a flute part for him to play.”

“As long as it’s not a duet,” Jellico commanded.
“That much I can promise.” She moved back into his arms. “No more duets...” She smiled up at him, caressing his cheek. “Unless they’re with you, Edward.”

“Really?” he whispered.

“I do love your singing.” Then she pulled him towards her couch. “I think we will harmonize well together.” And she meant more than singing.

This time when he kissed her, he let his lonely heart go. And it met her heart.

“I apologize, Nella.”

“For what, Edward?”

“For taking so long to do this.” He kissed her forehead. “And this...” He kissed the tip of her nose. “And this...” He kissed her eyelids.

“You’re an idiot, Edward.” She snuggled closer.

“Yes, I rather believe I am.” He kissed her again. This time on her lips. But not any more.

She parted her lips as she now kissed him back. He does know how to kiss...

They were in agreement.

A long time later, she whispered to her captain, “I think cristilia is now my favorite flower...”

On the bridge, Worf noted the location of the captain’s comm badge, then classified that information as for his eyes only. Too many people liked to snoop on board the Cairo. Clearly he should find everyone more work to do. And then Worf smiled.
Ro carefully opened her eyes as she tried to figure out what had happened. She most definitely was on the couch in the common room. She appeared to be fully clothed. From the sound of the engines, the Galen was still in orbit. Somewhere.

She raised her head. She was groggy. Someone had slipped her a mickey. And though she was loathe to admit it, her Number One suspect had to be Tom Riker. The big question now was why.

Someone was whistling a cheerful tune. Ro closed her eyes again. Riker was still here. She wished that life would stop being so damned complicated.

“I’ve made some pancakes,” Tom yelled out from the kitchen.

Ro carefully sat up. “How’d you know I was awake?”

“Your breathing pattern changed.”

She hadn’t expected an actual answer. “Now what?”

“Aren’t you supposed to be building a clinic?”

Ro was not going to be distracted by idle talk. “What happened?”

“You had a glass of ale and then passed out.”

“What? No meaningless fantastic sex?”

“I like my women to be ready, willing, conscious and enthusiastic. You weren’t.”

She was glad that he had at least some sort of gentlemanly standards. “You showed remarkable restraint.”

“Yes, I did.” He came into the room to inspect her.

“I don’t normally pass out on one glass of ale.” She yawned. “I guess I was really tired.”

“Why don’t you go sack out?”

“No. I’ve got to go finish building the clinic.”

“Well then, have some breakfast. You might feel better with something on your stomach.” He
offered her his hand.

She took it. For a second it felt as if a shock coursed through her nervous system. She immediately dropped his hand, and stood under her own power. She wasn’t too steady on her feet, but she made it over to the dining table. She sat down at the table, and glanced over at the port to verify that they were still in orbit about Macias. She was wondering what to do next. She didn’t want to admit it, but she was very disappointed in Tom Riker. And then wondered about the game he was playing. For she had genuinely liked him. A lot.

“I’d heard talk in Dozer that you’re the one who got all the supplies for the clinic. And the school too. How did you accomplish that? Rich uncle? Pirate treasure?”

He passed her some pancakes and watched her eat a few bites before he helped himself to the rest of the pancakes on the platter.

“No. I don’t have a rich uncle. Just a partner.” She poured honeyed syrup over her pancakes. “We had a wild run of luck at a casino in Ootzey. Enough to buy this ship, and then some. My partner suggested that I use his winnings for the greater good. So I decided to build a school and a clinic.”

“Very generous of the guy. Who is he?” The questions sounded innocent enough, but Ro was sensing something else.

“I’ll let you find out for yourself. You might be surprised.”

“He’s coming here? When?”

“Soon. I don’t have an exact timetable.” She ate another pancake. “These pancakes are very good.”

Riker laughed. “Seltzer water is my secret. Finally, someone who likes my cooking.” He picked up his coffee and sniffed it. “Ah, such good stuff.”

“We’ve got to get going. I’m on a tight schedule to finish the clinic. I’ve got to rendezvous with some traders on Thelka in a few days.”

“Will your partner be there?”

Ro was beginning to think that Riker was one of the worst spies she’d ever encountered. Problem was, who was he spying for? The only logical answer was Kalita for she had vouched for Tom Riker in the first place. And then the implication of her suspicion sank in.

The Maquis thought that she was a traitor…

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He just sat there, gazing upon her. His face was close to the crystal aluminum partition as if he had to be as close to her as possible. He was seated in the Greystoke lounge, overlooking the building docks of Utopia Planetia in orbit around Mars. All of the names of the lounges in UP referenced E. R. Burroughs. The Greystoke Lounge overlooked the construction of a ship.

Will Riker picked up his cold coffee, and finally finished it off. In eleven weeks, she would be all his. And she was the most beautiful, enticing lady that he would ever have. The Enterprise E.
He’d been sitting there for hours.

“Captain.”

Riker looked toward the man who approached. And quickly stood. “Admiral Nakamura.”

“She really is a beauty, isn’t she Captain? I truly do envy you.”

Riker smiled. “I can’t wait to get aboard her.”

“That can be arranged.”

Riker shook his head. “I’m not about to break the time honored unspoken rule that a new ship and her new captain should never meet until the day of the ship’s christening.”

“There are ways around that tradition, Captain Riker.” He glanced around, whispering, “Come with me.”

A few minutes later, Will found himself in a shuttlecraft approaching his new command-to-be.

“I hate to tell you this, Captain, but there may be a delay in the construction of the Enterprise.”

Riker stared at the shuttlecraft pilot in disbelief. And groaned. “Admiral, now what?”

“Actually you can blame your friend LaForge.”

“What did Commander LaForge do?”

“Nothing much. Just designed a brand new warp drive for the Enterprise and her saucer section. If it does what it’s supposed to do, it will be a major scientific leap forward. Starfleet Command is anxious to put it in action. Amazing that LaForge used the exact same size for the warp core as the original planned engine. There’s not that much that has to change in the plans.”

“That sounds like Geordi.”

Woody piloted the shuttlecraft into the landing bay.

“I don’t think that I need to advise you to keep your captain’s piloting skills from getting rusty. Nothing worse that a stuffy captain that has to be chauffeured everywhere because he forgot how to fly.” He motioned toward the door. Riker hesitated. Woody sighed. “Captain, has anyone at Starfleet Command formally offered you the captain’s chair of the Enterprise E?”

“No, Sir.”

“Then technically you’re not yet her captain. You can come on board her.”

Riker liked the way the Admiral thought.

“Jean-Luc thought of doing this first.” Woody added, “Captain Picard did the same thing when he learned about the possibility of being appointed captain to the Enterprise. He came on board her before anyone formally said anything.”

Riker laughed. “That’s Jean-Luc all right.” Riker then stepped for the first time onto the deck of his ship.

Woody showed Riker around the bridge for about half an hour, then engineering, and then he guided
Riker toward the crew’s quarters.

“Lots of improvement. More room for senior officers. And all senior officers will have their choice of water or sonic showers.” Riker could appreciate that amenity. “And only ensigns and the occasional lieutenant J.G. will have to share quarters. Senior NCOs will have individual cabins. Non-coms will only have two per cabin instead of four. And anyone who is married will get at least a three room suite. If they have children, they’ll get at least four or five room suites.” He paused, and motioned for Riker to enter a cabin.

Riker dutifully looked about comparing the vast difference between this junior officer’s quarters, and the ones that he’d had to share years ago. Then he noticed that Nakamura had pulled out his Tricorder and was checking over the room.

Admiral Nakamura locked the door, and motioned for Riker to sit on the bed since the rest of the furniture was not yet installed.

“Will, have you heard from Picard?”

Will didn’t quite know what to say.

Nakamura glanced about. “I’m pretty sure this cabin isn’t being monitored. I picked it at random.”

“Sir, I…”

“I go way back with Jean-Luc, Will. I was a lieutenant and Picard was an ensign, when we were both assigned to the Reliant. I’ve lost track of how many times Picard has beaten me in poker.” He sat down on the bed too. “I need to know if you’ve heard from him.”

“Admiral…”

“You’re old enough now to call me Woody, Will.”

Riker controlled his grin. “Officially, I have not heard from Captain Picard.”

“But you do know where he is?”

“I have a pretty good guess - Woody.”

Woody nodded. Then as if he were discussing something else, he asked, “You do know about the traditional galaxy class captain’s privilege, don’t you?”

“Meaning?”

“You get to chose your own crew. As I recall, Jean-Luc went and personally visited or inspected every candidate for department head and senior staff.”

“I don’t remember Picard checking me out.”

“Oh he did, Will. He just didn’t let you know it. From what I heard, he did give you a pretty tough time during your first year on board the Enterprise.”

“Now that rumor is actually true.”

“I take it that you’re working on picking your crew.”

“I’ve already decided on a good number of the officers that I’d like to have.”
“You need to officially visit them, Will. Personally meet them. And all the other candidates.”

“I don’t think that I have enough time to do so.”

“You do. The Enterprise E will be in dry dock for months - as long as it takes. Don’t bother trying to make arrangements for travel, Will. I’ve got a perfectly good Admiral’s yacht that I never use. You can borrow the Mae Jemison and take it wherever you need to go. She’s got diplomatic registration too. Which means you can go just about anywhere. And fast too. Warp restriction rules don’t apply to Admiral’s yachts.”

“Woody, I don’t know what to say.”

“It might interest you to know that since it is an Admiral’s yacht, you don’t always have to file a flight plan. Admiral’s privilege. We do so many secret diplomatic missions that sometimes I never even bother. I just notify Starfleet Command whenever I show up where I need to be. Or maybe not, if it’s personal…”

Riker’s mind boggled over the possibilities for he’d never heard of this Admiral’s privilege before.

Then there were the practical considerations. “Won’t I need a crew for the yacht?” He didn’t really want to go flying about the galaxy with unknown crew.

“One or two people, at best. I recommend Lt. Lefler and Lt. Commander Wesley Crusher.”

Riker’s jaw dropped.

Woody understood why. “Yes, Wesley rejoined Starfleet.” He saw the unspoken question on Riker’s face. “And no, you can’t have Wesley just yet. He’s got to finish something before he can be released for starship duty.”

“As soon as Wes is free, I get first dibs on him.”

Woody agreed.

“We could use a few more good Klingon officers in Starfleet, Will. You might want to contact Worf about possible candidates. If by chance you happen to visit the Klingon Empire during your travels, I wouldn’t mind it if you extended my personal greetings to Picard.”

Riker stood and pretended to inspect the closet. “I take it that you want me to take a message to Jean-Luc.”

Woody reached inside of his jacket pocket. “And give him this.” He handed Riker a chip.

“Be glad to, Sir.”

“Now, let’s get off of the Enterprise before we get caught.” Ten minutes later, Woody was guiding the shuttlecraft around the Enterprise so that Will could see all the new physical design changes.

After a few minutes, Woody stood and then motioned for Riker to stand as well.

“Captain William T. Riker, on behalf of Starfleet Command, I hereby do formally offer you the captain’s chair of the Enterprise 1701-E. Do you accept?”

“Yes, Sir. I do accept.”

“Good. Now you’re her captain, Captain William Riker. Treat this lady well.”
“Always, Woody.”

Woody sat back down in the pilot’s seat. And made several notations in his padd. William Riker was now officially the captain of the Enterprise 1701-E.

“Did Picard ever mention the Admiral’s round-up?”

“Uh, no, Sir.”

“Well, Will, once you actually sit in the big chair you will be officially invited to join the round-up whenever you can. We meet once a month. Usually at a Starbase somewhere. Or on Risa or Clarion. And bring your money bags. Some of us fancy ourselves to be great poker players.” He could see that Riker didn’t quite understand. “Will, you are a Starfleet Captain now. You probably will play poker with your senior staff. But, to tell the truth, you will find it difficult to be pals with them.”

“I know that. I’ve already realized that constraint just by being the Commandant of the Flight School.”

“Yes, well there will come a time when you need to talk to someone, and sometimes you just can’t discuss certain things with your subordinates. That’s what the Admiral’s round-up is for. We play poker. Or pool. We have bull sessions. You’ll be amongst equals of your own rank. Or you’ll be with mentors who already know what it’s like to be the captains of starships.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

“And Will…”

“Yes, Woody?”

“We only invite a few starship captains to join. Most captains are never going to be offered an invitation. So, we never discuss what goes on at the round-up with outsiders. And how you handle yourself will make or break your career. Don’t worry, Jean-Luc was nervous too, at first. But then he started winning at poker. Annoyed a lot of admirals. But on the other hand, we also knew he wasn’t a toady. Also knew he was very smart too. For he did let us win, now and then.”

Riker laughed. For that did sound like Picard.

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Lt. Cmdr. Reginald Endicott Barclay III was having fun. A concept that was almost foreign to the man.

“Raise ‘em high! You varmint!”

In mock terror, Reg raised his hands high, pleading, “Don’t shoot! You got me dead and square!”

The giggles behind him gave away the location of Jory and Harla.

A moment later his back was being prodded with a toy gun. “Straight to jail!” Harla ordered. Jory opened up a stall inside the stable where they were re-enacting scenes from Deadwood, the Holoprogram that Barclay had created a few years ago for another child, Alexander Rozhenko. He’d quickly discovered that Mela’s twins loved to play the sheriff and the bank robbers.
Every time Reg came to LaBarre, he always found time to play with the twins. And next to sending worshipful gazes at Mela, whenever he thought that the lady wouldn’t notice, it was one of his favorite things to do at Château Picard.

Reg meekly ambled toward the stall, when suddenly he picked Jory up and yelled, “Jailbreak!” He dashed out the stable door, straight into the cobblestone courtyard, heading toward the slate covered portico. Harla trailing after him, loudly yelling “Stop in the name of the law!” Somehow this command ended up with Barclay tussling on the cobblestones, with two active seven-year-olds, who were bent on tickling him to death.

Marie Picard slowly walked around the long wood table, laying down linen napkins and flatware, as she watched the commotion in the courtyard.

She glanced over at Mela, as she breastfed John Luke. The lady’s honey brown long hair draped over her shoulders, down to her breast It gave the Mela an almost Madonna like image.

“When are you going to put that man out of his misery?” When she didn’t get a response, Marie finished lining up the spoons, knives, forks and salt cellars in their proper order. She walked over to Mela. She was concerned. Her new-found friend was exactly what she’d needed in her life after the death of Robert and Rene. Jean-Luc had asked as a favor to provide shelter for Mela and her children. But what he had really done was a favor for Marie by bringing the laughter of children - life - back into her big, empty Château.

Mela placed her baby back in his crib, buttoned her ivory cambric blouse, and then looked over at Marie, trying to decide exactly how to answer that question.

“Not all men are like your husband,” Marie remarked.

“I know that. Jean-Luc showed me that some men could actually be a gentleman.

“Noblesse oblige,” Marie whispered. She caught Mela’s puzzled look. “That’s French for always acts like a gentleman in thought, word and deed. That’s my definition of Jean-Luc’s character. Much as I loved Robert, at times he was not always a noble man. He was too close to the earth. But Jean-Luc - he was born to the title Comte de Holl. I’m glad that he now has it. He embodies the noblest of civilized man’s sentiments.”

Mela’s eyes widened. During her stay here in LaBarre, she had learned of the locals and their devotion to ancient traditions - including the nobility. Though Mela didn’t exactly understand the concept of archaic French nobility; upper and lower class status was a fairly common idea wherever you went in the universe.

“This title means a great deal?"

“Only in France, Mela. I don’t think that Jean-Luc ever wanted it. Or needed it.” Marie’s lips trembled, as she added, “And he certainly never wanted to inherit it the way that he did.”

“How?”

“Usually passed from father to eldest son. Then to the nearest male heir.”

“I am truly sorry, Marie,” as she sympathized over Marie’s great losses.

Marie studied Mela. “You’re not in love with Jean-Luc, are you?”

Mela’s light laughter at such a thought, eased Marie’s mind. “It would have been so easy to do so,
but from the very beginning Jean-Luc made it clear that he loves his Beverly. Or his Ro Laren."

“For a man who seemed to have such an ascetic life style, he certainly does have a lot of woman trouble.” Marie smiled. “About time, too. I did worry that his life as a starship captain was too lonely to be good for him.”

More squeals were heard - mainly from Barclay.

Both ladies looked towards the sounds.

“Reg would make a good father,” Marie observed.

“I know.” Mela watched him for a while. “Only problem is, I don’t want to hurt him.”

“How so?”

“I can’t say that I wasn’t hurt when Jorge divorced me so quickly. He didn’t even wait to listen to my explanations, as if it were my fault that the Unk blew up, and I had to be rescued by a Starfleet captain. Then when he said that John Luke was not his son, I knew that I couldn’t go back to him again.”

“How on earth did you end up married to the bastard?”

“We lived on Dorvan V in a small farming community. I was only seventeen when I met Jorge. He had a prosperous farm and needed a wife. I was the oldest of five children. Jorge represented a chance for me to live my own life. He was the first man that had ever paid any real attention to me. I thought that Jorge would be my fairy tale prince. We got along fairly well, until the children came. And then the Federation gave our planet to the Cardassians. He changed, after that. Even though we were promised that there would be no changes in our lives, Jorge didn’t believe the Federation or the Cardassians. He went in search of another farm. And left me to sell our farm, and go to where he was going to settle on Tohvun... She shrugged her shoulders, “You know the rest.”

“So where does this leave Mr. Barclay? He’s been coming here almost every time he has a free minute.”

“I’m afraid to trust my judgment, Marie. I’m not going to make the same mistake again, just because Mr. Barclay pays attention to me too. I’ve learned that loneliness is not reason enough for marriage. It is too high a price to pay.”

“Then have an affair with the man. Find out for yourself what he is really like.”

Mela was a wee bit shocked at this suggestion. Certain terrafarming worlds were still a bit provincial.

“I think it’s a safe bet that Reg is going to worship the ground that you walk upon every day for the rest of your life, if you but give Mr. Barclay the chance, Mela.”

“I do like him...” Mela finally said, as she watched Reg. “He is very good with my children. And he is a better father to them now, than Jorge ever was.”

An hour later, just as dinner was ending, Marie asked Mela to get the crème brulee for the sweet course from the kitchen. She also sent the twins to help carry in their puddings, too.

Alone for a moment, Marie watched Reg as he gazed at Mela leaving the portico.

Reg turned his head. “Paris?”

“Mela needs to get away and relax. She hasn’t seen anything of France yet, other than LaBarre. I think you should take her sightseeing. Go to Paris, Reg.”

“I, uh…” he was about to stammer his answer.

“Without the twins and John Luke. I can watch them, if you’d be interested in sweeping Mela away for a long weekend, or a week or three.”

“What?”

“You can’t spend the rest of your days worshipping from afar. Not that I mind having you around helping in the winery. But you do have to do something, Reg. I know you’ve played the role of Cyrano de Bergerac. Jean-Luc wrote to me about it a long time ago. But don’t make Cyrano your romantic role model. He got the girl and then promptly died. You need to rearrange the order of things a bit.”

“I don’t know what to do!

“Play d’Artagnan instead - Les Trois Mousquetaires.”

“How?” It was almost a plaintive plea. And Counselor Troi was too far away to ask for help.

Marie supposed that scientific brainy types did tend to have problems with romantic relationships.

“Tell you what, Reg. I need to take samples of the new Beaujolais to some of my merchants in Paris. You could take the bottles instead. And ask Mela to go with you.”

“I don’t know how much time I can take off from Dr. Brahms. And Geordi.”

“I’ll arrange things with Dr. Brahms. And Geordi. You just work up enough nerve to ask Mela.” By his very expression, she knew that Barclay was hoping that Marie would ask Mela for him. But there were some things that Reg was just going to have to do for himself.

After they’d eaten their dessert, and Marie had placed all the children to bed, Marie stayed upstairs leaving Mela and Reg alone. She crossed her fingers.

“Uh, Mela…” Reg was nervously pacing back and forth in the salon, sort of walking in circles around Mela.

Mela didn’t mind Reg’s hesitancy. She found him rather sweet.

Reg continued. “Marie asked me to do her a favor. She wants me to take some of the new Beaujolais bottles to some of her wine merchants. In Paris. I, uh…:

“What, Mr. Barclay?”

“Please call me Reg!”

“What, Reg?” Her smile was soft and reassuring as she finally did call him Reg. She walked over to him.

“Would you like to come with me? You really should see Paris. It is the most romantic city on Earth…”

Though he was stumbling all about, Mela immediately understood what the real question was. She
placed her arms on his shoulders, and then was surprised to discover that he was trembling.

“A trip to Paris sounds wonderful.” He almost fainted when she placed a brief kiss against his lips.

From the landing upstairs, Barclay thought he heard someone say in a loud stage whisper, “Un pour tous, tous pour un.” With that encouragement, Barclay channeled a little of the self-assurance that he’d gained from his encounter with the Cytherians. He kissed Mela back, this time with more than a hint of passion. And mastery. He pulled Mela into his arms, and kissed her again, this time coaxing her into a more intimate kiss. She responded. Finally, he released her, as his bemused heart began thinking that a Provincial salon in the heart of French wine country, was the most romantic location on Earth. He found the courage to say, “Mela, if you want separate rooms in Paris, you will have them.”

Mela looked at him in disbelief. After that kiss, separate rooms was the last thing she was thinking about. For it had been so long since anyone had wanted to hold her. Somehow she had failed Reg.

Reg backed away from her, wondering if he’d done something wrong.

“If that’s what you want, Reg…”

It took him a while to figure out what she’d meant. His eyes widened as he began to realize that Mela was almost as unsure as he was.

He pulled her back into his arms. “Mela, I am not trying to pressure you. One room or two. It’s up to you. I’ll make arrangements. And I will be happy with whatever you decide. I just want your company.”

Taking a very brave chance, she answered, “Then, one, Reg. I think I’d be very happy with one room.”

This time when they kissed, they both recognized the alteration in their relationship. They’d gone from friends to lovers.

A long time later, something metallic clanged upstairs. Then the sound of shoes noisily clomping down the stairs could be heard.

Reg and Mela stopped kissing, and then started giggling as Marie made a grand entrance into the salon as if there was nothing unusual about their being in a clinch. Marie’s meddling had worked.

“I suggest the Hotel de Vendome. It’s exactly the sort of hotel that will impress… my wine merchants.” As an afterthought she added, “The beds are considered to be very comfortable.”

Reg walked over to Marie and picked up her hand. Then he bent over, and gallantly kissed it. He was channeling Cyrano now. “Thank you.”

Mela started fanning herself. “It’s a bit warm in here.” She pointedly looked at Reg. “I think I’d like to take a long moonlight stroll.”

Marie whispered into Reg’s ear, “Garden, Reg. Take her into the old rose garden.”

It took Reg a while to figure out what was Mela was suggesting. “Oh. Right.” He offered Mela his arm.
Deanna

Chapter Summary

Will starts assembling a crew. And visits Deanna.

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Captain William Riker went in search of Lt. Robin Lefler. He didn’t have far to go, for he discovered that she was on Utopia Planetia too.

She was as he remembered her. She was full of enthusiasm for her life and for being a Starfleet officer. He wasn’t going to have any problem offering her a posting on the Enterprise.

“Captain Riker, come in.”

She looked toward the living room of her quarters.

“Hello, Ensign Lefler. It’s good to see you again.”

“You’re smiling. That means it’s good for me to see you too.”

Riker was a bit confused by that statement.

“Just nerves, I guess. I always get nervous when a senior officer shows up unannounced.” She was relieved that there was nothing wrong with Wes.

She motioned toward the steel grey upholstered sofa, which now was decorated with many turquoise throw pillows. She was trying to cheer the room up.

“I haven’t heard from Wes for several days. But I gather that this is a social call, rather than…” Her prattling trailed off as she could see how bewildered Will Riker was looking. “You do know that Wes and I are married, don’t you?”

It took a lot to catch Riker unexpected. Learning of Wesley Crusher’s marriage to Robin Lefler was one of those times. “Congratulations!” was his immediate response, though he was having a hard time reconciling the young boy he once knew with a now grown up, married man. Riker crossed his legs after he sat down. “I take it that Wes isn’t here at the moment?”

“He’s on Caldos with his mother. She’s been having a hard time of it.”

“Yes, I’m not surprised. The way the Barton was attacked, and what she had to do as acting captain and CMO, was a lot of work.”

“Oh, I’d meant a hard time with her pregnancy. Beverly is having twins.”

Will Riker couldn’t have said a word if he’d tried. He was flummoxed.

“Wes did say he’d be back home, pretty soon. Guinan will still be there, to take care of Beverly.”
“Actually, one of the reasons as to why I’m here, is that I need to go to Caldos amongst other worlds. I’ve got use of Woody Nakamura’s yacht, and I was wondering if you’d like to pilot it. Tell Wes that we can pick him up.”

“Oh that would be great. We’ve only been married about four weeks. I find that I still actually miss him.”

“I’m doing the captain’s privilege tour, Mrs. Crusher.” Riker grinned as he said her new name. “I’m checking out possible crewmembers for the Enterprise.”

“I’d heard that you’re finally getting a captain’s chair.”

“It’s official now.”

“Congratulations to you too, Captain Riker.”

Riker waited to see if she would broach the question. He remembered what she was like as his junior officer.

Fearless.

“Well?” Her eyes were sparkling with anticipation.

“I could use you, Ensign.”

She could barely control her enthusiasm.

“And Wes?”

“Already asked Woody Nakamura. He said no. And that Wes was working on a project for him. But that as soon as it was finished, I could have him.”

“Dang it. Wesley is just going to have to finish off his experiments without blowing too much more of the universe up.”

Riker restrained himself from laughing.

“Of course, with the way that Wes can come and go, it’s not like I’d be missing him too much.”

Riker spoke with a touch of levity. “I take it that you’re accepting my offer? Intelligence Officer, by the way. With a promotion to Lieutenant, J.G.”

“Would I get married officer’s quarters?” For Robin did have a practical side to her nature

“You help me with picking out some of the crew, and I can guarantee your pick of quarters.” Riker caught the look of glee on Robin’s face. “And since I do want Lt. Commander Crusher on board as soon as possible, I am offering senior officer’s quarters.”

“Good.”

“In the meantime, will you help me and pilot the Mae Jemison for me?”

“When do we leave?”

Riker stood. “Tomorrow. 0600.” He briefly hugged Robin, and then whispered, “Wes is a very lucky guy. I hope that you both will be very happy.”
Robin’s smile was brilliant as she promised to do her best to keep Wes happy.

Geordi sighed with contentment. He just loved the way that Leah said good morning - and good night. He was a very happy man. And judging by the way Leah acted around him, she was pretty happy too.

Dr. Brahms had lived at Utopia Planetia for quite a few years. She didn’t just have quarters. She had a home. And Geordi felt as if he could stay here forever.

He missed being on board a starship. For he loved star hopping. But here at the Daystrom, if he had an idea - any kind of an idea no matter how theoretical - no one questioned it. They just asked what he needed. He didn’t even have to tell them why. He knew that it was partially because Leah had chosen him as her husband. But he was slowly becoming aware of how many scientists respected his discoveries. On board the Enterprise, his frequent discoveries were somewhat commonplace, something that everyone expected of him. But here, amongst other scientists, he was learning that his opinions were highly valued. And he wouldn’t have been human if he weren’t enjoying himself.

He scanned the room to see where his wife had gone. Smiling, he got out of bed and walked into their bathroom, opening the shower door.

“We don’t have time, Geordi.”

“Yes, we do. People expect us to still be in our honeymoon stage.”

She reached over and placed a peck on his lips. “May we never outgrow our honeymoon stage.”

He stepped into the shower, perfectly willing to scrub his wife’s back.

“Yes, but you have to be at the lab to cover for Mr. Data leaving this morning.”


She followed him out. “Did you forget your Dad was coming today? He finally got his wedding invitation.” She started drying herself off. Geordi picked up another towel to help. “I got the impression from his subspace message that our marriage took him by surprise.”

“I think what really surprised my Dad was that I got married at all. Until I met you, I was a spectacular failure when it came to women.”

“You’d never know it by me.” Leah turned around and kissed him. “You just needed someone to really appreciate you, my dear.” She swatted his behind. “Now, you’d better get going, or you might get in trouble with your boss. She might be forced to discipline you.”

“Promises, promises,” he sighed.

She kissed his forehead. “Later.”

On his way to Betazed, Will stopped at G-6. He closed out his office, and then summoned two of his
cadets, Bishop and Dunham, and asked if they’d be interested in being posted to the Enterprise after they’d graduated from the Academy. He then promised to join them for a congratulatory beer before he left G-6.

Then he went in search of Deanna.

Will Riker had always loved Betazed gardens. They were beautiful, full of brilliant colors and memorable, sensual perfumes. The many gardens surrounding Lwaxana’s mansion, were the best that could be found on Betazed.

And Will didn’t mind the company that he was keeping either, as he walked arm-in-arm with Deanna about the grounds. He was concerned about her because Worf had kept him notified about every important detail of Deanna’s pregnancy.

He was so used to thinking of Deanna as a strong and vibrant woman. But her pregnancy was wearing her down. He sensed, rather than by Deanna telling him, how difficult her pregnancy was becoming. Upon arriving on Betazed, he’d noticed that Deanna no longer protested her Mother’s hovering. That told him more than anything else, about how ill she was feeling.

Deanna guided him toward a bench, under a tall dark tree, overlooking a pond surrounded by the tall pink spikes of the muktok flowers.

They sat there in the shade for a while. Deanna really did need to catch her breath. She could also sense Will’s concerns about her health too. He was the only one she could talk to about that. Her Mother got too emotional. And Worf didn’t need to know everything. Not just yet. He had more important things to do.

Filled with unease, Riker had to voice his concerns. “Deanna, if having my baby endangers your health, know that I want you alive. And if you insist, in Worf’s arms…”

She pressed her finger against his lips. “Hush, Will. I chose to have our baby. If things become too difficult, the doctors say that I may place the fetus in stasis until a solution can be discovered.”

He pressed a chaste kiss on her lips. “Deanna, I can’t bear the thought of anything happening to you because of me.”

“Oh, my dear Will. It isn’t you. It’s what happened to my body when I bore Ian. I just have to be very careful, that’s all.”

He kissed her lips again. “But still…”

“Why did you come, Will?”

“Can’t husband Number Two visit his wife?”

She laughed. “Mother was very disappointed when she learned that she wouldn’t have you around to torment as a son-in-law.”

“Well, when you’re up to leaving your Mother’s smothering, I have a job offer for you.”

“Do you think that it’s wise?”

“I’d like Worf to be my Number Two. And with you on board as a counselor, I can’t envision two better officers for the Enterprise E.” He grinned. “Or a better solution as to how the three of us will all raise Junior here together.” He placed his hand on her tummy.
“It’s a viable solution, Will.” She smiled up at him before she leaned against his shoulder. “And one day, I’ll probably write one heck of a paper on untraditional Klingon/Betazed/Human family dynamics.”

“Always willing to help in scientific research, Deanna. And think how entertaining our relationship will be for my crew. It’ll keep them busy gossiping for years.”

She laughed, but to Will’s mind, it was but a pale sounding shadow of how she used to be.

They sat in a close, comfortable position for a while. “Tell me about Wesley Crusher and Robin Lefler.”

“Don’t know that much. During our flight to Betazed, Robin really didn’t talk that much about Wesley.” He thought for a moment. “Odd, that. She talked about everything she could chatter about, except Wesley.”

“Robin’s still madly in love with Wes. Wait until she calms down a bit.” Deanna rested her head on Will’s comfortable shoulder. “Where do you go from here?”

“On to Caldos. I need to talk to Beverly, and to pick up Wes.”

She sensed the sudden seriousness of his mood. “Captain Picard?”

“Things are obviously happening. But I’m still in the dark. I’m going to have to do something about that.”

“What?”

“I’ve been invited to Qo’noS. And I’m going, with Woody Nakamura’s permission.”

“Tell Captain Picard that I’d like him to be our son’s godfather. And Beverly, of course, as his godmother.”

“I don’t think that Worf will object.”

Deanna sighed. “I wish that all of our friends could be our son’s godfathers.”

“How about honorary uncles?”

“Not a bad idea, Will Riker.”

“When the time comes, I’ll probably reciprocate the favor.”

Deanna was puzzled. “For whom?”

“I take it that you haven’t talked with Beverly lately.” She shook her head. “Beverly is having twins. A boy and a girl.”

“Oh how wonderful.” As she came to realize all that this meant, she added, “Oh dear. Poor Beverly.” She looked up at Will. “At least I know where you and Worf are. But Beverly can’t even try to reach Jean-Luc when she needs him. I’m sure that Starfleet is watching her, waiting to see if she’ll get in contact with him.”

He pressed a gentle kiss against her lips. “The least I can do is get a message to Captain Picard. And see if she wants him to be told about the twins.”
He pressed a another kiss against her lips. “As for you, it’s got to be time for your nap.” He didn’t mention how dark the shadows were underneath her eyes. He stood and picked her up in his arms. “I’m going to carry you back to the house, whether you want me to or not.”

“Oh, you are such a gallant gentleman. Pity you’re not wearing that red uniform anymore, Will Riker. I always loved you in that uniform.” She waved toward the house. “Carry on.” Her voice trailed off, as her head nodded. She was exhausted.

As they entered the foyer, for the first time Will Riker got the impression that Lwaxana actually approved of his actions. After Deanna was safely tucked away for her nap, Will went downstairs, very concerned about his Imzadi. He found Lwaxana in the rose salon. She motioned for him to come sit down next to her.

“How is she really, Lwaxana?”

“Deanna has to be very careful, Will. I didn’t know about the alien baby. His radiation damaged her. Oh my poor Little One.” Lwaxana was close to tears.

“You’ll take the best of care for her.”

“She’s no longer being stubborn, like she used to be. It’s as if she’s using every little bit of strength that she has left, just to live, Will.” This time, she did start crying against Will’s broad shoulders. “What I wouldn’t give for her to curse at me, again.“

Will felt close to crying too.

In a corridor, off the rose salon, Robin listened to their conversation. She hadn’t meant to eavesdrop, but once Will had started talking about Deanna’s health, she hadn’t wanted to intrude. She wondered if there was anything that her husband could do to help Deanna…
Ootzey

Chapter Summary

Ro takes a trip. And runs into a lot of trouble.

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It had taken five days to finish building the John Luke Galen Clinic. Ro couldn’t fault Tom and the way he worked. He went above and beyond his duty to help finish the job.

She also tried not to find hidden meanings behind the way her Bajoran co-workers were treating her. Yet, their attitude towards her was different. They didn’t trust her now. Or Jean-Luc Picard.

Riker had been staying on board the Galen, sleeping in the brig that was now turned back into quarters. Every night he’d tried to share her bed, but so far she’d resisted him. And he hadn’t pressed the issue, either. The fact that he wasn’t complaining was of interest to Ro. He obviously wanted something from her that he didn’t want to jeopardize.

Since building the clinic was a dirty, dusty, hot job, both of them quickly went to clean up, when they beamed back aboard the Galen. As Ro was getting dressed for dinner, she finally decided what to do with Tom Riker. And if to get the answers she needed meant having to let Riker into her bed, she’d do it. Though she ruefully acknowledged to herself, it wouldn’t be too onerous of a task.

When she came out of her quarters, Riker was already whistling in the kitchen. “Salmon,” he announced. “I do a mean teriyaki sauce. Wish I could cook over an open barbecue, though. I think that’s the best way to cook salmon.”

Ro wasn’t sure that she’d ever had salmon before. So, when it came to how it should be cooked, she bowed to Tom’s better judgment.

“I’ve been thinking,” she casually announced, as she slumped against the back of the burgundy colored dinette booth.

“What, Ro?”

“I have to go to Ootzey, tomorrow. Want to come with me?”

He froze for a second as he seasoned the fish. He didn’t want to appear to be too eager to accept this invitation. “Need a bodyguard, eh?”

“You could say that.”

He placed the salmon under the broiler.

“Need me as anything else?”

“We’ll see. Ootzey is a lot of fun, with the right companion.”
“Never been there. What’s it like?”

“A true free-trader’s city. Dangerous There’s gambling. Drinking. And every vice you’d care to indulge.”

“Like luxurious hotel suites?”

“It’s possible we might rent one.”

He caught her use of we.

“Lots of shopping to be done. You are able to buy anything and everything…”

“And what are you buying, Ro?”

He meant the question as a joke. She answered him seriously. “Quantum torpedoes.”

He looked at her in surprise. “For this ship?”

“No. For the Maquis.” He was nonplussed. “Tom, someone is selling quantum torpedoes in the DMZ. Their ready access is a danger to every Maquis ship. Every Maquis world. I’ve got to find out who is selling them, who has them, and what they are going to do with them.”

He still looked surprised.

She decided to take the bull by the horns. “And yes, I know I sound like a Starfleet officer. I’m not. But think, Tom. If a quantum torpedo can destroy a Borg ship, imagine what it can do against a defenseless planet. And we all know that the Cardassians have quantum torpedoes. But they aren’t manufacturing them. Someone’s selling death, Tom. And I’ve got to help stop them.” She stared at him, daring him to denounce her. “You know the power of the quantum torpedo, Tom. I heard that you used them when you stole the Defiant.”

He was shaken by her words. He found that he really did believe her. And slowly, he began to wonder if his initial assessment of her relationship with Picard might be in error. That night, he didn’t try to seduce her in spite of the fact that Ro really did like his cooking.

The next morning, she was wearing her too tight scarlet cat suit again. As she sat in the captain’s chair, plotting their route, Riker joined her.

He whistled, noticing the catsuit.

“You just can’t help yourself, can you,” she teased.

“I always will notice a beautiful woman, Ro.”

“Laren,” she corrected.

He didn’t have a numerical designation for the smile that he gave her at being permitted to use her first name. “So, Laren, what do you want me to do when we get to Ootzey? What can I do to help you?”

“My main source of contact on Ootzey is a Ferengi, DaiMon Behlk. He’s as honest as I keep him.” She guided the Galen out of orbit. “So far, he hasn’t tried to cheat me or sell me to some Andorian slavers. Hasn’t tried to kill me yet, either.”

“The company you keep, Laren.”
She sent a glance his way. “Don’t I know it.”

He snorted. “You keep criticizing the hired help, and I just might quit.”

“You quit, and you’ll never get your pay, Tom.”

“What pay?”

“Oh, I thought that I’d surprise you with something at Ootzey.”

He was egotistical enough to think that his famous charm, had won her over.

A few hours later, she gave Tom a transponder. “Just in case we have to leave in a hurry.” She touched the blood red stone inset into the silver cuff she was wearing. “I’ve got mine built into my jewelry. I want to keep the Galen cloaked in orbit about a moon. You never know when we might have to leave in a hurry.”

“Fine place you’re taking me to,” he remarked as he walked toward the transporter platform.

“From all the gossip I’ve heard about the Rikers, Ootzey is exactly your kind of place.”

He set the remote transporter controls. “Shall we?” The moment he materialized in Ootzey, Riker looked about and decided that it was his kind of place after all. There was a lawlessness here that he did find appealing.

Ro lead the way into the Mudder, the casino/saloon/hotel/cat house that Behlk owned.

Riker’s whistle was low, as he observed the various human, alien, and combination there-of sex acts being displayed on platforms above the bar areas. This was not a place for the timid.

He whistled again as he watched a squat Ferengi come running toward Ro to give her a great big hug. “My favorite Bajoran!” Behlk cried.

Tom wondered just how good a customer Ro was, to get this kind of effusive greeting from a DaiMon.

Ro was a little surprised too. It was the first time he’d ever let himself be seen in public with her. Much less greeting her so enthusiastically.

“Make way, make way!” Behlk cried out, as the crowds parted. Behlk guided them toward his most private, protected set of suites.

They’d barely set foot across the threshold when servants rushed forward with trays of Springwine, Bajoran beer and canapés.

Behlk pointed at a table. “I’ve got Bajoran shrimp, calvas, deka tea, velklava…” He was nervous as he nodded deferentially to Ro. “And if there is anything else you might desire, you have only but to ask.” He then turned his attention to Tom.

Ro picked up a goblet of Springwine and then chose a foraiga canapé. She was amazed at the way that Behlk had greeted her. And rather puzzled. Ferengis were never hospitable without expecting a large profit.

Riker reached for the ale.

Ro remembered her manners. “This is Thomas Riker, DaiMon. He’s Maquis. And he works for me.”
Treat him as you would me.”

“Anything for you, Ro Laren, Anything,” Behlk readily agreed, flashing his best insincere smile.

“I’d like your best suite.” She sent a most seductive smile in Tom’s direction. “After we conduct business, Tom and I will be playing for a while.”

DaiMon Behlk snapped his fingers. “Done. Take their luggage to the Nagus Suite.”

Tom nodded toward the bags that had been dropped by the door.

“Would you take them up to our suite, Tom?”

Not exactly sure what Ro was up to, Tom willingly complied. Not that he was carrying their luggage. Three Ferengi servants rushed forward to take the two bags up to the suite. Tom followed them, amused. He was enjoying Ro’s performance. And though he wasn’t quite ready to admit it to himself, he was beginning to be impressed by her, too.

Ro picked the grandest chair in the room, sat down, and did not shudder as the gilded carved woods and inset jewels of the chair sharply poked into her back.

“So, how go my accounts in the Nagus Banks?”

DaiMon Behlk dismissed his servants, then handed Ro his padd.

Her eyes widened a little, as she read the totals. No wonder Behlk was fawning over her. Someone had added over nineteen million latinum bars to Jean-Luc’s account. She could only think that it had been Data.

“What do you wish, Ro Laren?”

“I want quantum torpedoes, DaiMon Behlk. Can you get them?”

His big lobes twitched. He was torn between the danger and the profit. But a DaiMon always would choose the profit.

“How many do you want, Ro Laren?”

“All of them. As many as you can buy.” She paused as if she’d just thought of something else. “And even if you can’t buy all of them, I need to know who else has bought them recently - say within the past year.”

Behlk studied his client. There was something going on besides the obvious. He was going to have to charge double. He thought of the size of her bank account. Maybe he’d charge quadruple.

“When do you wish to know?”

“As soon as possible. Sometime tomorrow at the earliest. Tonight, Tom and I are going to have some fun.”

“As you wish, Ro Laren.”

A servant guided her way to the Nagus Suite.

Tom was seated on the bed, waiting for her.
She had no doubt as to what the expectant gleam in his eye meant. She also tried not to shudder at the thought of having sex in rooms covered with purple, orange and bright pink fabrics. And copulating naked figural table lamps that dripped flaming oil.

“I’m going to change into something more suitable for our night on the town.” She was a bit nervous, now. “I’m hungry, aren’t you?”

He walked up behind her, and put his arms about her waist. “Oh yes, Ro Laren. I am hungry too.” He pulled her against his body, as if to remind her that he most definitely was a virile man. And now, a very hungry, aroused man. “Why did Behlk treat you like you were his number one client?” He nuzzled her neck, not really waiting for an answer.

“Someone increased the money in my Bank of Nagus accounts.” She shuddered as he nibbled on her lobe. She still couldn’t understand why one touch from him aroused her so quickly. “I have a pretty good idea who did it. But I’m not quite sure as to the why of it.”

“Let’s find out, tomorrow.”

He nuzzled her neck again, even as he slowly traced every rib, carefully moving towards his goal of the zipper tassel to the catsuit.

She knew what he was doing. She let him do it.

Seconds later his right hand, slipped between the edges of her zipper. He wasn’t surprised to discover that now he was fingering nothing but velvety soft flesh. He found her nipple and lightly tweaked it. It stiffened beneath his touch.

Her moan was low as he massaged her breast. He knew what he was doing…

She turned in his arms to kiss him. Within seconds, their kiss flared into a lover’s mating ritual. Tongues entangled. She couldn’t get enough of the taste of him. Any faint thought of resisting Tom was quickly vanishing. She held on to him as she suddenly jumped up and wrapped her strong legs around his hips. She began to rhythmically move against him, wishing that her clothes could instantly disappear.

Riker had not expected this kind of blazing sensual response from Ro. And certainly not so swiftly. He was lost from the moment she surrendered.

And neither one of them heard the door silently swing open to the suite.

It wasn’t until they both heard the sound of phasers firing that they knew how much in trouble they were.
Riker drops in for tea.

Chapter Summary

Riker and Robin visit Caldos to see Beverly and Guinan.

It was another beautiful day on Caldos. The weather control infusion systems were all in sync bestowing cotton candy clouds against a baby blue colored sky.

And Riker was having a hard time keeping up with Robin’s pace as they walked to Beverly’s cottage from the field where they’d parked the yacht.

Robin broke into a run when she saw her husband.

Riker supposed he’d better join her, though he didn’t quite have Robin’s sense of urgency. He dashed after his lieutenant.

When he got to the cottage door, he supposed he’d better just knock, since Wesley was rather busy at the moment. Robin had knocked him down onto the grass, flat on his back, and was now kissing her husband with her legendary enthusiasm. Riker supposed that the Boy was going to be busy for a time. It had been a very long time since any woman had missed Will Riker like that. For a second, he was envious.

“Knock, knock,” he announced as he opened the cottage door.

Guinan glared at him. “You’re early. You weren’t supposed to be here until this afternoon.”

“Robin found a little extra gas in the jalopy, so she drove over the speed limit.”

“Beverly is still in bed. I’ll tell her that you’re here.”

“Already know,” Beverly called out from the top of the stairs. “Give me a few minutes.”

“Brought your daughter-in-law with me,” he called up the stairs.

“That’s why it’s going to take Beverly a few minutes before she comes down those stairs, Will Riker,” Guinan archly remarked. “Pregnant ladies don’t quite move as swiftly as they used to. She wants to make a good impression when she meets Robin again.”

“Considering that Beverly is Wes’ mother, she’s probably already made a good impression on his wife.”

A few moments later, Beverly came down the stairs, dressed in a white blouse, a dark blue and green Howard MacDonald tartan skirt and an ivory colored shawl.

“You’re glowing,” he observed, pleased that she looked so well. “It suits you.”
“Flatterer.”

“Who needs to flatter when I’m only telling the truth?”

“Listen to the man,” Guinan advised, as she moved about preparing breakfast for five people.

“Someone has to pay you the compliments you deserve,” he remarked in a low voice, as he hugged her.

Will didn’t have to say why. Beverly knew that he was standing in for Jean-Luc. And tears formed. He brushed them away, softly caressing her face. “It will be all right, Beverly. I promise. One day.”

“I wasn’t this weepy when I was carrying Wesley.”

The door swung open as Robin and Wes walked into the kitchen, holding hands. Robin walked right up to Beverly and gave her a great big hug.

Beverly saw the joy on her son’s face, and knew that Robin truly loved her son. She was very glad Robin was her daughter-in-law. They were a family now again.

Guinan sighed.

Wes and Will exchanged knowing glances. And then Wes extended his hand to the newly minted captain.

Will gladly took it, as he studied what the boy he once knew, had now become.

“I hear you’re a Lt. Commander, now. Are you the youngest to achieve that rank in Starfleet’s history?”

“Not quite, Captain.”

“Almost, he is,” Robin called out. “Second youngest - after James T. Kirk.”

“I’m not going to stand around talking all morning,” Guinan interjected. “Let’s eat.”

Wes went to the table, and pulled it open to add an extra leaf. Then he set the table as Guinan started bringing the food to the table. Blueberry scones. Fresh boiled eggs. Scottish strawberry jam laced with a few drops of scotch whiskey. Melon. And good Scottish blade cut oatmeal with currants. Hot tea. And in deference to Will’s preference, Guinan had made coffee.

Will didn’t quite groan out loud when he saw the oatmeal. It was not one of his favorite foods. He had a sneaking suspicion that Guinan knew that fact too.

After they were seated, Robin spoke up. “Lord, we thank thee for your bounty. And please bless and keep safe all who share it. Amen.”

Somehow, Will wasn’t that surprised by Robin praying. He’d suspected that she was a spiritual soul. And it was clear by the way Wes was holding her hand, that he believed too.

Later that afternoon, Will proposed a walk in the garden with Beverly. Not surprisingly, he escorted her to a carved stone bench that was decorated with wyverns.

“Jean-Luc’s favorite place in the garden.” Her words was seemingly casual. The look in her eye, was not.
“I guess you wish to talk, Beverly.”

“What have you heard, Will?”

“I know where he is. Gowron has him in seclusion. Somewhere on Qo’noS. There are two galaxy starships in orbit at the moment. The Galaxy and the Venture. If they’d arrested Jean-Luc, I’m sure that I’d have heard about it by now.”

“I thought that he’d be with Ro.”

“I’m not sure what part Ro would play in all of this. Jean-Luc went to Qo’noS about three weeks ago.”

“And what of his innocence?”

“We are all doing our part, Beverly. Data and Geordi have been doing all sorts of research. I know they’re trying to track down where the quantum torpedoes came from that were used on the Barton. Some of the most damning evidence that Jean-Luc has against him, is that he had traded a quantum torpedo for Mela Torez and her family. If he’d just left that fact out of his report, he wouldn’t be in trouble right now.”

“Jean-Luc wouldn’t falsify a report.”

“Well, he has been known not to mention everything in a report.”

“There’s something about all this that just doesn’t make sense, Will. From the very beginning, I don’t understand why Data and Worf had everything set up for their emergency plan to smuggle Jean-Luc off UP. It’s almost as if they knew in advance that something was going to happen.”

“I’ve asked Worf. He said that Data told him to make the arrangements. I hope to be seeing Jean-Luc very soon. I’ll ask him.”

Beverly trembled. “You’re going to Qo’noS?”

“Yes. And with any luck, I’ll see Jean-Luc if I can do so safely. I’m sure I’ll be watched the minute I cross over into the Klingon Empire.”

“May I come with you, Will?”

“Beverly, that’s like announcing to the galaxy that you know where Jean-Luc is. And that you’re still associated with him.”

“Of course I’m associated with him, Will. I’m going to have his children.”

“Yes, I just learned about that. Congratulations. You know you have my blessing. It’s all the more reason that you don’t try to see the captain right now, too.”

“I don’t know, Will. I just don’t know.” She sounded defeated.

Will feared that more tears were going to flow. “I can take him a message. Should I?”

“He has to know about my pregnancy, Will. He’s suffered so much these past few months. Jean-Luc has to know that there is a future. For him. And us.”

Will agreed. “Anything you want, Beverly. Speaking of the future…” Beverly only looked up at him. “I would like you as my CMO. When you’re ready and able to join the Enterprise E you just let
me know.”

“I don’t think so, Will.”

“What?” He’d thought her to be a sure thing in his search for senior officers.

“Will, after we clear his name, what would Jean-Luc do on board the Enterprise E? You both can’t be captain. Even if you’re the real captain, could you really not defer to Jean-Luc if he were on board your ship?”

And Will realized that with all of his planning, he’d forgotten one of the most important things of all. What would Jean-Luc be able to do…

From a distance, Robin and Wes watched Will and Beverly talk. “Can you do anything to help your Mother, Wes?”

“I don’t think that I should reveal my abilities to Captain Riker. He’d have to know, if I help Mom.”

From behind their backs, Guinan cleared her throat. “Of course you can tell Riker, Wes. Have you forgotten? It really is Will Riker, not some fuddy duddy superior officer. He will keep all our secrets if you ask him. My Q once called Will his best friend. Surely, he can be accepting of you too. I’m going to trust him. I always do trust the captains of the Enterprise.”

A moment later a Victorian glass topped, wrought iron tea table appeared within an arms’ length of Beverly Crusher. Out of nowhere, three Baccarat champagne flutes materialized on top of the table, followed by a magnum of Château Picard champagne, and a glass of Russian herbal tea for Beverly. Then came a small, lit brass samovar holding more hot water and tea fixings.

Will’s eyes widened as he watched Wes carrying Robin in his arms, float down from the heavens in a most controlled descent. When they landed, Wes put down Robin, then snapped his fingers. Three matching wrought iron armchairs appeared. Robin and Wes sat down. A moment later, Guinan materialized.

Guinan studied the table. She snapped her fingers, and Strawberries Romanov were now on the table, set on a hors d’oeuvre Chippendale period Edinburgh hallmarked sterling tray, with dishes of both sour cream and brown sugar, as the sides. Guinan snapped her fingers again. Canapé plates that matched Nana’s bone china appeared, with additional forks, spoons and linen napkins embroidered with the Howard family crest.

“What the…” Riker muttered under his breath.

Guinan started pouring out the champagne. But she wasn’t using her hands. She only waved her hands. And the bottle floated from flute to flute, filling them.

“To Wesley and Robin. To the children to come!” Guinan raised her glass and waited for everyone else to pick up their flute. Guinan snapped her fingers again. A Baccarat crystal flute was now in Beverly’s hands. Guinan poured about half a glass of the real champagne into Beverly’s flute. “A little of the good stuff won’t do you any harm,” she advised.

“To Life!” Riker proclaimed, though his voice was a bit unsteady. Then he studied everyone around the table. “Am I the only one that didn’t know about your powers, Wes? And yours, Guinan?”

“Always was slow on the up take, Riker,” Guinan casually responded.

Beverly found her voice. “I know you told me, Wes, but I didn’t really realize exactly how much
you could do."

“Oh, my dear Mother-in-Law…”

“Call me Beverly.”

Guinan butted in. “Beverly’s too young to find herself with a married son and the possibility of grandchildren some time in the near future.”

Beverly really wanted to swat Guinan, but she didn’t want to spill any of the first real drink she’d had in a while. So she refrained from doing bodily harm.

Riker was hungry again. And quickly discovered that Strawberries Romanov and champagne were absolutely delicious together. He wondered how he’d missed discovering this treat before.

His brain was also still having a hard time coping with what Wesley had become.

Beverly gave Will a quick accounting about what she knew of Wesley’s abilities.

Riker was afraid to ask Guinan about her skills. Picard had warned him that Guinan always did things her way. And woe be the starship captain who tried to alter her sense of timing. Or moral compass.

Riker almost glared at Wes. “Am I correct in assuming that Starfleet doesn’t know about your prestidigitational abilities?”

“Starfleet doesn’t know. I’m not a miracle worker, Captain. I mean at least, I cannot be a miracle worker all the time. I’m bound by as strict a code of conduct as that of a Starfleet officer.”

“No conflict of interest?”

“If there is, I have to go by that which does the least harm.”

“And you decide? Not your commanding officer?”

“Nothing personal, Captain Riker. But I’ve already lived over two centuries. I’ve experienced things that you can not yet comprehend, Captain. Or imagine. I am human now, and will remain so for a long time to come. But I haven’t forgotten what I’ve learned.” He could see Riker bristling. “I always will consult my commanding officer, when I do have a decision to make of import to his command or ship.”

Riker was somewhat mollified.

Guinan cleared her throat. “It’s the way I handled Jean-Luc, Will. He understood.”

“You also disappeared for months at a time Guinan. Though now I know why you rarely used the transporter when you left the ship. Hell, most of the time Worf could never even tell me exactly where your quarters were.”

“Data owed me a favor. He kept letting me move around to wherever my mood would take me.” That was all that Guinan was willing to say by way of explanation.

He finished off his champagne and then poured another glass. “Lt. Commander Crusher, you cannot disappear at whim. Your commanding officer cannot allow it. If you come to the Enterprise E, I need to know that I can rely on my chief science officer to be where he is supposed to be when I need him.”
Will had given Wes a way out if he’d wanted it. For a second, Riker fancied that he saw a wealth of ageless wisdom in Wesley’s eyes. He waited for Wes’ decision.

“When Admiral Nakamura lets me go, I’ll agree to your terms, Captain Riker.”

“What’s Woody got you doing, Wes?”

“Well I’m teaching temporal dynamics and information retrieval at the Academy. I am researching temporal anomalies at the Daystrom. I’ve also been helping Commander LaForge and Dr. Brahms with the new warp coil designs for the Enterprise E. We’re trying to go beyond Warp 10, and to counteract and control the temporal and dimensional holes that we’d be creating by going at speeds greater than Warp 10.”

“What?” It was a day of some surprises for Will.

“Controlled worm hole technology, Captain. When needed, the Enterprise will be able to create her own wormhole, and be able to direct the terminus to a specific location. I’m just fine-tuning the details with Reg Barclay before we test her warp engines. We’ve already got the prototype engine installed in a Defiant class ship.”

“And it works?” Wes’ grin was nearly boyish. “Already flown the Montgomery Scott a couple of dozen times in and out of a couple of galaxies. So far, so good.” As an afterthought he added, “I’ve requested that when we test the engines on board the Enterprise, that we add the Montgomery Scott as one of the onboard ships.”

“Nice of you to inform her captain,” Will dryly noted.

“I’ll be briefing you about all the aspects of the wormhole technology, Captain, when the time comes. The potential for it is incredible. But it does create a great strain on the warp engines. It uses quite a lot of power, and therefore shouldn’t be used except when absolutely necessary.” Wesley ate a couple more strawberries before he added, “That’s one of my projects with Mr. Data. And Dr. Brahms. We’re trying to increase the available power from the warp coils. Geordi seems to have found a way to do so. That’s why we’re changing the warp coil drive configuration. Again.”

Riker shook his head in amazement. He now knew why Wes had become a lieutenant commander so rapidly. “Why did Woody ask me to take you with me? Shouldn’t you be back at Utopia Planetia?”

“Mr. Data knows how to reach me if necessary. And if really necessary, I can always pop back.”

“He wriggles his nose,” Robin helpfully provided.

“Mr. Data knows about your abilities?” Will was trying to learn all the facts

“Mr. Data’s known for a long time.”

“And he never said a word,” Will stated in amazement.

“I asked him not to.” Wesley picked up another strawberry dunked it in sour cream and then rolled it in brown sugar. He savored it as he ate it.

. “I think it would only take about one more punch before you knock Riker for a really big loop, kiddo,” Guinan observed.
Wes leaned over and kissed his Mother who was now just beginning to understand all the things that her remarkable son could do.

“About Captain Picard…,” Wes slowly said.

The ray of hope in Beverly’s eyes was almost too painful to see. “Captain Riker, when we get to Qo’noS, I can bring my Mother to wherever Jean-Luc Picard is. Without anyone knowing she’s gone. I can even leave a duplicate cipher sleeping in the cottage, as if to give anyone monitoring confirmation that Mom’s in her bed.”

Riker looked about the garden noticing the many varieties of roses. He idly asked, “And you think no one with prying eyes noticed your little magic display?”

“It’s not magic, Captain. Anyone monitoring the house only saw what I wanted them to see - family and friends celebrating our marriage.”

“If it’s not magic, then what is it, Lt. Commander Crusher?”

“You know how when the wizardry and alchemy from a primitive culture is actually a more advanced society’s science?”

Will nodded.

“You’re the primitive culture, Riker,” Guinan succinctly stated.
Jean-Luc was taking Mok’bara classes. Though the lower levels of Gowron’s palace had enough space for him to run on a daily basis, he quickly was becoming bored with the lack of the change of scenery. So he was trying Mok’bara.

When Gowron had learned of this, he sent Picard his own personal instructor, Kilmor. Who also felt it was his duty to teach Picard how to properly use all battle weapons, including bat'leth, mek'leth, and lahj. Picard began to fervently hope that one day he’d be able to join Worf in his Holodeck exercise program, and really shock his favorite Klingon officer with his new found skills.

This Mok’bara instructor also insisted on at least two intensive sessions a day. There were nights when Picard needed the services of both Nuvian masseuses to work out the kinks. It also took Picard a while to realize that having Qia and Qila as his personal masseuses, was a sign of Gowron’s great respect. Ever since he’d started living in the palace, the deference that Gowron’s warriors or servants had shown toward him, was genuine. Picard no longer sensed any Klingon arrogance over his all too frail human condition.

Picard was soaking in one of the bubbling hot water pools in this Klingon version of a lavacrum communis. He wasn’t that surprised when a naked Gowron appeared, and took the steps into the pool, sitting himself opposite of Picard.

“Aaaaahhh…,” Gowron sighed. “My ancient bones need this place.”

“I do know what you mean,” Picard agreed, as his muscles still pained him every time he tried to move.

“You surprise me, Human.”

“How so?”

“Kilmor has kept me informed. You're still alive.”

“I’m rather surprised by that fact myself.”
Gowron roared. “My Mok’bara teacher is actually impressed by your progress. He says that you have the courage of a Klingon trapped in a puny human body.” Gowron snorted. “He says that it’s a great waste of valor that you can never fight like a true Klingon warrior.

“Thank you, I think.” Picard reached for a ladle and poured hot water over his head.

They both soaked in peace, for a few minutes. “The emissaries that we’ve sent with your proposals to the new Bajoran government, the new Cardassian government, the Nagus, and to Ambassador Spock’s senators have all answered back. They are at least willing to agree to consider to talk.”

“Good. Have any of the Maquis responded?”

“Not yet.”

Gowron floated about then parked himself next to Picard. “There are more reports coming in tracing the sales of the torpedoes. Who’s buying. Who’s selling. The web is spreading, snaring the hur’q. Your plan is working. We have many names now. I will become the new Kortar of these shadow devils.”

“Yes, you will. I cannot think of a better choice for leader of the forces to destroy them.”

“I may lead, but you are the force, Picard.” He shoved off again, to swim to a position opposite of Picard. “Captain Kargan contacted me. He’s captain of the IKS Pagh.”

Picard knew why the name sounded familiar. Riker had once served on board the Pagh.

“Yes, Gowron?”

“Riker contacted him. Seems he wants Kargan to bring him to Qo’noS. Tonight. What shall I tell him?”

Picard was very surprised by Riker’s appearance in the Klingon Empire. Obviously, the captain had some sort of important news to impart. News that Data hadn’t heard about yet.

“I would enjoy the company.” He glanced about Gowron’s cloaked, private portions to the palace. “As long as it doesn’t endanger your sanctuary. Will you permit this visit?”

“I will order Kargan to bring them all to the palace. There is a way that they can beam down without being detected by the starships that are still in orbit.”

Only after Gowron left, did Picard realize that Gowron had indicated that Riker had brought someone else with him. He wondered who.

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Riker left Robin Lefler in command of the yacht, as it orbited about Qu’Vat, a Klingon colony world. Qu’Vat had been the focus of Federation contact and battles many times, so it was not that unusual to find a Federation registered ship in orbit.

What was unusual was that the Jemison’s passengers did not beam down to the surface. Instead, they beamed over to the IKS Pagh, where Riker was crushingly greeted by Captain Kargan, one of Riker’s very old friends.
After showing Riker and Wesley about his ship, pointing out the many changes, Kargan led them to his ready room. Along the way, a few Klingon officers followed Klingon tradition, and snarled at the humans as they passed by. Riker snarled back at the first ritual greeting. Crusher joined him. But Wesley’s snarl was very scary surprising a few Klingons. The Klingons took notice at such a roaring sound coming from such a stripling. And they were impressed.

Riker just had to know how Wesley was doing it.

“I was a Maravellian dragon for a couple of years,” was Wes’ simple explanation.

Riker blinked as he now realized that he could add shape-shifting to Wes’ unorthodox capabilities.

Inside his ready room Kargan immediately made firewine for the three of them. He raised his goblet in a toast to Riker’s promotion to captain. Then Kargan was surprised to see that the young officer who came with Riker, not only drank the firewine but knew how to drink it and not get burned.

Riker drank his firewine as well for Kargan had taught him the secret the last time Riker had been on board the IKS Pagh.

“You raised by Klingons?” Captain Kargan just had to ask of this young Starfleet officer.

“Yes, actually I sort of was.” Wes’ reply surprised Will. He didn’t think that Worf would have taught the young acting Ensign Crusher how to drink firewine. Wes glanced over at Riker. “Lt. Commander Worf thought that I should be exposed to many aspects of Klingon tradition. Including warrior’s drinks. I was just a kid when Worf included me in his basic workouts too.”

Wesley just kept on astounding Will.

Finally Captain Kargan sat down in his armchair, and questioned Riker. “You go to see the Picard?”

“Yes. He will always be my Captain.”

Kargan grunted his approval. “I’ve heard Gowron describe him as the most honorable officer in Starfleet.”

‘He is. But he has enemies, and they have framed him for murder. I’ve come to clear his honorable name.”

“Gowron wants the Picard to be Admiral of his personal fleet.”

“I am sure that Captain Picard would do so, if honor dictates it.”

Kargan refilled his goblet, but didn’t light it. “For you, Riker. I will do whatever you ask.”

“Thank you Kargan. Once I am captain of the Enterprise E, our bonds will always be forever honored.”

Kargan grunted, pleased. “We’ll be at Qo’noS within the hour.”

When they arrived, the Pagh went into a synchronous orbit above the Capital City and the Klingon High Council’s palatial complexes.

Kargan announced, “The Federation Starships, the Galaxy and the Venture, are still in orbit. They are scanning us.”

Riker looked at Wesley, for his Lt. Commander has assured his captain that the starships would not
detect their human presence during a scan. Wesley nodded. Then stepped forward.

“Captain Kargan, I have a way to avoid detection when we beam down. And you can keep your shields raised.”

Riker looked at Wesley. “May Commander Crusher have access to your transporter controls?”

“NaDev ghoS!” Kargan motioned toward the correct control panel.

Wesley quickly sat down and entered data. “Let’s go, Captain. I’ve set the deflector beam to last for thirty seconds once we reach the transporter. While it is in operation, the starships will be blocked from scanning for human DNA.”

A minute later, they beamed into the grand foyer of Gowron’s palace. They were alone. Riker whispered to Wes, “Can’t the starships detect us now?”

“We don’t exist at all, Captain. I just gave the Klingons a plausible explanation as to how we got away with being undetected. Reality is that no scanner is going to pick up our existence, unless I permit it.”

Riker didn’t want to know any more. He’d had enough surprises from Wesley for one day.

A Nuvian entered the room, her slippers making no sound against the marble floors. “Follow me.” And so they did. They walked for almost twenty minutes before the Nuvian reached a solid marble wall. Then she pressed her palm against an intaglio carved marble tile depicting a doorway to Stovokor.

And the entire wall swung open. She motioned for them to precede her. “I am Qia. I am one of the Picard’s shuVak.” The door swung closed behind them, considerably darkening the illumination in the hallway.

“The Picard waits. If you wish, we will prepare a dinner for you.”

“Of course. Thank you,” Riker politely replied, searching to see if Picard was somewhere in the gloomy corridor before them.

Qia pointed down the corridor. “Go straight. The Picard is in the last room to your left. This part of the palace is shielded. No one above can detect its presence.” With that, she left them.

As they walked the long corridor, Riker whistled. It seemed as if the entire history of great Klingon battles was displayed by the frescos along the walls as flames of torchlight highlighted the art. “This is quite something,” Riker commented as he tried to determine just how long the corridor actually was.

“Almost there,” was Wes’ reply.

“Number One…” A voiced echoed down the marble hall. And Picard stepped before them.

Riker and Picard stared at each other, studying each other as if to see any minute changes.

And then Riker came forward and shook Picard’s outstretched hand. Picard surprised him, by pulling Riker into a brief hug. Then Picard turned to look at the person who had joined Riker. “Wesley,” he whispered. He was surprised but didn’t show it. He quickly led them to his dining hall. They entered the decadent room. The fire pit was blazing. And another Nuvian was in the background, as if
awaiting Picard’s commands. Picard motioned for her to leave.

Picard went to Wesley and hugged him. It had been a long time since Wesley had seen the man who had been as a father to him.

Picard looked Wes up and down, pointedly staring at the Starfleet uniform and the rank it bore. “When did this happen, Wes?”

“I joined Starfleet four months ago, Sir.”

“Wait till Wes tells you what he’s been doing, Captain. He’s earned his pips.”

“We can discuss my actions later, Sir. There is one thing that you should know. Ever since I left Tau Alphan, I’ve become like Guinan. I’m a cousin to the Q.”

Picard glanced over at Riker. This news was not a surprise to his Number One.

“Does Starfleet know?” Picard was well aware how secretive Guinan had been about her abilities and keeping Starfleet from discovering that she had them.

“No, Sir. Only Captain Riker, Mr. Data and my Mother know, Sir.”

Picard accepted this. “Let’s us eat and talk.”

“Yes, Sir,” both officers agreed in unison. Then Wesley stopped. “Sir, maybe we should delay eating a bit.” Picard looked at Wes in puzzlement. “My Mother could be here in a few minutes. I will bring her here whenever you wish.”

Picard froze, almost afraid to say her name aloud. Then whispered, “Beverly.” He thought a bit more. “You have that kind of power, Wes?”

“No all the time. Only now and then.”

“Then business first.” He motioned toward the sideboard. “There’s wine and ale.”

Riker stepped over to the highly carved wood sideboard. “Captain?”

“I’ve learned to appreciate Klingon ale.”

Riker nodded. “I acquired a taste for it when I joined the crew of the Pagh.” Riker filled their steins. “That’s how we got here, by the way. Captain Kargan smuggled us past the Galaxy and the Venture.”

Picard looked at Wesley. “You managed to disguise your human signatures from the starships?”

“Yes, Sir. They’ll never know that Captain Riker and I were ever here. Unless a Klingon decides to betray us. And if they do, I will have the log entry data from the Mae Jemison to prove otherwise.”

Picard accepted his tankard from Riker, then sat down near the fire pit.

“It was the House of Duras that framed me, Will. They blamed me for the deaths of Lursa and B’etor.”

“They destroy the Enterprise and then want to punish you for it? The bastards…”
“Gowron has issued a death sentence against the surviving members who attacked the Barton.”

“That’s great news, Jean-Luc. We can clear your name.” Riker sat down opposite of Picard, mentally noting the plush dark red upholstery of his bench. This was not a typical, austere Klingon house.

“Gowron’s hideaway. There are more sides to Klingon nature than I’d ever realized,” Picard stated, as if to explain the room.

“I’ll take the evidence myself to Starfleet Command,” Riker decided as he began to contemplate an end in sight for Picard’s ordeal.

“Not just yet, Will.”

Picard studied Wesley. “How much do you really know about what I’m doing here, Wes? What did Mr. Data tell you?”

“I know, Sir. I’ve been working for Admiral Nechayev and Mr. Data. I will help you in any way that I am permitted to do so.” Wesley’s grin was huge. “Fortunately my destiny is to be a Starfleet officer. So, I’ve got quite a lot a leeway as to what I can do without violating any of my Continuum restrictions.”

Riker tried not to sound frustrated as he spoke up. “Does this mean if you wriggle your nose, you could solve all of this mess?”

“Doesn’t work that way, Will,” Picard advised. “I know how Guinan’s gifts work. All the distant cousins of the Q Continuum have rules they cannot break.”

“Then who can break those rules?”

“Q,” Picard and Wes answered together.

“Robin always says that it’s not wise to ask any kind of favor from Q,” Wes recommended.

“I already know that, Wes.” He sounded annoyed, frustrated that even Wesley knew what Picard was doing and he did not. Then Will stared at his former captain. “Care to tell me, Sir, what is really going on?”

Picard knew it was time. And told him.

Riker sighed. He didn’t seem to take mind-boggling discoveries in stride like he used to. Maybe he was getting old…

“Will, what else do you have to tell me?”

“I saw Woody Nakamura when he swore me in as the new captain of the Enterprise.” This news pleased Picard. “He pulled some cloak and dagger routine so that he could talk to me in private. He asked me to send you his regards, his belief that you’re innocent, and then to give you this.” Riker handed Picard the data chip he’d received from the admiral. “He also gave me his admiral’s yacht, ostensibly to go roaming about the galaxy to vet my crew choices. Except that I don’t have to file flight plans. And I have his permission to come here to see you, Captain.”

“I used Woody’s yacht when I was checking out my prospective officers too, Will.” He shot a knowing glance at Will. “I do believe I made a mistake in not interviewing you in person, before I made you my Number One.”
Will harrumphed.

Picard remembered a detail. “You came with another crew member? Who is this Robin? And where is the ship?”

Riker snorted at this question. He intensely watched Picard as he waited for Wes to answer Picard’s questions. “The admiral’s yacht is in orbit around Qu’Vat. My wife is the pilot on board her.”

Picard suddenly choked on his ale. “Wife?” He still saw the Boy who’d once had the temerity to sit in his captain’s chair. “Who the devil is she?”

“The lucky lady is Lt. Robin Lefler, Sir,” Riker politely answered. “She is joining me on the Enterprise. Wes will too, once Woody Nakamura releases him for space duty posting.”

“We were married a few weeks ago, Sir,” Wes mentioned, anticipating the next question. “Yes, Robin does know all about me. She’s already met Mother, again. I think that they both approve of each other.”

“Where is your Mother, Wes?”

“She’s been staying on Caldos.” Afraid that he might give too much away, Wes added, “But I’ll let her tell you about all of that when she gets here. Do you want me to bring her here, now?”

Picard stood. “I’ve got to read Woody’s chip. Then we’ll send for your mother, and have some supper.” Picard stood, then cursed, “Merde!”

“What, Jean-Luc?”

“I don’t have access to a terminal until the morning. Gowron decreases the extent of the shielding at night, because he doesn’t want the power drain to give away the location of these quarters. During the day, having shielding around the entire palace would not be unexpected.”

Wes merely waved his hand. “One terminal at your service, Captain Picard.”

Picard eyed the Boy. Getting used to the new Wesley was going to take an effort on his part.

He put the data chip into the player. “Open,” Picard commanded. Woody Nakamura’s holographic image appeared. But before a word was heard, Wes snapped his fingers, and the terminal with the hologram disappeared.

“The chip had a tracer bug, Sirs. The moment you turned the chip on, the tracer was activated.”

“Did you destroy the chip?” Picard readily accepted Wes’ explanation.

“No, Sir. I sent it to Guinan. She’ll debug it.” A moment later the chip and the terminal returned. Wes pushed a button. “It’s safe now, Sir.” It contained Woody’s message of support and the routes of the quantum torpedo shipments from two of the ARV weapons’ plants. Then there was a long list of confirmed agents of the Suliban. Some of the names Picard recognized. A few were officers he’d once considered friends. He sadly eyed the list of names. “Wesley, have Mr. Data double check the evidence against every one of these names. We have to be sure.”

Wesley quietly responded, “We already are, Sir. Many are imbedded sleeper agents, joining Starfleet decades ago. They were never ever Starfleet at heart - only Suliban agents.”

A somber Picard considered the repercussions. He knew he was doing the right thing, but the
consequences of his actions would trouble him for years. He concentrated on the facts at hand.

“Do what you must, Wesley.” He thought of something. “The tracer. Were you able to shut it down before it broadcasted our location?”

Wesley smiled. “The signal never got outside this room. Gowon has a very impressive force shield set up.”

All three were silent for a moment. Picard stood. He calmly said, “Wesley, I’d like to see Beverly, now.”

“I’ll go get her.”

“Where is she now? The Admiral’s yacht?”

“No, Sir. Mom is still on Caldos. I’ll be back in a few minutes.” With that, Wes disappeared.

“Now that is something that will be hard for me to get used to…” Riker chuckled, then considered his next move. “Tell me about Ro Laren, Jean-Luc.”

Picard sat down again. And so did Riker. Picard explained Ro’s function in his plans.

“You really are trusting Ro Laren, Jean-Luc?”

“She’s been invaluable to me, Will. If I ever return to Starfleet, I’ll do my best to bring her back, and get her amnesty. She’s more of a Starfleet officer in conscience than most of the officers with whom I’ve ever served. Present party excepted.”

“Sure it’s not just the sex, Jean-Luc?” For Riker still remembered her passion.

Picard did not take umbrage at this question. “You knew her, Will.” And by the twinkle in Picard’s eye, Will suspected that his former captain knew about a certain unforgettable Lysian incident. Picard continued. “As I recall, Ro said something about having shared something that you will treasure forever.”

Riker groaned. Then he drank some more of the strong, dark beer. “So what is she to you, Jean-Luc?” For he was now wondering if bringing Beverly to him was such a good idea. Apparently Jean-Luc Picard had a more interesting love life than even his own.

“Beverly knows about Laren, Will.” Picard stared into the fire pit for a moment. “I sometimes think that if I’d never fallen in love with Beverly when I first met the lady, I could have just as easily fallen in love with Ro Laren. There is something about that Bajoran that has always called to me. And I’ve responded.” He drank some more ale. “Ro deserves to find some personal happiness considering how much she has suffered in her past, Will. I cannot truly give her what she needs. But for now, I consider her to be a close, trusted friend.”

Riker remembered what a pain in the ass Ro had been to him. But he also remembered the attraction he’d felt with Ro, and what sleeping with the Bajoran had been like too. Those nights had been very sensual, and memorable. Now, Picard was calling her friend. It was very high praise indeed for the Bajoran. And Riker did respect Picard’s opinion. The enmity between Ro and Riker, was slowly starting to dissolve.

“Jean-Luc, if she ever does come back to Starfleet, I’ll offer her a position on board the Enterprise.”
Considering some of the things that Ro had told him about Riker and their mutual antagonism, Picard recognized what a magnanimous gesture this offer was.

“So you really think that there are Starfleet admirals in collusion with the Cardassians and the Romulans?”

“Along with the Suliban, Romulans, Andorians, Ferengi pirates, as well as the Maquis.”

Riker shook his head. Not that he doubted Picard, but still, it was difficult to accept. “Not that I’m prying, Sir, but I had heard that you were giving money to the Maquis.”

“Only for humanitarian causes, Will. Schools. Medical facilities. Seed. Etc. I’d be doing it whether I was a wanted man or a Starfleet officer.”

“Why, Sir? Please understand, I know you well enough to know that if you have Maquis sympathies, they are not in conflict with your Starfleet oath.”

“Will, the Maquis should never have been forced to be in conflict with the Federation.” He finished off his ale. “I may never be able to prove it, but I do believe that the Cardassian-Federation treaty of 2370 was fraudulent. Members of this shadow conspiracy drew the borders so that they would benefit. It had nothing to do with settling the boundary disputes. Planets were stolen from the Federation and Cardassia, in order to make a profit for somebody else. Most of the planets in question are mining planets. I do believe that the Obsidian Order is involved. As well as several powerful Ferengi. Whatever that treaty is, it is to the detriment of the Federation. And the Maquis.”

“You’re suggesting that this shadow conspiracy has been around a long time.”

“Data is investigating anything that might show a link to the conspirators. And yes, I do believe that they’ve been manipulating the Federation for years. Everything they’ve done indicates a complicated, well thought out long term plan. They may have been doing this for decades.” Mentally Picard added centuries.

“When I was in the Nexus, Will, I met Captain Kirk. There were sub rosa conspiracies then too. He told me that he’d formed something he called the Kirk Cabal.”

“What the hell is that?”

“Kirk too, suspected outside manipulation in the affairs of the Federation, the Klingon Empire, and other worlds. From what I understand, the Kirk Cabal are counteragents to the shadow factions. I don’t know if the Cabal still exists. Data’s investigating them as well. He keeps me posted.”

“Of course, Sir. We should meet again.”

“Soon. In the meantime I am going to leave Qo’noS, and go find Ro. I haven’t received her weekly report. She usually is very prompt about such things.

“Yes, Sir .”

“It’s time that my senior staff should learn about my true mission. I want you to tell them, Will. Everything. But let Wesley decide whom he will tell about himself.”

“Of course, Sir.”

Picard called out, “Qia. Qila.” Both Nuvians quickly appeared. “Please prepare the dinner. There will be four of us.”
“For the Picard, everything is ready. We will serve when you summon us.” The ladies left.

“Nice servants for the Picard,” Riker observed as he was appreciative of how very buxom they were. And how little they wore.

“They are Klingon spies, Will. Gowron sends them to Risa. And they both are excellent masseuses. I avail myself of their excellent services every day.”

Riker didn’t think he meant sex, but one never knew… “Spies?”

“Yes Will. They’re part of a very sophisticated spy network that Gowron has built. Word to the wise, Will. Don’t ever underestimate the Chancellor.”

“Why do you need a masseuse?” For Riker couldn’t remember Picard ever availing himself of that service on board the Enterprise D.

“I’m being coached twice daily by Gowron’s Mok’bara instructor. And I am being trained in combat weaponry and their techniques as well.”

“My body would need a masseuse for a regimen like that.” Riker was impressed by Picard’s routine.

“Don’t tell Worf. One day I’d like to surprise him.”

Will chuckled at the thought of it.

“How is Worf? And Deanna?”

Will’s expression changed. His concern became evident to Picard. “Deanna is very ill.”

Picard stilled. Deanna held a special place in his heart. “What?”

“She’s pregnant. And there are some serious complications. Not from carrying my baby, but from radiation damage done by that alien that was her baby.”

“Please let her know that I am thinking of her.”

Picard noted the way Will was describing Deanna’s pregnancy. He gathered that having Riker involved with fathering the child had Worf’s approval.

“Where is she?”

“She’s on Betazed with Lwaxana. The best doctors that Worf and I could find are in attendance.” Will stoically hid his fear. “But Deanna just keeps getting worse. Weaker. And there doesn’t seem to be anything that can be done. She refuses to abort the fetus.”

Picard touched Will’s forearm.

“If there is anything that I can do…”

“Thank you, Jean-Luc. I’ve got to respect Deanna’s wishes. But Lwaxana may have to override them, if Deanna keeps getting worse.”

“Why isn’t Beverly with her?”

“That’s a long story, Sir. From what I understand, Beverly, for the time being, is going to remain the Cairo’s CMO. I asked her to join me when I take command of the Enterprise, but she has refused
“Why on Earth would Beverly do that?”

Riker smiled. “She’s afraid that I couldn’t cope with there being two captains of the Enterprise playing musical captain’s chairs.”

“Beverly is a wise woman. Though I will set her straight. If I ever return to Federation territory, I will tell her that I would not be returning as a captain.”

Riker quickly stated, “Sir, I’ll step down.”

Picard knew exactly how much bravery it took for Riker to make that offer. But he wasn’t that surprised. For loyalty had always been one of his Number One’s strengths.

“Will, I won’t take your chair. Or any chair for that matter. And for a very good reason too. I’m already an Admiral, Will. Rear Admiral Nechayev rammed my promotion through right after the attack on the Barton. I had to have legal diplomatic standing just in case my mad scheme actually worked. I won’t be able to go back to being a starship captain even if I wished to do so.”

“Admiral?” Riker silently mouthed.

“Be careful, Will. If you don’t behave when I return, I will appoint the Enterprise my Admiral’s flagship.”

Will did a mock shudder at this thought.

“Admiral?” a confused voice whispered.

Picard rushed toward the doorway, and embraced Beverly. He didn’t kiss her. He just held her as if he were an empty man who’d just recovered his soul.

Will turned away from the reunion. He didn’t need to intrude upon them.

Apparently Wesley had the same idea for he materialized right next to Riker.

“What took so long,” Will dryly asked.

“You know women, Captain. Mom had to change her outfit at the last minute.” Wesley glanced at his Mom who was now kissing Picard as if there was no one else in the room. “As if Cap…, er, Admiral Picard, would notice anything like that at a reunion like this.”

“Show your Mother more respect, Boy!” Picard called out. Still, he did step back to inspect Beverly and the flowing aquamarine dress that she was wearing. His appreciation showed in his eyes. And she proved that she could still blush. He also didn’t let Beverly out of his arms as he guided Beverly into the hallway.

“Maybe we had better go in search of supper. Qia?” Riker shouted out.

Qia quickly appeared, then studied Riker as if she wasn’t sure she should obey him. She turned and disappeared. A minute later, both Nuvians came into the room, pushing a cart with many covered dishes upon it. They then proceeded to set the table.

In the hallway, Picard led Beverly toward a small cacti and succulent garden room overlooking the pools.
“How long can you stay?”

Beverly just held onto him, as if she couldn’t believe she was really touching him. Finally she answered his question. “I really don’t know. I think a few more hours, at least. I have to be back on Caldos by my daybreak. Somehow Wes has fooled the people watching the cottage into thinking that I’m sleeping, instead of being here. But they will expect to see me moving about.”

He kissed her forehead. “Then those few hours will be the most precious of my life. Amour de ma vie. How I’ve missed you. Je t’aime…”

“Am I really the love of your life, Jean-Luc?”

“From the moment I first saw you. I have sought to deny what I had felt for so very long during my life. No more. Now I curse all the time that I’ve foolishly wasted.”

She understood. Her reply was to passionately kiss him. That told him what she really desired. “Don’t be too noble a man for me, Jean-Luc. I don’t want to wait. She glanced around. “Where’s a bed?”

He’d always appreciated her honesty. “We’ve got company for dinner,” he reminded her.

“They won’t starve. And I’m not hungry for food.”

He was not going to argue with the lady when she was like this. And when their time was so limited. Picard took her by the hand and led the way into the darkness.

Will politely waited about ten minutes. Then he got up from the table, and stuck his head out the door to see if he could see them. The corridor was empty.

He refilled his ale tankard, bringing the bottle back the table. He offered Wes some more ale. “I feel like I’m corrupting the morals of a teenager,” Will opined.

“It’s been a couple of centuries since I last was one,” Wesley answered. He filled up his tankard. “One day we’ll have to trade stories.”

A few minutes passed. Wesley was not embarrassed. “They’re not coming back, are they?”

“You’re a married man. What do you think, Wes?” “I think that when all this is over, I’ll find a shotgun and force the admiral to marry my Mother.”

Riker grinned. “Make sure to sell tickets when you do. I’ll be the first to buy one. You’ll make a fortune…”

Wesley chuckled at the thought.

Privately, Will was surprised by Picard’s disappearance. For he could not ever recall Jean-Luc putting his personal desires above all else before. Will smiled, pleased. For it was about time…

Riker lifted up the cover to dish. “Gagh! I haven’t had good Gagh in ages.”

Wes lifted up another lid. “Captain, this smells like coq a vin.” He used a spoon to place some of it on his treen plate. Then he tasted it. “It is chicken.”

Riker was taken back. “Looks like Gowron really values Picard’s company.” For about half the dishes on the table were more Terran than Klingon.
Wes helped himself to a little bit of every dish on the table. “Never had real Klingon food before. I like to try everything at least once.”

Riker didn’t know if Wes was very brave or very foolish. The Gagh was far more spicy than he’d remembered. Then he helped himself to some bok-rat.

=B=*

Beverly didn’t care what Picard’s sleeping chamber looked like. She barely discerned the massive iron candle lit candelabra that stood in each of the four corners. There was only one thing of importance to her when she entered his bed room. And that was the location of his bed - not that it was the largest that she’d ever shared with Jean-Luc. But it would do.

Somewhat bemused by Beverly’s determination, Picard watched as she quickly undressed, dropping her dress where she stood, then rapidly removing her underwear until she was naked, standing in front of him.

He wished she’d have let him remove her undergarments. He would have enjoyed it.

Then she worked on stripping him. First the olive shirt and then the pants. Picard stopped her by placing her hand against his groin. She stroked him through the silky material for a moment. Then it took only seconds for her to remove his pants. He stepped out of his shoes, and now he was naked, too.

She shoved him back onto the bed, and followed him down, lying across his body, as she sought his kiss once again. She wanted him to start doing something erotic, immediately.

Nothing was a stronger aphrodisiac than such great desire. Picard was already hard before he kissed her again. “Lift up, my love. Guide me.”

Her hand found his cock, then steered his hardness to where she needed him most.

Barely able to breathe, he let Beverly set the pace. There was no refinement to their loving. Just searing, frantic Lordy how I missed you sex as she rode him.

“You’re so hot and wet, my love…”

“Fill me.” She plunged up and down with great need.

He did his best to comply.

His fingers seared a path against her inner thigh. Then he searched her vulva, his finger using some of her wetness to lubricate the sensitive bud, rubbing against it as she still rose and slid down.

Their loving was too hot. She started moaning as his fingers moved in rhythm with her motions. Moments later, she collapsed on top of him, spent.

She was greedy. She wanted him to come too. Before he understood her intent, she lifted herself off of him, and started kissing his staff. He lost control, and came within a few kisses and licks of her tongue.

They rested. A few minutes passed before he rolled over and pulled the light coverlet over their cooling bodies. He used an edge of the silken coverlet, to dry both of them off. She was still
breathing as if she needed more than a few minutes to recover. Slowly he traced his hand over her body. It had been too long a time between lover’s explorations.

And then he stopped. His fingers felt something new. Her breasts were larger. He lightly brushed his thumb over her dusky pink aureole and nipple. It hardened. His hand roved some more. And then he reached her belly button. He remembered many the time he had tickled it, knowing that she liked that caress. Yet now, the planes of her stomach were different. She suddenly rolled over on her side to look at him. She sensed his curiosity, his questions. “It is what you suspect, Jean-Luc.”

“What?”

“I’m pregnant.”

His hand stilled. He wouldn’t permit himself to feel anything yet. Then he pressed his palm against her stomach. “Truly? How did it happen?”

She was amused. “The usual way, Jean-Luc. I couldn’t keep my hands off of you. And, for some reason, my birth control failed.”

A feeling of guilt rose up his throat denying him his joy at her news. He couldn’t believe that he’d been dallying with Ro when Beverly had needed him more.

He choked out, “I don’t know what to say…”

“There’s more, Jean-Luc.”

“What could be more?”

“I’m carrying twins.”

“Merde.”

She knew him too well. She saw the confusion on his face and recognized the look of guilt that was hiding in his eyes. She whispered against his lips, “On pardonne tant que l’on aime.”

Deeply moved, he whispered back, “We pardon to the extent that we love…”

He bowed his head against her shoulder. And his emotional dam gates broke. Everything from the loss of his ship to his grief to the hell he’d put Beverly through to his own loneliness rushed through him. He wept. Beverly could only stroke his head as she held him. She waited, comforting him, wishing that she could take away every sobbing breath of his and replace it with nothing but love. She would always wait for him. He’d been so brave for so long. He’d been a captain for so long. He’d never let go over anything, until now. And now, he needed her. She gave him her heart as a balm.

Maybe ten minutes had passed before he lifted his head to gaze into Beverly’s sapphire blue eyes. He saw only sustaining love there. She bent to kiss him but he stopped her. “I used to dream of you carrying my child.” He corrected himself. “Our children.”

“Yes, I did too.” She kissed him.

“Then I stopped having that dream. I never believed it could really happen.”

“I always did.”

He kissed her back. Then he gazed at her, his eyes beginning to accept and reflect her joy. They just
held each other, living for this moment of peace, of rightness midst the insanity of their lives.

A long time later she murmured, “You know, Jean-Luc…”

“Yes, mon cœur?”

“I’m a perfectly healthy, lusty wench who happens to be pregnant.”

“Lusty wench, eh?”

“Does your ego really need to hear the words about how much I missed you?”

“Wouldn’t hurt.” Then he considered her condition. “You won’t let me do anything to hurt you?”

“As if you could ever hurt me, my love.”

His heart began to beat faster. In the past, he’d practically had to coerce the word love from Beverly’s lips. But not tonight. “How lusty are you?”

“How much time do we have?”

“I don’t know. But we will make the best of it, mon cœur.”

She wrapped her arms about him, and started placing random kisses all over his face. And head.

He chuckled. “I do believe, Doctor, that you find bald men sexy.”

“Only one particularly callipygian bald man, Jean-Luc.” Her fingers moved across his pate before trailing down his spine and then caressing his buttocks. It was only a light touch. But it was incendiary.

He inched his way down her body. It was time to do all the things they hadn’t gotten around to doing during their first mating.

He searched for a nipple, laving it with great intensity. Sucking it with great need. And then scraping his teeth over this sensitive bud as if to remind her he intended to continue to explore her quite thoroughly. Then he concentrated on her other breast, licking first the entire breast before he attended to her nipple.

But as he kissed, his fingers moved to explore. He easily slipped them inside of her soft cleft. He stroked her curly hair, making it slick with the moisture he was finding. She was so soft. So needy. Her folds started clenching as two fingers entered her vulva even deeper. Slowly he moved his fingers in and out, using his thumb to go around her sensitive button. She shimmied, as if she wanted him to explore even more within her luscious folds. “Shall I pleasure you, mon cœur?”

“Yes…” she whispered, desire coloring her voice.

He moved even lower, resting now on her legs, not letting them move until he was sure that she understood the significance of his position. He lay there, teasing her. Cupping her vulva. Then suddenly delving deep within as if to intensify what he was going to do.

“Jean-Luc,” she moaned.

He started licking, probing her folds.

Her gasp became a stronger moan.
He opened her lips, to lightly lick within her sensitive flesh. Then he tickled her. She jumped in shock. “Easy, Beverly. I’ve only just begun.” He raised his head. “Do you want more?”

“Damn you, Jean-Luc.”

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

He lowered his head again, this time using both hands to spread wide her cleft. She tried to splay her legs wider, but was held back by his weight. He took pity upon her and eased himself between her legs.

She immediately draped her legs over his shoulders, entrapping his head. He returned to the business at hand. His fingers entered her again, stoking the fires. Then he began kissing her most sensitive spot. She was so wet now. He sensed the time was quickly approaching for her release. “Stay open, mon cœur.”

She barely heard his voice, but she did obey.

Delving within her core, he strongly plunged his fingers within her. Insatiable lust began to rise. He couldn’t taste enough of her. He bit. And soothed the bite with a carnal kiss. He began his erotic sucking, enhanced by his explorations. She was moving now, searching for release, for what he was doing to her was too much. Then he imprisoned her nub with his teeth, gently holding it captive. It was her twisting that created her turmoil. His sucking intensified, as if he wished to drain her dry.

She would never forget this night. This loving.

“Jean-Luc!” She moaned his name over and over.

He gave her what she wanted. Another little nip; a twirl of the tongue, then relentless sucking. And her orgasms pulsated through her, lasting for a long time. He relished every pulse of her body. He kept on kissing her until the quivering stopped. He worked his way up into her arms, then he rolled them both onto their sides.

“Why did you do that, Jean-Luc?” she finally whispered.

“Ah, Beverly. Don’t you know how much I love to see you come? To feel you come? To know that I am the one who pleasured you? I dreamt about doing this to you so often. Our few months together were not enough time for me to do all the things that I’d ever imagined.” He stroked a damp strand of her golden red silk away from her cheek

“We’ll have a lifetime of exploration together, Jean-Luc.” She reached over to kiss him, her tongue delving between his lips. She didn’t mind the taste of their loving. For it was theirs.

“Will we have a lifetime?”

“Of course we will. If the worst does happen, I can always ask Guinan to send me to wherever you are. One way or another, I’ll have you. I’ll live with you.”

“Practical woman.”

She wiggled a little, moving against his body. “Surely, I can do something for you?”

“Only when you’re ready, mon cœur.”

She decided to show him that she was ready. At this stage of her pregnancy, her libido was on a
white hot setting. She couldn’t keep her hands off of his body.

One man, this man, a dozen times a day. That was her definition of paradise.

She was determined to take advantage of their every minute. She started placing hot little kisses over his chest and shoulders. His nose and chin were next, as she showed him how much she loved them. She found his ears irresistible. Nipping them sent shivers dancing along his nerves. She loved dancing with him like this.

Then she moved to his chest, brushing her sensitive breasts against it. She did this for quite a while, loving the way his chest hairs tickled her nipples. Then she placed her nipples directly against his. She squirmed. His gasp signaled his approval. She was igniting her fire, just by touching him. She then licked his nipples, knowing that now his were supersensitive too.

His moaning grew as she kept finding more inventive ways to torture him. She searched for his mouth, needing to kiss him with all the intensity she could summon. “Beverly…” His moaning continued

“Are you ready for me to make you hard?”

“I am becoming aroused just thinking of what I am going to do to you..”

“Soon, mon cœur.” She lifted up, a little bit. And then went in search of his scar. Her lips found the place where the Cardassians had placed their instrument of torture. He’d never wanted that scar removed. And as a doctor, she’d respected his decision. But now, it was the one place she had to kiss.

For a while he lay there, just feeling her loving. And then her hands started exploring again. She seemed particularly interested in his groin. She played with his hairs. Fingered the more sensitive parts of his anatomy. And being a doctor, she knew precisely where to touch, and how to touch, for maximum arousal.

He decided it was his turn to fondle too. He moved his hand, to her most receptive flesh. Just touches of his finger told him of her readiness, again.

“Care to dance, my Dancing Doctor?”

“Let’s dance, Jean-Luc.”

Moments later he was on top of her, bracing himself so that she wouldn’t bear his weight. But she wanted his weight. She needed his sweaty flesh to press against her body. She enjoyed the earthiness of him like this, too much. Her arms clutched at his shoulders, nails digging deep, as she waited to kiss him when he slid his manhood within her.


Slowly he slid in and out of her heated flesh. He took his time to please her, making sure that her moans contained no sound of physical pain. He heard only her desire for him.

Her body pulsed with a longing that only he could assuage. “More, Jean-Luc. More..,” she pleaded, as he slowed down for but a few strokes. “Faster,” she entreated him

He bent his head, and captured a nipple with his teeth. He sucked. Then bit. Then rubbed his chin against her breast, massaging both with his tongue.
Then he plunged in and out of her, at a quicker pace. She immediately matched his movements. She was insensate with his power. She screamed his name.

He did as she wished. And then he lost control. He felt her coming. And he sped up his stroking to finally please himself. He moved as if to leave her. But she pulled him back, needing to feel his body against her, as they shared their pleasure.

For a little while, they slept.

Then Beverly stirred. He rolled off of her, regretting having to leave his favorite lover’s pillow. He lightly touched her breast.

“Glorious,” was his opinion.

“This place have a shower?” Beverly had the soul of a romantic, but she was also forever practical.

Unbidden thoughts of Beverly braced against a steamy sky blue tiled wall filled his mind. He’d entered her from behind as a stallion. And she’d loved that position. He contemplated doing it that way, next. For though he did his best in the light of day to treat Beverly as an equal, deep in the darkest part of the night, he loved the thrill of domination, too. “Yes, there are rather comfortable bathing facilities. Do you wish to go alone, Doctor? Or may I join you?”

“Surely you don’t have the energy…”

“I wish we could spend the night together. I’d have the energy in a while.”

“Well, I suppose you could wash my back.”

He stood, and helped her stand. “This way,” he motioned. “There is a small hot springs pool off the large ones. We can be alone there, at least for a little while.

She watched as he walked naked to the doorway. “Why do I get the feeling that you’ve been re-enacting The Emperor’s New Clothes for a while now.”

Picard grinned. “Not being a starship captain anymore does have its perks. No one around here is shocked if I am not in uniform.”

“Especially when I’m your audience.”

He pulled her wrists behind her back. “Especially when you are my captive audience.” He nuzzled her.

“An audience of one?”

“There are servants. But they are from Risa. I sincerely doubt we’re doing anything that they haven’t seen before.” She harrumphed at that thought.

The golden marble was cool against her flesh. The water was crystal clear, bubbling and warm. Their laughter echoed around the high walled room. She floated above a ledge, as he leisurely washed every inch of her body. He touched her vulva, wondering if she needed more pleasuring.

“I’m exhausted,” she warned.

“Of course.”

He kept fingering her.
She sighed. “You’re trying to arouse me deliberately,” she accused.

“You’re trying to arouse me deliberately,”

She sighed again. Then stood, dragging him over to the nearest bench. She shoved him down. He sat on the edge of the bench. And then she knelt before him.

He watched her, accepting what she wished to do. His eyes darkened as she touched his manhood with the tip of her tongue.

Then she engulfed him, surprising him just a little for she’d never done this to him before. “Ah, Beverly…” She may have been hesitant, but she definitely knew how to pleasure him, to lick the water droplets away.

After a few minutes, he lifted her head, stopping her ministrations. He was getting too close. “Ah Beverly, I want to make love to you. I want to feel your heat…”

She interrupted him, demanding, “I don’t want to make love right now, Jean-Luc. I want to fuck.”

He understood, pushing her away from him, standing quickly, and then positioned her facing the marble wall.

She braced herself.

“Ah, Beverly, like the first time we made love…”

He rammed into her from behind, lifting her up with his body, so that her toes barely touched the floor. He held her pinned to his body. And then he lowered her, reaching forward to massage her sensitive button.

Then he repeated the movement.

She loved his love play. The humping. The plunging. The naughty words he whispered. The strength of the way he charged into her as if they hadn’t already made love before.

“Feel it,” he commanded.

“Oh, yes,” she moaned. “It feels so good…”

He was using her. And she was loving it.

Then she felt his hands on her hips, lifting her again. Then pinching her sensitive flesh. He was driving into her now. With savagery. “Jean-Luc,” she begged.

One hand encircled her waist, then slid lower, to rub her thighs. Then he placed his open palm against her vulva, so that not only was he thrusting into her, he was pressing her into his palm. A finger went searching. And found her clitoris. Now he was simultaneously stroking her with his manhood as well as his fingers.

She was lost.

He pinched her clitoris.

Great waves of pleasure roiled through her, building in intensity.

“You’re mine. Mine,” he warned. He stopped moving, as he still felt her trembling. He waited. And
then he continued as if she hadn’t already orgasmed.

“No more…,” she pleaded.

He ignored her words. He pulled her away from the wall, then positioned her backwards onto the bench, standing by the edge of it, between her legs. He captured her wrists and pulled them above her head.

“Jean-Luc?”

“Once more, mon cœur.”

“Oh, no…” she sighed even as she wrapped her legs around his hips.

He plunged back and forth with a ferocity she found amazing. His stamina had decidedly improved, she thought, when she could think.

He was at the correct angle. She was feeling every inch of his flesh as his cock invaded her again and again. Within moments she was wanting again, as if he hadn’t already sated her. He leaned down and sucked a breast matching his licking to the timing of his thrusting. Then he bit her nipple, only to prickle, not to hurt.

She loved this driving connection between them. He kept going deeper. She was in danger of not being able to take much more of his torture. She squeezed, trying to manipulate his manhood, as he stroked.

“Insatiable…”

“Always for you, Jean-Luc.”

“Beverly…”

His orgasm poured into her.

She screamed in response.

He stayed hilted in her until she stopped shuddering. He kissed her before he left her body.

“What brought that on?” she asked as she tried to understand why this mating seemed so different from what they’d done before.

“I kept having this fantasy about the way we loved that first time on SB 74. In the blue bath, there.”

Beverly didn’t quite understand. She’d thought that she’d remembered every moment of their first tryst. And she didn’t recall ever being flat up against a wall having sex from behind. No matter. It was the here and now that was important.

This time after he assisted her entry into the pool, Jean-Luc only helped to wash her. Apparently, he was finally exhausted too.

Are you hungry?”

“For food.” And then she remembered the two officers that they’d left in the dining room.

“Oh no…” It was not the heat of the pools that caused her to turn red.
He followed her thoughts.

“They both are men of the universe, Dr. Crusher. And what Wesley doesn’t know, Riker will teach him.”

She eyed him. “You really like calling me Dr. Crusher when we’re naked, don’t you, Captain Picard?”

“Just fulfilling another one of my fantasies.”

“By the way, a mother doesn’t expect to be the one who inspires her son to become a man of the universe.”

“Well I could claim that I was just showing you around the palace. And we got lost.”

“Not even I would be willing to believe a faradiddle like that.”

He helped Beverly out of the pool, admiring her voluptuous beauty as he carefully dried her off. Afraid that if he let her dry him off that they’d end up going back to bed, he quickly toweled himself dry, sending a rueful glance toward her.

“Let’s just be brazen,” he suggested as they returned to his bedroom, to dress.

“Walking buck naked down a corridor filled with attractive female servants wearing short dresses is more than brazen enough for me.”

“Do you think either will say something?”

“They wouldn’t dare. Your reputation precedes you.”

“Beverly, you don’t think that Will would snicker? I have heard rumors...”

“He won’t do it to you. That’s because you were his captain. Trust me, anyone with less than four pips on their collar, has heard Will Riker snicker.”

“I guess I’ll just have to get around to reprimanding him one of these days.”

Beverly snickered. “A reprimand might do Will a world of good. Wait till I tell you how Deanna got Worf - and Will to marry her.”

“I don’t gossip. Though I suppose I should listen to matters that might concern my closest friends, Madam.”

“Worf had orange orchids in his hair. So did Will. At the wedding.”

“I really regret missing that wedding.”

“I do, too.” After they dressed, they walked arm-in-arm back to his dining room.

No one was in it.

Looking around, they’d noticed that some food had been eaten. Beverly found the note. “Wes says he’ll come and get me at 0200 hours.” She glanced over at Jean-Luc. “Any idea what time it is?”

Picard checked a Klingon clock, then calculated the time into Federation standard. “I’d say we have about half an hour.” He motioned toward the table. “Let us have an early breakfast. I’ll go find us
something to eat.”

Beverly more closely inspected the food on the table. “There’s bread. Cheese. Forks. And a fire pit. What more do we need?”

“Ale for me. Water for you.”

She pouted. “Not fair, Jean-Luc.”

“Life isn’t fair.”

He picked up a metal tray. “Let’s toast the bread, and use this to melt the cheese.” As he started to make their sandwiches, Beverly found Zilm’Kach, and nuts. And Bahgol for her to drink. The spices in the hot tea teased her nose. She liked the spicy goodness.

A few minutes later, they had a simple but surprisingly delicious feast. Picard was almost too quiet as he watched Beverly eat with her fingers. She even ate with graceful motions.

Then the full impact of Beverly’s news dawned. “When are the babies due?”

“Not quite thirty weeks.”

“If I can’t be there for their birth will you be able to forgive me?”

Beverly understood the seriousness of this question. “There’s no need for forgiveness, Jean-Luc. What you’re doing is your duty. I cannot blame you for that.”

“Thank you, mon cœur.”

Beverly let him know that she was happy. Especially when he called her mon cœur.

“You will accept Will’s offer, won’t you, Beverly? I want you close to those who love you, if I can’t be there.”

“And when you come back?”

“I will be an admiral, Beverly, when I come back. There shouldn’t be any conflict with Will over that. Though I’m sure that if I pull all of this off and actually achieve a diplomatic settlement in the DMZ, Starfleet will probably insist that I join the diplomatic corp.”

“Would you want that?”

“Actually, yes. I’d get to travel. I could justify the use of the Enterprise E for diplomatic missions. We’d be together more often, I think.”

“We could move to LaBarre and help Marie.” She touched her stomach. “I think I want your son to know all the Picard traditions.”

“Son?”

“And a daughter.”

He wondered what he’d ever done to deserve such blessings. He brought her hand to his lips, and kissed her palm in gratitude.

She cupped his cheek. “Jean-Luc, I would do anything to make this easier for you. You deserve to
be with me when our children are born. I don’t want to tell them about you. I want you to tell those tall tales.”

He lifted his head and just looked at her for the longest time as if he were debating telling her something. His attitude shifted.

And Beverly braced herself.

“I have to tell you about Ro.”

She wanted to deny him this expiation, but she knew that he needed it regardless of how it might distress her.

“Ro’s my agent. And in some things, my partner.”

“Your lover.”

“She was. During the time when I was on the Galen. I left her behind when I reached the Klingon Empire. I haven’t been with her since. And I will never be her lover again.”

For a brief moment, Ro Laren had her sympathy. For she knew what it was like to live without Jean-Luc.

“Beverly, you are the woman of my heart, of my mind and of my soul. I will forever love you.”

He placed a quick kiss against her brow. “I find I am selfish, now. I cannot release you. I wanted you to be free - to have choices - if I failed in my mission. I didn’t want you to suffer, to lose your career because of your love for me.” He lost himself for a moment in her gaze. He brushed a tear from her cheek. “I find that I am too weak. I just can’t do it. I will never let you go. You’re mine now.” He kissed her palm again, then placed it against his heart. “We are together now. Forever. Whether it be through failure or success.”

“I will never let you go.” She glanced about the room. “Let me stay here with you, Jean-Luc.”

For a moment he was overcome. His heart filled with joy even as he knew what his answer must be.

“It is too dangerous for you to stay here, Beverly. I don’t yet know all the faces of our enemies - who the traitors are. Be cautious, my love. Stay on Caldos, with Guinan. Our friends will protect you - and our children.”

“Should I go back to the Barton?”

“Beverly, there are those in Starfleet who have betrayed its very principles for greed’s sake. I…”

She interrupted him. “You don’t want to ask me to give up my job, but you would prefer it if I stayed on Caldos instead of going anywhere else?”

“Yes.” He couldn’t say any more.

“I’ll stay on Caldos until you send for me. I’ve got enough leave accumulated to deal with a problem pregnancy. Considering my age, no one at Starfleet Medical will blame me for being cautious.” She whispered in his ear, “Though I’m in the best of health at the moment, my love.”

He thought he was going to have a battle royale on his hands. Instead, she’d understood. He had to kiss her. But a noise was heard.
“Mother?” a voice called out from the hallway.

Picard noted that tact was another one of Wesley’s qualities. He was grateful for the warning.

Reluctantly they broke apart.

“Here, Wesley,” she called back.

Wes greeted them. “Sorry, Sir. We have to go.”

“Of course.”

Wes grabbed his Mother, hugged her briefly, let her go, then spoke to Picard. “I’ll be back shortly.”

He stopped talking when he saw that his Mother and Captain Picard were now ignoring him. For Picard was kissing her with the kind of passion that most of his former crew would never have believed their captain was capable of feeling. And Wes now had an idea of how deeply his Mother loved Jean-Luc back.

Wes also had a suspicion that he might have to drag his mother out of Picard’s arms. After a few minutes, Picard finally released Beverly. “Forever,” he whispered.

Beverly was blinked away.

When Wes returned, he found Picard staring into the fire pit, drinking Chech’tluth, a very potent alcoholic Klingon punch.

Wes poured Chech’tluth into a pottery cup for himself. He sat down to confront his hero.

“I won’t have you hurt her,” Wes warned. “You don’t know what I’d do to you, if you did.”

“I have a pretty good idea, Wes. I’d do the same thing to anyone who’d hurt Beverly too.”

Picard drank some more of his liquor.

“We need to discuss your powers, Wesley.”

“Meaning?”

“Q once made Will Riker a god. Will had the power to do anything he wished. But he was wise enough to reject the ability to do so. Are your powers that great?” He paused for a moment. “You seem to be much more powerful than Guinan.”

“I am.” Wesley was not going to dissemble over his abilities. “That’s why Q sent for Tau to help me.”

“Q made the arrangements? Why?”

“He sensed what I could be at Farpoint. That’s why he tormented you. He wanted an excuse to be around me to see what I might become.”

“I am not going to view Q in too favorable a light, in spite of what he may have done for you.”

“One day, I’ll bore you with the whole story, Sir. Q does have his good days.”

“Once a millennia or so?
“That sounds about right, Sir.”

“And as for your power?”

“I was meant to be what I am. I wish I could wriggle my nose and correct everything that is wrong with the universe. But it just doesn’t work that way.”

“Don’t lose sight of your humanity, Wes. Great power means even greater responsibility.”

“Robin will never let that happen. Besides, Guinan warns me when I need it.”

“Will Robin always be around?” He paused for a moment, considering the extent of Wes’ powers. Was Wes a God? “Can you grant immortality?”

“I can’t give her true immortality, but I can extend her life a bit. I think that when Robin dies, I will die too.”

“I don’t know your wife that well, Wes. She was an excellent officer on board the Enterprise. But this I do know, she wouldn’t want your love to be diminished because you don’t have the courage to live without her.”

Wes was silent for a while. “I hadn’t thought about her death like that.”

“You do have more to learn, Wesley.”

“Guinan says that there will come a time when I will become the teacher, not the student. Not yet, I guess.” Wes stood. “I have to go get Captain Riker.”

“I don’t want you to go, Wes. There are so many concerns we should discuss.”

“I know. But we no longer have the time. I have to fetch Captain Riker so that he can say his goodbyes.” Moments later, Riker appeared. No one wanted to leave. But Riker had his duty.

Picard shook Riker’s hand. “I can’t envision a better man to be captain of the Enterprise. You don’t need any guidance from me anymore, Number One.”

“Thank you, Jean-Luc.” Riker couldn’t imagine life without Captain Jean-Luc Picard being in it. “But I think I will need to call on you for advice every now and then.”

“I can bring us together when needed,” Wes added.

“I would appreciate it, Wesley.” Picard turned to Riker. “By the way, I got Dr. Crusher to change her mind. She’ll be your CMO.”

Riker didn’t want to know exactly how Jean-Luc had changed a very stubborn lady’s mind.

“I have a request, Will.”

“Anything, Jean-Luc.”

“Will you take care of Beverly if I cannot be there when her time comes?”

“Of course, Jean-Luc.”

“Thank you.” He studied Wesley. “Protect your Mother, Wes.” He knew the Boy understood his fears. He briefly hugged Wesley, still marveling at the how well the boy had grown up.
“Always,” was the Boy’s promise.

And then they were gone. Picard was alone again.

The next morning, Picard found Gowron lazing in the pools. “Good night, eh, Picard?”

Somehow Picard sensed that Gowron knew what he’d been doing most of the night. Then he wondered why Gowron wasn’t asking any of the obvious questions.

“Thank you for letting my friends come. There was a lot to discuss.”

“I think you discussed very little with the flame haired woman.”

“We said what was important. Beverly carries my heirs. Twins. A son and a daughter.”

“Proud sire, eh?” Gowron dunked he head under the water. When he came up for air, he announced, “How’d she get here?”

“I cannot…”

Gowron raised his hand. “I suspect that I don’t really wish to know. But one day, I would like to meet your friends from the Q Continuum.” He floated for a moment. “I will assign guards to watch over her - from afar. She won’t know that they are there.”

“I think that Beverly will notice Klingon warriors hovering about.”

“I rule many worlds, Picard. I have many non-Klingons who are loyal to my House. I will find those I can trust to protect your woman - your family. On Caldos.”

“Maj’qa’. Thank you, Gowron.” Once again Gowron had surprised him. And he was appreciative. “Speaking of women, I need to locate Ro. I must speak with her.”

Gowron roared with laughter. “All those Mok’bana classes will be useful for you when you tell that Bajoran she is no longer your mistress.”

“You think I’m going to give her up? Why?”

“What little I know of this Bajoran, tells me that she would not wish to interfere between you and the flame-haired doctor now that she carries your children. Besides, you are too honorable. You are, after all, the Arbiter of my Succession. Gowron dunked his head again. “Become a member of the Klingon Empire, Picard. That way you could marry both women.”

For a brief second, Picard actually considered it again. And grinned at the thought of what his ladies would say to such a proposal. “The Federation permits marriage contracts between more than two people.”

“Pah! A contract. That is for weaklings. A warrior committing to two wives. Now that takes true courage!”
T-Ro-uble

Chapter Summary

Ro meets her captors.

Chapter Notes

This is an adult chapter mainly because of the violence. And non-consensual sex. It's not overly graphic, but it isn't pleasant either. No one under 18.

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The floor was cold beneath her cheek. She could sense the thrumming of engines through the metal. She rolled her head against the coldness. It helped the pain in her head a little bit. And then Ro remembered. She’d been phasered. She tried to lift her head.

“Steady, Ro.” Relief flooded over her at the sound of Tom Riker’s voice. She could barely admit to herself how glad she was to hear him.

“I think you got a stronger phaser stun that I did.” He placed a damp rag against her forehead. “Not sure how clean the water is. But it does help the headache.”

“Where are we?”

“I don’t know, Laren.” He helped her sit up.

She gingerly looked around. There was a sink. A toilet. What looked like a dirty blanket was thrown into the corner. And nothing else. The only place to sit was on the filthy mustard yellow floor. The entire room had dirty grey walls, no windows, and a door that was obviously locked, otherwise Riker would have already left. “See or hear anything?” she asked.

“I heard two voices in the corridor about half an hour ago. But they were speaking in a language that I did not recognize. In fact, the voices didn’t sound quite humanoid either.”

“This is not what I’d planned for our night in Ootzey.”

“I’ll say.” Tom agreed as he remembered what they were doing before they were so rudely interrupted. “You did intend to seduce me.”

“I thought you were the one doing all the seducing.”

The door creaked open.

Riker helped Ro to stand as they waited for their captors to enter the room. Riker glanced over at Ro.
She shook her head in answer to his unspoken question.

Five humanoids entered the room. Four were pointing disruptors directly at them.

They were all the same humanoid race. Bald heads, stodgy bodies, and skin that looked like it was covered with lumpy, green pea soup. They appeared to be dressed in civilian clothing, though Tom had a sense of military discipline by their stance and wariness.

The unarmed male walked up to them.

“Who are you?” Ro politely asked.

“We are Suliban - the Suliban Cabal.”

Riker shook his head, as if to tell Ro he’d never heard of them.

“Why did you kidnap us?” Ro politely asked again, firmly holding on to her temper.

“Big bounty on your head, Ro. Very big bounty.

Ro’s eyes widened. “You’re pirates?”

“Cabal.” He sounded annoyed.

“I am Lieutenant Ro Laren of Starfleet. This man is Thomas Riker, a Maquis criminal wanted by the Federation. I was arresting him when we were shot.”

“If that is what you call it, then I wouldn’t mind being arrested by you too.” The Suliban’s laughter sounded coarse.

“The Federation will pay double whatever bounty you demand.”

“Suliban do not double cross their partners - unless we want to.”

“Who’s paying the bounty?”

The unarmed Suliban smiled. It was not a friendly smile. There was a cruelness to his expression that worried her. As if he wanted to torture her, he waited a few seconds before responding, “You’ll find out. We’ll be docking with his ship soon.

“Why?”

“Like we said - big bounty. That and because you interfere with Cabal business.”

“How did I do that?”

“Suliban buy quantum torpedoes. You buy quantum torpedoes but ask questions too. None of your business. You’ll pay for your questions with great pain.”

The male turned and walked back to the door. “I will think about your suffering. It pleases me greatly.”

Riker rushed forward to stop him. Four disruptors that were not set on stun, pointed at Riker’s chest.

“Tom,” she warned.

“It is not necessary that we keep you alive, Tom. Try anything and I will let my men torture you to
death.” He nodded at the guard to his left. “This Suliban enjoys skinning our enemies alive. Cause a problem, and I will enjoy watching.”

“So why don’t you kill me now and get it over?” was Riker’s bellicose response.

“I want you to suffer too. When the Cardassians come.” This time his smile was definitely evil. “I believe you know the Gul. Named Lemec.”

The Suliban chuckled as he walked out of the room. He knew that he’d shocked and scared Ro.

The only sign of her distress was the way the color drained from her face. And then when Riker caught her as she’d fainted.

They were on the floor now, Riker holding her in his arms, rocking her as if this could comfort her.

Her eyes fluttered open. Riker only saw the stark terror on her face.

“Laren,” he whispered, helpless to really comfort her.

“If it is Lemec, kill me Riker. I won’t - I can’t live through it again.”

“Don’t talk nonsense, Laren. Maybe it won’t need to come to that.”

“You don’t know what Lemec did.”

“I was in a Cardie prison. I know how the guards…”

“It wasn’t merely rape, Tom. Lemec forced me to entertain at his parties. Sometimes, they’d rip the clothes off of me, and compel me to service them naked. Other times, Lemec would rape me in front of his guests. There was a Jevonite dagger. He liked to show how much pain he could inflict without quite killing me.”

“Oh, Laren.” Tom bowed his head weighted down by the pain of her words.

Speaking, almost as if she needed him to know, she continued. “And then there were times they would chain me spread eagled to a bench. And use me any way they wanted. If it was only one at a time, I considered myself lucky.” She clutched at him. “I can’t survive it again. Please promise me that you’ll kill me.”

“If it comes to that, I will,” he gravely promised. His mind could barely grasp the horrors that were coming. And he was so helpless to do anything about it.

She started shuddering and shuddering, and couldn’t stop. He pressed her against his body as if to warm her.

Suddenly she stopped and grabbed the lapels of his leather jacket, pulling him down, kissing him as if he were her last lifeline. Passion flared.

“Laren?” Tom didn’t understand.

“Make love to me Tom. I want you to hold me in your arms, and make love. I want to remember what it feels like to be loved by a good man one more time.”

Guilt raged with need as he considered her request. He understood it. He slipped out of her grasp, removed his jacket and bundled it up, placing it on the floor. Then he stood and picked up the dirt colored blanket that was in the corner, shaking it out with the vague hope that if there were any
vermin they would fall off.

He knelt by Laren’s side. “I’m sure we’re being monitored.”

“I don’t care.“ She put her arms around his neck.

Riker lay down by her side, pulling the big blanket over both their bodies.

“Ah, Laren,” he whispered, as his fingers deftly unzipped her cat suit. He helped her slide it down her body. “It shouldn’t be this way.”

“But it is.” She found his cock beneath his waist band and started rubbing it. She unleashed it, feeling it spring into her hand. He was already hard for her.

She still felt that electric connection between them. She didn’t know how it came to be. Or what it was. But it was a powerful emotion. She wouldn’t say no now. She’d felt this bond between them, from their first kiss.

“How, Tom. Take me now.”

Riker softly touched her vulva, surprised by how wet she already was. He stroked her a few times as if to prepare her. But she was the one determined not to wait. She placed him at her entrance. His penetration - his assault was what she needed.

She moved closer. “Please, Tom. Hurry, hurry…”

He held back. He began a slow, steady stroking cushioned between her thighs. His movements were even, long, filling and fulfilling.

“More.”

“I hate this,” he whispered to himself

“No,” she contradicted “Make me love it. Love you.”

He stopped. “Could you love me, Laren?”

“Already do,” she answered, as she sought his lips.

He thought that she didn’t know what she was saying to him. Soft moans fluttered in her throat as he commenced his movements.

She was overwhelmed by the feel of him. Flames started to rise within her. And it spread to him, like bushfire burning across his body as well. He moved much faster now as he lost all semblance of control.

She gasped. He silenced her scream with his mouth as he tangled with her tongue. “Tom…” She cried his name over and over. Until she was silent.

That was when he gave over to his orgasm. And was surprised to feel her clutch at him again. She had another orgasm, this time coming with him.

And for a few seconds neither of them remembered anything else but each other.

When she was calmer, she reached up and brushed away some tears from his cheek.
“For me?” She was touched beyond words.

He buried his head against her shoulder.

“God forgive me, Laren. But I don’t think I can kill you. I want you to live…”

“I want to live too, Tom.”

“Then we’ll just have to escape, eh, Laren?”

He moved away from her reluctantly, as he helped straighten out her catsuit, and then his own clothing.

He sat up, leaning against the wall, and pulled her into his arms. They were silent for a while, as they both tried to comprehend what had happened, and feared what might be coming.

Finally Ro spoke. “Thank you, Tom.”

“Your welcome.” A touch of his own wry humor surfaced.

“You know, you’re a lousy spy.”

He was nonplussed. “Where did that come from?”

“That first night. That mickey you slipped me.”

“Ro… I didn’t…”

“Time for truths, Tom. It takes more than one beer to knock me unconscious. Besides, I know the difference between a hangover and a drugging.”

“Something I got from Sirius. It wasn’t supposed to have any harmful side effects.”

“It brought you into my life. I might consider that to be a harmful effect.”

“I can’t say that. It brought us together. I’d say that was a wonderful effect.”

When she raised her lips to him, he saw that she’d been crying, too. He pressed a light kiss against her trembling lips. And lingered for a moment.

She just had to know. “Why, Tom? Did Kalita really think that I’d betray the Maquis?”

“You’ve known we suspected you all along?”

“Like I said - you’re a lousy spy.”

“Then why didn’t you get rid of me?”

“What better way to prove I’m innocent than to show you what I’m really doing?”

“You just told that Suliban who looks like and smells like a Denibian slime devil, that you’re a Starfleet officer.”

“I thought that by telling him I was Starfleet, he might be willing to accept my bribe. If I’d told him I was Maquis, he knows there is no Maquis that has two credits to rub together. He would have never believed that I could pay him off.”
“So you’re still Maquis?”

“So in heart and mind.”

“Then what were you doing with Picard?”

“Picard was framed for the attack on the Clara Barton. I was trying to help prove his innocence and find the source of the quantum torpedoes.”

He believed her. “You seem to be willing to do anything for your friends.”

“Whatever I can and whenever I can, Tom.”

“I sort of like that idea. But did it have to be with Starfleet’s most respected captain?”

“He’s my friend, Tom.”

“I find that hard to believe. You’re Maquis. He’s Starfleet.”

“He was Starfleet. In his heart, he is Maquis. But he just couldn’t betray Starfleet or his whole life’s work. He’s trying to reconcile his honor with his beliefs.”

“And what does Picard believe?”

“He believes that the Cardassian treaty was fraudulent. He is trying to prove it. He wants to change the treaty; to correct its errors. Maybe that way the Maquis and the Feds can be on the same side again.”

“And I’ve never known a grizzly bear to become a vegetarian.”

In spite of the circumstances, Ro almost smiled. “I had a friend on board the Enterprise. She was sort of a prophetess. She once told me that Picard was cursed with greatness. And that for a time, I would be his woman. I didn’t believe her. I guess I should have.”

“Where’s Picard now?”

“The Klingons are protecting him.”

“Protected by Klingons, championed by a Bajoran Maquis freedom fighter. What does this Starfleet captain have that I don’t?”

“Actually, he doesn’t have me at the moment. I was due to check in with him four days ago. But we were somewhat busy. I was going to contact him after I got the information from Behlk.”

“Will he come looking for you?”

“He’s probably already on his way.”

“Calvary to the rescue?”

“By the prophets, I hope so.”

Riker kissed her gently. “I wouldn’t even mind being arrested by the Klingons if they get to us in time.”
Captain Kargan enjoyed showing Picard around his starship, as one captain’s courtesy to another. Picard was inquisitive and observant of everything.

After the long version of the tour, Kargan led Picard back to his ready room. In a way, Picard found the tour to be interesting. He’d never really had a chance to thoroughly look over a Vor’cha class may’Duh before. And the way that the crew treated him, was rather surprising. He had not expected such vuv from Klingons.

Kargan offered Picard a Klingon martini.

Picard dutifully tasted it, just to be polite to his host. He choked. “Gin, vermouth and blood wine?” The fiery alcohol seared a path down his throat.

“It’s a warrior’s drink.”

“I don’t doubt that.”

“Recipe has been in my House for generations.”

“Captain, I wonder if I could ask you a question?”

“You are captain to my warrior brother. Speak.”

“Why? The way Gowron has been treating me is beyond what I would have ever expected.”

“You are risking your soul, your women, your life and your reputation in order to bring honor to us all. And you are genuine in your respect of us unlike other Humans.”

“Nonsense. Once we Humans get to know you…”

“Picard, you have never underestimated us. You offer your life to protect us. That cannot be said by many in Starfleet.”

Picard mulled Kargan’s words. “I regret to say that you speak the truth.”

“You protect Gowron and have saved his life many times. A warrior always repays his leader’s debts.”

“I would prefer it if you think of me as your friend, rather than as being indebted to me.”

Kargan nodded. His assessment of Riker greatly increased. To be Number One to such a man was a great honor indeed. “I wait for the time to come when Riker sits in your chair. And you will become the Ambassador to Klingon.”

“So that’s why Gowron wanted me in his debt. He thinks that one day I’ll be a diplomat.”

Kargan stopped smiling. “I prefer a good fight over talking, Picard. But you - you could bring peace to Klingon and her enemies. After the Borg all the worlds by the zone need to recover. You will do it.”

“I hope that you don’t put too much faith in me. I’ve a daunting task ahead of me.”
“You will not fail.”


A junior officer enter the room. “There is a sub-space message for Captain Picard.”

“Send it in here.”

Kargan swiveled his view screen around.

Moments later, the scared face of DaiMon Behlk appeared on the screen.

“What is it Behlk?” Picard hid his concern over Behlk suddenly contacting him.

“Picard! Picard!” Behlk squealed.

“What?”

“It is your ship. The Galen!”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s still here!”

“And?”

“I don’t know where Ro Laren is!”

“Meaning?”

“Three days ago Ro Laren came to see me, to buy more weaponry. She said that she was going on the town with her lover. But they never left her hotel suite.”

He inwardly grimaced at the thought of Ro with another lover. “Ro is free to do as she chooses. I do not need a report of her private life from you.”

“No, Captain. You don’t understand. She’s not in her suite. She’s not anywhere on the planet! I’ve been looking once we realized that the Galen was in a cloaked parking space!” He drew a breath, and dramatically announced in a high pitched voice, “Someone has kidnapped her!”

“Surely…”

Behlk interrupted his most favorite client.

“Captain, there was phaser fire damage in her room! And the man who was with her, disappeared too.”

“Any idea as to who might have…”

The DaiMon was so nervous he interrupted Picard again. “Only ship that has left since she disappeared was Suliban!”

Picard felt a swift dart of concern. “Who was the man that was with her?”

“I don’t know. An underling. She called him Tom. Said he was Maquis…”

“Thank you, DaiMon. I’ll be arriving soon.”
Without even being asked, Kargan tapped his comm badge and ordered, “Warp 9 to Thelka.”

He looked at Picard. “We’ll be there in three hours.”
I Love Paris...

Chapter Summary

Reginald Endicott Barclay woos Mela.

Mela loved every moment of their first day in Paris. Reg had actually put some thought into what they would do. A visit to the Eiffel Tower, lunch on a boat cruise, and then a leisurely walk about the Rue des Artistes. Reg was as excited as Mela was, for it was Reg’s first time in Paris too.

They’d checked into the Hotel de Vendome mid-morning. Reg had reserved a deluxe suite.

The elegance of the suite was overpowering. It was a glimpse into a way of life that was unknown to most everyone. Antique original Louis XVI furniture upholstered in rust and gold. An escritoire with a kingswood and satinwood inlaid top, with bronze d’ore ormolu. A huge bed with a canopy that once really did belong to a prince. In short, a suite that was perfect for sophisticated lovers which Reg and Mela were not.

The hotel was also across the street from the Louvre. It was surrounded by jewelry stores carrying only the most exquisite of gems, Haute Couture salons, and art and antique galleries; all within walking distance.

It had been a perfect day for the would-be lovers. Then at night, it turned into a disaster or as Barclay would refer to it, a typical date.

For Reg was an idiot when it came to romance. Every decision he made was prefaced with the question: What would Riker do? The only problem was that he wasn’t Will Riker.

Not that Reg would ever admit it, but he’d kept certain souvenirs from his days as a holodeck addict. Mainly videos of the many trysts that Riker had held in the hollow deck over the years. Riker had thought that his security protocols could not be overridden. But he had not realized just how much a determined genius Reg was when it came to hacking into things.

Not that Reg saved them solely for prurient pursuits. He actually watched them to hear how Will said what he said, the way he moved, how he wooed and how he mated. In short, Reg memorized everything that Will had done. And then he acted out the Riker scenario.

His first mistake was to over-plan a romantic dinner in their suite. Mela had little experience with romantic, elaborate dinners.

Mela’s wedding celebration with Jorge had consisted of a pot luck dinner in a barn after the ceremony. And a glass of wine when Jorge took her back to his farm. That was it. It was her first and only romantic dinner. Her wedding night also had been a disaster. And it didn’t get any better as the years went on. So now that she was facing something similar, she was determined not to have history repeat itself.
Reg had spent more credits on their room service feast than Jorge had spent on Mela during the entire ten years of their marriage. Reg ordered all the fancy stuff. Dom Perignon. Russian caviar. Baked brie with apricots. Chateaubriand. Potato aligot. And Crepes Belle Helene for dessert.

Mela had never eaten such food before in her life.

Reg thought that Mela would be impressed. Instead she was dazed, imagining that Reg lived the kind of life where such dinners were normal - and she would never fit into his world. Then they had dinner. She came to realize that Reg hadn’t a clue, either.

First Reg opened the bottle of champagne. His aim wasn’t too good as the cork bounced off a mirror before it knocked over a bud vase containing a red rose.

After mopping up the spilled water, Reg poured the champagne into tall Lalique flutes. They overflowed. Then he proposed a toast and tried to entwine his arm with the crook of Mela’s elbow. She’d never seen a romantic movie where this had been done before. He clinked her glass too hard. It broke. It was not surprising that most of the champagne spilled down the front of the red strapless dress that Marie had given to her.

“Reg!” she squealed, as he tried to mop that up with a wet napkin. He was also trying not to touch anywhere where Mela might object.

Champagne can be very sticky. And Mela was a wee bit upset over the stains to the first perfect dress that she’d ever worn. She rushed into the bathroom to try and blot the material.

Reg suggested in his best imitation of Riker, that he could help remove the dress for her and then offered to help scrub her front.

Mela’s response after she washed up, was to come out of the bathroom wearing one of the thick robes that she’d found in the bathroom.

This wasn’t quite the outcome that Reg had hoped would happen. Things went down hill from there.

He thought he was seducing her.

She wondered what Holoprogram had been the source of his silly dialogue. And she was becoming more disappointed with every cliché.

He placed his hand on her thigh as he tried to press caviar onto her lips. Not a good idea at all. She jerked away. Little black gluey dots sprayed everywhere.

What clinched it for her was when he compared her eyes to sunlit topazes. Her eyes were blue. He knew he’d made the wrong comparison, but he’d been so caught up into trying to remember exactly what Riker had said, that he’d forgotten her reality. He tried to make it up to her by suggesting that they relieve their stresses by going to bed.

She dumped ice from the champagne bucket over his head. Then she threw a fancy crepe at him before running into the bathroom and locking the door.

Reg hadn’t a clue as to what Riker would do under these circumstances. Riker never had a lady shut the bathroom door in his face. Reg hadn’t realized that Riker’s holoprogram records were the success stories.

He sat on a fauteuil and put his head in his hands. It was hopeless. He desperately wished he could
talk to Deanna. But when he’d tried calling Betazed, he was informed that Deanna wasn’t available. He didn’t know what to do. Maybe an hour later, the sniffling stopped. Reg used a napkin to wipe his nose. He finally stood, then knocked on the bathroom door.

“Mela, are you all right?”

“Go away.”

“Mela, you have to come out sooner or later. You can’t sleep in there.”

“Care to bet?”

“Mela…”

A moment later Mela opened the door. And socked him in the jaw. “You are an idiot,” she succinctly informed him.

Barclay nodded.

“You are an absolute dolt of an idiot!” she screeched as if she were a harridan in training.

Reg looked at her as if she’d struck him with a bolt from the blue. He’d never seen her angry before. He never even thought that Mela could get this angry. She’d always been so practical, calm, gentle and level headed.

“How could you, Reg! I thought you liked me. I never thought that you were playing a game!”

Reg stuttered, “I dddon’t… do not know what you’re talking about!”

“Damn it, Reg. Don’t you know how much I was looking forward to…” She took a deep breath. “Why’d you have to ruin it!”

“What did I do? I really don’t know…”

“You weren’t you, Reg. Everything you said and did tonight - that wasn’t you. You were acting like you were imitating a very bad actor in a really bad soap opera holoprogram.”

“But it worked for Riker!” The minute he opened his mouth he just knew he shouldn’t have said it.

“Riker! He’s your love coach?”

“He’s the new captain of the Enterprise,” Reg mumbled.

“You mean the man who was stupid enough to lose his Imzadi? John Luke told me quite a bit about him.”

“He’s my friend, Mela.”

“And you asked him to coach you?”

“Not exactly. I didn’t really ask. I just sort of copied what I’d seen Will do…”

“You really are an idiot.”

“Why?”

“I don’t want a copy of someone else. I want you! The Reg I came to know on the cruise ship. Who
kissed me. I’ve watched you play with my children. Didn’t you think that I’d know the difference between you and some Casanova computer program? Your performance tonight - that was not real. I just wanted to be with you, Reginald Barclay!”

“You really wanted me?” he whispered, shocked. For no one else had ever wanted him like this before.

“I said yes to sharing a room with you. What do you think I meant? And don’t tell me that I’m here just to go sightseeing. I could’ve done that with Marie.”

“You don’t understand, Mela.”

“What?”

“I don’t have much experience when it comes to all of this - and girlfriends.”

Mela just looked at him, puzzled. She’d always thought that Starfleet officers had a girl in every space port. “What makes you think I have a lot of experience?”

“You’ve been married. That’s more experience than I’ve ever had. The very first date I ever went on in my life was when I was at the Academy. I took her out to dinner. She told me that she needed to go to the ladies’ room - and then she never came back!”

“Oh, Reg.” She reclined on the recamier. She motioned toward the space next to her. When Reg didn’t move, she commanded, “Sit!”

He sat. “I knew then that I wasn’t boyfriend material. So I over-compensated. Riker’s holoprograms. A lot of holoprograms. Then, Risa. That’s my experience!”

She rested her hand on his arm. “Reg, I married the first man that ever showed me any attention. I soon came to realize that he didn’t love me. He just wanted someone to be unpaid labor, with bedroom privileges. Jorge never cared about my feelings. Just his. He didn’t even want children, once I started focusing on them. It meant less time for me to jump at his command.”

“How could anyone not want Jory and Harla?”

“Reg, he even accused Jean-Luc of being my lover and fathering John Luke. Mind you I was eight months pregnant when I met Jean-Luc. But facts didn’t matter to Jorge. I was someone who’d inconvenienced him. Do you have any idea what that feels like?”

He knelt before her. “Forgive me. Please, Mela. I was just so nervous about our being together. I didn’t know what to say. How to touch. What to do. I thought that if I acted like Riker, and go for the fancy stuff, I’d at least have a guideline of how to…” He stopped speaking because Mela bent her head and gave him a tender kiss.

“We have a problem, Reg.”

“What?” He was still bemused by her marvelous unexpected kiss.

“Neither one of us seems to be an expert when it comes to relationships.” She gave him another soft kiss.

Now she was the bemused one.

“Do you know what we’re going to do about it?”
He shook his head.

She draped her arms over his shoulders. “We’re just going to have to gain experience. We’ll have to trust each other enough to learn together.”

This time Mela’s kiss had nothing to do with comfort. She wanted him.

His eyes were bright with tears as he realized she was giving him a second chance.

A long time later she was weeping. In his arms. In bed. “Please, Mela. Tell me. What did I do wrong?” He was scared to death that he’d some how hurt her.

And that she wouldn’t love him anymore.

She turned into his arms and hugged him, as if she had no intention of letting him go.

“I don’t understand.”

‘Reg. I’ve never, ever felt like this before. You’re the first and only man who’s ever…,” she searched for the right words, “loved me. Who has pleased me. Who cared for me. You’ve showed me that love could be wonderful…” Her voice was hesitant as she dared to ask, “Did I please you too?” She sounded so unsure.

Reg kissed her to reassure her. “It was the first time I’ve ever found the stars, Mela.” Reg held her in his arms, carefully stroking her hair as if he didn’t even want to cause her any pain by tugging a tangle. He vowed that if he ever met Jorge Torez, he’d hit him in the jaw.

As she rested against his chest Reg suggested, “What do you say to going to the toy stores tomorrow. I’ve heard that Au Nain Bleu and Galeries Lafayette are really great…And then there’s all sorts of shopping…”

“Yes, Reg. But let’s go out in the afternoon. I think I’ll be a lazybones in the morning, staying in bed, maybe until noon… with you…”

Reg kissed Mela, wishing that he could get a hold of Deanna, and tell his Counselor that he had finally found his happiness in life.
Ro's in big trouble.

A Glinn entered the cell holding a Tricorder. He was flanked by three guards with disruptors.

Riker held Ro close, for they both were still seated on the floor. She started shivering.

The Glinn stepped closer. “Stand.”

He pointed to Ro. Riker wouldn’t let her stand.

The Glinn explained, “Please. I have to check your health, Ro Laren. My name is DuLac. I am a physician.”

“Why?” Riker demanded, hiding his fear behind a wall of anger.

DuLac almost seemed apologetic. “The Suliban want proof that she was not harmed by their actions before you go on board The Reklar.” He proffered an empathetic smile. “If you don’t stand, these guards will force you to do so.”

Reluctant, Ro stood. Riker took a defensive posture behind her. DuLac scanned them both.

“Good. You both pass. I will inform Gul Lemec that you and your baby, Ro Laren, are in excellent health.”

Tom steadied Laren. She suddenly felt like fainting.

“You did not know you were with child?”

Ro was speechless. She shook her head in denial.

“About five weeks,” he announced. Then he stepped closer, and whispered, “I will try to see to it that Gul Lemec or Madred does no harm to you or the baby.”

She fainted.

Moments later, Riker carried Ro down the corridor. The faint hope that DuLac offered was the only reason that Riker hadn’t attacked the guards in a suicide move.

Gul Lemec was furious. He’d struck the Glinn when told the news about Ro. He’d had plans for the
Bajoran, starting that very night in his quarters.

Gul Madred started chuckling, leaning back against his chair, bumping into the bulkhead of his office.


Lemec turned on him. “What do you find so funny, Madred?”

“You fail to grasp the importance of the news.”

“What?”

“Ro Laren is carrying Jean-Luc Picard’s child.”

“It could be Riker’s child. Or any number of the other men that fucked the slut.”

“You should read your daily reports more often.”

“That is your duty - not mine!”

“If you’d bothered to read the surveillance reports, you’d have noticed that Riker only came into Ro’s life about two weeks ago. But she was with Picard more than five weeks ago. The child is his.”

Madred, stood up and walked over to DuLac. “Can you identify the father from a genetic sample?”

“Oh yes, Gul Madred.”

Madred touched a few buttons on the padd on his desk. “I have sent you Picard’s DNA. A souvenir from the last time I met the good captain.” His smile was evil. “Tell me the sex of the child…”

“It’s a girl,” DuLac quickly said.

“Then confirm the girl is Picard’s daughter. Go. And let me know as soon as you know. Dismissed.”

The Glinn scrambled out of Lemec’s office.

“Why are you interfering with my plans, Madred? I was rather looking forward to reacquainting myself with Laren. I was planning a party especially in her honor.”

“In eight months, you can still party with Ro, Lemec. But imagine the bargaining chip we’ll have with Picard.”

“Bargaining chip with a rogue Starfleet officer who has turned Maquis? That is not a very desirable chip.”

“Picard is no more Maquis that I am. I tortured the man for days. I know how he thinks. Where his weaknesses are.” Madred turned to look out his office’s port windows. “No, whatever Picard is doing in the DMZ, it is not simply to join the Maquis. I could not break the man with torture. I only pierced his armor, when I told him what I was doing to his woman. Imagine what we could make Picard do if it’s his daughter. Knowing what we could be doing will torment him every day of his life. Oh no, Lemec. Picard is still Starfleet. And we will control him through his daughter.”
She was moaning, as Tom held her. For some reason, they were put in the same cell by the Cardassians. Riker didn’t know why. He only knew that whatever the Cardie reason was, it wasn’t to be kind.

At least this cell was better than the one on board the Suliban ship. There were two cots. A sink and a toilet in dull grey metal. Two skimpy blankets. Two chairs and a table bolted to the deck. Compared to some Cardassian cells Tom Riker had inhabited, this cell was almost palatial.

Ro stirred again. “Tom?”

He bent over and kissed her lips. “I’m here, Laren.”

“Did the doctor say that I was pregnant?”

“Afraid so.”

She didn’t say any more, she just rested in his arms.

He comforted her the best he could, under the circumstances. ”I take it that the baby’s father is Picard.”

She snuffled yes. She lifted her head. “I don’t understand how it happened. I’ve always been diligent.”

“Does it really matter, Ro?”

Ro shook her head at the enormity of it all. “I never thought that I’d ever be a mother…”

“Hey, I never thought I’d one day become a father…”

She didn’t believe what Tom has just said. “What?”

“How charming.” The voice was too cultured, too cool. And so very frightening.

Ro gazed in horror at Gul Lemec.

“Time to go, Ro Laren. We need to renew our acquaintance.”

“Surely I know more than Ro does about the Maquis.” Riker quickly stepped up to the force field. “Take me, instead.”

“Perhaps I will. But not now.” He flicked his wrist towards the guards. “I may schedule you for torture or taking, or whatever, later. My guards might enjoy you.”

The guards entered the cell. And Riker charged them. He didn’t stand a chance. He was phasered and dropped to the deck.

The guards had to physically lift Ro off of the cot, and drag her out of the room. She refused to cooperate. The guards ended up carting her to Gul Lemec’s ready room, then handcuffed her. They forced her to sit onto an armchair set in the center of the red and black room.

There were dramatic shadows in the forms of pyramids everywhere. And an overhead spotlight
focused a triangular patterned light directly at the chair to single her out.

“They didn’t kill Riker,” Lemec casually informed Ro, as he rose from his desk. “He doesn’t escape his torture that easily. My Glinns will do something amusing with your lover in a while. I hope he survives. I might find something amusing to do with him together with you.”

Ro said nothing.

He walked around the desk and sat on the edge. “What? No tender greetings to a long-lost lover? How remiss of you.” He contemplated her for a moment, as if he couldn’t decide what to do first. “I am so pleased to see you, my dear. I’ve been looking for you for a long time. I’ve even planned a special party in honor of your return. All of my senior officers will attend. The men and the women. I thought that your return should be celebrated with something rather distinctive.” He picked an invisible fleck off of his sleeve. “I do believe that my female officers can be more demanding of a female slave than my men. I hope you do know how to please women. I shall be watching. I’m sure it will inspire all of my guests when they fuck you.”

Gul Madred entered the room, motioning for Glinn DuLac to come in as well.

“Come to greet Ro Laren yourself, Madred? I don’t mind an audience. You may participate, if you wish.”

“How kind of you to include us. However, I’m afraid that this party will have to be officially postponed for at least eight months.”

“Meaning?”

“It is Picard’s child, Lemec.”

“No matter.”

“Actually, Gul Lemec, I’ve contacted our superiors. They feel that it does matter to them. Greatly.”

Lemec glared at Madred, furious for his interference.

“She cannot be rap…” The doctor stumbled over the word. He’d seen far too much of it serving these superior officers. “She cannot have violent intercourse. Her body is having difficulty coping with her crossbred fetus. It would take very little for her to reject it. Any kind of stress, a rise in blood pressure, deprivation, or pain, could cause a miscarriage.”

Ro’s expression didn’t change at the Doctor’s pronouncement, but a fragile hope was beginning to build in her breast.

Lemec paused to think for a moment, then ordered, “Well then Doctor, you will stay and watch. Monitor her. Tell me when she has reached her limit of endurance.” He slowly removed his gloves, one finger at a time. He nodded toward a guard.

Quickly two guards dragged her to her feet. They held her as a chain and hook were lowered down from the ceiling. At first she dangled. Then Lemec glanced over at Madred and saw the fury building there. He motioned for the guards to position her so that she could stand. One guard held her, as Lemec approached.

“How nice that you dressed for me.” He tapped the tassel on her catsuit. “So easy for me to slip it down.” He yanked the zipper down all the way, till it was level with her thighs. The he shoved the fabric as far back as her position would allow. Her breasts to her stomach were exposed.
Lemec turned around and picked up a Jevonite dagger from his desk top. He saw her shudder when she recognized it. “Best not move, Laren. The blade is very sharp. I’m sure you remember that. Wouldn’t want you to be cut unintentionally.” He sliced the fabric of her sleeve off her shoulder fully exposing her breast. He bent over and licked it. Then he viciously bit, drawing blood.

Gul Madred stayed DuLac from interfering.

Lemec did the same to her right breast, slicing the fabric away. Ro refused to show that he was effecting her. She was going to survive in spite of what the Cardassians would do. Her resolve to kill herself had vanished the moment she’d learned she was pregnant. She could kill herself. She couldn’t kill an innocent.

Lemec motioned for the guard to move the chair so that he could sit facing her. He was contemplating the flesh that he could see. He started slicing away with his dagger, till the top part of the suit was in tatters. Then he pulled the fabric down to her knees.

“Ah, where are my lovely scars, Ro Laren?” His breath blew against her mons veneris. “You’ve had them all removed. No matter, I’ll make more.” He looked up at her and gave Ro the kind of smile that would haunt her nightmares for the rest of her life.

Slowly he slid the dagger up her inner thigh, then poked the point into her labia.

She didn’t react.

“Lemec!” Madred warned.

He raised the point of the dagger more deeply into her sensitive flesh. Then his finger searched her channel, scraping. Blood flowed down her thigh.

Lemec moved the dagger up her body to her shoulder blades. Then he used it to trace a path down the valley between her breasts. He was leaving a trail of red wherever it touched. He stood and licked away some of the blood from her breasts. “I do love the taste of your blood, Ro. I’ve dreamed of tasting it - and more, for years.” He bit her nipple with force. She screamed.

Suddenly he reached behind her, and with one hand, dug deeply into her buttocks, raking his nails into tender flesh. More blood flowed.

He used the flat of his blade to lift up her right breast.

Ro flinched.

“I won’t tease you any more, Ro Laren, if you do one small thing for me.”

She finally spoke. “What?”

“Massage the gulls on my neck with your breasts.”

She shuddered with revulsion. “Anything else?”

“I want you to bring me satisfaction. You can use your mouth or your hands, Whichever you’d prefer.” He turned at looked at the Glinn. “You see DuLac, I can follow the Doctor’s orders. I won’t fuck her or really torture her.” He pinched her ass. “And I won’t even pump her exquisite ass, though I will find it very difficult to wait the requisite months.” The carved Jevonite dagger touched the hollow of her throat. “Ro does so enjoy her foursomes, don’t you Ro?”
She couldn’t control the hatred she felt. Even though she knew that any sign of it only fed Lemec’s insatiable need to cause more pain.

“If you want me to use my hands they must be free.”

Lemec nodded toward a guard. They unhooked her and took off her handcuffs.

He ordered, “If she hurts me, shoot her.”

The Glinn gasped. “Lemec, another phaser shot could cause a miscarriage!”

“I’m sure Ro knows this.” He tapped a finger against her cheek. “I’m sure you will behave, won’t you Ro?”

She nodded her reluctant acceptance.

Lemec’s response was to scratch her cheek with one pointed fingernail. Another long thread of blood appeared. He sat down in the chair. “Try to control your reticence, my dear. Your shyness displeases me. And I know you do not wish to annoy me.” He thrust his groin toward her. “You may begin.”

Trying not to reveal any emotion, Ro leaned forward. Her torso was forced to touch his body, in order to reach his sexual gulls. She began to press both breasts against the pleasure gulls on the right side of his neck.

He grabbed a breast, gripped it with a bruising strength, and stopped her. “No, Laren. Not this way. I want your delicious breasts on either side of my neck.”

Slowly she complied. Because her breasts were not large, she had to force her bosom against his face, in order to reach his gulls. As she began to move against his sensitive pleasure gulls, he began to suck then bite her flesh leaving bloody red marks wherever he mauled.

After a few minutes of this massage, he grabbed her shoulders and shoved her down onto her knees, between his legs. “Finish me off,” he commanded.

She was held within the grips of his thighs. Finally she reached forward, and unhitched his codpiece.

“Lips,” he ordered. “Show me how much you missed me. Kiss me. Tongue me. Suck me.”

“Gul Lemec!” the doctor warned. “It’s too much!”

He sent the doctor a look of hate that told the Glinn that Gul Lemec would find ways of punishing him. DuLac began to tremble in fear.

Lemec grabbed Ro’s hand and yanked it against his tumescent flesh. After a few seconds she began to masturbate him. When he was finished, she wiped her hand against the remnants of her catsuit and dropped her head.

But Lemec wasn’t through with her just yet. He picked up his dagger and touched her under her chin. The point forced her to raise her head and look him in the eyes. “I’ve been told by the Glinn that you carry a girl. I am so looking forward to her birth.”

The most horrific, overpowering fear began to grow in Ro’s mind and heart.

He delighted at the terror he saw in her eyes. “I fancy Picard’s daughter as my personal house slave.” He smiled in contemplation. “I’ll wait just a few years before I begin to teach her how to please me. I may even keep you alive so that you can watch. And instruct her. You know what I like.” He
glanced over at Madred. “You may borrow the girl now and then, if you wish.”

Ro began to sway on her knees, as the ebon horror descended.

“Take her back to her cell,” Lemec ordered.

The Glinn picked her up with his arms.

Lemec added, “Do not heal her, Doctor.”

As he walked down the corridors to the cell block, DuLac whispered into Ro’s ear, “Don’t despair.”

When they reached her cell, the guard quickly lowered the force field. The Glinn placed Ro on a cot.

“What did you do to her?” Tom bellowed. Only the guard kept him from attacking the doctor.

“She’ll be all right, Riker.” The doctor checked her over again. “I’ll be ordering healthy food to be brought to you. Madred won’t permit me heal her wounds. I am so sorry.” He patted her arm. “Try to get some rest.”

Riker knelt by the cot. Saw her nudity. Saw the blood. Will had known horror in his life before. But this was beyond it. The look in Ro’s eyes scared him.

“What did Lemec do to you?” he whispered.

He carefully began to inspect her wounds. There was so much blood, that he was afraid for her.

“Superficial,” she finally whispered. “Hurts.”

He found a towel, soaked it with warm water, and began to carefully clean her knife wounds with a gentleness that even he did not know that he possessed.

He was appalled by the blood on her thighs and buttocks. “I’ll kill Lemec,” Tom vowed, trying to restrain his anger, knowing that Ro needed a protector now - not someone who’d lost control.

“You’ll have to stand in line,” she weakly promised.

Slowly he rolled her onto her side, and began to clean the claw marks on her buttocks.

“That fucking evil Grendel slug. His mother cursed the day that he was born. That bastard…”

He rinsed out the towel, and then carefully moved her legs apart to cleanse those wounds. His hand’s trembled as he cleansed this flesh. His hatred grew with each touch. He wanted revenge. When he was finished, Tom removed his jacket and carefully placed it over Ro’s naked body. He held her hands to warm them. She sought refuge against his chest.

“Lemec wants to take my daughter and turn her into his slave. He said that he would train her to please him…” She couldn’t continue...

He was horrified. “She’s our daughter now, Ro…” And then he placed a chaste kiss on her forehead. He meant every word. “We’ll protect her or die trying.”

When their food arrived, along with the tray that was shoved through an opening in the force field, was a black soft cloth tunic that the Glinns wore under their armor.

Tom sniffed the cloth, before he brought it over to Ro. “It’s clean,” he soothingly said as he helped
her sit up. He knew she didn’t want to touch anything Cardassian, but right now, the only other option for clothing was Tom’s shirt. And it wasn’t long enough to reach her thighs.

She sat still as he carefully removed the remnants of her catsuit. "Pity.” He took off the last tatter. “I rather liked this shade of red.”

She weakly smiled. “You are incorrigible.”

She slipped the tunic on, grateful for the long sleeves as she suddenly felt very cold. Shock was setting in. Riker draped his jacket about her shoulders.

“After we eat, let’s try to get some rest, Ro. We can spoon if you’re cold.”

She didn’t insult his offer by accusing him of being a bounder. Ro was so exhausted that she fell asleep almost immediately in Tom’s arms.

Tom wasn’t about to sleep. He was too keyed up. He just held her praying that she could get some rest. And that he could find a way out of this Cardassian hell.

Some three hours later, he heard noises in the corridor to their cell. Carefully climbing around Ro in order not to disturb her, he silently walked to the force field, wondering what was coming.

A moment later Glinn DuLac stepped into view. DuLac held his finger to his lips, motioning for Riker to be quiet.

“What?” Riker whispered as he tensed, planning to knock out the doctor.

“Gul Madred has authorized my leaving to go visit my family. We can go now. Madred does not want Ro Laren to stay on board the Reklar. Lemec won’t know we’re gone until he calls for her. As for me, I’m never coming back to this Lazon rat-run ship.”

Riker relaxed. He would never trust any Cardassian. But anything was better than staying aboard this ship. He went over to Laren, and gently shook her awake. He pressed his lips against hers in order to silence her when she opened her eyes.

“Quiet, Ro,” he commanded. Then he lifted her up into his arms. “We’ve got a get out of jail pass if we leave now.” Moments later, they beamed over to the Glinn’s Danube-class runabout.

Any plans for overpowering the Glinn and stealing the runabout were squashed by the two guards with weapons trained on them when they materialized.

So Riker placed Ro on a bunk bed, and then sat next to her. “Now what?”

“Varan II” the doctor said to the pilot.

Then DuLac turned to the two guards. He motioned toward Riker. “Set up their force field, then beam back to the Reklar.” He looked at Riker. “Sorry, Riker. But you and Ro will be confined to the area around the cot and the washroom. I’ll let you out when we get beyond the half way point in fuel consumption. That way, the only place you’ll be able to fly this ship, just in case you might be thinking about overpowering the pilot and me, is where we were heading in the first place.”

Ro had heard enough. She closed her eyes, her exhaustion was overtaking her again.

After the guards beamed away, DuLac said to the pilot, “Follow the route that we’ve planned.” And then the doctor beamed a broad smile toward Riker. “Varan II was where Madred ordered me to take
you. But my brother Remy and I,” he nodded toward the pilot, “thought of some place else. Salva II.”

“That’s a Federation planet.”

“A former Federation planet. There are settlers on the planet, now. From Cardassian controlled worlds. The only two cities on the planet need considerable rebuilding. It’s still fairly primitive.”

“Why the rescue, Dr. DuLac?”

“There’s been too much pain and death. I’m not going back. My brother Remy is going to drop us off, and then get my wife and children out of Lemec’s reach. I’m sorry I couldn’t get you back to a Federation planet, but if Madred ever found out that I’d done it, not even my former neighbors would be safe from Madred’s retribution. Madred may seem civilized, but, quite frankly, I think that he’s worse than Lemec.”

“So what are you going to do with us?”

“Ro Laren will rest. You’ll have to help farm, or do manual labor. They need skilled people. Do you have any skills, Riker?”

“I can hunt, fish - I once built a log cabin with my own hands. I’m good with engines too.”

DuLac seemed relieved. He wasn’t a completely useless too-educated ex-Starfleet officer. “Try to blend in. I do not doubt that sooner or later Madred will track you down. Before that happens, we’ll move you again.”

“What’s the world like? I think I heard it was an M class planet.”

“It can be pleasant during some months. You should be safe there, as least for a while. In the meantime Ro needs good food and peace of mind. My analysis of her physical condition is truthful. Half-Bajoran, half-humanoid - that is not always a stable genetic mix during the first trimester. She’ll need special care during the next few months until the fetus is healthy and safe.”

“Will you be able to help Ro?”

“I am not a specialist. But I will do my best.”

Riker considered DuLac’s other statements.

“We’ll do our best not to be conspicuous.”

The Glinn studied Riker, wondering if this man could ever be inconspicuous. Then, noting his protective attitude towards Ro. he was curious. “You are willing to accept another man’s child? Most noble Cardassians would never do such a thing. The child would be killed.”

“‘I’m hardly a noble man. My relationship with Ro is complicated, Doctor. I know that my brother let Laren escape when she became a Maquis. Picard protected her then too. So I am loyal to Laren. I will raise the baby as my own. I was planning on marrying Ro eventually. So if she comes with a daughter, I will be glad.”

She didn’t move. She didn’t want Tom to realize that she’d overheard this conversation. A small tear slipped down her cheek. Her emotions were truly unable to intelligently understand all the events of the past day.
Picard boarded the Galen. Everything appeared to be as it should be. There’d been no breech in the defense protocols. No unauthorized entry. There was no sign of struggle. Yet, he was a cautious man. Something seemed off. He started scanning. He sensed more than saw a movement with his peripheral vision. Ducking under the com panel saved his life. He grabbed the phaser hidden there, and started firing in the direction of his attacker. Using the command chair as a barrier, he rolled to the right side of the chair. And waited. More blasts came, this time from down the corridor. Picard cautiously looked around the chair, and saw a Suliban. He fired at the Suliban. He missed. But then the Suliban sparkled and disappeared. Picard warily approached. At first, he thought the attacker had been beamed away. But then he found ash residue on the deck. The Suliban had committed suicide rather than risk being captured.

Realizing that it was possible that the Suliban could possess technology that could beam through security shields, Picard was much more careful as he adjusted his Tricorder and scanned the ship. Eventually, he came to the conclusion that he was alone.

Picard then finished the task he’d first started. He found bugs. They weren’t there when last he’d seen Ro. So it was highly likely that whoever the man was, he was the one who had planted the spy bugs.

He sat down in the captain’s chair, and started checking the logs. After a few minutes, he found the log he needed. And the name he needed. Tom Riker.

He tapped his comm badge.

“Yes, Picard,” Kargan answered.

“I need to be routed through to Will Riker’s ship, the Mae Jemison. I think that they should still be in orbit around Qu’Vat.”

Moments later Riker’s face appeared on the view screen. “What is it, Sir?”

“Ro Laren and Thomas Riker have been kidnapped by the Suliban from Ootzey. It happened three days ago. That’s why Laren didn’t contact me on schedule.”

Will didn’t say anything for a moment. “How did Tom get to Ootzey in the first place?”

“I’m assuming that Tom is Maquis?”

“Yes, sir. I meant to tell you all about that.”

“What is there to tell, Will?”

“Tom joined the Maquis, did something to really piss off the Cardassians and the Federation, and ended up with a life sentence in a Cardassian prison camp two years ago. The Federation did not protest the sentence. Then I’d heard that some, um, mutual friends were planning on rescuing him. I can only assume that he rejoined some Maquis group afterwards.”

“Any idea who?”
“Someone named Kalita contacted me.”

Picard knew Will Riker too well. He was not the kind of man to let Tom Riker spend the rest of his life in a Cardassian labor camp. If he had known, he would have helped Will too.

“What did you really do, Will?”

“They needed latinum to help get Tom free, Sir. And since it was a Cardassian prison camp, I didn’t have any qualms about footing the bill.” Riker looked at Picard trying to judge his mood. “I told Kalita never to let Tom know that I was involved.”

“Can you contact Kalita?”

“I can try, Sir.”

“Tell her what has happened. We want as many people as possible searching for them. I don’t know the Suliban intent, but Will, it is entirely possible that they are actually in league with the Cardassians.”

Will shuddered at the thought.

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Woody Nakamura drank his coffee and tried a couple of Bularian canapés.

“Not bad,” he remarked to Alynna Nechayev, as she sipped her hot Earl Grey tea. She looked about the view off of her balcony; a suite of rooms in one of the most elegant hotels in all of Risa. The view was spectacular.

“How goes it, Woody?”

“Ro Laren and a lover, have apparently been kidnapped by the Suliban.”

“Busy Bajoran. That’s better than what I expected.”

“Picard won’t like it when he learns about it.”

“Picard is still too soft when it comes to sacrifices in war.” She put down her cup. “Still, when it comes to Picard, he will go after them. It’s more proof that the Suliban kidnapped Federation citizens.”

“The Maquis consider themselves to be an independent nation.”

“Doesn’t matter what the Maquis consider themselves to be. As far as the Federation is concerned they are our citizens. Never mind if they’re behaving like wayward teenagers, they are still our people.”

“I’ve heard from my sources. The Klingons are advocating all of Picard’s new treaty proposals. They’ve already approached the Cardassian government. And sent unofficial envoys to Ferenginar - and the Maquis.”

“And to the Romulans?”

“Nothing definite. But Gowron is as determined as Picard to create a new treaty in the DMZ. And to
stop the Romulans. And to find everyone involved in the deception and fraud. I still can’t get over how many different races and governments were tricked by this shadow group.”

“Mr. Data believes that the group goes back farther than Section 31. They may have been causing trouble for centuries.”

Woody nodded. “That would make sense. When Captain Archer dealt with the Klingons, there was actual talk of a mutual accord. Then it all suddenly changed. The Klingons were our enemy and we didn’t know why.”

Nakamura ate one more of the canapés.

“I’ve got a massage scheduled in a few minutes. Alynna, you really should try one of the Nuvian masseuses. The one named Qia is fantastic.”
Riker was in his quarters, sleeping. It had been a very long couple of sleepless days for him.

Robin was piloting the yacht to their next destination, a planet of the arts named Clarion. Her husband sat next to her, just gazing at her with adoration.

“Stop it, Wes. You don’t want me to bump into a planet or something, do you?”

“I could gaze at your forever. Conquer the universe for your smile. Soar to the heavens with you in my arms.”

“That sounds like fun. We’ll have to try that when we’re alone again.” She was enjoying herself. She corrected their course. “I couldn’t speak before, but I overheard something when I went with Captain Riker to Betazed to visit Deanna Troi.”

“Heard something?”

“I really wasn’t eavesdropping, Wes. I was just standing in a hallway when Captain Riker was speaking with Lwaxana Troi. It was about Deanna.”

“What, Robin?” He could tell by the expression on her face that it was serious.

“She’s very ill. Confined to bed rest. Apparently, years ago, she gave birth to some sort of alien baby.”

“Ian. I remember.”

“There was some kind of radiation poisoning. It injured her. And now, she’s in danger of losing Worf’s baby. And possibly losing her life if she tries to carry the baby to full term.”

Wes brushed fingers against her cheek. “You want to know if I can do anything to help?”

“Please, Wes. I only knew her briefly, but she is a friend. She needs our help.”

“Deanna was as a mother to me when Mom went off for a year to be CMO at Starfleet. I will go see if there is anything I can do.”

“When?”

“Now.” He glanced toward the corridor to Riker’s quarters. “Don’t tell the Captain what I’m doing. I don’t want to get his hopes up.” With that, Wesley was gone.
Minutes later he was on the front lawn to Lwaxana’s mansion. It was late at night there. And the weather felt like autumn. Only a few lights were still on - mainly towards the back. Wesley went exploring through the winding paths.

A moment later he saw Lwaxana sitting on her patio. She wasn’t doing anything, just staring at the flames in a small fire pit.

Wes carefully approached her. “Madam Troi?”

She was startled. “Who’s there?”

“Wesley Crusher.” He stepped into the light. “Forgive my intrusion. I didn’t mean to disturb you.” He noticed that she’d been crying.

“Wesley…” She rushed into his arms to hug him. After a moment, she sniffled, “You’re taller than me.” She took a step back and examined him as if he were a prospective suitor. “And you look very handsome.” She ran her hands across his chest. “Nice broad shoulders.” She observed his collar. “And a Lt. Commander? I thought that you’d dropped out of the Academy.”

“I came back,” he simply said.

“Well, that’s good.” She eyed him again.

Wes raised up his left hand and pointed to the ring on his finger. “I’m married, by the way.”

“Well, I never…” She grinned as she said it. “Do I know the most fortunate lady?”

“A Starfleet lieutenant named Robin Lefler.”

“I recall Deanna writing about her to me. Something about a practical, nosy woman who’d saved her life…”

“That’s a story for another day.”

“So why are you here, Wesley?”

“I came to see Deanna. To see if there was anything I could do to help my favorite honorary aunt. I can’t tell you how much she’s helped me in the past.”

Tears welled up in Lwaxana’s eyes. “She’s…” She started sobbing.

Wes darted into the house to find his way into Deanna’s bedroom. Lwaxana ran after him. The only reason she wasn’t shrieking was because she didn’t want to disturb Deanna. She found him standing next to Deanna, raising her limp arm.

“Shhh!” he ordered Lwaxana before she said anything. She held her tongue as she tried to figure out what Wesley was doing.

All of a sudden Wesley smiled. It was a dazzling, stunning smile which he sent Lwaxana’s way.

“What?” Hope started rising in her breast.

“The alien that hurt her. He didn’t mean to harm his mother. He didn’t know he’d done it - until now.” He turned toward Lwaxana. “He’s … someone I know…”

And then Deanna started to glow.
Lwaxana wheezed.

The light grew brighter.

Slowly Wesley motioned his arm over the length of her body. The light started to blaze, yet there was no heat being emitted.

Then the light faded. Wes reached over and turned on a bedside lamp. "Deanna will recover, Mrs. Troi. And when she wakes up, she will be hungry. Have her call her husbands then. Everything is all right."

"Mother?"

It didn’t sound like a word whispered by someone who’d had the vitality drained out of her. The Deanna that spoke actually sounded like the old Deanna.

"Mother? Wesley?" Her voice was stronger now, filled with surprise, and amazement.

And Lwaxana Troi cried out with joy as she enveloped her daughter into a smothering embrace.

"What’s going on?" Deanna was confused, as if she were waking up from a dream.

"I came for a visit," Wesley explained. "Did a magic trick or two, and fixed you up. You will be well, now, Counselor." He bent over and kissed her cheek. "I would love to be invited to your son’s naming ceremony." He was about to leave, when he thought of something else. "I’m with Captain Riker right now. He is well. Call him in your morning."

Wesley put his hand on Lwaxana’s shoulder. "I know it will be difficult, but please don’t tell anyone but Will or Worf what I did. I have secrets of my own that I must keep." Lwaxana agreed. She knew how to hold her tongue when it was necessary.

Moments later, he was back, seated next to Robin in the pilot’s chair. "How is she?"

"She’ll be fine, Robin. The alien - it was someone I once knew. In fact, I may have attracted the energy spirit to the Enterprise in the first place, unwittingly." He raised his hand to stop her questions. "Later, Robin. I'll tell you everything. Anyway, once I contacted the energy spirit and explained to him what was wrong, he gave me permission to cure Deanna. And I did."

"Let’s go tell Captain Riker!"

"No. I think he’d only believe it if he heard it from Deanna herself. She’ll be calling him shortly."

A few hours later, Robin rapped on Riker’s door. "Captain." She heard nothing from within his quarters. She started singing, somewhat off key and in a very loud voice, "Good morning. Good Morrr-er-or-ning…"

Riker threw something at the door. It thunked. He yelled, "Go away, Robin." He sounded very annoyed.

"Wesley and I need to get our rest too, Captain."

"Last time I’m the odd man out to a pair of honeymooners," he muttered loud enough for Robin to hear. Robin just giggled. He came out of his cabin dressed in his duty uniform. "Any chance for breakfast before you try to get some er, sleep?"

"Be happy to fix you some breakfast, Sir. The usual? Or would you like to try some strawberries
with your oatmeal?”

“If you fix oatmeal again, you will be court-martialed, newly demoted Ensign Lefler.”

“I think you’ll be changing your mind in a minute.”

Wesley approached. “Captain, there’s a call for you, from Betazed.”

Riker rushed to the comm panel. He feared the worst. Instead, it was the best. Deanna was on the view screen, smiling up at him.

“Deanna.” His voice broke as he said her name. He was so stunned, and then he became immeasurably happy. “Imzadi…”

“I’m better, Will. Almost back to normal. And I will be normal once I gain back the weight I’ve lost. I’m determined to eat every triple hot fudge sundae that I can find.” She sensed what he was feeling. “Wesley cured me.” She really couldn’t enlighten him. “I don’t quite know how.”

Riker glanced at Wesley. He knew how. But he wasn’t happy about the how of it. “And our baby?”

“Healthy. And normal. Or as normal as any baby can be when he has a grandmother-to-be like my Mother. I barely got out of bed this morning, when she started trying to dictate to me what I should have for breakfast…”

His relief was profound. Deanna was returning back to normal.

“Will, I have to call Worf now. I’ll be back in contact in a few days.”

“Goodbye, Imzadi,” he whispered. The screen went blank. He turned to Wesley. “You did cure her?”

“Yes, Sir.”

His anger was unleashed. “If you could cure her, why didn’t you do so earlier? Much earlier? Why didn’t you save Deanna from so much pain and suffering? Why didn’t you cure her sooner!”

“I didn’t know, Sir. And when I heard she was ill, no one told me the gravity of it. I went to visit her just to see how she was. That’s when I learned the seriousness of her condition.”

“And by curing her, you didn’t break any of your rules?”

“I did have to ask permission, Sir.”

“And what if you had not been granted permission? Would you have obeyed your rules?”

Wes stared at Riker, incredulous. “How could you even ask that question, Captain? Do you really believe I would not have helped Counselor Troi, Sir? Sure, I would have been severely punished. As if that mattered.”

Riker was mollified.

But Wesley was now the furious one. “Permission to leave the ship, Sir?”

Riker was taken back by the boy’s barely contained anger. And the request. He just nodded. And Wesley was gone in a flash.
Robin broke the silence. “Well, at least we know that he will return.”

“Meaning?”

“I’m here. If he weren’t coming back, I’d be gone.”

Riker went back to his ready room. And considered his words. He was wondering how he could have made such a stupid mistake. He couldn’t quite understand how instead of thanking Wesley for what he had done, he’d insulted him instead.

Part of him knew that in the old days, he’d become accustomed to the young boy Wesley following him around like a puppy dog. But this was a very different Wesley. A man. And a man who no longer hung on Riker’s every word. And Riker ruefully acknowledged to himself that he had missed the hero worship. He’d been angry with Wes because he’d thought that Wes had let Deanna needlessly suffer, when the opposite was actually true. Wes had risked himself in order to save her. Riker knew from experience that the Q Continuum did not treat transgressors lightly. And he should have never questioned Wes about his sense of honor.

The Boy -no, the man had the right to be insulted.

His door bell buzzed “Enter.”

Wes stood in the door. “Permission to enter, Sir.” The easy camaraderie they’d been sharing on their journey was gone.

Riker motioned for Wes to enter. Then he stood straight up and moved around his desk.

“Commander Crusher…”

Wes paused.

“I’m sorry.”

They said it in unison.

Riker suddenly grinned. “I’m an idiot, Commander. I lashed out at you instead of thanking you.”

“It’s understandable, Sir.”

“Is it?”

“Sir, I just thought about how I’d feel if I thought that someone had needlessly let Robin suffer instead of helping her as soon as possible. I then knew I shouldn’t have reacted as I did.”

“Wes, I should have never said it in the first place, too. Probably the only time in your career that you’ll hear me agree to being called an idiot.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t go so far as to say that.”

Riker was still chuckling, as walked back to his desk, and opened up a bottom drawer.

“Woody Nakamura left me a welcoming present.” He pulled out a bottle of Aldebaran brandy. He hefted the bottle. Then he ordered two low ball glasses from the replicator. He poured double shots into each glass. And he handed one to Wesley. Riker raised his glass. “To the man you’ve become, Wesley Robert Crusher. And may I never make the mistake of thinking that you’re a boy ever again.”
Wesley clinked his glass against Riker’s glass. “And may I one day be as wise as you and Captain, er, Admiral Picard.”

Riker hoisted his glass again. “To Picard.”

“To Picard.”

Riker picked up the bottle and moved over to the dark brown sofa. He placed his glass upon the glass coffee table, and poured another double shot. He offered the bottle to Wesley. Wesley refilled his glass.

Riker offered another toast. “To the Enterprise D. Damn finest ship that there ever was in Starfleet.”

“To the Enterprise E. Best new ship that will be in Starfleet!”

“Wesley, I believe we are the very first to toast her.”

They drank their brandy. And talked.

“I’ve been hearing stories about the wake. Did Mr. Data really throw the first punch?”

“He did indeed.” Riker took a drink and let the smoothness slide down his throat. “Hey, be grateful for the wake. That’s when your Mother finally had enough of Jean-Luc’s will he or won’t he nonsense when it came to their relationship.”

“Did she really seduce him in a hallway?”

“Don’t believe everything that Woody Nakamura says, Wes. He really likes to tell tall, tall tales.” Riker took another sip. “Point in fact, as I heard it, they were just honoring Klingon mourning rituals.” Riker laughed as he remembered the way Worf said it.

“I heard that Worf and Admiral Nechayev…”

“Actually it was Nechayev and Kang. And Worf.” Riker grinned. “It was one hell of a party. Barclay has the complete set of videos.” He drank some more. “A captain can always tell how good the brawl was by how many crewmembers he has to bail out of the brig.”

“I’ll remember that, Sir, if I ever become a captain.”

“Of course if the crew has to bail the Captain out of the brig, then it was more than one hell of a party.” He offered Wes some more advice. “Always make sure that someone stays sober so that you can get bailed out of the brig.”

Wesley laughed.

“Hell, Wesley, at the rate you’re advancing, you’ll be an admiral by next week.”

“I don’t want to be an admiral. I want a starship of my own.”

“Damn right way of thinking. Don’t ever forget it.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Stop calling me that.” Riker put his glass down to fill it again. “When we’re not on duty, call me Will. I’ve known you too long.”
“Yes, Sir. We do go a long way back, Will.”

Wesley filled up his glass again. Neither officer was bothering to measure any more.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you, Wes. How do you like marriage to Robin?”

“The crowning achievement of my life was convincing Robin to love me. I highly recommend marriage to the right woman. Why have you never tried marriage, Will?”

On the other side of the ready room door, Robin was grinning from ear to ear. She’d set the ship on autopilot for nothing could have contained her curiosity as to what was being discussed behind closed doors.

“I did meet the right woman, Wes. But I didn’t have the courage to trust in her. Or in myself. I left her for a promotion. And then when Deanna and I were both assigned to the Enterprise, I thought that we’d just pick up where we’d left off. But she’d have none of it. Oh, we did get together, now and then. But I didn’t think I could be a one-woman man. And she wouldn’t accept anything less.”

Riker drank some more. “I was a fool, Wes. You were smart enough not to make my mistake. You didn’t need to sow your wild oats.”

Wes finished off his glass. “Actually, Will, I did. What do you think I did for two hundred years?”

Nanites came to Will’s mind. “It took you two hundred years to settle down?”

“Something like that.”

“Where’d you go?”

“Mainly the Epsilon and Gamma Quadrants. There are planets there that you wouldn’t believe. Places that make Risa seem tame.”

Riker considered his words. “I really am a fool, aren’t I? I’m never going to get Deanna out of my heart. And now, she’s with Worf.”

“If you ever get a second chance, Will Riker, don’t blow it.” For Wesley had a sense of where the future was going for Captain Riker.

Riker was getting more than a little drunk. There were questions he needed to ask. “Why didn’t the Q do anything about the Borg? Why did they let them exist?”

“That was something they couldn’t change. That’s why Q warned Picard what was coming. It was all that Q could do. As for me, if I’d known about my abilities when Captain Picard became Locutus, I might have been able to interfere. At that moment. But now, if it were to happen over again, I wouldn’t be able to do a thing.”

“Why not?”

“Every being in the universe has someone who is stronger and smarter and more powerful over them. Even the Q. Those higher powers wouldn’t permit it. It isn’t a question of would we, it’s a question of could we.”

He glanced over at Riker. And saw his head nod. He removed the glass from Riker’s hand.
“You won’t have a hangover when you wake up, Will. It’s something that I can do for you.”

Wes was perfectly sober. He cleared away the glasses and went in search of Robin. Robin was sitting in the pilot’s chair. “How is the Captain?”

“He needed to vent.”

“He didn’t mean what he said, Wes.”

“I know that Robin. He’s been too hard on himself.”

“True. But he was a fool to lose Deanna.”

Wes studied his bride. “It’s not a permanent loss, Robin. Worf, Will and Deanna are going to be involved for a long time to come. Love is never as simple as they would think.”

“Are you insulting or complimenting our love?”

He didn’t take the bait. “We’re different. We always knew what we wanted, even if it did take a while for all the pieces to fall into their proper place.’

“You mean it took you a while.”

She watched the stars go by for a minute, before she finally got around to asking, “What would the punishment have been?”

“Banishment from the Alpha Quadrant. But I would have found a way to bring you with me.”

“In the future, make sure that you do find a way, Wesley Crusher. That Gamma Quadrant sounds pretty interesting.” She kissed him into silence.

=W=

Worf was at his duty station, when the comm officer said, “Mr. Worf, there is a message from Betazed for you. Ambassador Troi.”

Captain Jellico turned in his captain’s chair at this piece of news. He saw Worf pale.

“Mr. Worf, use my ready room,” he ordered.

Worf just ran into the room without saying thank you.

Worf was scared for the woman he loved. He hesitated for a second.

”Connect us,” he ordered.

Deanna’s face appeared on the screen.

He sat down hard, in the captain’s chair. “Deanna!”

“Hello, my husband.”

“You - you are well?”
“Yes, the baby and I are well.”

“How?”

“It’s a bit complicated. Wesley Crusher is involved. I’d prefer to explain it in person.”

“The boy!”

“Can you get leave to come and see me?”

“I’ll come as soon as I can.” He thought for a moment. “Does Will know?”

“Yes, I just got done talking to him.”

A spike of jealousy stabbed at Worf’s heart.

She knew what he was feeling so she explained, “I knew where Will was. I had to search in order to find you. His sub-space message went through first.”

Angry with himself for what he had felt, and then annoyed that Deanna had already guessed ahead of time, Worf grumbled, “Good.”

“We’ll talk later, Worf. My Mother is telling me that I have to go back to bed.”

“Obey your Mother.”

“Say Hello to Woofie for me, Deanna!” Worf heard from the background.

“Mother says Hello,” she dutifully complied.

“Tell your Mother that Woofie is very thankful that all is well now. And for her care of you.”

“I think you better tell her yourself. I am beginning to feel a little sleepy.”

Worf was immediately apologetic. “Rest, bangwI’ - My beloved.”

Deanna left the screen. Lwaxana stuck her head in front of it.

“Is she truly well?”

“Yes, Worf, she is recuperating. Her recovery really is a miracle. The doctors are speechless. I think we have friends in very high places, Worf.” She dried her eyes with a frilly lace handkerchief. “No matter. She’ll call you. When are you off duty?”

“In six hours.”

“Deanna will call you then - and I won’t even listen in.” Lwaxana signed off.

A moment later Captain Jellico walked into his ready room. He stopped when he saw a Klingon crying into his sleeve. He turned to exit.

Worf abruptly stood up. “Captain, I apologize for sitting in your chair.” Worf walked around the desk, waiting to be disciplined.

“Worf, a chair is where a body usually sits when they take a sub-space message.” He moved over to sit in his chair. “And Deanna?”
“She has recovered, Sir. My Mother-in-law says that it is a miracle. My Mother-in-law is not prone to too much exaggeration. Deanna and our son lives.”

With genuine sincerity Jellico said, “I am very glad to hear that, Mr. Worf.” Another moment later a Klingon warrior left his captain’s ready room.
The Plot Thickens

Chapter Summary

Jellico finds out what is going on. Reg proposes.

Captain Jellico was waiting in the transporter room, and he was actually smiling, for Mr. Data and his friend were about to beam on board.

Nella rushed into the transporter room just as the shimmering sound of the transporter began. She stood close to Jellico, not quite touching his arm, but when she moved a little, her fingertips would brush his.

Edward kept on smiling.

When the two figures finally beamed on board, Nella started laughing as she rushed forward to embrace her great aunt Carrie DelaChancie.

“What a surprise, Aunt Carrie! Why didn’t you let me know you were coming?”

“I didn’t know I was coming until Mr. Data kidnapped me.” She stepped off the platform. And pointedly looked at the Captain. “You must be the Captain Jellico that Nella never does bother to write home about.”

“Aunt Carrie!” Nella protested.

Mr. Data stepped off the platform. “I apologize, Captain Jellico.” Data shook his hand. “Mrs. DelaChancie is old and quite senile. Pay no mind as to what she says.” Nella gasped. Then Data smiled. “Or you could believe, Captain, that Carrie’s sole purpose for forcing me to kidnap her, was in order to bring her here to inspect you.”

Jellico froze. He was pleased to see Mr. Data. But he was not quite sure what to make of Nella’s great aunt. Or Mr. Data, for he hadn’t seen this side to the android on the Enterprise D.

“Aunt Carrie. You’ve tortured enough people for one day. Why don’t I have your things brought to my quarters, and after you’ve rested, we’ll talk.” She kissed the android’s cheek. “Data, did you bring your violin?”

“Of course. You requested that I bring it.”

“Good. There’s a concert tomorrow night. You’re going to be my surprise guest star.”

By now, Jellico was quite confused. But the one thing that stuck out in his mind was that Nella would be sharing her bedroom with her great aunt.

As Nella led her aunt away, Data chuckled.
“I was told that you’ve acquired emotions, Mr. Data.” Jellico sounded gruff. And even more confused.

“Confusion is a common emotion around Mrs. DelaChancie, Captain Jellico. In spite of her age, she can be quite intimidating. She is a true matriarch. She has a bawdy wit. I adore her. And Nella loves her.”

“Nella’s already told me quite a bit about the lady.” They walked out of the transporter room.

“She is really here to inspect you and to make sure that you are good enough for Nella.”

“I gathered that.”

“She didn’t believe me when I told her that you were a man to be reckoned with.”

“You spoke up for me, Mr. Data?”

“Of course, Sir. Why ever not? If Nella has chosen you to be her lover, then I am your friend as well. Nella is a very rare woman. I respect her greatly.”

“I don’t know what else to say but thank you.”

“Though you best beware, Captain. Carrie is determined to see Nella married with a vengeance.”

Jellico grinned. “So am I, Mr. Data. I was planning on proposing during the next shore leave.” He had just forgotten that he was conversing with an android.

“May I suggest stellar cartography instead? When Nella isn’t playing her piano, it’s one of her favorite places in the universe.”

Jellico understood. “Speaking of pianos, was there one on your transport ship?”

“I knew the minute I saw it, that you had purchased it for Nella. So did Carrie. That is why she greeted you as she did. Any man who would buy a Bechstein grand piano for Nella most definitely has marriage on his mind.”

“I want it to be a surprise for Nella, tomorrow night, during the concert.”

“Then I had best tune it tonight. It is a lovely piece of craftsmanship, Captain. I am sure that Nella will want to play a duet with me at some point during the evening.”

Jellico stopped at the door of Mr. Data’s guest suite. “You suite, Sir.”

“Thank you for escorting me, Captain. Please, would you step inside for a moment.”

“Yes, Mr. Data. Are you still a civilian? If not, I’d like you as my First Officer.”

“Sir, that is not why I am here.”

“Why then?”

“May we speak in your ready room in fifteen minutes?” Jellico nodded.

“Why, Mr. Data.”

“Captain, technically I am a civilian, but I am acting on Starfleet business. I must inform you of some
very serious matters.”

“I see.”

“And Captain?”

“Yes, Mr. Data?”

“Commander LaForge, Dr. Leah Brahms-LaForge, and Lt. Commander Barclay, will be rendezvousing shortly with the Cairo.”

A very puzzled captain walked back to his bridge. Those little niggling thoughts that he’d been having about the whole Picard mess were beginning to form into something. Captain Jellico was just ordering some coffee from his replicator in his ready room, when Mr. Data requested admittance.

Jellico sat down. “What is going on?”

“Captain Jellico, Rear Admiral Alynna Nechayev will be contacting us shortly.”

Moments later, the captain was being hailed.

“Admiral Nechayev,” Jellico politely greeted the lady. “What can I do for you?”

“Captain, everything that Mr. Data will tell you is top secret. You are to share this information with no one other than the individuals of which Mr. Data approves. I order you to obey any command that Mr. Data makes.” She looked at Data. “I have been informed that you will also be rendezvousing with Captain Riker and Lt. Commander Wesley Crusher. Admiral Picard may be coming as well.” She waited for Jellico’s reaction and was not disappointed. “Nechayev, out.”

Alynna loved dropping bombs on her captains.

Mr. Data observed that Jellico had stopped breathing when he’d heard of Picard’s promotion.

“It’s beginning to make sense, Mr. Data,” Jellico finally stated.

“But it is also top secret. I take it that you never believed in Picard’s guilt?”

Jellico motioned toward the chair in front of his desk. “At first I did. Then I began to try to make sense of it. As you may know I am not personally a friend of Admiral Picard. But I also knew that Picard was not capable of betraying Starfleet.” Jellico eyed Mr. Data. “I also know that Picard has a great many people who would still give up their lives and their careers for him. A cowardly traitor who killed innocent people as well as Starfleet cadets, just does not engender that kind of depth of loyalty.”

“A correct assessment, Captain.”

“So, Mr. Data, why is Picard in the DMZ?”

Data told him.

Jellico shook his head, not quite believing what Picard was attempting to accomplish.

“I’ve got to hand it to Admiral Picard. He never does anything small.”

“When we have our meeting tomorrow, Captain, one of the things that we have to do is find Ro Laren, and Tom Riker. They have been kidnapped by the Suliban.”
Jellico nodded, personally satisfied that he now knew that Ro Laren did have Picard’s help in escaping from his ship. But that was a matter that he would discuss with Picard in private.

“Mr. Data, if I arrest Admiral Picard when he steps foot on the Cairo, what would Admiral Nechayev do?”

“Nothing, Sir.” He could tell that he’d surprised Jellico. “Everything that Admiral Picard has done would not be revealed. He would be publicly tried as traitor. And sent to prison. And the Klingon Empire probably would go to war with the Federation. Gowron would also take the arrest as personal insult to him.”

“Is Commander Daren involved in any of this?” Jellico hated the idea that he had to be suspicious of Nella, but he also had to know.

“No, Sir. The only officers involved from the beginning are Admiral Nechayev and myself.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“Admiral Picard wanted to protect his former senior staff, just in case things did not go as he had planned, so all are uninformed as to the nature of Admiral Picard’s missions.”

“That’s quite a plan that Picard thought up.” And for the first time, Jellico began to realize the real difference between himself and Picard. Jellico knew he was a very good Starfleet captain. But Picard was more. Much more.

“And Mr. Worf?”

“Admiral Picard told Mr. Worf that he needed to get to the Klingon Empire as quickly as possible. And under what circumstances. Mr. Worf made the arrangements. Mr. Worf did not ask why. He just did it.” Mr. Data considered his words. “Mr. Worf is as loyal to you, Sir.”

“What?”

“You’re his captain, now. Mr. Worf says that it is an honor to be in your service. Actually, it is because of Mr. Worf’s opinion, that Admiral Nechayev has chosen the Cairo to be the site of the secret DMZ negotiations. They will be held in seven days in orbit around Orias III.”

Jellico almost dropped his coffee cup. “What? Why didn’t the Admiral Nechayev say anything about that?”

“Because I am a civilian, Captain. That way, if things do not come to fruition, all of Starfleet can honestly say that I did it - not Starfleet.”

“What about security for the delegates?”

“We have the entire Klingon Empire fleet at our disposal, Sir. In fact, the Klingons will be escorting most of the delegates.”

Jellico nodded at this. “I take it that you have everything arranged?”

Data handed him a data chip. “Only thing left to be done, Sir, is to clean the guest rooms. I have already arranged the menus.” Data just grinned as Jellico digested the news.

“My guest suites are always clean, Mr. Data.”

“Of course, Sir. Now, with your permission, I’ll go talk to Mr. Worf.”
“You’re a civilian, Mr. Data. You do not have to ask my permission.”

“I am studying the art of diplomacy, Sir.”

Jellico didn’t know if Data was joking or not.

As they stepped upon the soggy Salvan II soil, the first thing that Riker noticed was that it was cold. And it was near dawn.

He lifted Ro into his arms when he saw how muddy the ground was. Judging by the way the earth was smelling, Riker decided that it was probably early spring. He walked behind DuLac who seemed to know where he was going. “You know this place?” Riker suddenly stopped when he heard the runabout take off. “You’re staying here?”

“Yes. I told you that I was going to stay and help Ro as best I could.”

Riker caught up with the doctor as they still walked. “You couldn’t have planned all this in just a few hours.”

“Actually, I’ve been planning on coming here ever since I was assigned to the Reklar. Not all Cardassians are cold blooded rapists, sadists and murderers, Riker.”

Tom accepted his words at face value.

“The town itself was greatly damaged during the wars. We’ve been helping them out.”

“Who else?”

“My brother Remy and I. He’s just gone to drop off some supplies at the town center. He’ll be back to pick me up. I have to go to the planet where I’ll be joining a colony after I disappear.” He handed Riker a space comm unit. “If I’m not on planet, I can be here within an hour if you call. I’ve got my own land unit, but Remy will have to go to a place safe from the Obsidian order, and swap runabouts. You don’t need to know the details.”

The sun was rising when Riker and Ro inspected their sanctuary. It was a small house with cobblestone walls and a composite roof. There were two small out buildings, a paddock and a small barn. In the distance, Riker could see a garden plot as well as fields beyond. Though he didn’t see it, he could hear running water somewhere in the forest north of the house.

A woman had joined them as well as two burly men using a small hover platform to carry supplies and food. The woman was a Terran/Bajoran named Ava who was the town’s homeopathic healer. She had curly brown hair piled high in a bun. She was rather broad and tall, and acted like she was a very competent, strong woman. Sorkan Aron and Emanon were two Bajoran brothers. They were identical, and looked exactly like one would expect terrafarmers to look.

One of the brothers spoke. “The fields are planted with katterpod and kava seeds. You’ll have to plant the house garden yourself. Soon.” The brothers put the supplies in the house, then walked towards the town.
“Are there a lot of Bajorans here?” Ro asked.

Ava nodded. “There’s about 180 of us at Oldton. I’m married to a Bajoran, Din Oll.” She helped Ro into the house and assessed Ro’s condition when they reached the bedroom. “Dr. DuLac told me you are with child. When the time comes, I have done the traditional birthing ceremony many times. The sheets are clean.” She looked at Riker. “The stove has a power source. Heat two large pots of water. I will bathe her shortly.”

“Thank you,” Ro whispered.

“I have a salve for your injuries. Then you must recover from your Cardassian vacation. They are not the best of hosts.”

Laren laughed. It was a weak laugh but it was music to Riker’s ears.

“I’ll be all right.” Laren tried to rise.

“Typical Bajoran stubbornness,” she sighed.

“I’ll say,” Riker said by the stove. He walked into the bedroom. “My name is…”

“No!” Ava ordered. Do not tell anyone your real names. If we do not know who you are, we cannot betray your names to anyone.”

“Call me Thelonius, then. And this is Vash.”

“After the water is hot, go heat up some jumja tea. There’s also larish pie, dried kava fruit, kava breakfast rolls and kava soup.”

“You grow a lot of kava around here, eh?”

“Don’t sound so superior, Felonious. You might like kava once you eat it. It’s one of Bajor’s most favorite foods,” Ro tartly observed.”

Riker hoped that Ava wouldn’t catch the way that Ro had changed his name. But she did. And it stuck.

When they were alone, she asked, “Why Vash?”

“She’s an archaeologist that Picard knows.”

Ro remembered shipboard gossip. “Picard’s troublemaker?”

“Yes, indeed. Mr. Data and Guinan told me a lot about the senior officers of the Enterprise. And if Picard hears rumors about Vash being here, hopefully he’ll investigate.”

Ro’s eyes widened in surprise. “Smart.”

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Reg had come to Château Picard to tell Mela that he was leaving to go on a special mission.
They were outside, in the moonlit rose garden.

“I don’t want you to go, Reg. I thought that you were going to stay on Utopia Planetia and work there.”

“Captain Picard needs me, Mela.”


“I will Mela.” They kissed for a long time. “Mela?”

“Ummm…” she murmured.

“I’ve been thinking. What I’m doing with Mr. Data and Geordi is important work. But I don’t actually have to stay at the UP all day, every day.” He pointed toward the west. “There’s some land over there that isn’t good for vines. But it’s got a nice view. And a great old stone house that needs a lot of repair. I was thinking about buying it and fixing up the house. And building a work lab. That way it would be easy to do my work, and still help Marie with the vineyard.”

“And come to see me?”

“Actually, I was thinking more along the lines of us visiting Marie, together.”

She stirred from his embrace. “What?”

“Marry me, Mela. I, uh, love you. So much.” He rushed his words, too nervous to stutter. “If it’s too soon for you, I do understand. I want you to be very sure about me. About us. I love your kids and would be so honored if you’d let me be their dad, so please think about it and say yes.”

Mela decided that he was absolutely adorable when he was nervous around her. She put him out of his misery. “Shut up, Reg. I need to kiss you.”

“What?”

“I think from now on, I’m going to be spending my future kissing you a lot.” She surprised him with an open mouth kiss. The force of her passion was astonishing to him. He fell backward and brushed up against some florets on a floribunda vine. It took him a while to notice the thorns.

A few minutes later, they both broke for air. Reg was giddy, even as pulled away from the roses and removed a box from his pocket. “I sort of thought that you liked this type of ring when we visited Cartier.” He showed her a one carat trillion cut diamond solitaire.

“A ring?”

“It’s an old custom to give an engagement ring.”

“You were thinking of marrying me, even when we were in Paris?” This surprised her somewhat.

“Mela, I wanted to marry you the day that I met you. Captain Picard thought he was asking me for a favor. But you were holding John Luke, and smiling. And all I wanted was for you to smile at me like that one day.” He kissed her again.

“I think we should honeymoon in Paris…”

Reg was so thrilled that he dropped the ring. He knelt searching for it. Mela knelt too, then caught him by surprise as she kissed him with unrestrained passion. Reg had never suspected how romantic
making al fresco love in an ancient French rose garden under a moonlit starry sky could be.

Marie wisely stayed indoors.

\[=\Lambda=\]

Jean-Luc Picard was a very frustrated man. Klingon ships were searching. So were many Federation ships, though most were told that they were looking for rebels. And the Ferengi were looking in earnest - especially since DaiMon Behlk had offered fifty thousand bars of latinum each for both Riker and Ro.

Picard was getting the Galen ready. He’d loaded the quantum torpedoes that Behlk had bought on board the Galen after he arranged for DaiMon Behlk to upgrade all the sensors again.

There were many data chips that Mr. Data and Mr. Worf would analyze as well. Picard received all of the information about the Suliban who’d come to Ootzey, from Behlk. When he was ready to leave Ootzey he went to pay his bill. And then paid triple the bill that Behlk had presented to him. Behlk then fell on his knees and proclaimed his undying love. Picard made other arrangements as well.

Now Picard was doing the systems check on the Galen, and was about to leave Thelka’s orbit when Wesley popped in for a visit.

“Admiral Picard…”

Picard put his ship on autopilot. “Wes, good to see you again. And so soon.”

“Captain Riker would like you to join him on board the Jemison. For dinner.”

“Tell Captain Riker, yes. I…”

Moments later the ship was no longer in orbit around Thelka. He could see the Jemison, in his view screen. “Wes, surely you’re powers aren’t unlimited?”

“Once in a while I get tired - Robin’s fault.”

“Wes…” Picard was not diverted. “You’re really a Q, aren’t you?”

“Not all the time, Sir. Only on the good days, like today. By the way, Deanna and the baby are better. Both will be well.”

Picard was relieved about Deanna. But he also understood that it was because Wesley had cured them. And that troubled him. He was trying to see beyond the surface changes in the man. “Deanna Troi is dear to me. I am pleased that you will care for those who love you.”

“I will help all of you whenever I can, Sir.”

“Then do you know where Ro Laren and Tom Riker are, Wesley. Can you rescue them?”

“No, Sir. That’s beyond my limited powers. But, I do think I can find out more about the Suliban. I will keep you informed.” Wes disappeared. But his voice lingered for a moment. “1700 hours, Admiral.”
Picard beamed over precisely at 1700 hours. Riker greeted him warmly.

“I did the cooking,” Robin announced as she hovered in expectation.

Picard breathed an audible sigh of relief.

“I hope you enjoy dinner in your new quarters, Sir,” Riker cheerfully announced. Picard noticed the huge roguish smile that Riker was sending in his direction. And was puzzled.

“Commander Crusher, I am hereby formally placing former Starfleet captain Jean-Luc Picard under arrest for being a fugitive from the Federation, and a traitor to Starfleet. Throw Jean-Luc Picard in the brig.”

“What?”

Wesley hauled Picard to the brig.

“I’ve been waiting a long time to do this, Captain.” As the brig’s force field went up within inches of Picard’s nose, a very mystified man asked the question, “Why, Will?” He had observed that Robin was trying very very hard not to laugh.

“Remember Baran, and Data throwing me into the brig?” He nodded. “My turn to throw you into the brig…”

Picard was amused, but was not about to give Will the satisfaction of knowing it. “Always knew you were an s.o.b., Will.”

“I do my best, Jean-Luc.” Riker let him out of the brig. “Now, let’s have some dinner.”

It was the finest fried chicken, biscuits and Aurelian coleslaw that Picard had ever tasted.

After dinner was over, Riker remarked, “Now I know why Wesley married you, Robin. The only trouble is, I still can’t see why you married him.”

“I’ve had Wes’ cooking, Sir. Now it was my turn to save the universe.”

Since the crash of the Enterprise Picard had experienced few chances to have a relaxing meal with friends. He enjoyed learning much more about Wesley and Robin, as well as appreciating dining with Will as a friend rather than as his commanding officer. Then they played poker. Picard had missed such camaraderie.

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The lights in the concert hall were dimming. Captain Jellico escorted Mrs. DelaChancie to a chair next to his in the front row. The lady had been instrumental in Jellico’s conspiracy to keep Nella Daren away from the hall and discovering his present too soon.

On the ebonized glossy finish of the piano stood a crystal vase filled with lavender cristilia. A note was on the music rest. Then spotlights focused on the curtain. Mr. Data and Nella Daren were announced. There was polite applause. Their program was announced, consisting of Saint-Saens’ Havanaise and Bizet’s Carmen Suite arranged by Sarasate for violin and piano.
Jellico questioned their choices, for they were not exactly easy performance choices to play.

Nella stepped onto the stage and walked up to the classic concert grand piano. She gasped. She stroked it. It was not a holographic reproduction. It was a real Bechstein. Then she glanced at Edward and gave him a dazzling smile.

Nella picked up the card, read it, and put it in into the pocket of her glittering twilight blue evening gown. She bowed toward the audience, sent another brilliant smile in the direction of the ship’s captain, sat on the piano bench and then looked toward Data. He stepped onto the stage holding his Stradivarius. And he was wearing a midnight blue tuxedo, with a cerulean rose boutonnière.

Nella nodded. They played with the confidence of artists who really knew their music, and were comfortable and very familiar with each other’s ways.

After the first few minutes, Edward was simply in awe of Nella’s talent. He knew she was good. But Mr. Data brought out her brilliance. Edward never automatically thought of Mr. Data as an android again. For Data was a musician - a concert artiste.

Carrie patted Edward’s arm. “She could have been a concert pianist,” she whispered into Edward’s ear. “But she preferred the stars. Thank you for letting her do both on board your ship, Edward.”

The next number was Nella’s solo version of Gershwin’s Rhapsody in Blue. At the end of it, Edward was cheering as loudly as the audience. Few could ever recall seeing their captain so enthusiastic about anything. Or anyone.

Three more acts appeared, including a pair of tap dancing Vulcans, an a capella group from engineering singing somewhat sanitized engineering space chanteys, and the Benzite Mordock doing an Elvis impersonation.

Then it became the captain’s turn. He stepped onto the stage and held out his hand for Nella to join him. Much to his surprise, instead of the recorded music accompaniment, Mr. Data stepped up to the piano, and started to play the introduction to their duet choice - “If I Loved You.”

Not a sound could be heard in the hall. Though there had been rumors that the captain could sing, most had considered it to be a shipboard fairy tale. Then Jellico held Daren’s hand. They started to sing. When it was over, this standing ovation was genuine too.

Nella stepped forward. “For our final performance of the evening, the noted composer, Mr. Data, will perform selections from his tone poem, “Memoriam.”

Not sure what to expect from an android composer, Edward escorted Nella to their seats. Data started with the scherzo entitled “Tasha Yar,” and finished with the theme and variations named “Eline”.

Thunderous clapping announced everyone’s pleasure in Data’s work. Nella brought out all the performers again, for the final curtain call. Then the crowd and performers moved toward the reception at Six-Forward, the Cairo’s version of a bar.

Mr. Data escorted Carrie. Edward offered Nella his arm. She took it, but they didn’t move with the others. Instead, he guided her to stellar cartography. As always, she stopped to breathe in the beauty, hand-in-hand. She chose to thank him for his gift by kissing him, after making sure that the monitors were turned off. She didn’t notice him palming a small box that he’d left on the railing before the concert.

“Edward, that is the most thoughtful, wonderful gift that I’ve ever received. Thank you, you dear man.” She didn’t give him a chance to speak for a while. Edward was still showing some restraint,
though. Finally she gave him a chance to breathe. What she wasn’t expecting was what he did next. He dropped down onto one knee.

“You know I’m a direct sort of man, Nella. Some don’t seem to appreciate my style. But I think that you do. Nella, I know that there are many reasons why we shouldn’t consider a relationship between us. But, I love you. And that reason trumps everything else as to why we should be together. Marry me, Nella. Marry me.”

“I need to think about it, Edward.”

He winced in dismay. But he bravely stood and opened the jeweler’s box to reveal a three carat, emerald cut, Burmese flawless blue sapphire flanked by two matching one carat diamonds. It was set in platinum. “It was my grandmother’s antique engagement ring. She had a happy marriage.” He smiled as he also answered her unspoken question. “Deborah preferred something more modern. However, I have noticed that you do like antique things - including me.”

Nella’s eyes glistened. “All right. I’ve thought about it.” She wrapped her arms around his neck, and paused, studying him as if she were memorializing the moment. Then Nella kissed him for a very long time. “Yes, by the way,” she whispered, as they both finally got around to breathing. A moment later he slipped the ring on her finger. And he kissed her as if he was wearing his heart on his captain’s sleeve.

“The reception,” she reminded him.

“Dammit.”

She laughed. “ Comes with the territory, my dear captain. Comes with the territory.”

They went to the reception holding hands in public. And Nella was wearing his ring. To say that the crew was speechless was not an understatement.

Carrie hugged Edward like a long-lost son. Mr. Data kissed Nella on the cheek, then shook Edward’s hand. “Do not hurt her,” he whispered. It was a warning.
Revelations

Chapter Summary

Picard and Riker are kidnapped. And Picard throws a dinner.

Chapter Notes

Please note, that this chapter does contain scenes of torture of violence. It's graphic but not extreme. Under age 18 not permitted.

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In a dive, on an everything goes kind of planet, near the edge of the Bad Lands, Captain Ragner, was sitting drinking at a dirty bar, on a sticky stool, imbibing something fuchsia. It was the kind of drink that when a drop of the alcohol hit the bar, it bubbled the paint.

Ragner was the Vorlo free-trading pirate captain of the Adama, that had once used Ro Laren as a Maquis liaison and then rescued Jean-Luc Picard and a pregnant woman with twins. He was a large man, with long grey messily braided hair, wearing a very dirty suede tunic, and carrying multiple weapons. Some of which were hidden in places no one would want to willingly inspect. The last being he ever expected to see approach him, was a Cardassian. The Cardassian also said something to Ragner that he never expected to hear from a Cardie.

“Buy you a drink?”

Ragner thought for a moment. He supposed that he could kill the Cardie after he had the drink. He nodded.

After two drinks were poured, and the Cardie paid for them, the Cardie pointed to a table in the corner. Ragner kept a hand on his phaser as he took a seat.

The Cardie placed a piece of paper on the table and shoved it over to Ragner.

Ragner couldn’t believe what he was reading. Or the images. Some Ferengi was offering fifty thousand bars of latinum each for Ro and someone named Riker.

“I know where she is, Captain.”

Ragner just looked at the Cardie.

“I heard you had a special relationship with Ro Laren, Captain. I know where she is. You have a ship that can get us there. Interested?”

Ragner couldn’t deny this. “Who are you?”
"I’m just a lowly Cardassian named Remy. I’m a shuttle pilot. I own a local shuttle."

"You know I could kill you and hunt for Ro myself."

"But I know where she is. We could get both of them - fifty thousand latinum bars each."

"What’s to prevent me from killing you after I get both of them?"

"They’re in Cardassian space. Different security codes going in and getting out. You can’t get out if you kill me."

"Are you trying to tell me that my little waffa bird is hiding under Cardie noses?"

"No Cardassian officer knows that she is there. She was a prisoner of Guls Lemec and Madred. She escaped. You know what they did to her."

Ragner gagged, shocked and furious at this news. He may have had plans for Ro but they were his plans. Now the Cardies had hurt her. Again. He was going to avenge Ro Laren.

"I need to get my crew together and my ship ready. It might take a week or so."

"I’ll come back to this bar in seven days."

"How did Laren escape?"

"My brother and I helped them. My brother wants to get them out of Cardassian territory before Lemec or Madred realize that we were involved. We’re going to disappear too."

"Seven days it is, Cardie," Ragner grunted.

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“All outgoing subspace communications have been halted, Sir. News of the Admiral’s arrival will not be transmitted until you approve it, Sir,” Mr. Worf stated. “Only local authorized incoming and outgoing transmissions will be permitted, Captain.

“Good, Mr. Worf. Tell our guests to beam on board. I’ll meet them in Transporter Room 3.” Jellico rose from his chair. “Mr. Worf, you have the bridge.”

When he reached the transporter room, he signaled for the crewman to proceed. Riker, Lefler, Crusher and Picard arrived. Jellico stepped up to Picard and extended his hand. “Welcome aboard, Admiral Picard. It’s an honor, Sir.” Picard shook his hand. He was dressed in an Admiral’s uniform, and up until the moment when Jellico had extended his hand, Picard wondered if Jellico was going to have him arrested or not.

Jellico stepped up to Riker. “I hear you’re now the new captain of the Enterprise E. My sincere congratulations, Captain Riker.”

Riker found it hard to believe that Jellico was truthful. But he shook Jellico’s hand politely. “Thank you, Captain.” Riker stepped forward then turned towards his officers. “Captain, may I introduce Lt. Commander Wesley Crusher and Lt. Robin Lefler.”
“How do you do.” They greeted him.

“Commander Crusher is aide to Mr. Data, and Lt. Lefler is with me.”

As Jellico escorted them from the transporter room to their destination, he remarked, “Mr. Data, and Mr. Worf are waiting for us in the captain’s conference room. Dr. Brahms, and Commander Barclay have just arrived.”

After the greetings were exchanged, Captain Jellico motioned for everyone to be seated. Jellico was at one end of the long oval table. Picard was at the other end.

Jellico nodded at Picard.

Picard stood, and smiled at his fellow officers with remorse. He knew he’d greatly upset his senior officers.

“I apologize for deceiving some of you - at least for a little while.” He saw their questioning looks tinged with dismay and maybe just a little indignation at not having been told.

“My mission is vital to the welfare of Starfleet.”

He told them everything pertinent. Then he ended with, “By the way, the person who proposed that I do this mission was Ro Laren. Ro may be Maquis, but she just desires what I want - what Starfleet wants. An equitable peace in the DMZ.” He watched as they all began to understand his goals and what he had done to achieve them. “There is something more. A secondary mission. Ro Laren and Thomas Riker have been kidnapped by the Suliban. We need to find both of them. Many sources are now searching. Though, the treaty and the fraud in the treaty are our primary missions.”

“And keeping the delegates safe,” Jellico added. “Considering the number of parties involved, and the way that the shadow group has insinuated itself into most segments of the various societies involved, it is logical to assume that the location and individuals involved in this conference are already compromised.”

Mr. Data stood up. “Sirs, if I may? Gowron is sending three Klingon fleets for protection and escort duties. Mr. Worf will be in charge of all security details concerning the Klingons. There will be Vulcans and the Betazed on board every ship as security officers in case they can sense some aberrant thoughts or intents.”

Data sent information to everyone’s padd. “Thanks to Commander LaForge’s investigations, there is proof linking the sales of the quantum torpedoes to various factions and individuals, and then tracing where the torpedoes went after that. Payments were traced to various shadow accounts of many individuals of import. Right now other members of my staff are trying to determine who were involved merely for financial gain, and who are actual members of the shadow group. Some have suggested that the shadow group is a part of Section 31. I have found no evidence linking the two. However, I have found one common link between all the individuals, groups or governments.” Data paused, for dramatic effect. “The Suliban.’

“Suliban? Who the hell are they?” Jellico asked.

“That is the question, Captain Jellico.” Data replied. “According to Starfleet’s historical archives, they are a minor incident in Captain Archer’s Enterprise logs. I soon discovered that most of the official records about that first contact were removed or altered. Considering the kind of influence it takes to alter such records, I believe that the Suliban have been involved in Federation events for centuries. Captain Picard and the Enterprise D were the first to encounter the Suliban - and that was
in 1850 on Earth. When I realized that the entire Starfleet record of that particular encounter was altered in contrast with my own internal records, I deduced that the Suliban are the driving force behind the deceptions. That group calls itself the Suliban Cabal.”

Picard stood. “Thank you Mr. Data. Though it is not in the official Starfleet records of the incident that led to the crashing of the Enterprise D, I was swept into the Nexus. I met Captain James T. Kirk there, and convinced him to leave the Nexus paradise in order to stop Soran and once again save the Enterprise. Along the way, Captain Kirk told me about his Kirk Cabal. It is a counterintelligence group that he formed to address the issues of shadow groups within the Federation. I do not know if Captain Kirk did this specifically because of the Suliban, or if he did it just on principle in order to protect the Federation.” Picard paused, and studied each face at the table. “The Kirk Cabal still exists today. They are the admirals who approved my missions. I do not know all the members of the current council, but some of the names who are involved are of import, including Alynna Nechayev, Woody Nakamura, and Ambassador Spock.”

“The history of Kirk with the Klingon Empire is a rather interesting one,” Mr. Data started to explain. Data recognized the look that Picard directed at him. Data went to the next item on his agenda. “Some of the Starfleet officers that are involved, are being arrested as we speak. Some are being watched. Within the next twenty-four hours, there will be more arrests. I do not believe that we will stop the Suliban completely, but we are inflicting considerable damage to their network.”

After all the details were discussed, Captain Riker went up to Admiral Picard. “And here, I thought that you were just lazing around that pool on Qo’noS, with sexy masseuses all day long.”

Picard gave Riker an annoyed look.

“What is Commander LaForge?”

Mr. Data joined them. “Admiral Picard, Admiral Nechayev kept Commander LaForge at Utopia Planetia. There was a concern about the Enterprise E.”

“Why was I not informed?” Riker demanded.

Data started to explain why a delay in the schedule was occurring yet again.

Captain Jellico approached. “Admiral, may I speak to you in private?”

“After you, Captain.” It was not Picard’s place to worry about the Enterprise any more.

Picard and Jellico walked onto the bridge together then entered the ready room. A few of the bridge crew didn’t quite believe the sight of the admiral’s rank on Picard’s collar, but were too well trained to say anything about it out loud. Besides, Worf had returned to his duty post and was staring at the crew. He looked dangerous.

After Picard was seated, Jellico went to the replicator. “Earl Grey, Admiral?”

“It’s Jean-Luc, Edward.” Jellico nodded, and brought Picard his tea as well as coffee for himself. “Now, what did you wish to speak about?” Picard picked up his tea.

“Security. I don’t think that there is enough of it. You’re thinking too logically, Jean-Luc. What if what we know about the Suliban Cabal is just the tip of the iceberg? You’re focusing on a few individuals influencing decisions. What if there are whole races being controlled outright by the Cabal. I’m not afraid of small groups. I’m afraid of an armed fleet coming after us. Larger than the Klingon’s numbers.”
“What do you suggest?”

“Get every armed ship we can, here - right now. Starfleet. Ferengi. Maquis. Bajoran. Doesn’t matter. Set up a perimeter of defense.”

Picard tapped his comm badge. “Mr. Data. I am changing my security orders. Per Jellico’s suggestion, contact every armed Federation ship within reach of our location to come immediately. Red Alert. Admiral’s authorization to go to Warp 9. Then contact Nechayev, and have her get all other available ships sent as well. Jellico will update you as to whom.”

Edward was a bit stunned that Picard had so readily accepted his suggestion.

“Can you think of anything else?”

“Who will be in charge of all the ships?”

“You will, Captain. You have one of the best tactical analytical minds I’ve ever encountered.” Picard tapped his badge again. “Mr. Data, I wish for Captain Jellico to organize all of the defenses and placement of ships.”

“Understood, Sir.”

“Is there anything else, Captain?”

“No, Admiral.”

Picard stood, acting as if the situation was not the slightest bit awkward between them. “I understand congratulations are in order, Edward.”

“Thank you Jean-Luc.”

“Nella is an extraordinary woman. I envy you your courage by marrying an officer under your command. I could never bring myself to do it.”

Jellico blinked. He’d never quite envisioned Picard making that statement.

“I won’t wish you all the best, Edward, because you already have it with Nella.” Picard extended his hand.

Jellico shook it.

“Just out of curiosity, Edward, do you drink Nella’s herbal tea blends?”

“I like them.”

Picard chuckled. “You most definitely are a man in love. I am happy for both of you.”

“And what about you and Dr. Crusher?” If Picard could be personal, so could Jellico.

“I intend to marry the lady just as soon as I can walk around Starfleet Command and not be clapped in irons and thrown into a brig.”

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Picard glanced around the banquet table. Mr. Data had arranged a private dinner for all of Picard’s former officers. And for a change, he had shown some restraint. It was just a simple meal with only a few flourishes ala Riker.

During the dinner, Picard had kept the conversation light and amusing. He especially focused on Nella Daren, rather delighted that the lady had found someone who suited her inclinations and temperament. He was fond of her. He also wondered what it said about him since, apparently by Nella’s standards, there was not that much difference between himself and Edward Jellico.

Nella was seated next to him. Across from Picard was Riker, flanked by Worf, Leah Brahms and Barclay on one side, and Mr. Data, Wes and Robin on the other.

Barclay stood up, and cleared his throat loudly. “Attention everyone, I have an announcement to make.” All chatter stopped. Barclay picked up his wine glass and looked at Captain Picard. “I just want to say thank you, Admiral Picard.”

“For what, Mr. Barclay?”

“Forcing me to travel with a mother and three children. Mela and I are getting married.”

Picard was truly pleased by this engagement and he congratulated him.

“And how is Dr. Beverly?” Reg innocently asked.

“Very pregnant,” Wes replied, interrupting the admiral. “That’s why Mother isn’t here.”

Picard knew Wes was enjoying his embarrassment. So was Riker, from the look on his face.

“Pregnant with twins, “ Riker added.

Another round of good wishes and congratulations followed. But as the convivial words died down, Picard sat back down, and poured a synthehol brandy. Then he passed the bottle.

“We are facing one of the Federation’s darkest hours. We’ve been invaded from within. It’s a threat equal to if not greater than the Borg. And this enemy has accomplished that which no other enemy has ever done. They have actually captured Federation planets with our own co-operation. The depth of their infiltration, is chilling. Trust no one. We are truly fighting for our way of life. Our freedom.”

“And it’s up to us to stop them…” Riker solemnly whispered.

After the dinner was over, only Riker stayed behind to talk to Picard

As Leah left the dinner, she started talking to Wes, Robin and Barclay. “Come on back to my suite,” Leah asked. “There are so many things I’d like to learn about all of you. Data tells too much. And Geordi is…” She looked at his friends. “Well you know what Geordi is. I need to know more.”

“We’d love to come, wouldn’t we Wes?”

Worf approached.

“Come for a drink, Mr. Worf,” Leah asked.

Worf hesitated. “Of course. But first I must talk privately with Commander Crusher.”
Wes came over to Worf. “We’ll be there in a few minutes. Worf and I do need to talk for a moment.”
“The observation lounge,” Worf ordered.

The others walked away.

A few minutes later, after making sure they were alone, Worf confronted Wesley. “Deanna said that you saved her. And the life of my son. I am grateful if you did so but I do not understand how.”

“Worf, it’s a long story. When the time is right, you can ask Mrs. Troi, or Admiral Picard.”

Worf growled.

“You’re not going to let it rest, are you?”

“Would you, if it were Robin Lefler?”

“No, I wouldn’t Worf. The short of it, is that I am somewhat of a cousin of Q. I have some abilities, though no where near the level of the Q Continuum.”

“Like Guinan?” Worf observed.

Now Wes was surprised by the way Worf was taking this news. “You’ve known about Guinan?”

“She’s an old friend.”

Wes considered his words. “Does Jean-Luc know?”

“He has never asked.”

Wesley started laughing. “Guinan still has a lot more to teach me, I think.”

“I think so, too.” Then he slapped Wes hard on the back. “You know I am in your debt. I will never forget.”

“I could do nothing less for my first crush. And you.”

Worf slapped him again. “Let’s go drink to our brides.”

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“Are you going to stay on board Jean-Luc, or are you going back to your yacht?”

“I think I’ll spend tonight on the yacht. Once the delegates start arriving I’ll have to stay on board the Cairo.” Picard stood. “Care to see the little ship that I own, Will?

“Thought you’d never ask, Jean-Luc.”

Picard tapped his comm badge reaching Data. “Mr. Data, I’m beaming over to my yacht with Will Riker.”

“Understood, Sir.”

A few minutes later, Picard was giving Will a grand tour. He also pointed out that the biometric security system would recognize Will’s DNA as well.
“She’s a beauty, Jean-Luc. When can I take her out for a spin?”

“There are a few mysteries I’d better reveal to you, before I let you anywhere near my captain’s chair, Will.” He paused, “You are off duty, correct, Will?”

“Yes, Jean-Luc.”

Jean-Luc pointed to a control that was labeled volume. “Top of the line Klingon cloaking device, Will.”

Will just eyed Jean-Luc. “I’ll pretend that I didn’t hear you say that, Jean-Luc.”

“It came with the ship. I haven’t gotten around to having it removed. Yet.” He motioned towards other sections. “Upgraded weapons arrays - almost as many as the Enterprise D. I’ve also added quantum torpedoes of my own. But what she lacks in firepower, she makes up for with agility. It’s like flying a skeeter on the Martian run. You can take all sorts of challenges that a wiser man wouldn’t. She’s fun to pilot.”

Will understood. “I can hardly wait.” Then he glanced around the bridge. “I take it that our conversations are secure?”

Picard nodded. He pushed a few buttons.

Will sat down on the chair to the right of the captain’s chair. “What do you make of Wesley? I’m very grateful for what he did to help Deanna. But then he turns around and does things like relocating this ship in the blink of an eye.”

“I’ve noticed. Though I haven’t detected any signs of a god complex that usually occurs with such powers. Q is still prone to such thinking. And Q is far older than Wesley. Though I do believe that Wes is the wiser.”

“I don’t quite know how to deal with him, Jean-Luc. I want to treat him as an ordinary officer. But then I find myself wondering that once he comes to the Enterprise E, will I begin assuming that Wes will pull off a miracle every time I have a situation? Or worse, will I subconsciously expect Wes to routinely save the day without even bothering to think up my own solution? I just don’t know how to judge him. I don’t even know if Wes knows the extent of what he can or can’t do.”

“Will, with Guinan as his teacher, I think that Wesley will know how to deal with any situation. I always knew that Guinan had some sort of powers, though I hadn’t realized the extent of them. I only heeded her advice. I didn’t expect her to eliminate the danger herself.”

“And what happens when Starfleet finds out about Wes - and then realizes that we knew?”

“That’s another ethical issue. But for that issue, I’d prefer to err on the side of silence and caution. There are too many people who may see Wesley as a weapon, and threaten his family in order to force Wesley to do their bidding.”

“Understood.” Will stretched. “Got anything blue to drink, Jean-Luc?”

“Would you settle for green?”

A minute later, they were imbibing. “Good stuff,” Riker remarked as he sipped the green stuff. “Once all of this is over, we should have a poker party. I still have some kidnapped credits that I need to rescue from the clutches of your rather large Nagus bank account.”
Picard was about to inform his former Number One of the odds of the actual likelihood of that event ever occurring when all the proximity alarms started blaring.

“What the…”

A Galor-3 class warship uncloaked right in front of the Galen.

“When did the bloody Cardies get cloaking devices on their ships?” Riker roared as he reached for the Galen’s cloaking control, and Picard went for the weaponry. Neither was fast enough. They were targeted by transporter beams, and vanished.

Even as the Cairo fired phasers in the direction of the Cardassian ship, the ship disappeared.

Red alert claxons were going full blast. Worf was already plotting possible trajectories of the ship’s flight. He didn’t glance over to the elevator when he heard it open. He knew that the captain would be in it. “We have to go after them!” Worf shouted as Jellico entered his bridge. “They’ve got Picard and Riker!”


“They weren’t on board the Cairo, Sir. Admiral Picard and Captain Riker beamed over to the Galen fifteen minutes ago.”

Before Jellico could even order it, Mr. Worf started sending out alerts to all the Klingon ships that were stationed near the Cairo.

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Tom Riker was sweating. He’d forgotten just how much work hard work really was. And how good it felt to be doing something freely for oneself instead of being stabbed with the Cardassian version of an cattle prod.

He rested on his axe, and wiped his forehead. It might be early spring, but the sun was hot.

“Lunch,” Ro called out.

He dropped his axe. “Laren! You’re not supposed to be doing anything at all!” He ran toward the house, with the intention of reading her the riot act. Again.

She was laughing as he came lumbering toward her, wear the too large mud boots that he’d found in a closet. He followed her into the house.

“In all my days, I never thought I’d see such a sight. Riker, the kava farmer. Go clean up.” She nodded toward the old water closet.

He just looked at her, not really wanting to admit that he really liked hearing the sound of her laugh. She had seemed too fragile three days ago. Now, she was teasing him.

“You can cook?” Tom didn’t hide his incredulity.

“I lived in the refugee camps for years, Tom. You’d be surprised at what I can cook. It might not
taste too good, but it would keep you alive another day.”

“I was chopping some wood for the fireplace. It will save on fuel. Right now we don’t have much to
trade for supplies and food.”

“Except wood.”

“Right.”

“Figured out how to get the wood cords to market?”

“I’m working on it.”

He sat down at the small wood table and watched her ladle kava soup.

“Details, Laren. Details.” He proffered her his best, bad boy grin. Ro laughed again.

And then his mood changed as she sat next to him. “How are you feeling, Laren?”

“The scabs are itching. But the salve that Ava left calms it a bit.” She left unsaid anything about her
nightmares.

“If there is anything I can do to help…” Tom really meant it.

“Give me a few more days before you offer to scratch my back, Tom.”

She was flirting with him. And he was glad.

“You know, being trapped behind Cardie lines is not too bad with the right partner.”

She leaned over and lightly kissed his cheek. “Thank you, Tom.”

He eyed the soup. “Let me guess what’s for desert. Kava cake.”

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Ten armed Cardassians were waiting for them when they materialized.

Riker was about to be Riker, and swagger his way through whatever was coming, when he observed
Jean-Luc’s face. There was fear there. Great fear. And Riker was shaken to the core

The armed guards just motioned the way with their large disruptors. “Coming, Sir?” was all he said,
as he gave Picard a shoulder to lean on.

He thought he heard Picard whisper something.

“I can’t…”

They walked down long dark corridors, with triangular form spot lit highlights every thirty-six
meters, reflecting on the black marble floor.

They were shoved into a cavernous black chamber with more spot lights alternating with ominous
impenetrable shadows. It was cold. Very cold. And there were shackles dangling from a ceiling that
was not visible in this dark. “What is this place?” Riker whispered, noticing the frost on his breath.

“Four lights…,” Picard whispered.

“How kind of you to remember, Jean-Luc.”

Riker instinctively stepped in front of his friend, as if to shield him from whatever it was that was coming.

A Gul stepped into a light. “I am Gul Madred. I am so pleased that Jean-Luc remembers me. I wasn’t sure that our time together had made any impression on the…,” Madred paused as he savored the moment, “…on the Admiral.”

Riker moved forward, into a more aggressive posture. “We are Starfleet officers. By the terms of the Cardassian/Federation…”

“ENOUGH!” Madred roared.

He pulled out his jeweled Jevonite dagger from its hilt. He pointed the tip at Picard. “You are not here for me, Jean-Luc.” He stepped into Riker’s personal space. “You are here for me, the both of you - William and Thomas Riker. I didn’t know you had a brother. Imagine my delight at meeting him. Maquis and Starfleet. Soon to be Brothers in blood.”

Will couldn’t grasp how Tom could be here too.

Gul Madred relished Will’s sense of confusion. “You’re here for me, oh great new captain of the Enterprise E. - and then there is your Maquis brother. I wonder what I will do to the pair of you together.” The expression he gave Riker was that of refined evil. “I have Ro Laren as well.” Madred watched as Jean-Luc Picard comprehended his words. He had inflicted great pain to Picard without even touching him. Madred decided that soon he would torture Laren in front of Picard. Perhaps he would force Ro to pleasure him with her mouth He already started plotting refinements.

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Beverly was dozing in front of her grandmother’s fireplace. She found comfort in the sound of the crackling and popping fire. Guinan was moving about, fixing supper. All of a sudden, something happened, and Beverly heard the sound of breaking glass.

“Guinan, are you all right? Guinan didn’t answer her.

Beverly started to get up, but Guinan came over and stared at her. She sat upon a small needlepoint footstool directly in front of Beverly.

“It has begun.” Her voice was calm. Devoid of emotion.

“What’s begun?” Beverly didn’t wish to worry but the way that Guinan was looking was alarming her.

“You’ve got to be very brave, Beverly. And trust me. Things will become right, in time. But not until we endure the darkest of nights.” She rose, and straightened out her dark brown robes about her. “I have to leave now. But have faith.” She kissed Beverly’s cheek, then hugged her. “Have faith
Beverly. You know whom to trust. Trust no one else.”

She left. And then Beverly heard the beep of a sub-space transmission arriving.

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Robin was speechless, as she looked at her beloved. “What do you mean, you can’t go after them?” she whispered, too shocked to really understand what her husband was saying.

“I can’t, Robin. If I try, I will be stopped. Violently. There is nothing the use of my powers can do to find Admiral Picard and Captain Riker.” He looked at the stars twinkling beyond the Jemison’s window port.

She listened to what he’d said. Then wondered if he’d missed the obvious. “Darling, then use your brain. Or is that off limits too?”

“No, Robin… I can use my brain. But what happens next is solely up to Admiral Picard and Captain Riker.”

“So true, so true…”

Both jumped when they heard those words.

“Q!” Suddenly Wesley was excited. “I cannot go, but can you…”

Q started shaking his head as a negative. “Not even I can interfere with this, Wesley. Jean-Luc would never forgive me if I prevented him from saving the universe yet one more time.”

“Will he be able to save it?”

“He’s Jean-Luc Picard. What do you think?” Q hugged Wesley. “I don’t say this very often, but, I do apologize for every minor little thing that I’ve ever done to you and your Mother…” Q disappeared.

“What the hell was that all about?” Robin demanded. And then she saw something on Wes’ face. It wasn’t just confusion. It was fear.

“There’s only one reason why Q would mention my Mother. Something is going to happen to her…”

Robin grabbed his arm. “Wes, don’t go.”

“What?”

“Guinan is with your Mother. She’ll protect her. But you - you are needed here. It’s your duty. We have to find them…”

Commander Crusher began to fully fathom the nature of this test, and how he was being tested.

A second later the Cairo went into warp drive.

Wes blinked and they were now on board the Galen. He sat down in the captain’s chair and began to
plot a course. “Robin, check the space lanes. Find us the fastest way to the Cardassian border. Then tell Worf what we’re doing. And that we have a cargo hold full of quantum torpedoes.” He was nothing but purpose now.

Robin gasped. Loudly.

“What?”

“The Cairo is not going after Picard and Riker! Mr. Data is insisting that the conference continue…” She gulped and looked at her husband, “…and then he wishes us good luck.”

Wesley started laughing.

“Wes!”

“Don’t you get it? One of my mantras at Starfleet Academy was…”

“What would Picard do… Mine too.” She comprehended what Data was about. “We both know what Picard would do - and saving his own life instead of dealing with the peace treaty is not it.” Tears were threatening. “Maybe we should be with the Cairo?”

“No, Robin. I can’t save them my way. But I can save Admiral Picard and Captain Riker their way. We’ve got a fully loaded ship. A better cloaking device than the Cardassians. Two brilliant tactical analysts on board her. Of course I might be prejudiced on your behalf. And maybe I’ll stretch things a little and say go Warp 12. Or 14. As Riker would say, we’re huntin’ for bear…”

“You’ve got me too,” Guinan remarked as she took the chair on the other side of Wes.

“What’s happened with my Mother?”

“She’s safe. Gowron’s guardians have surrounded the cottage. And Q has sent his mother to watch over Beverly.” Wesley tried to absorb the concept that Q had a mother…

They were alone now. They weren’t chained. Riker was walking around in the dark, trying to judge the perimeter of the room, and where the hatches were.

“How the hell did they get Ro and Tom? I thought the Suliban had kidnapped them.”

“Will, I’ve long suspected that the Suliban and the Cardassians were associated with each other. I wonder if the Cardassians also know that the Suliban are working with the Romulans, too.” Picard hoped that they were being monitored.

“But what’s the purpose?”

“All the parties are being used by the Suliban. I think the Suliban truly think that they can conquer us all.”

Picard finally moved and started searching the metal desk that Madred used.

“So what happens now?”
“Will, we will be tortured. Starved. Denied water. Denied our dignity. But the real torture will be what Madred will do to us in front of each other. Madred wants us to feel twice the agony.”

“Sir…”

“Our kidnapping might be in response to the Suliban Cabal. Or it could just be Madred seeking revenge.”

“Or it could be a little of both.”

Picard did not recognize the voice.

But Riker did. “Gul Lemec.” He pivoted to observe the Commandant’s approach.

“We were out for a test run with our new cloaking device, and all of a sudden, like magic, there you were, Picard. Madred just couldn’t resist the temptation. You were the bonus, Captain.” Lemec stepped into the light. He extended his hand. “We haven’t met. I am Gul Lemec, Gul Madred’s superior.”

Picard didn’t move.

“Unfortunately for you, I do not interfere with Madred’s business. Though he did interfere with my business a few days ago. No matter. You might wish to know that Thomas Riker and Ro Laren will be interrogated by the Grand Inquisitors of the Obsidian Order in a little while. Then they will be returned to me.”

Lemec waved his hand. Soundlessly, six guards appeared. In spite of his struggles, Riker was grabbed, stripped naked and left dangling from the overhead shackles. His toes barely touched the deck.

The only thing the guards did to Picard was to handcuff him to a heavy metal armchair.

Madred walked into the light. He kept looking back and forth between Picard and Riker. He ignored Lemec for a moment. Then, speaking idly, as if he was trying to decide what to chose for dinner, he asked Lemec. “Which one do you think will beg for mercy first? Riker or Picard?” He looked down at the seated admiral. “My money says that it will be Picard who will beg first.”

“Probably, Madred. I do not care to play your games. This is not what the Obsidian Order has commanded us to do.”

“The Obsidian Order will get both of them, almost in one piece.”

“One piece each, Madred!” Lemec warned. Then he walked away.

Madred nodded at a guard. Riker’s torture began.

The guard picked up something that looked like a fishing gaff with a sharp spike. He poked Riker’s ribs. Then he used the hook portion to pull at his flesh.

Riker did not make a sound.

Picard closed his eyes.

Madred whispered in Picard’s ear, “If you do not watch, human, I will kill him.”

Waiting until Picard opened his eyes, Madred then continued his leisurely torture. Riker’s every rib
was injured by the gaff. Some injuries were serious, and all were very painful.

Riker made no sound.

Madred stayed the guard. Then he approached, and walked completely around Riker, inspecting him. “Do you have any medical conditions of which I should be informed, Captain Riker? I would hate to be accused of mistreating a sickly prisoner. Though you do look to be in excellent health to me.”

He hefted his Jevonite dagger. Then swiftly moved, slicing a thirty centimeter deep gash from Riker’s groin to his left inner thigh.

This time Riker made a small sound.

The next move was a sharp blow to Riker’s manhood. Blood dripped. The moan was louder now.

Light years away, Deanna started screaming her Imzadi’s name.

“Interesting,” Madred observed. He glanced over at Picard. “Human, you made little noise when I first touched your cock. Ah, the pleasure you gave me. How you struggled when I took your body… It was only during later sessions that you began to beg for my favors.” He considered Riker. “Perhaps I have misjudged Riker’s ability to withstand my interrogation techniques.”

“You haven’t asked a fucking question yet!” Riker yelled.

Madred smiled at the guard. Suddenly the gaff was shoved up against Riker’s ass, jabbing him, ripping the flesh severely.

Madred then looked at Picard. “Your turn, human.”

Picard sat there, in his uniform, and considered what could possibly be worse than this. Or the savage torture that had happened before.

Madred flipped on his four lights. “You know, only a few days ago I was playing with a friend of yours, human. Ro Laren is such an entertaining slut. She was hanging around, just as you are right now, Riker. Except that we were in my quarters. I was throwing a small dinner party, and she was my guest of honor.” Madred observed the tears streaking down Picard’s cheeks. He wiped one away with his dagger. “Why do you cry, human? It’s not like I took your woman pregnant with your unborn daughter and tortured them here in the cold. At least it was warm in my quarters.”

“What?” And for a brief second, Picard was scared that he had meant Beverly… And then he understood.

“Don’t worry, human. That bitch of a Bajoran lives. Someday, your daughter will be my slave. Imagine your daughter at a very tender age fulfilling my every wish. My every inclination…She may even service Jil-orra.”

“No!!!” In spite of the way he was handcuffed to the heavy solid metal chair, Picard found inhuman strength from somewhere. He pushed to his feet and swung the chair over his head trying to bring it directly down on to Madred. Madred tried to avoid Picard’s maneuver. But he was off balance. He bumped against his desk. And fell forward.

The dagger plunged straight into Picard’s abdomen and was dragged upward into his chest as Picard fell to the floor brought down by the weight of the chair.
Data Steals a Ship.

Chapter Summary

Picard and Riker need rescuing. Data steals a ship. And Picards officers and friends rally round.

Deanna was panic-stricken. There was nothing that Lwaxana could do, other than to summon a physician to give her daughter a sedative. And then she called Worf.

In spite of everything that was happening, Worf took the call on the bridge. One look at his mother-in-law’s face told him how desperate Riker’s position was.

“Deanna is hysterical. She says that they are torturing Will to death. What is going on, Worf?”

“Be brave for both of us, Lwaxana,” Worf slowly answered, unaware that everyone on the bridge was now listening to his every word. “Will is in the hands of our enemies, and I cannot rescue him.”

“I order you to rescue him, Worf!” Lwaxana screamed. “I am the senior Ambassador from Betazed! You have to…”

Worf yelled, “Quiet, Woman! The Cardassians have my cha’Dich as well as Will, Lwaxana. I am swearing a blood oath to avenge their honor. But I cannot do my sacred duty and rescue Will and Picard. Tell Deanna that she is my beloved. And beg her to forgive me. For I must do what honor demands. Worf out.”

For the first time, Madred realized that he may have gone too far. He immediately summoned a doctor. And was informed that Glinn DuLac was off the ship on leave.

Madred yelled at the guards to lower Riker and release him. The moment Riker was let go, instead of trying to kill Madred, he grabbed his duty tunic, and tried to staunch the blood, bubbling up from Picard’s chest.

“You think they’re somewhere in the Badlands, Wes?” Guinan looked as if she was just watching the flames roll by, fascinated by all the blazing colors flowing about the ship.

Robin was using echolocation to try and find the Reklar midst the gravitational anomalies and plasma
storms. Robin was also very grateful to Picard for the foresight to install ultra-upgrade ship systems, including the shields, that were on board the Galen.

“Nearest bolthole, Guinan. The Cardassian official government is already apologizing for the kidnapping. They claim it was done by rogue Obsidian Order operatives. Though how they got their hands on the Reklar, the Cardassian high command claims not to know. But I know…”

Guinan knew that certain Cardassians had just made an enemy for life in Wesley. And Wesley was going to live a very long life.

“I've found a ship!” Robin yelled, interrupting her husband’s vow of vengeance.

Guinan didn’t have to check the screen. “It’s them. I feel… Riker’s presence.” She was now fearful. “Something has happened to Picard.” She squeezed Wesley’s shoulder. “Go, Wesley. I give you my permission.”

Wes disappeared.

“Guinan, you know anything about quantum torpedo arrays?”

“No, Robin.”

“Then you pilot the ship while I plot where the torpedoes can do the most damage.”

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Beverly thought she heard something. When she looked out her window into the twilight, she saw several men from the village standing in a perimeter all around her cottage. She reached into an antique black basalt Wedgwood urn that was on the right end of her mantel. She picked up a small phaser and opened her door. She recognized a neighbor from down the lane.

“Ian Reynolds, what’s going on?”

“We don’t really know, Beverly. We were just told to grab our weapons, and protect you.”

And then to her absolute amazement, Ian performed a perfect Klingon salute and stood braced, as if he could take on any foe.

Ruby MacPherson approached. “Beverly. Guinan asked me to bring over some of my stew and biscuits. She said she couldn’t fix your dinner tonight. That something had come up.” She crossed over the flagstone doorjamb. “So, what came up?”

“Jean-Luc is missing.” She started to sway as the fear and the fatigue took hold of her. Before she knew it, she was carried to the sofa, by Ian and his brother Mal. Ruby proceeded to make some Corellian jasmine tea.

“Calm down, gel. You’ve got your babes to worry about. Won’t do a body any good if you get too upset.”

Beverly started to struggle to get up.

Ruby sat beside her, pressing the flat of her warm hand against Beverly’s cheek. “Eat something.
Keep up you're strength. You are going to need it.” And with that she went to get Beverly some dinner.

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Wesley froze time as he observed the scene in the torture chamber. It wasn’t an absolute zero time freeze. Everyone in the Continuum knew that was something they really should never do. But it was close enough. If Wes chose to do so, he could keep Picard alive like this for centuries. But it was not the right thing to do. He considered his options. And then released the time line, stepping into the scene.

Madred was astonished by the sudden appearance of this unknown human.

By this time, Lemec had come back to the chamber, and immediately wondered where the extra Starfleet had come from.


Will was so relieved to see Wesley that he muttered aloud, “Thank God!”

Wesley placed his hand on Picard’s chest. “I am not God, Captain.” Suddenly a shimmering whitish glow encased Picard. “I’m placing him in stasis. That is the only thing I can do, Captain.” A second later, the three officers disappeared.

Six seconds after that, a barrage of quantum torpedoes hit the Reklar. Each had been targeted to disable the Cardassian ship. But two united with the plasma flares, and severe damage was done.

“Stasis?” Robin asked.

Riker screamed the same word too. He didn’t care about the blood he was losing, his own severe injuries or the fact that he was naked, bother him.

“I’m sorry, Captain Riker,” Wes tried to explain. “I cannot save Captain Picard. He’s got to get to the Cairo sickbay. The stasis field I’ve created will only hold about twelve hours.”


“And that is precisely why I cannot. Captain Picard ordered me not to.”

“I’ll go get Beverly,” Guinan announced.

Wes stopped her. “And how would we explain her presence, Guinan?”

He was about to ask Robin to plot a course to the Cairo’s new position, but Robin had already done that, as well as send a message that they’d rescued Picard and Riker. And where the Reklar was. And that they needed an emergency doctor to meet the admiral’s yacht as soon as possible en route. It was a matter of life or death for Admiral Picard.

The low hum of the anabolic protoplaser could be heard. Guinan was treating Will’s less grievous wounds. She could only staunch the more serious ones. For she’d scanned broken ribs, injured lungs and pierced organs. Riker was on the chaise lounge now, his gaze still fixed on Picard.
“Go, Guinan,” he pleaded. “Get Beverly. Get somebody that can help him!” Riker ignored his pain. And then he remembered Laren and Tom. He passed out from the weight of all of it. He could bear no more.

Guinan sadly shook her head. Her wren brown hat only flapped a little bit. “Will, believe it or not, Wesley’s decision is the right one. It’s what Jean-Luc wanted Wes to do. Picard does have his reasons.” She talked to the unconscious man as she tended to his wounds. “Trust me, Captain Riker.” Then she covered him with a warming med blanket.

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On the bridge of the Cairo Worf bellowed and whooped his victory cry.

Everyone stopped moving.

“Worf!” Jellico bellowed back.

“The Boy - that is Commander Crusher. He’s rescued Riker and Picard! And turned the Reklar into salvage.”

Under his breath, Jellico whispered, “Thank God.”

Worf’s jubilation stopped. His voice became somber. “Admiral Picard is gravely injured. Commander Crusher is requesting an emergency medical team to leave at once to meet the Galen. They’ve had to put Admiral Picard in stasis. And they don’t know how long the field will hold.”

“Get it done, Mr. Worf.”

Hours later, Jellico entered his quarters, and found Nella waiting for him. He could see that she had been crying. “Are you all right, Nella?” He sat on his Prussian blue sofa next to her.

“That’s my line, Edward.”

“I’m still on duty. You heard about Picard?”

“Yes. Poor Beverly.”

“Why poor Beverly?”

“I know how I would feel if it had been you instead of Picard.” She began to massage his shoulders. “Beverly is pregnant with twins.”

She felt him stiffen. “Damn. How regrettable.” He felt the need to hold Nella close for a moment. He found his handkerchief and dried her eyes, then placed a gentle kiss on her brow. He released her. “I have to go. Gowron is demanding that the conference now take place on Qo’noS. And I have about a dozen other leaders insisting that it take place on their worlds.

“Go with Gowron, Edward.”

His instinctive inclination was to deny her an opinion, but then realized that she did have that right. He was beginning to learn how to live with a fiancée.
“Why, Nella?”

“Gowron protected Picard against the Federation. His status as a leader of the Klingon Empire would be endangered if he doesn’t get the conference. Gowron has the most to lose.”

“You should take the Bridge Officer’s Test, Nella. You have the mind for the strategy.”

She kissed the top of his head.

He reluctantly rose. “I think I’ll just tell Gowron that he has the conference and deal with the Admiralty later.”

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“Pah. It’s the nobility that always causes the problems.” Remy readily agreed.

“Is Ro safe?”

“Probably.”

Ragner eyed the Reklar. He yelled at the communications officer. “Send a message to Starfleet command. Tell them that I am claiming the Reklar as salvage. And give them this location. Tell Starfleet to come and get my ship.” Captain Ragner sighed. “I need to get out of this business when the only trustworthy contact who won’t rob me in the entire DMZ is Starfleet.”

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It had been eleven days since they’d arrived on Salva. Ro’s wounds had healed to the point where most were only scabs or red scars that would one day diminish. Riker had been pleasantly surprised that the only thing he needed to trade for food and seeds and fuel, was his own labor. And he was returning home to Ro, carrying some smoked fish, more kava, and a large jug of honey ale. It was mildly alcoholic. He also had a smaller flask of Bajoran ale for himself.

He almost dropped both jugs, when he stepped into the house. Ro was wearing a simple skirt. It was dark blue, with a light green long sleeve blouse. He whistled his appreciation. Anything was better that the glinn’s tunic over a pair of too big pants.

“Ava bought this over. Said that she grew out of it. I don’t think that even as a child, it actually fit her.”

Riker was amazed. “I don’t get this place. It reminds me of what…”

“…the Maquis was like in the old days.” Ro finished his words. Riker agreed.

Riker displayed the bounty that he’d brought.

Ro shook her head. “You’re going to have to fix the fish, Tom. I can’t bear to smell it.”

He poured a small glass of honey ale for Ro. “Try this. Ava says it may help settle your stomach. It’s what they drink around here when a woman is pregnant.”

Ro sniffed then sipped. It tasted good.

Later than night, Tom put his arms around Ro, spooning, and tried to get to sleep. But the bed was narrow. And she kept wiggling. He was trying to be a gentleman, but she was making it very difficult for him.

Sighing with exasperation, she turned in his arms and faced him. “Riker!” She was about ready to scream with frustration.

“What, Ro?”

“Do you really need a written invitation? Kiss me!” She put her arms around his neck and insisted, ‘Kiss me, or you are a fool.”

His thumb caressed her cheek. “Are you sure, Laren?” He couldn’t resist sliding his hand lower to
stroke the softness of her throat. “I’m not boasting, Laren, but I really am a big man. I don’t want to endanger you or the baby. Having sex might be too much for you right now.”

“Not having sex would harm me more, Tom.” She kissed his chin, his cheeks, his nose. And then brushed her tongue against his lips, searching for a way in.

“Oh, Ro,” he whispered as he swept her up into his arms. They kissed for a long while. He broke away from her. “We’ll make love my way, Laren. I will be as gentle as I can. Promise to stop me if I hurt you.” She tried to kiss him again. He wouldn’t let her. “Promise me, Laren, or else I’ll sleep on the floor.”

“Can’t have that,” Ro agreed. “I fear the bugs will bite you instead of me biting you.” She nuzzled his neck. “I promise, Tom.”

He revered her. He kissed her softly, carefully. Every caress, every move was plotted and controlled. The desire he was building was with measured increases, as if he were constantly checking her condition to see just how much she could take. And when she needed release he brought her over the brink with his tongue or his fingers. He did all the work as he brought her body to satiation. She’d never known such a gentle worshipping of her body before. And he’d asked for nothing in return. She tried to pleasure him. But he wouldn’t permit it.

“Tom?” she wondered as she regained her senses.

“Another time, Laren.” He stroked her black hair. “Tonight my only goal is to love you…”

She slept on his chest, curled in the protection of his arms. And whatever demons that Madred had tried to reawaken in her mind with his torture, did not come to her this night.

It was before dawn. She could hear a few musical bird songs, alerting the world to the new day.

She was feeling cherished. Only one other lover in her life had made her feel like this before. And the Ro who had always prided herself on the control of her emotions, felt like crying again.

She must have moved. For slowly Tom’s breathing changed, and she felt him sigh.

“What happens if we see Picard again?” His voice was quiet. Calm. And tinged with worry.

She didn’t answer him for a while, afraid to say the words that might destroy what she was now sharing with Tom. “Jean-Luc has to know about the baby, Tom. I owe him that. But I won’t go back. Only forward, Tom. With you, if you’re interested.”

He kissed her and held her tight, before he had to restrain natural inclinations.

“When we - on board the Suliban ship that is - first made love, Laren. Did I hurt you?

“Oh Tom, it was only the best kind of hurt.” She started to stir in his arms, to thank him for everything that he’d done before. “Though this time, I’d prefer it if we did things my way.”

“Laren, when it comes to loving, we don’t have to be equal partners. Sometimes it means more to be the one that gives, not receives.”

“But that’s not fair to you.”

“Until you are thoroughly checked out by a doctor that knows what he is doing, it’s going to have to be my way, Laren.” He kissed the tip of her nose. “If necessary, I can handle myself.”
Laren resigned herself to falling in love with another noble man. She raised her head and gave Tom her best trouble-making grin. “There’s no reason why I can’t handle you myself, Tom. If you insist on not having sex—the usual way—I am positive that I can find something else to do with you that you might like.” Her grin grew wider. “And that I will not find exhausting. Though I cannot promise the same thing for you.”

“Promises, promises.”

Ro proceeded to demonstrate.

This time, when they slept, both lovers were satisfied by their love’s labors in the dawn. And when they awoke, it was already mid-morning; one that was bright and beautiful. She was again resting on his wonderfully hairy chest, debating if she had enough energy to kiss him awake.

“We have to get up, Laren.” His voice was soft, as if he had no desire to disturb their lover’s idyll either. “I really don’t want to move.”

Ro plucked a chest hair.

“Ouch!”

She rested her chin on her crossed forearms on top of his chest, so that she could study her lover’s face.

“I have one thing to ask of you Tom.”

“Anything, Laren.”

“How the hell did you break out of the Galen’s brig? I had Ferengi locksmiths put in the systems. I was promised that if I stored latinum in there, it would be safe. Then, I added a few touches of my own. So how did you do it?”

He chuckled. “Been bothering you, eh?”

“What do you think?”

“I guess I have a confession to make.”

“Do tell.”

“I am not Will’s brother.”

She stiffened. “What?”

“I really am Will Riker.”

“You’re not a clone! The biometric safeguards would have detected a clone.”

“I really am Will Riker, Laren. I had a real doozy of a transporter accident. I ended up being beamed into two different locations at the same time.”

“What?”

“When I was a lieutenant on the Pegasus, I was sent to an automated research facility deep below the surface of Nervala IV…” He told her the story. “And all I could show for eight years was learning a couple of dozen languages, teaching myself how to phaser sculpt, and studying enough so that when
I joined the Gandhi as a lieutenant, I passed master degree courses for xenolinguistics, astrophysics, geophysics and Advanced Theoretical Physics."

“Wow. Even by yourself you still were an over-achiever. Me, I’d have just read holo-novels. Who made you Will’s brother?”

“Being Will’s brother Tom was the solution provided by Starfleet. And then I joined the Maquis. I’d started learning what had happened during my lost years and I just couldn’t stomach the injustice of the DMZ.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“It’s the truth, Laren.”

“No what I don’t believe is you. You without a woman for eight years? I really don’t believe it.”

His smile was inscrutable. “When I was on the Enterprise, a great lady took pity on me…”

She nodded. “I think I can guess…”

Their bucolic lover’s world was disturbed by the sound of a shuttlecraft landing too close to their own front door. Riker grabbed his pants and then an axe. It was the only real weapon that he had.

Ro on the other hand, slipped on her tunic. She stuck her head out the door and saw her shuttlecraft, the Starbuck. She ran across the front yard, straight into the arms of the man who stepped out of the shuttlecraft. She even kissed him. And the Vorlo kissed her back.

Riker warily stepped closer, still holding the axe. “Care to introduce us, Laren?”

“I’m Ragner, captain of the Adama.”

“I’m Tom Riker.” Riker extended his hand. “Pleased to meet you, I think. Ro has told me what you’ve done for her. I thank you for that.”

“Should I be jealous, Ro? Or are you only willing to come home if he comes along?”

“We will go anywhere with you, Captain, as long as it’s away from Cardassian space.”

“How about Thelka?” he asked with a grin.

“What’s happened? I thought you were banned for life.” Ragner only chortled. “Oh no. Don’t tell me that the planet has been civilized while we’ve been gone?”

“Don’t be a silly wiffa bird, Ro. It’s still a Breenian rat hole. Behlk will like me - a lot, now. He’ll have to lift the bounty on my head. Though what I really want to know is what did you do to him to cause him to offer a reward for you and this Riker?”

“We snuck out of his hotel without paying the bill.”

Riker started groaning, as he realized that Ro’s tongue was one day going to get him into serious trouble.

Remy came out. “When I learned he was your friend, Ro, I showed him how to find you.”

“There was a bounty on your head,” Ragner stated.
“A bounty?”

“Fifty thousand bars of latinum.”

Ro was about to crow to Tom over her perceived worth, when Remy added, “Same amount for him too.”

“Who the hell…” Tom muttered.


Tom knew that he should be grateful, but his mind was recalling every ribald Klingon curse word he knew.

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Captain Will Riker heard the words. But he really didn’t understand what the doctor was saying. The man kept trying to tell him about his own injuries and the need for immediate surgery, when all Riker wanted to know was what about Picard?

The Excelsior class Cairo’s sick bay was not as large as the Galaxy class sickbays. The Enterprise’s sickbay was on a par with major hospitals. The Cairo’s sickbay was sufficient for the ordinary requirements of a starship with about nine hundred crew and civilians on board.

But to keep Admiral Picard alive, Picard was going to have to get a new cardiac implant. And that could only be done by a very specialized medical team performing the Van Doren technique. And the closest Federation facility that could perform it was more than eight days of Warp 9 travel away, in the opposite direction from Qo’noS.

The conference of Qo’noS took precedence over everything. Captain Jellico knew his duty. But he feared that by doing it he’d sentenced Picard to his death.

Lt. Commander Crusher stood by Captain Riker’s bed, waiting for Will to open his eyes. Every once in a while, Wesley would glance over to where Admiral Picard’s body was lying in stasis. The doctors had repaired what they could, but then felt that Picard’s best chance for survival was to remain comatose in stasis. No one said a word about Picard’s level of recovery.

Wes was approaching exhaustion. The strain of keeping Picard alive was beginning to charge a heavy toll on him.

Slowly, fighting the pain that was rolling through him with awareness, Riker again regained consciousness. He focused on Wesley. “Jean-Luc?” His voice broke.

“There’s no change, Will.”

The CMO of the Cairo approached, slightly surprised that a subordinate called a captain by his first name. “Captain Riker, I am Dr. Kil’dar. We had to perform surgery on you. Your left lung had been punctured, and there were other internal injuries, the most serious being your colon. But, we’ve repaired everything. You’re healing nicely, and should be out of here by tomorrow. I expect that you’ll be fit for duty in five days.”
Riker stared at the man as if he were babbling. “What do I care about myself? How is Admiral Picard?”

“Under these unusual circumstances, we are doing the best that we can.” That was not the answer that Riker wanted.

Wesley stepped closer. “Doctor, I’ll explain the rest to Captain Riker.”

The CMO eyed the Lt. Commander. He seemed very young for holding such a high rank. Then the doctor shrugged his shoulders. He didn’t understand but it was not his place to question non-medical subtexts.

Wes sat close to Will. “Admiral Picard needs a new heart. The problem is that one isn’t available. It’s something that the replicator cannot properly duplicate.”

“What…”

He knew what the Captain wanted to ask. “I cannot, Captain. But Mr. Data and I are trying to find a solution.”

Away from Sickbay, Robin was arguing with Mr. Data. “It will work, I tell you! It will work!”

Mr. Worf entered the conference room and eyed Wesley’s agitated bride. “What will work?”

She stomped around the conference room table, frustrated. “Geordi’s flown the Montgomery Scott a few times already.”

“But Wesley and I were on board,” Data explained.

“Look, it’s fourteen days from Earth to Qo’noS by regular warp four. But if we can get Beverly to Earth, she can go on the Montgomery Scott to get here …,” she glared at Mr. Data, “…at what? Two hours by wormhole?”

“32 minutes and 42 seconds less,” Data mentioned.

Worf mouthed wormhole.

Mr. Data noticed Mr. Worf’s consternation. “I will explain about the wormhole later, Mr. Worf.”

Then Data pointed out what he considered to be an insurmountable problem. “Admiral Picard was specific about not contacting Dr. Crusher in the event of his serious medical emergency.”

“She’s his doctor, damn it!” Robin protested.

“There is Dr. Crusher’s health to consider as well.” “Only because of what was going on with Admiral Picard! It’s not because of her pregnancy,” Robin countered. She grrred. “You tell him, Mr. Worf! Admiral Picard made that request of non-contact when he thought that there was little chance of him clearing his own name, much less succeeding against the Suliban. Trust me. I tell you that Beverly will demand to know what has happened to Admiral Picard. And that if we don’t find a way to save his life, she will never speak to any of us again!”
“But Geordi has never flown the Montgomery Scott by himself before,” Data reiterated. “There are variables that must be compensated for, that Commander LaForge might not be able to do without my assistance or the help from Wes.”

She knew she wasn’t going to convince Mr. Data by sheer logic alone. “All right, Mr. Data. If the positions were reversed, what would Picard do? Would Admiral Picard respect Beverly’s wishes - or would he do everything in his power to save her life?”

Worf was about to agree, when Data made his decision, took an illogical leap of faith, and stood up. “I understand. Admiral Nechayev will not approve of what we must do. I will request her permission after the fact. But if we must do it, it is best that we do it swiftly. It will minimize potential security issues. I will authorize it, and deal with any difficulties later.” He calculated. “I will contact Commander LaForge. It will take approximately 22.4 hours for Commander LaForge to prep the Montgomery Scott. Geordi will then go to Caldos, pick up Dr. Crusher, and then come to Qo’noS.”

“We could save more time by sending Beverly directly to Utopia Planetia. The IKS Pagh is in orbit about Caldos,” Worf interjected. “Gowron ordered Dr. Crusher to be guarded at all times during the Admiral’s mission. He wanted to give Admiral Picard some reassurance that Dr. Crusher would be protected.”

Barclay understood Worf’s point. “Would it not be helpful if Dr. Crusher got to UP sooner, rather than have Geordi make two jumps in a prototype ship?”

“Make it so.” Then Data grinned; for the first time in days. “Let us go steal a ship.”

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Beverly kept glancing around her garden, expecting to see Guinan show up sooner or later. Her guards were still in evidence. Ian and Malcolm Reynolds didn’t say much, other than to tell Beverly that they owed Gowron a big favor. Her other guards were mainly neighbors and friends of her Nana, who had been persuaded to help protect her. The only problem was no one was precisely telling her why she needed protection. And what it was that Jean-Luc had done that had created this situation in the first place.

The noise began, growing louder with every passing second. It couldn’t be what she thought it was. She stood, and moved toward it, gasping as she watched a Klingon cruiser land in the field across from her cottage.

A Klingon captain and his escort approached. The captain greeted her. “Dr. Beverly Crusher?” Beverly nodded. She was still a little speechless. “I am Captain Kargan of the IKS Pagh. Chancellor Gowron has requested that we take you to Earth to meet Lt. Commander LaForge. Then you will go to Qo’noS”.

“Captain, what is going on?”

“I was told to say that Mr. Data said that the Dancing Doctor should comply with this order.”

“I need to check…”

Captain Kargan roared, “No. It is a matter of life and death. We leave now.”
“Whose life? Whose death?”

“They can’t answer that question, Beverly.”

She breathed a sigh of relief as she turned and faced Guinan. She froze when she realized that Guinan was holding a suitcase. Guinan handed it to Beverly. “Go, Beverly. And be strong.”

“Guinan?”

“Go.”

Moments later, Beverly found herself in the best guest cabin on board the Pagh. Which wasn’t saying that much. She felt the ship lift off.

Kargan entered the room. “When you are ready, your son wishes to speak with you.” He nodded and stepped back. And motioned toward the view screen.

With trepidation, she sat down, wondering why Wes had found it necessary to do it this way, rather than simply contacting her.

“Hello, Mom.”

She stared at him for a moment. His face seemed alien to her, as if he’d aged decades since the last time that she’d seen him. “What’s happened to Jean-Luc?” She knew in her heart, that it had to be the man she loved who was in trouble.

“The Admiral was kidnapped by Cardassians. He was injured.” Wes’ formal mien cracked just a little and some of his pain came through. “By the time you get to Utopia Planitia, Geordi will have all the med records. And then he will take you to Qo’noS. Time is of the essence, Mother. Do not discuss this with anyone - including and especially with Starfleet. We’re all probably going to be court-martialed and thrown into prison for what we’re about to do, anyway.”

“What are we going to be doing, Wes?”

“We’re stealing a ship so that we can get you here in time to save Jean-Luc’s life. He’s in stasis, Mom. And the doctors on the Cairo think the field is close to collapsing.” Beverly paled as she realized the implications. “And we’re kidnapping the best Van Doren cardiac implant medical team to help you save Jean-Luc Picard’s life.”

“If the field is deteriorating, I’d have to be there now, in order to…” She was scared now, fearful of Jean-Luc staying alive long enough for her to get to him.

“You’ll be here soon, Mother. And I will do my best to keep him alive until then. I love you, Mother.” And Wes signed off.

She stood there swaying, trying to accept everything that she’d just learned. And then strong arms picked her up, and she found herself being placed on her bed.

“I will die in defense of you, Dr. Crusher.”

She eyed him as he walked to stand by her door.

Kargan knew enough about human females to know that she was not partial to sharing a cabin with a Klingon warrior. “Captain Riker is my blood brother,” he explained. “Gul Madred tortured him too. I will kill Madred after I bring you safely to Commander LaForge.”
Beverly recognized the Cardassian name. And the bile rose in her throat.

“There may be cowards in the Klingon Empire. I cannot take a chance that might permit you to be harmed. I stay here.” He looked resolute. She no longer cared. She just accepted his judgment. Eventually she slept for she knew that she had to take care of herself. Kargan stood watch. He never moved.

Seventeen hours later, the Pagh uncloaked next to the Montgomery Scott, beamed Beverly on board, then did the Saturn run, uncloaked.

It was enough of a diversion to give Geordi a chance to maneuver his ship away from the Starbase, and open his own personal wormhole without setting off the security alarms until it was too late. They were gone.

Geordi finally greeted Beverly. “That was the tough part, Doctor. If someone realized that this ship was doing an unscheduled maneuver, they’d have tractor beamed us before we entered the wormhole. Trust Captain Riker to have loyal Klingon friends.”

“What can you tell me about Jean-Luc, Geordi?”

Geordi nodded at her terminal. Twenty minutes later, Beverly was beyond numb. “How can we get there in time,” she whispered. “If this data is correct, he has less than four hours to live. And there is nothing that I can do to stop it. All of his biosystems are degrading to the point of no return in stasis.”

“In the conference room, you’ll find your surgical team. They only know that they were ordered to report to this ship. Nothing else. We should be there in less than an hour, Doctor.”

That caught Beverly’s attention. “How?”

“We’re on the ship that Wes and Leah built, Beverly. One with our own programmable fixed point worm hole.”

Beverly didn’t care about that at the moment. She needed to see who was in the conference room, check the artificial heart, and then pray. Her medical self was leading the charge now. She was going to save Jean-Luc’s life however impossible it seemed.

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Admiral Winston Holt Wiley was yelling at the Utopia Planetia stationmaster, head security chief, and just about every other head of every department that he could corral into the main security conference room of the station. The most important, top secret project that Starfleet had ever created was gone. Stolen by one of its own creators, no less. He was furious.

Admiral Nechayev entered the room, and just simply said Dismissed to all the personnel. The way they left the room could best be described as running.

Wiley was turning purple.

“Stow it, Winnie,” she ordered.

“The Klingons have stolen our wormhole ship!”
“No, Commander LaForge has stolen our wormhole ship. And that is what worries me.”

Wiley was as close to speechless as he’d ever been.

“Winston, do you know how grave the situation must be for LaForge to risk doing this?”

“He’s one of the shadow cabal!” Wiley countered. “Just been waiting his chance.”

“No, he’s one of Jean-Luc Picard’s officers. When it comes to which side to choose, my chips will always be on Picard’s officers.” She turned her dead-eye stare on him as she announced, “I’m ordering all of Starfleet to stand down if they encounter the Montgomery Scott.”

“You’re insane, Alynna!”

“No, the insane one is Gowron. The stakes must be very high if Gowron is risking starting a war with the Federation in order to assist Picard in whatever it is he’s doing. What we should be doing right now is trying to figure out what is really going on. We’re not going into a potential war invoking situation without all the facts.”

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Though they thought is was a bit unorthodox, none of the surgical crew questioned why they were on board a ship they’d never seen before, being prepped for heart surgery by the former CMO of Starfleet Command. All six of them just assumed that they were now on a secret mission. It would not be their first such mission.

The one bright light of the situation was that Dr. Ogawa was one of the doctors. She didn’t need to ask what was going on. Alyssa knew it had something to do with Jean-Luc Picard. And Beverly was so glad to see an understanding face even if they didn’t have time to personally talk about what was happening.

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Captain Jellico was dealing with the delegates, and the issues of the conference with his noted efficiency. The Cairo was orbiting the Klingon homeworld.

Jellico was not a diplomat. He didn’t like diplomacy in general for he preferred to do rather than to talk. But he was only doing his duty.

His very no-nonsense attitude about so many of the little issues that usually popped up with multiple representatives of diverse races in diplomatic conferences, smoothed waters that might have stymied Picard. Jellico didn’t care about the size and shape of the conference table and who sat where. He just wanted everyone sitting at it. And when many ambassadors complained, he devised a lottery system for the daily seating arrangement that upset everyone. Jellico would rather have the delegates complaining about him, than complaining to him.

Jellico hadn’t been able to silence the rumors about the condition of Picard. But neither had he
confirmed them. For the first time in days, he walked into his quarters to get some rest, and was surprised to see Nella asleep on his blue sofa. He leaned over and kissed her.

“Edward…”

“You should be getting some sleep, Nella.”

“You’re the one who hasn’t had any sleep, Edward. You don’t have to tell me how rough the last few days have been for you.”

In spite of his exhaustion, part of Edward’s soul soared at the thought that Nella was concerned for him.

“There’s something that I have to tell you, Edward.”

He sensed something and tensed. “What?”

She moved so that he could sit next to her. “It’s not that I know most of the former Enterprise officers that well. I was only on board the ship a few months. But I do know Mr. Data.”

“Mr. Data has accomplished the incredible, Nella. We’re going to have a treaty and soon, I think.”

“No, Edward. It’s not the conference…”

“It’s Picard.” Edward finished her sentence.

“In spite of everything, Mr. Data and all the others, are trying to save Picard’s life.”

“I knew that.”

“You did?”

“Not even Mr. Worf protested when I told them my decision to proceed with the conference rather than divert to Anana II to get Admiral Picard to a medical facility that could save him.” He slightly sighed. “Mr. Worf didn’t look me directly in the eye when I told them. That’s when I knew that they were plotting something. Do you know what it is?”

“Not exactly. But Leah Brahms said something to me about Captain Crusher arriving very soon.”

“I haven’t been notified of her arrival.”

“That’s what is worrying me. Dr. Kil’dar is prepping his sickbay for something. He isn’t questioning anything that Mr. Data is ordering.”

“From what I’ve heard, Captain Crusher is the kind of heart surgeon that could save Admiral Picard’s life.”

“But Edward, where is the artificial heart coming from? When all of this started, not having a heart available was the major problem. There wasn’t one within reach of us.”

“Dr. Crusher must be bringing it with her.”

“But where is she coming from? The same thing applies to her.”

Then Edward said something that really surprised Nella. “Does it really matter, Nella? I’ll do everything I can to save Admiral Picard’s life. And I see no reason to ask unnecessary questions that
should be the purview of the doctors - not of a starship captain.”

“And if it goes against regulations?”

“How can a regulation be more important than the Admiral’s life?” He silenced her questioning by kissing her. He was not as tired as he had thought. Early the next morning, after only a few hours sleep he went in search of Mr. Data.

He found Mr. Data in the suite that he’d commandeered for the Conference Headquarters.

Data politely stood when Jellico entered the room. “Captain Jellico?”

“Mission accomplished, Mr. Data.”

“What, Sir?”

“You wanted Commander Daren to deliver a message to me. I’ve received it.”

“Sir?” He was the picture of android innocence.

“If you can save Admiral Picard’s life, I don’t care how you do it just as long as you get it done. And if it ends up with my being court-martialed, so be it.” Data blinked. On purpose. “What I do care about is how you’ve ensnared Commander Daren in whatever it is that you are plotting. Does she know?”

Data could have denied everything, and Jellico would have been forced to accept his word. But Mr. Data had come to appreciate the captain, and how a somewhat predictable man could change.

“Captain, Nella does not know the details, but she is aware that something will be occurring within the next few hours. Nella was not trying to manipulate you. She insisted that you be warned, albeit obliquely.”

Jellico nodded. “Mr. Data, I envy Jean-Luc. One day I hope to have friends and officers as loyal to me as you are to Jean-Luc Picard.” He turned to leave.

“Captain Jellico.” Jellico stopped. “You already have my friendship and loyalty.”

“Thank you, Mr. Data. I pray that you do succeed.”

“Sir?” Mr. Data was curious.

“What, Mr. Data?”

“You did not ask me not to request Nella’s help in the future. Why?”

“If there is anything I’ve learned about Nella, I will never be able to tell her what to do.”

“You are her captain.”

“Oh, I can order Commander Daren, and when it comes to Starfleet she will obey. But when it comes to Nella, the only way I have any influence over her is if I simply ask.”

“Am I correct in assuming that this is a definition of love? A mutual accord between two people even if they disagree?”

“It’s one of the better ones, Data.” He strode to the door. “Matters would be helped if we pull the
rabbit out of the hat, Mr. Data. Starfleet might be less inclined to court-martial us if we succeed in creating a miracle.”

“Sir?”

“Yes, Mr. Data.”

“You might hear reports that Commander LaForge has borrowed a ship.”

“I don’t think that I need to learn any more of the details, Mr. Data.”

“Understood, Captain.”
The Happenings

Chapter Summary

Things are beginning to happen. Riker and Ro especially.

Thomas Thelonius Riker did not like the way the Ferengi doctor looked. He certainly did not like the way the Ferengi doctor smelled. And he had a feeling that he would not like the bill he was about to receive from the Ferengi doctor, especially since everything that he was worth was literally the shirt on his back.

But he would do anything to help Ro.

DaiMon Behlk, was almost as nervous as Riker was, but for a completely different reason. The lady and her association with Jean-Luc Picard were his chief source of profit. But there had been rumors of Picard’s imminent death. And if that occurred, then Ro Laren would be solely in charge of one of the largest fortunes in the Bank of Nagus. The last time Behlk had dealt with Picard, the man had been very specific about Ro’s role in Picard’s plans. Considering the concept of Ferengis dealing with females and finance caused him the quivers. But then Behlk rationalized that Ro was not a female. She was a Bajoran. He could work things out.

Eventually, the doctor came out of the best suite in the hotel that DaiMon Behlk owned in Ootzey. He was smiling. But then in the presence of great amounts of latinum, a Ferengi would always be smiling.

“The great lady is in need of rest, and food appropriate for her condition.” The doctor snickered at the thought of the lady’s pregnancy being discussed with those who were not her family. “The great lady should stay in bed, and relax. Then, she should have fun. You are her escort?” Riker would have said something but the doctor was already chippering away in Ferengi with Behlk. “Give her pleasure. Take her wherever she wishes to go. But make sure she gets in bed at an early hour.” The Ferengi tittered. And as if he knew Riker’s next question, he added, “No rough stuff. Weapons. Ticklers. Stingers. Stop if she is in pain. And give her plenty of Oo-max.” The doctor was about to suggest other things to do, but Behlk waved him away.

Behlk escorted Riker into the suite.

Surprisingly it was not the one that Riker had been in before. This suite was more reminiscent in style of the English Crocodile period of the early19th century that some called Regency. Still, it was a little bit better in style than purple and orange with fluttering, flaming putti.

Ro was asleep on a chaise lounge upholstered in an almost tasteful combination of blue and gold. She was still wearing her Glinn tunic.

Behlk was about to wake her up, but Riker stepped in-between Behlk and Ro. The look in Riker’s eye convinced Behlk to withdraw.
Then Riker sat down on the floor, and leaned against the side of the chaise lounge. It only took a minute for him to doze off.

Maybe an hour later, slender fingers were sidling through his hair. He stretched as he turned toward the source of his disturbance.

She slid down next to him, and lightly brushed his lips with her own.

“Laren.”

“Hmmm….?” was all she said.

“You stink.”

She stopped her explorations. “What?”

“And I am in need of a bath.”

He stood, picked her up, and went in search of the water facilities. There wasn’t a tub. But there was a hot springs pool. Riker sighed as he wondered about the fickleness of fate. One day, dirty freezing water. The next night, really hot water. But only because bathing in it with Ro had raised the temperature quite a bit.

After bathing, loving, eating, loving, playing, loving and then finally sleeping, Laren was ready to take on the new night, with Riker.

For a brief second, Ro remember the very last time she’d had fun. And with whom she’d shared it. But she was here with Tom. And part of her acknowledged that he was the better choice. Still she missed Jean-Luc…

Several hours into their night to remember, DaiMon Behlk approached Ro and Riker who had been winning at Cabrini poker. He was brimming with suppressed excitement. “It’s here! It’s here!” Behlk squealed.

Riker had had more than a few drinks, so he was willing to ignore being annoyed by Behlk. “What’s here?” The sober Ro inquired, “The equipment that I ordered for the medical clinic?”

“Follow me!” Behlk oozed with excitement.

Actually curious, they followed Behlk outside the casino, through the private exit.

She sat there, gleaming in the dark with bright lights shining down upon her sleek curves The ship wasn’t actually a twin of the Galen, but she had the same graceful bloodlines. Built for speed, power, defense and offense, and offering the engineering best of many worlds, it was a free-trader’s dream ship.

“What is this?” Ro softly asked, as Behlk led the way to the bay door ramp.

“The Picard ordered it for you the last time he was here,” Behlk explained. “He said that he wanted you to have a ship worthy of your expertise, Ro Laren. Especially since he was taking the Galen.”

“What’s her name?” Ro softly asked.

“You get to name her,” Behlk twittered.
“Larengytis?” Tom suggested.

She ignored him. She stepped onto the ramp and slowly walked the length of the ship, followed by Riker and Behlk. She noted the differences. And was glad that the captain’s cabin was on the other side of the ship away from any possible memories. And then she noticed the color schemes of the ship. Grey walls, of course. But with colors of ruby red, rust and bronze throughout. She didn’t need to see the captain’s bathroom to know that there’d be some sort of luxurious shower system there. And a captain’s bed so comfortable she could dream on it forever.

Privately, she knew that he’d chosen those colors and everything else, for her. In spite of everything that had happened, Jean-Luc had been thinking of her.

A low whistle pierced the silence, as Tom took note of all the features of the bridge.

She joined him and slid her arm through his. “Come up with a name, Laren?”

“The Gale.”

Riker was a disappointed that she wasn’t going to name it after himself. “After the Galen?”

“No. After my father, a Bajoran freedom fighter who was murdered by the Cardassians. Ro Gale…”

After a minute, Behlk stepped closer to the couple. “Is everything as you wish?”

“What happened to our stuff?” Riker was a very practical man.

“It’s in your suite in the hotel.”

Ro didn’t move. “Tom, please go and get everything from the suite. I think I’d like to fly around for a while.”

As soon as Tom had left, she sat down in the captain’s chair, wondering if there might be a message from him. She found it.

“Laren. I hope by the time you receive my gift to you, all matters will have been settled, and that we’re both alive and well. I’m rather fond of the Galen, so since I didn’t want you ‘liberating’ her from me, I think I’ve found an equitable solution. Enjoy this ship. If you get what I actually ordered, she’s a beauty of a ship too. And remember you do have options. For if ever I become a Starfleet Admiral, I would welcome you as my officer whenever you wish. In the meantime, I’ve turned over half the Bank of Nagus accounts solely to you, to be used at your discretion. I will always be your friend. And if you ever need me, I will come. Take care of yourself, ma belle…”

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Captain Jellico was solemnly listening to the realignment debates of planetary boundaries in the DMZ, when he received notice that Dr. Beverly Crusher had arrived on board the Cairo.

Jellico was seated next to Gowron in the Great Hall on Qo’noS. He wasn’t surprised to note that Gowron had received a written message from one of his Bekks.

“Shall we go?” Gowron suggested to Jellico.
“The only good that we can do Jean-Luc right now, is if we reach a solution.”

Gowron sighed. He’d been hoping for a chance to escape momentarily the discussion of the dispositions of the moons of Janus II. He had no use for Class P planets and their moons.

A moment later, a Starfleet security officer handed Jellico a padd. Gowron, being ever nosy, indicated by a mere flick of a finger to his staff that they were to investigate. Jellico muttered, “Damn.” He spoke in a low voice to the officer. “Confine Commander LaForge to his quarters. Not the brig. I will deal with this later.” He had a sudden thought. “Tell Mr. Worf, that if any further orders come down concerning LaForge, that he should let Mr. Data deal with them - whenever it might be convenient for Mr. Data to do so after Mr. Data takes care of all of his other responsibilities.”

“What?” Gowron whispered, as if talking about internal security matters with a Starfleet captain was an ordinary thing.

“Bureaucrats.”

Gowron understood that curse word

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It was worse that she could have imagined. Major potentially fatal damage to every organ. Cyanotic damage. Cerebral anoxia. Every time she tried to deal with one issue, ten more would appear. What was keeping him alive? She didn’t understand why Jean-Luc wasn’t already dead. All of her medical knowledge kept screaming that he should be, based on the damage she was discovering. She would have to stabilize him before she could even attempt to replace his artificial heart. And she knew that she had already run out of time.

“Mother…” She sensed Wesley’s thoughts. “Look within yourself… Use your strength… Use my strength… Cease feeling... Just do... For you are my Mother…You too have gifts for you gave them to me…”

Now she knew who was keeping Jean-Luc alive.

“We’re replacing the heart now,” Beverly ordered.

There was a low murmur of protest from two of the doctors as if questioning the validity of the order.

Dr. Ogawa-Powell handed Dr. Crusher her instruments.
When Jean-Luc Met Beverly

Chapter Summary

How Jean-Luc really met Jack's fiance.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is adult mainly because of the lovemaking. No one under 18.

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He knew this place… The bright white everything… There were no shadows… The voice of god was bellowing his name… Nagging him… Irritating him… He’d been here before… Maybe he had never left…

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It was a beautiful night. One of the finest in recent memory. Of course, Jean-Luc Picard had spent the last eighteen years of his life as an officer then captain of the Stargazer, so his encounters with beautiful nights on balmy planets were few and far between.

Jean-Luc Picard was on leave. He really didn’t want to be here, but he’d been given no choice. The Stargazer was in dry dock for several months at Proxima Centauri, having long-needed upgrades being done to all of her major systems. Picard knew that he should be there, supervising. But the Starfleet psychiatrists had a different point of view. Picard had not taken a shore leave in over two years. The doctors did not give him a choice. He’d been forced to take a minimum of a forty day leave. And if he didn’t behave the psychiatrists might extend it.

At first, he’d explored Alpha Centauri, but unfortunately ran into Admiral Woody Nakamura. In no uncertain terms he was told to go vacation somewhere else that was light years away from his ship.

Realizing that his old friend Woody was adamant, Jean-Luc Picard took the first passenger ship out of port, and ended up going to Clarion.

Picard had only heard of Clarion, and had never visited, even though it was one of the finest vacation planets in the Alpha Quadrant.

It was an artist’s planet. A planet for all the worlds, devoted to the arts in all of its forms. Music, dance, literature, theatre, art in all its forms, gambling and more. It also didn’t hurt that the planet itself was one of the most beautiful in the Federation.

It was during his second week of shore leave on Clarion, that he found himself ambling along a cliff
face following a park trail downhill through a semi-arid plane, on his way to an outdoor amphitheatre below in a valley.

As he neared the outdoor symphony hall (for it never rained on Clarion during an outdoor performance), he felt as if the night was brimming with anticipation. For what, he did not know. But he was enjoying the sensation. He hadn’t felt it in a long time. He was beginning to relax.

The path, though dark, was lit with many flickering guide lights. It meandered by smaller stages built against the cliff sides, set into gardens with benches. Anyone was welcome to perform before the concerts.

So, the captain slowly walked. Sometimes he was amused by what the artists performed. Sometimes he watched, listened and enjoyed. Sometimes the performance was of little interest, though he did politely wait a few minutes at every stop, just to at least acknowledge the effort of the performers or musicians.

As twilight fell, he knew that the concert would be starting soon, so he hurried his step.

He heard the music before he came up to the next station. He knew it well. Rachmaninoff’s Rhapsody based on a Theme and Variations by Paganini. He walked quietly as he approached the stage. And then he froze, stunned by the vision before him.

For she was beauty like the night; grace incarnate.

And he had never seen anyone so exquisite before, in his life. Almost afraid to breathe lest he startle her, he watched her dance.

She flowed, as if floating over the stage. She was tall. Her slender body gracefully interpreted the melodic lines of her dance.

She was wearing something silvery grey. It was an Antarian skin suit with a long chiffon skirt. Something twinkled in starburst patterns across the fabric. Her hair was long and flowing - a glorious flame red, that now moved with wild curling abandon with the föhn breezes.

He sensed her control, her strength. She was a dancer moving with the sheer joy of it - dancing with her heart. Picard sensed that she would never be able to duplicate this choreography again, for it seemed extemporaneous. Her soul was creating her every movement as the music played on. And when the music ended she gracefully moved into her final position, resting on the stone floor of the stage.

She glanced in his direction.

She had known he was there. There was no one else. She had performed only for him.

She stared at him. Questioning.

“You were superb…,” he finally whispered, surveying her visage, mentally acknowledging that she was as beautiful a woman as she was a dancer. He stepped forward, bowed and offered her his hand. She clasped it, and permitted him to pull her to her feet.

Picard froze at the touch of her hand, as something elemental passed between them. Something that was not just visceral, but eternal, was touching his soul.

“Superb…” he whispered, again, brushing a soft kiss across her palm. Then he kissed each finger tip, lightly caressing them with his tongue.
Her palm tingled. The touch of his lips brought forth a thrill of heat, of longing, that stunned her. She trembled. No man’s touch had ever brought about this kind of response before. How could a stranger’s touch ignite her heart? She should protest. But she lacked the will. She withdrew her hand and backed away from the heady intensity of his gaze. It was as if he wanted to own her. Her mind instantly knew he was a very dangerous man. Her body only desired his touch.

He knew that he must see more of her. He took a step closer to her.

He let her go, fearing that if he pursued her, his life would never be the same again.

The concert was excellent. He enjoyed deFalla’s Amor Brujo, Rodrigo’s Fanfare for the Common Man, and the subsequent pieces by Albeniz, Turina and DeLaRoccha from New Spain. But there was a part of him that kept scanning the crowd, in the vain hope of seeing a flame-haired dancer again. Finally, he ruefully acknowledged to himself that he was being foolish. He beamed back to his garden suite.

For a brief time, he allowed himself a bathetic moment as he contemplated his aloneness. For on such a night like this, there should have been a beautiful woman on his arm. And he had yet to seek out the company of any such female during his shore leave.

An hour later, he received a message from Woody Nakamura. Woody was on Clarion too. But he was at a hotel in New Las Vegas. And he asked Picard to join him for a drink and maybe a friendly card game. Picard considered it and then agreed. For the night was still young, and at least Woody was an old friend as well as an admiral. It had been a long time since Picard had indulged in just friendly companionship and discussion, as well as cut-throat poker games.

He glanced about his suite. It was acceptable. He asked Woody back here along with the other officers that were sure to be in attendance at the game. Picard no longer had a taste for smoke filled back rooms and seedy dives. He went to a terminal and ordered the appropriate food and drink items and the time to deliver them. His choices included Berengarian whiskey, Bajoran spring beer, and Château Picard wines. For the Marriott was a luxury hotel complex, and had Château Picard in their wine cellar. And Picard knew of no admiral that would refuse an excellent vintage wine.

Picard’s hotel suite was actually a private lodge set in the middle of one of the art filled garden parks surrounding the main Marriott hotel. He had decided to indulge himself on this shore leave by choosing the more luxurious hotel options. He had a private waterfall, set into the cliffs behind his lodge. If one ignored the glow from the lights in the distances, it was almost as if he was residing in a flower and sculpture filled wilderness.

He changed into a dark brown shantung shirt and matching slacks. He didn’t want to appear overly dressed when he met Woody. But he also didn’t want to stand out too much in a saloon named The Blue Tattoo.

When Picard reached New Las Vegas, he was impressed by the way the Clarions created the atmospheres for the various themed cities on the planet. Clarion Prime was balmy. But Vegas was tropical. Steamy. And it was a good excuse for many not to wear too much clothing.

The Blue Tattoo Bar was as he expected. It had been a long time since he’d had a drink in one like this. The noise in the bar was equaling Klingon sortie sound levels. There were females and some males, dancing on raised platforms, wearing little more than flashing beads and blue tattoos. Many wore a come hither for a price smiles. A few even approached him as he entered the establishment. He shrugged them off with an apologetic smile. He scanned the room and didn’t see anyone that was
obviously Starfleet out of uniform.

Loud music, but with a surprisingly sexy pulsating beat filled the main floor dance area. There were several dance and dining floors above the atrium that held the main bar all filled with patrons imbibing freely.

Picard found an iron café table on the main floor in a somewhat quieter corner, where he could observe. For he was early, and had yet to see any signs of admirals out of uniform. The waiter that took his order also informed him that there were no senior officers present. Though there were many students on break.

He watched for a while. And then he sensed something. Faint. His pate prickled. He felt itchy as old restrained emotions began to threaten to surface. He glanced about the room trying to locate the source of these sensations.

Then he saw her. She was the ethereal nymph from the park. But she had dramatically changed her style.

His flame-haired Muse had reinvented herself as Voluptas, the Roman goddess of sex.

Lust slammed hard at his gut. It was stronger than anything he’d ever known before including during his days as a randy space cadet. He was so aroused that he didn’t just want her. He wanted to own her, to possess her, to carnally know her in every way he could imagine. He had to have her. He wanted to conquer her. And take more. Everything more. And then more.

The flame haired goddess was in a line dance - sort of a conga line about the floor. The throbbing of the music was inspiring her body to movements that should never be done in public. He was instantly jealous of every other man looking upon her.

Compared to what the other women were wearing in the bar, she was dressed like a Vulcan High Priestess. It was a long dress of shimmering copper with a high mandarin collar, and a revealing slit up her left leg to her hip. It clung to every curve. The sheath’s only purpose was to emphasize the fullness of her bosom, the curve of her hip, and the length of her impossibly long legs. He was one moment away from kidnapping her and dragging her to the nearest dark corner he could find.

Jean-Luc Picard had never paid for sex in his life. But he did consider that he finally might have met the woman who’d change his mind. Whatever her price was, he would pay it.

Beverly had come to this bar with her friends, just to drink and have some fun, and to not think about the future. She’d taken this spring break in order to have some time to consider her feelings for Jack.

And then she saw him - the man from the park. Their gazes locked. And for some unfathomable reason, she was caught spellbound. Captivated by his eyes.

It was him. Of course he would be here. He was her personal trial, the devil who could seduce her by just kissing her fingertips.

Subconsciously she raised her arms above her head. Now she was moving with erotic deliberation to the rhythm of the music, as she gazed only at him. Thrusting her breasts forward, twisting her hips, enticing him with her every come hither step; her every movement was a private invitation only for him. Her mind didn’t know what she was doing. Only her body did. She was dancing for him again. But this time, it was with pure carnality.

He accepted her silent invitation.
Rudely confronted by the actual reality of her fantasy walking directly towards her, she panicked. She had prayed he wouldn’t move. But he did. She turned to go. One arm snaked about her waist, pulling her roughly against his chest. She felt his arousal. His heat burned into her thighs. He felt her nipples harden against the pressure of his forearm. His lips whispered against her neck, sending frissons of sexual excitement coursing through her body. His hand moved across her breast, creating an ache that was primal.

Her response shocked her. Thrilled her.

“Art though not fatal vision…”

“She lost her ability to speak, when he nipped her ear lobe.

He was rational enough to be somewhat surprised that she had recognized a quote from MACBETH. He turned her in his arms, intending to kiss her senseless. He didn’t care that they were in public.

She tried to struggle, to force him to let her go. And then he almost did. But it was not a voluntary release for a Nausicaan had tried to rip her out of Picard’s arms.

“MINE!” the Nausicaan roared, announcing her as his prize, as he started to drag her away.

“MINE!” Picard roared back, just as loudly. Picard would not let her go.

She reacted instinctually, her body remembering the two self-defense courses that Starfleet medical required interns to take.

She kicked with her spiked heel. It was ineffectual.

Her captor squeezed her breast. And that’s when Beverly lost her temper.

Picard saw the look in her eye. And intuitively knew what she was going to do.

“Mon Dieu, no!” he yelled. But it might as well have been a whisper for all the heed that she paid him.

This time she raised her foot, braced her arms on Picard’s shoulders, and kicked from underneath, spiking her high heel straight into the Nausicaan’s balls.

The Nausicaan doubled over, screaming in pain. For a second, everyone in the bar stopped, looking around to see what could possibly be making such an earsplitting, agonized cry that was louder than the music.

And in that split second, time stopped. Jean-Luc Picard, captain of the Stargazer, a man who’d kept his emotions in check for decades, a man who’d always led with a cool-headed logic and wisdom far beyond his years, a man who was already a legendary icon of a Starfleet officer with an aloof reputation amongst all those who had ever worked with him, a man who’d valued his few close friends more deeply than they ever knew, and a man who’d loved his duty even more than his life, lost it.

He fell in love with this woman. Irrevocably.

Then he became a man of action. Punches were already being thrown midst the bystanders. Since he had no inclination to fight a Nausicaan, a Nausicaan’s warrior pack, their friends, and now half the bar, he acted swiftly. There was only one viable course of action. He threw the lady over his
shoulder in a fireman’s carry and ran straight up the wide, red marble staircase, heading for the back rooms that this kind of place always had.

She was fighting him all the way. Picard guessed that she didn’t understand the danger of their situation. So he ignored her blows against his back and buttocks. He forced himself not to be distracted by the feel of the curves of her bottom cheeks squirming against his arm.

The hallways were crowded as everyone rushed forward to see the brawl churning down below. He put her down, kissed her briefly but with a stunning force, and then dragged her against the flow of the mob. He forced his way through, checking doorknobs until he found one that was open. The room was empty.

She really started battling him when he entered the room. She was swinging at him, trying to punch him wherever she could. Knowing that they only had a few seconds at best to disappear, he shoved her backwards onto the bed. He turned and locked the door.

She began throwing whatever she could grab at him, trying to get him to stop whatever he was intending to do to her. For he had to stop. She knew if he didn’t stop, she wouldn’t be able to stop if he touched her.

She hit him with a large, old pillow. It broke open. Crumpled feathers flew. Then floated.

“STOP IT, YOU SILLY WOMAN!” he ordered in his best captain’s voice. Then for good measure he braced a chair against the door.

It was the word silly that stilled her frantic actions. Beverly could genuinely not remember a time when anyone had ever called her silly.

WHAT THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU’RE DOING?” she yelled. “Are you drunk?”

“I never even had a chance to drink my beer…” He paused, and realized that he didn’t know what to call her. “What’s your name?”

“You think I’m going to tell you my name, you Tkonian Slaver! Go F…”

“Red.” By the way she stiffened, he knew he’d guessed her nickname correctly.

She huffed, as she began to think that maybe he wasn’t a slaver. Her voice was icy, as she inquired too politely, “Who are you? Priapus?”

The fire in his blood was abating - for the moment. And his sense of humor was surfacing as he picked off some of the feathers floating down upon them.

“I actually have been called that before. A long story.” He sat down on the edge of the bed as far away from her as possible as if to alleviate her fears. Then, with all the command coolness he could muster he casually asked, “Listen you beautiful, foolhardy goddess - did not anyone ever warn you not to play with Nausicaans?”

Her hackles rose. “He attacked me!”

“The Nausicaan was posturing. Challenging me to arm wrestle him for your favors. It’s the way that Nausicaans do things. But no, you had to enrage him - to provoke a fight. A fight, that if I had fought it, I would have lost. Then you would have belonged to the victor.”

“I would never have allowed…” She saw his look of incredulity. “We’re on a Federation planet.”
“We are in a bar in a part of Clarion, in a town where the gendarmes might arrive about an hour after the fight is over. You would have disappeared probably for good, and I’d be either dead or in an infirmary somewhere getting my heart replaced. I’ve fought Nausicaans before. That is why I had no intention of fighting them again. I choose to avoid such difficulties when possible.”

“So why didn’t you let me go? I didn’t need a knight in shining armor. I could have taken care of myself, Sir Gallahad.”

“I think not.” He knew she resented his words. “I’ve had decades of self defense training, and the only time I would willingly go after a Nausicaan single-handedly is if I had a suicidal death wish, which I do not have.”

She was not in such a snit that she didn’t know he probably was right. She was a doctor, not a fighter.

The door knob rattled.

“Perhaps we’d better go?” he suggested.

Beverly started thinking of all the troubles a cadet could get into for causing a brawl. A big brawl.

“Yes.”

“Discretion, then?”

She nodded, wondering exactly what he’d meant.

“Two to beam to the Lucia di Lammermoor suite,” Picard whispered into his comm badge. He pulled her into his arms. And they shimmered away arriving at the door to his suite, standing by a moonlit waterfall.

“Won’t they be able to track where we went?”

“I don’t think that the officials will care. We harmed nothing. We took nothing. No transaction was made.”

“All right.” She looked about. “So where are we?”

“My hotel.”

She moved away from his embrace. He reluctantly let her go. “Do you have a comm badge with you?”

“No.” She didn’t want to admit to this man that she was on a student budget, and the luxury of having a civilian comm badge on a vacation planet like this was not in her budget.

He was quickly reassessing his estimation of her occupation. For no professional escort would be without a comm badge. She was not a lady for hire which was a pity. She was more than likely a student. Which meant that she was way too young for him. At that moment, he felt every minute of his forty-five years of age. And he sighed. He didn’t realize that he’d sighed out loud.

She heard him. And thought that he’d decided something about her. And found her wanting…

He took the comm badge out of his pocket. He offered it to her. “You can go wherever you wish. Just send the badge back to this suite when you get a chance. It’s the…”

“I’ve read Sir Walter Scott. I’ll remember the name of The Bride of Lammermoor even if it is in
Italian.” Her words were edged with frost for she had finally realized what he’d implied by stating that no transaction had been made.

He appreciated her classical literacy but wondered why she’d suddenly turned icy. He sought to make amends. “Your dancing truly moved me tonight.” His expression softened as he remembered.

She noticed that he didn’t specify which dance. But by the very tone of his voice, he was dismissing her. She really couldn’t blame him. She obviously wasn’t the company he was looking for on this moonlit night. Then she understood something else. She didn’t want to go.

“From Earth?” she politely inquired. She still hadn’t touched his comm badge. “I was born on the moon.” She was rambling, not really knowing what to say to him.

She was testing his patience.

“Go!” he ordered. “I’m in no mood for games tonight.” He took a few steps away from her, then stared back at her, studying her in the moonlight as if he was trying to memorize everything about her. He knew he shouldn’t ask it, every brain cell he had warned that it was not the proper thing to say, but he had a gambler’s soul this night. His voice softened. “Or, stay.”

She saw the desire in his eyes. She hadn’t imagined it. Every nerve in her body danced, telling her what he really wanted from her. And the only thing her brain was telling her was that he had a sense of nobility. And to run! He had let her go. But she could choose to stay.

Her heart gave her the courage. “It can’t be forever. I have plans for my life.”

He chuckled. “I only have a few weeks on my own, too. My life does not belong to me either.”

There was only one thing preventing her from leaping into his arms. “Married?”

He took a deep breath at that question. It was a fair one. It had been so long ago. “She died. Too young.”

She took one step closer to him. “A few days out of time, perhaps?”

“Perhaps.”

“Strangers in the dark? A fling? A few days lost to the world? I don’t know you. You won’t know me. We’ll ignore our real lives for a while? We’ll go home and only have the memories?” She knew she was babbling.

“If those are your demands in order for you to become my lover then yes, I willingly agree.” He wanted her, and now, he wasn’t even trying to hide it.

She felt stripped naked before him, as if he already knew every detail of her body. And he acted as if he knew how to send her into sexual oblivion with only a few touches. In an elemental way, he terrified her. But it was a delicious kind of fear. She hungered for him.

She then took the comm badge from his outstretched hand. He didn’t bother to hide the disappointment on his face. And she subconsciously reveled in her power over him. She gave him a smile full of sinful promise. “Message to Harriet Vane, Donizetti House, number 22. Met a friend. Will be back in time for departure. Have fun. I will. Red.”

She handed him back his comm badge.
She knew she was delaying all her decisions. But this man - if he could tempt her by merely kissing her fingers, what did it say about her goals if she could so easily be distracted?. She had to face what all this meant. But she’d do it later. Much later.

He pulled her into his arms. His body pressed against hers. His embrace told her so much about him. He was powerful. Physically fit. Sinewy muscles that could hold her hostage, if he so wished it. Beautiful eyes. She wished she could see their color. A strong chest to shelter her against the outside world. And a desire for her that tingled her every nerve. No man had ever wanted her like this before. A feeling came over her as if this was where she was supposed to be, forever. She twined her arms about his neck.

His first kiss was gentle. It was a polite introduction into what he hoped would soon become both social and sexual intercourse between them. He really didn’t want to scare her away with his barely controlled raging needs.

She moved out of his arms and looked about. Moonlight danced on cascading pools of water. “I’d like to sit by the waterfall - later.” She looked at the door.

Without being asked he swept her into his arms, then ordered the computer to open his carved front door.

Inside the large amber and tan living room with a fireplace in one wall, she looked about. The walls were sandstone with light sensitive crystal paneling throughout. It was luxurious. Tasteful. And obviously very expensive. Then she noticed the chilled wine and the variety of foods on the sideboard.

“What am I interrupting?”

“Nothing. I was planning on playing poker later on with some old friends.”

“They won’t come looking for you?”

He carried her into his bedroom. “Computer. Notify players that the game is cancelled. I’m incommunicado. I am not to be disturbed. Lock the doors.”

He lowered her to his bed placing her on the silken grey spread as if she were the most precious of burdens.

Her laugh sounded nervous even to her ears.

He kissed her. It was a sweet kiss at first. Amazingly lovely. Comforting. With only a hint of what was to come. Almost hesitant, he touched his tongue to her lips, lightly outlining them. She felt the heat of him against her prophesying soon a conflagration. Pressing his weight harder against her yielding willingness, his tongue darted around into the sweet harbor of her mouth. “Please.”

He stopped kissing her, giving her time to breathe again, to give her a chance to flee. “Are you sure?”

“No.” She brushed her fingers against his cheek. She ruffled his hair. “But I don’t want to stop.” She gave herself up to the passion of his kiss. She welcomed him, tightening her arms around his back and using her own tongue to taunt over and around the invader swirling at the roof of her mouth. He withdrew and she followed. Probing, her tongue eagerly ventured into his mouth. Twirling and flicking, she teased the growing lust stirring within his body. His fingers explored her body, even as his lips fused to hers. The heavenly pleasure of touching and being touched overwhelmed them both.
It took a few minutes before Beverly came to realize he was searching for something more than her breasts. “Need help?” Her voice was more composed than she had thought possible under the circumstances.

Frustrated, he raised his head and caught the glint of amusement in her eyes. “How do you get this blasted dress off?” So much for his legendary lover status.

“Let me show you.” She slid away and then up from him. He sat on the edge of the bed, not willing to let her step too far away. He palmed her buttock.

“You can help,” she whispered, before she leaned over and kissed the top of his head.

She thrust her breasts deliberately close to his mouth. He touched her left breast with a finger, searching for her nipple. He brushed it, and then lifted the nipple to the taut fabric so that he could nip it through the silk. She held him close to her as he kissed her breast. She bent her head, kissing his head again. She could have stayed this way forever, safe in his arms if her desires weren’t demanding something more.

She backed away then and knelt between his legs, facing him.

“Under the back of the collar,” she whispered, as she rested her head on his thigh. His hand found the instant zipper. He touched it and watched as the zipper moved down her back. She stood. For a moment she just stared at him, as if trying to decide what to do next. She stepped backwards and shimmied. The silk started sliding off her body. He reached over and tugged until it puddled about her feet as a copper pool.

Placing his arms about her waist, he pressed kisses on her stomach and felt her tremors against his lips. Slowly he removed the last barrier to her flesh - her scarlet lace panties. His fingers traced circling paths about her hips and thighs. His warm breath heated her skin. But though he looked, he had yet to breach her most private parts. He wanted to explore her in every way before she opened her thighs to him.

But she had the impatience of youth. She was too needy to wait. She slid down his body to land on her knees. Then she bent backwards to display her naked breasts to him in silent invitation. Carefully he brushed a finger against her nipple. It sprang to attention. Something shifted within him. He no longer was about to suggest patience, for she had just inspired him.

For a moment he just looked, exploring every inch of her with his eyes, expertly critiquing her body. Everything was perfect. The size of her breasts, the nipples already hardening under his glance, the red curls that hid her secrets. It was a body promising intense erotic delights and she was offering it all to him.

“Touch me.” It was the most erotic plea of her life.

Almost reverently, he placed his hand on her right breast, slowly massaging it, feeling her nipple harden. Silken flesh flowed under his fingers. He scissored her nipple, and saw how much she responded.

But she grew frustrated. “I’m not a goddess…”

She pulled him into a hot kiss, maneuvering so that her breasts were pressed against his chest. She wanted to feel all of his body against hers again.

He stood and offered her his hand, helping her up. He pulled her into a passionate embrace, then realized that while she was naked in his arms, he was not.
“You’ve bewitched me, mon coeur…”

“I would rather have you naked,” she suggested.

“Your wish is my command.”

She reclined on the bed as she watched him undress. She rather appreciated what she observed as her personal inspection matched the intensity of his. The professional side of her nature decided that he was a fine specimen of a man. Maybe he was even the finest that she’d ever known.

In a moment he was by her side. Low moans rolled up from her throat as his lips moved down the long sensitive arch of her neck to the valley between her breasts. Lightly kissing, he took control of her body. He had to kiss her nipples, worship them, tickle them. And to try to bring her almost to orgasm as he suckled them.

“Make love to me,” she pleaded.

He loomed over her bracing himself on his arms. He bent his lips to her breast again.

But that wasn’t what she wanted. “Please.” She moved her body under him. “Please,” she sighed, wrapping her long legs around his hips. She nudged his cock with her vulva. “I need you now.” Her hand moved to touch him, to assess his length and width, to stroke him and then to guide him into her channel.

He would never deny a lady’s request. He slowly entered her, moving an inch. He stirred a little, brushing against her clitoris. He moved a little more into her.

She opened her eyes to look into his. And seemed to understand why he was making her wait.

“Our first time?”

“Must be savored,” he replied, as he bent his head to hers. He kissed her with all the passion in his soul. Her heat equaled his. She was becoming lightheaded. His kisses were dizzying. In her entire life she’d never felt this wanton before. Such a great desiring.

He hilted himself in her. She was tight. She was exquisite. Her muscles were clenching him, massaging him. She groaned deeply under the full-powered impalement of his sex.

He completely pulled out of her warmth, caught her gaze again, and then lunged. This time with vigor. Her lips formed a silent “Oh”. He took this as a sign to invade her mouth again, matching his tongue’s strokes to that of his manhood. His pelvis jerked forward, sinking his length into her liquid warmth. A few more strong strokes, and her orgasm blasted through her. She hadn’t been expecting it. Not this quickly. It was mind-boggling.

He stopped his movement, fascinated as he watched her face exposing her coming. Her passion was a revelation to him. When she was calmer, he began a slower, steadier pace, moving in and out of her sheath. His cock glided into her, eased by the slickness that they’d made.

Her eyes were wide open now watching him. She wondered how he could possibly think that she could take much more of this pleasure. Yet her body was following him toward his path to gratification. The swollen shaft of his prick repeatedly drove in, slamming its satisfying fullness into her body. She moaned under the heavy impact and whimpered as her throbbing sheath begged for more. She became lost in the sensations, now clinging to him as he changed his rhythm. He lay on her now. He was between her legs, captured by her thighs, thrusting with a rising vigor. He began to feel his rapture approach. And he sped up his movements, ramming her now, reaching for the
heavenly ecstasy that she promised. He was not disappointed. Seconds later she was quivering underneath him.

“Don’t go…” she weakly whispered as he moved as if to leave her body. “Stay awhile.”

“Forever,” he silently promised.

She pulled up the covers that they’d pushed aside in their lovemaking, then rested her head on his chest. “That was remarkable…”

“Yes, it was.” He kissed her temple. Remarkable - such a tame word for such joyous abandon…

She slept for a while in his arms.

He held her, content. It was an rare feeling for him. Still, he was thinking. This woman was a puzzlement. He’d had lovers before. He had enjoyed every one of them. And he was egotistical enough to think that they’d felt likewise. But his Muse was different. His Muse was a wanton with him, yet she still had an innocence about her - an inexperience he found charming. And something that he could cure quite easily if she permitted it. To his mind, the lovers she had known before had been mere boys who knew little about the joys of expertly loving a woman. He would show her what it was like to be his lover. He knew her time with him would be short. Yet, she had already become essential to him. He was discovering that he didn’t just desire sex with her. He desired sex, but only with her. He was going to find a way to keep her, even if it meant negotiating his soul away to Starfleet.

She stirred.. And was delighted to discover that he still held her close. When he made no move to touch her, she chose option number two. “I’m hungry,” she announced as she slid out of bed, in search of food.

He followed her. “Would you like a shirt or a robe?” He was only trying to put her at ease.

“Would you?” Her grin was wicked.

And he just laughed, as he had no need for any clothing either.

A few minutes later they were picnicking on the silken rug in front of the fireplace, resting against a couch. “I love firelight,” she whispered, leaning into his shoulder. “The popping and the crackling. It’s always fascinated me. Made me feel safe.”

He fed her a bit of toast covered with melted raclette. “Croute au fromage,” he announced. After one bite, she greedily reached for the entire slice of toast.

“Pinot Girs,” he added, as he handed her his glass. She took a sip, then her eyes widened.

Now it was his turn to be surprised. “You’ve never had fine wine and cheese before?”

“No, on my budget.”

“Then let me show you more.” He was finding his role as teacher to be quite enjoyable.

He waited until their repast was finished, before she seduced him again. This time, she rode him in front of the fireplace. She was totally in control, concentrating only on him, focusing on how his body was joining with hers. His stamina was thrilling. And the way he moved was showing her something new with every thrust.
He watched her, somewhat overwhelmed by her pale beauty. Her carnality. There was a flame in her that outshone any firelight. He could not remember any women he’d ever known having this intense depth of desire for him. She instinctually knew how to torment him. How to bring him to the brink of orgasm, and then stop, leaving him gasping for her. Then she was calming, and reviving him again. She had experienced two orgasms already. And they’d been spectacularly beautiful to behold. Now the way she was riding him suggested she was working toward her third orgasm, perhaps again without him. He’d have to see about that.

He raised his head, searching for her breast. And when he’d captured her nipple with his teeth, she stopped, focusing solely on this touch. His fingers moved toward her other nipple to rub it, then lightly pinch it with his thumb and forefinger. Then he rolled the nipple, helping it stand out. He reversed the position. He sucked. He felt her twitching with this additional stimulation. Her vaginal muscles were clamping him, demanding his surrender. He trailed hot kisses up the curve of her neck, then to her lips. He sat upright and embraced her, twining his legs under hers, pressing her against his hips. They were sitting upright, two lovers intimately coupled embracing the wonderment of their joining, and the miraculous discovery of each other.

And then they were still. For a time serene. They were motionless for minutes as they just held each other, absorbing the scent, the touch, the sighs and the breath of each other. He looked at her as if he were searching for every secret of her soul in her sapphire eyes. She felt lost in the stormy grey sea of his gaze but dared not look away. She’d never understood the dominating power of the flesh before until this very second. How this eternal force could strip away all rational thought with just a firing of the senses. But it only happened with him.

Finally he moved, brushing his lips against hers. Then he waited. She moved closer to him and pressed a kiss against his lips, rubbing her breasts against his chest. Her fingers stroked their joining, lightly touching. He opened his mouth to hers, sensing something new in their lover’s kiss. And then the dam broke.

He kissed her with a raging passion, suddenly needing her with an intensity of desire that would later astonish him, for he’d never felt this way before about any woman. And her desire matched his. In every stroke. In every moan. In every kiss. They were equals. His mind would only recognize this fact at another time.

He had to pleasure her again. He moved rubbing her clitoris with his thumb and then with his cock. Then he stopped. He held her close as her orgasm flooded through her. Wave after wave of soul-shattering pleasure broke over her, deluging her body with heretofore unknown marvelous sensations.

He rolled swiftly, lowering her onto her back. He gave no mercy. He pounded her flesh. He was lost in the taking of her body’s succor. She could only hold on to this raging force, following wherever he led. And when his ecstasy raged through him, this rush was extraordinary. He’d never known such pleasure. He was addicted to her. He needed her now and forever.

Beverly could barely breathe as he collapsed on top of her. Her mind was finding it hard to believe what had just happened. She couldn’t call it an orgasm. It was a revelation. If she died now, it would be a happy death.

“Incredible,” he muttered against her ear, as he regained a bit of his control. He was sated, and judging by the way she was clinging to him, it was mutual.

She held him against her sweating body, reveling in the sensation; rejecting any thought of letting him go. “I love the way you feel against me, my Gallalahad. The way we love. Don’t ever leave me.”
“Never…,” he promised. This time he said it aloud.

For a while, he held her, studying her face by firelight, tracing the planes of her face with his finger. He had a feeling that he would remember this night for the rest of his life. And he would remember this woman always. Eventually, he rolled to his side, and pulled her into his arms as they slept.

Up in a dark corner, Q floated on an Oriental carpet. A ruby red bokhara to be precise. He was enjoying his observations. He’d always wondered what Beverly Howard would be like in a lover’s clinch. But the captain that she had chosen, he had been the surprise. Q knew that he should be ending this tryst very soon. But, considering how much in love they were, he decided to permit them a few extra days of lovemaking. He might actually learn something more, considering the way this Starfleet officer mated. For he’d done sexual things that Q had never thought of doing...

About an hour later, she rose, went to the bathroom, then sat on the ivory sofa in front of the fireplace, and studied the man who had led her into such temptation. He had given her the most intense pleasure of her life. He was addictive, a drug she couldn’t refuse. No man should have that kind of power over her.

But did he? What was she doing here? Having a last fling before committing to Jack? Or choosing a new future? She had thought that she’d loved Jack. But could she really love Jack, if she were so eager to fuck someone else? And this man was an extraordinary lover. She knew that she was out of her depth with him. If she stayed here, he might show her too much, so that she could never go back to the life she’d known before.

She hadn’t noticed that he was awake, so he didn’t move. He studied her too. And he knew that she was thinking, trying to come to some decisions. About him. And her life. He couldn’t permit her to choose a life without him. He wouldn’t give her up.

It took her a while to notice that he was now watching her. “I like the view,” he remarked marveling at how she looked with her red gold hair a splendid tangle about her shoulders, the firelight highlighting the soft flesh that he would soon kiss again.

“T’m a mess,” was her response.

“Never.” But then he considered how much of a mess he was. Their lovemaking had been sweaty and elemental. A thought crossed his mind. And his loins.

She already knew his expressions well enough to know that whatever it was he was planning would be wonderfully wicked. She encouraged him, holding out her arms to him. He swept her up into his arms.

“Computer. Privacy shield,” he ordered. “We can see out, but no one can see in,” he explained, as he carried her outside. “Your bath awaits.” Then he gleefully dropped her into the pool at the base of the cascading waterfall.

She squealed as she fell. She sputtered when she came to the surface. “How do you know I can swim?” “The pool is only 1.5 meters deep.”

“Help me out,” she politely asked. However, he still didn’t know her well enough to know that her enticing smile was a sign that he should now be very, very wary.

He held out his hand.

She merrily yanked him in head first. Now he was sputtering in the cool water.
“Why, you…,” he spluttered.

She dove and pinched something sensitive, gliding her fingers between his legs then tweaking his cheek.

“Minx!” he shouted as he tried to grab her.

She laughed as she slid through his fingers, swimming like a mermaid, with decidedly more skill than he had for aquatic sports.

Then she introduced him to her version of lover’s tag. He reached for her. She swam under him and brushed his manhood before moving out of reach. He soon caught on to the rules of the game. She might be the better swimmer, but he understood battle tactics far better than she did. And he applied them to her.

He managed to tweak a breast before she splashed water in his face. He let go of her breast, and received a spank for his efforts then a pinch. He climbed upon a rock, and waited. “Come and get what you want, you flame haired witch…”

She found something very interesting to grab, and tugged him into the pool. When he rose to the surface, he yelled, “No Fair!” And he was laughing without restraint. He was thoroughly enjoying himself. Then he went in search of something more interesting to capture. He caught her with her back to him. He pulled her very close, and gave her proof as to how aroused he was. Then he tickled her. She broke away laughing.

Outside the privacy barrier, a very embarrassed Woody Nakamura stood. They hadn’t seen him. But he had heard enough. And he remembered the stories he’d heard earlier in the evening about a red haired woman who had challenged a Nausicaan at the Blue Tattoo, and the balding man who had rescued her.

He was also relieved, for based on what he had just heard, Jean-Luc Picard was finally having a helluva really good shore leave. Playing with a woman like that was something that the captain of the Stargazer would never do. Jean-Luc had converted back into being just a lusty man again. It was something that Jean-Luc really needed. And something that he had rarely been doing during his long years as captain.

Woody decided to find out who the woman was that could make Picard laugh like that. Maybe he could find a way to keep her around for his friend. For Woody worried about his friend. Picard had yet to learn that one had to be a man as well as a captain, in order to be a successful captain. He slipped away, glad that Picard hadn’t noticed him.

Picard finally captured her, and enacted his revenge. He positioned her on a ledge behind the waterfall, trapping her hands under her bottom. She wasn’t trying too hard to work herself free. For she was anticipating whatever it was that he was going to do.


She looked at him in amazement.

He leaned over her, and whispered, “Have you ever danced this pas de deux?”

“No.” She placed tiny kisses down his nose. “You’re a balletomane?” She nipped him.

“I am now, because of you.” He pulled her closer.
“I’m not a professional dancer…”

“Au contraire. I am paying a very high personal price for your dancing. I think I’ll be willingly paying…”

The music started, silencing the captain. Picard had chosen some of the most passionate music ever written for lovers. And he was determined to share it with her.

He was so very skilled. He intended only to pleasure her. She could only mindlessly sough as he moved down her body, worshiping her. His lips didn’t miss an inch. Her breasts, her arms, her bellybutton, the crease of her thighs - he would explore all of her flesh.

And then he knelt. With gentle touches he traced his thumbs against her labia, spreading the flesh open for his experienced tongue.

His first touch electrified her. She had never felt this kind of sexual rush before. It was awe-inspiring. And glorious. And then he kept driving her higher to plateaus that only this night had she begun to sense exist. He explored and tickled, licked and sucked. By the time he’d rubbed his nose against her sensitive button, she’d come to realize that all the theoretical anatomical knowledge in the world didn’t come close to the reality of his touch. She was well and truly lost.

And then he started nibbling and stroking with a flat tongue. He suckled her nub. She couldn’t contain herself. Higher and higher she soared. She couldn’t stop coming…

She was still peaking when he lowered her onto his cock, then thrust into her. Part of her brain realized that he was now moving to the tempo of the music. He lifted her into his arms now, to hold her, to ravage her mouth, her body. She floated in his arms clinging to him, her long legs wrapped about his hips. Their performance moved with the soaring notes of the Adagio. She shattered when he came, her orgasms continuing through his. She was boneless. So was he. Yet he still could stroke her down from their highs even as the music slowly ended. He was the victor. She was his captive.

He held her in his arms as they rested, watching the dawn break. There came a time when he casually pointed out the various morning stars, calling them by name, as they floated. Every once in a while, he ordered a change in the water temperature. He was too comfortable to move. And he suspected that his goddess felt the same way too.

Eventually she found the toiletries, and started to wash her hair. He moved up behind her and did it for her. He wasn’t trying to seduce her again, but she wanted him anyway.

“We’re shriveling,” she noticed.

“I achieved that state thanks to you, my lady.”

She smiled at her new memories. “We can make more memories in a little while. Unless you have something else to do today?”

“I thought that maybe we should go out to dinner tonight. Maybe a little dancing.”

“You mean a date?” She floated around to face him.

“I find it difficult to have a discussion with you when your beautiful breasts are bobbing so close to me.” He caressed one breast lightly, lingering for a moment. “But yes, I’d like to take you out for the evening.”

“Yes, there is something to be said for anticipation,” she agreed. She couldn’t help but watch him as
he climbed out of the pool. He was comfortable with his nakedness. More so, than any other man she’d ever known. He pulled her up too, and found a towel, carefully drying her off.

“I have nothing to wear,” she observed sighing over the thought of what had happened to her beautiful copper sheath. She hoped it could be cleaned. She loved that dress now even more than before. “I suppose I could go back to my room…”

“Let me pick something out for you.”

She was well aware of the difference in their class status. And their finances. When she’d come to Clarion, she’d been sharing a rented dorm room with three other friends. That sparse bunk bed was a far cry from the sybaritic lifestyle of this man. She didn’t realize that this hotel suite was an indulgence for him. For normally, he led an ascetic life, in sparse surroundings.

He sensed her hesitancy. “I just wish to give you a gift, my lady. From one lover to another. No strings.”

“Ever?”

He had the good graces to be embarrassed. “I may have misjudged you for a few minutes. Your beauty blinded my common sense.”

“You don’t know me.”

“I know enough.” He ran a finger lightly over her nipple. “I will learn more.” His teeth followed his finger, nipping as he caressed her breast.

His intensity made her nervous. He was no longer talking as if he was a starship passing in the night. She didn’t dare try to reconcile him with her reality. Every moment with him convinced her she had no future part in his world. But her wayward heart beat with crazy hope.

He carried her into the house, and sat her down on the floor in front of the fireplace. He got a brush from the replicator, sat on the sofa, and then leaned her against his legs as he insisted on drying her hair.

She teased him about wanting to remember what it was like to have long hair to brush, for she didn’t mind his balding spot. And he warned her that he would find a suitable punishment for her scurrilous words. They shared their laughter.

Jean-Luc idly tried to remember the last time he’d laughed this much especially with a woman. He could rarely recollect being with a woman who had such an appealing sense of humor before.

She turned between his legs to face him. With an impious smile, she began to lick his prick, trying to rouse him one more time. He leaned back, enjoying her ministrations, yet somewhat surprised by her seeming inexperience in this type of loving though her enthusiasm was stimulating. She was learning, though. And he wondered if he should teach her more of the sensual arts. He slid down onto the silk rug, positioning her so that her legs straddled his head. He placed soft kisses on the inside of her thighs. She was unsure, confused. He slapped her fanny. “Pay attention to your business, mon coeur. Follow me. We’ll be doing this as one.”

He spread her legs, and touched the tip of his tongue to her mons veneris, lightly outlining her lips. He heard her gasp. And then he felt her mouth sucking him again. He repaid the favor. And led this dance sensing how new this position too, was to her. But she was learning how to balance her body on top of him, how to match her kisses to his, and how to suck. He smiled to himself as she pleased him. And he pleased her. Their grateful bodies heaved and trembled in the wake of their
passion. He pulled her to his side, calming her trembling with his hands. With tender love, their mouths met and kissed in silent thanks for the pleasure that they’d shared. They both were exhausted.

It was a magnificent kind of exhaustion, one that he hadn’t experienced in years. Yet, with this flame haired witch, it felt different, too. He didn’t question the gods. He carried her to their bed.

They slept. He was used to starship time. Day or night, it didn’t matter to him. And after a year of being an intern, Beverly too, had learned to sleep whenever the opportunity presented itself. It was yet one more way they were compatible.

He held her close in his arms, as if he were protecting her. Cherishing her. She felt safe.

When she finally regained consciousness, their king sized bed was empty. There was a note and a single red rose on the bed table. Before she opened it, she smiled, pressing the envelope to her lips. For she was alone, and with his terminal. Only a few calls would supply answers for all of her questions. But he was trusting her. She opened her note, and then cursed, impolitely. It was written in French. She’d have to use the computer to translate it. Then she had another thought. She used the terminal to contact a friend.

“Red, where the hell are you? Did you get kidnapped by an Andorian slaver or something?”

“Something like that, Harriet. I highly recommend it.”

“Wearing his blue shirt, Hmmm?” Harry teased.

“First thing I could get my hands on,” Bev explained. “I need your help to translate something in French.”

“Wow, this is getting better and betterer.”

Beverly read the contents of the note. “Que mes baisers soient les mots d’amour que je ne te dis pas…”

Harriet giggled. “Red, you really do know how to pick them. What a last fling you’re having.” She didn’t notice the sorrow in Beverly’s eyes over that thought.

“Let my kisses be the words of love that I don't say,” Harry translated. “You end up with a romantic Frenchman on your shore leave. Me? I’ve just got my guide book to keep me warm.”

Promising to be ready to leave in three days, Beverly signed off.

From the shadows he watched her. He’d just walked to the hotel lobby to make certain arrangements. And then he’d done a little shopping on the side.

Now, as he watched her say goodbye to her friend, he finally knew how much time he really had with Red. And that he could trust her. He knew she had many questions, but she respected him enough to wait for him to tell her in his own good time. He was grateful to her.

“Red,” he called out as he came into the living room from the side entrance.

She greeted him with laughter. And then kissed him with earnestness. For she had taken the words from his love note and incised them into her heart.

Laughing back at her, he swept her up into his arms and carried her towards the bathroom.

“Put me down. I’m too heavy!”
He only looked at her and chuckled, considering how many times he'd already carried her in his arms. “Nonsense, mon coeur. We’ll have a quick shower, and then get dressed for our date.”

She slid out of his shirt, and turned in his arms, entwining her arms about his neck. “I know we have enough time for you to scrub my back, but do we have enough time for what I intend to do to you? I’ve been told that my touch can be very stimulating.”

He considered the look in her eye. “I can always change the reservation to tomorrow night.”

“Might be a wise idea…” She started nibbling. “I’m not hungry for food at the moment.” She gave him a quick demonstration of what she intended to do to him in the shower. He quickly stripped, before dragging her into it. She wouldn’t let him touch her. This time, it was all about her pleasuring him.

She shoved him down onto a marble bench inside a shower that could best be described as decadent. Pool basins, multiple shower heads and water sources, and temperature controls. It was the height of luxury in aqua and teal sandstone and marble.

Kneeling before him, she explored his body. She just looked him over. It was the first time her blood was calm enough for her to minutely inspect him. Jean-Luc willingly submitted to the most erotic examination he’d ever known. She glanced down and studied the thick pole shafting out toward her. Gently, with loving care, she reached out and tenderly ran her fingertips down its unbending length. It throbbed and pulsed with virile life beneath her touch. Her breath blew on his tip. He was as aroused as he’d ever been in his life.

But she was in no hurry to give him comfort just yet. She wanted to torture him. And she most definitely was learning how to do it. She was learning where to lick, to bite, to tickle and to kiss. And then to suck. For a while, he was falling into heaven. It took every ounce of his determination to refocus on her. Close to his orgasm, he tried to stop her. For he had other intentions. But she would have none of it. She wanted him this way. And when his pleasuring was finished, he pulled her into his arms and just held her, replete. He silently thanked her for her comfort. He hadn’t demanded it of her. But he was coming to understand what kind of woman she really was. She tried to play fair in everything. And to him, that was a major, important revelation.

He stood and offered her his hand, lifting her up from the bench. “Shall we take a shower?” She nodded. He swept her up into his arms and walked into the bath, carefully placing her on a padded bench, face down.

He found some bath oil, and started massaging her back. Then her buttocks. The backs of her thighs. Her arches. And every other inch of flesh that he could reach. He lingered over sensitive flesh, knowing that she had to be sore. Yet she didn’t stop his fingers from searching; plunging. When she started pleading for more, he picked her up and positioned her, bracing her against the bath wall. He took her from behind. Surging into her warm channel with pounding strokes that were hard and furious. She cried out. Lunging, thrusting, drilling and spearing his cock lashed in and out of her body. He came too, exploding as the white-hot light of passion flared, throwing him into the heights of ecstasy.

Beverly eventually got around to washing her hair again. He took his time in toweling her dry. She did the same to him. This time, they were really exhausted. He replicated turquoise cloth robes for both of them.

They ate a quiet dinner listening to music, quietly talking about nothing and everything important. Then she made the mistake of mentioning the Prime Directive. The debate that followed was exhilarating. For though their arguments were purely theoretical, she kept winning points against
him. Which completely took him by surprise. His ego took a hit, but his heart did not. For part of him was in awe of her now. He’d become too accustomed to his ways, his old arguments. She was teaching him to again consider other possibilities.

They both discovered that anger was a potent aphrodisiac. And its aftermath was extraordinary.

When she had the energy, she moved up her lover’s body and rested on top of him. She tapped him on the nose and smiled. “Penny for your thoughts?”

“If our every argument ends this way, I’ll have to pick a fight with you more often,” he whispered.

She laughed. “You called our little debate an argument? You haven’t seen me get really angry. And if you’re wise, you never will.”

“Forewarned is forearmed, eh?”

She stood and winced. Then she blushed, for he understood why she was sore. He’d done it to her.

He walked away from her and returned with a medi-kit. Quietly, he asked, “May I help?”

“I’ve used a medi-kit before,” she whispered, as she took the kit from his hands.

When she returned, he handed her a plush robe. He was wearing one again, as well.

“The honeymoon is over,” she sighed with great exaggeration. She slipped the robe on.

“I’m not a randy cadet anymore, mon coeur. I need to recoup. I fear I am too old for you.”

She stepped up to him and fingered the cowl to his robe. “I’m not a randy young girl either, my Gallahad. And from my point of view,” she leaned against him and whispered, “…everything about you is just right. If you were a nineteen-year-old, I don’t think I would be alive.” She grinned then quickly kissed his cheek. “I think we both need time for our bodies to recuperate.”

When they were calmer, she took a chance and challenged him to a game of chess. She’d correctly guessed that he played.

After the first game, she knew she had to come up with something to distract him. The way he was watching her, and knowing her dilemma, made her suspect that he was hoping that she’d start exposing some flesh for these hotel robes covered everything. She tried a different tactic. She quoted Shakespeare. And dared him to cite the reference.

By the end of the second chess game that he still won, he’d misidentified two of her quotes, but she had accurately cited the answer to every one of his quotations. Then it dawned on him. She wasn’t just a dancer - she was an actress. A classically trained Shakespearean actress.

“You flame-haired witch. You’ve memorized all the plays!”

She laughed. “Not all of them and not every scene. But if there’s a good role for a woman, I’ve acted it. I’ve been in Community Theatre since I was a teenager.”

He won their third game. But he had to concede that she was clever, and managed to hold her own against him. She instinctively understood the strategies of chess as well as the tactical use of unorthodox gambits. With a little tutelage, she’d be close to his equal. With a lot of instruction, she’d probably beat him.

Then he reminded her that to the victor went the spoils of war, and that she had to do everything he
wanted. She obeyed every one of his erotic requests. Then demonstrated a few more that he hadn’t thought of. Later that night, they slept, tired. And sated.

The next day was more of the same - playing and loving and talking. Beverly had never known such a time. She regretted that this was a lost weekend for it did feel more like a honeymoon. They didn’t make it to dinner that day either. But they did, on their final day.

When it was time to get ready to go out, he casually placed a garment bag across the foot of their pewter silk bed spread. “I hope that this will be acceptable.”

Presents had been few and far between in Beverly’s life. She eyed the dress bag with excited anticipation. For what he’d chosen for her would speak volumes about his taste, and what he thought of her.

She carefully opened the bag and lifted up the contents. In it was a long evening gown, in royal blue silk velvet. Spaghetti straps trimmed with rhinestones, criss-crossed the heart shaped bodice. The dress had an A line design, flowing from the fitted bodice, down to a glorious sweep of a skirt. It was the perfect dress for dancing. And it was beautiful. Sophisticated yet sexy. And the color of her eyes. She assumed that the lack of a back to the dress was for Sir Gallahad’s benefit. He also provided a matching evening bag, and high heeled sandals. He clearly wasn’t bothered by her height. And she fell in love with him all over again.

“It’s perfect.” She stroked the fabric, surprised by its unique sinuous softness. “Surely the hotel boutique didn’t have something like this?”

She looked up at him, and then realized that he’d been nervous about her reaction to his gift. He wasn’t that confident all the time. He still wasn’t that sure of her. Her heart melted some more.

“No, they didn’t. But they did know where to get it.” He saw the way she was caressing the dress. “It’s silk. You should always be draped in silk.”

She thought of her scrubs, envisioning them in silk. She smiled to herself.

He left her then to dress.

Once she put the gown on, she was delighted with the way it flowed. It was the supplest velvet she’d ever worn. What amazed her even more was that her bejeweled sandals were a perfect fit. She found the sapphire wisp of silk that apparently was the only underwear he wished her to wear. He had thought of everything. And somehow arranged it. And considering what the past days had been like, it was just one more overwhelming thing that he’d done.

He didn’t say a word as he watched her fix her hair into an upsweep, for though he preferred her hair down, he did consider how much he would enjoy releasing her hair, later on. He knew the feel of her silken strands would haunt him forever.

She had replicated everything that she’d needed to get ready. And he was trying to recollect the last time he’d had a lady’s toiletries strewn about his rooms. It had been a while.

She saw him in the mirror. He was wearing a tuxedo, in a deep navy blue. He looked so dignified. Handsome. And was from a world so far removed from her own, that they should have been using universal translators to communicate.

She took his breath away. She’d been stunning as a Muse. Magnificent as a temptress. Beguiling as a mermaid. But now - the way she looked. He was without words. She took his breath away.
She smiled.

He stood before her, mesmerized. “You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen, my lady…”

She blushed. He lightly touched her cheek then kissed the palm of her hand. He perused her. “Ah, but something is missing."

Beverly quickly glanced in the mirror. She couldn’t see anything obvious that was missing.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small case, opening it up to reveal a pair of simple emerald cut blue stones with a blue star sapphire tear drop at the base. The colors matched her dress. And her eyes. And thinking that they were replicated stones, she didn’t have a problem with accepting them. But it would be decades before she learned that all the stones to her dress and her jewelry were real blue diamonds and star sapphires. Not fakes.

“Perfect,” he remarked as he stepped away, to study her yet again. He didn’t mention the matching star sapphire set with blue diamonds that he’d had made into a ring for her. That was a gift for another time.

“Perfect,” she agreed, as she studied him as well. She offered him her arm.

“Shall we?” He wound his arm through hers, handing her the evening bag.

A moment later they beamed over to the most exclusive restaurant and night club on Clarion, the Centauri Room.

It was everything that Jean-Luc Picard would have expected of an expensive, lauded restaurant.

Beverly, on the other hand, had never quite seen anything like it before. On the surface she presented herself with her most sophisticated facade, but inside, she was a tourist from Caldos. She was looking at everything from the shimmering chandeliers to the floating star candles, to the opulence of the silver to black décor. It was almost Art Deco in style with many mirrored accents including a black mirrored dance floor. She was excited.

They were immediately escorted to their table, on the second level of a semi-circle whose center was the orchestra and the dance floor.

He somehow knew that she was impressed with his choice even though she wasn’t obvious about it.

He was pleased with her. His heart had been blinded by love in his passion for her, but he was glad that his intellectual side could acknowledge her as well. He had found his ideal woman, in all ways.

He picked a Château Picard White Bordeaux, the ‘26 for their wine. And he then proceeded to order their appetizers.

“How nice,” she informed the waiter who then left. That’s when she kicked him underneath the table cloth.

He was startled. How could he have forgotten that she liked to kick…

“Might I not order for myself?” she too-politely asked. “After all, you have no idea if I am allergic to Bajoran shrimp, or Briglodian caviar, do you?” She had a point to make and she made it.

He was beginning to learn when she was displeased. And how he had unwittingly overstepped his bounds.

“I am sorry. I presumed too much, didn’t I?”
“Yes.” Her eyes glittered with some sort of emotion.

She was clearly expecting more from him. He searched for more words. “And I will never do it again?” he added.

“You’re learning.” She nodded her approval.

And then he started chuckling. “I must never take anything for granted with you, my lady.”

“I would be displeased if you did. I’m not Galatea, you know. All of this may be new to me, and I may be impressed, but it is only to be enjoyed. It isn’t what is really important to me.”

He took her hand and kissed the pulse point of her wrist. “Forgive me?” She pressed a kiss against his cheek. And then his lips. When he straightened up, he saw their waiter approach with their wine. He asked, “What would you like for our entrée?”

“You choose,” she answered.

His low laughter could be heard several rows away. He selected that which he thought would please her. Vichyssoise, Sole a la Grenoblois, a simple salad of spring greens, and a chocolat gateau for desert.

From several tiers away, a startled Admiral Winston Holt Wiley observed his captain with the lady. He hadn’t known that Picard could laugh like that. After dinner, he’d meet the lady who had caused such a sound coming from his most austere of captains.

They watched several stage shows as they ate their dinner. There was a chanteuse with a sultry voice, and a dance act that Beverly found enjoyable. She was pointing out to her lover all the styles that were in the routine, and how difficult they were to do.

“Are you a professional dancer?” He chose to delve.

Beverly now had to consider how to proceed. She had enjoyed this time of theirs with no past or future. When she could focus only on the present. But now she had to face her realities. “No. I’m not a professional dancer. I would have liked to have become one, but, to tell the truth, I am too tall.”

“Nonsense. Your partners were too short, that is all.”

He loved the sound of her laughter.

The waiter came to remove their plates.

“So, who are you?”

“I’m the man falling in love with you,” was his simple non-answer. Her breath caught before she screamed with frustration. He stood and asked, “Shall we dance?”

Hesitantly, she took his hand. This was a major test in their relationship for her. Could they dance together? She blushed as she had a flashback to their intimate pas de deux in the pool. But this was different. You could learn so much about your partner on a dance floor. Now, she wondered if she really needed to know it.

Her head was already whirling from his use of the word love. She instinctively knew that it was a word that he never used casually. Her heart was singing her reply.

The orchestra specialized in archaic music. They were playing a slow dance called True Love.
He was smiling, as if he was pleased with the orchestra’s choice. He swept her into his arms, as they swirled onto the dance floor.

His hand gently pressed against the small of her back as he guided her. She quickly came to realize that the missing back to her dress wasn’t just for his benefit alone. She shivered in his arms from his touch.

“You dance very well,” she murmured.

“Thanks to my granmere. She insisted that I learn the social niceties when I was a child.”

“You’re a little rusty,” she casually remarked, wondering if he would take the bait.

“If you’d met the ladies with whom I’ve been forced to dance over the past few years, you would be rusty too. Ambassador’s wives, admiral’s daughters, politicians; all that would try any sane man’s patience.”

She just let the music move her as she deduced that he must be a diplomat. That would explain everything about him. She relaxed and followed him wherever he led. Though she did tease him, with a brush of a breast here, a touch of a thigh there, and an occasional naughty suggestion whispered into an ear.

He was thoroughly enjoying himself. And then he prayed that the gods would not demand too great a recompense for granting him such happiness.

When the waltz was over, he escorted her back to the table for their desert.

Waiting for them at the table was Admiral Wiley.

She heard him curse Merde! under his breath. He clearly did not want to see this man.

The Admiral shook Jean-Luc’s hand. “Good to see you, Captain. It’s been a long while.”

“Yes, Admiral.”

The admiral pointedly glanced at Beverly.

Picard stiffened, as he began to search for the right words to introduce the lady.

She saved him by being bold. She shook the Admiral’s hand. “I’m best known as Red, Sir. Though the Captain has been known to call me by other names.” Her grin was saucy, as if she were unimpressed by the man’s status.

“Known each other long?” Wiley politely inquired.

“Yes, and no.” She batted her eyelashes and presented to the admiral her most glamorous, teasing, sexy smile. “I feel as if I’ve known Sir Gallahad here, forever, though in reality, it’s only been a few too many days. He does have a way with Nausicaans though.”

Wiley thought that she was being witty.

Picard was simply impressed by her quick thinking.

A waiter intruded with the iced ‘37 Château Picard champagne. Picard saw a way out of this awkward situation. “Admiral, may I send a bottle of my champagne over to your table?”
“Why of course, Jean-Luc. I’d be delighted.”

Admiral Winston Holt Wiley left, unaware of the damage that he had done.

Even in the low light of the night club, he saw how she’d paled. Obviously she’d recognized his name. And now he would have to learn why it bothered her.

She moved numbly, responded automatically. If her lover was who she suspected he was, her entire life had just crashed down onto her head. And broken her heart.

They clinked their glasses. She let him toast to us. And then she drank all of her champagne, not even noticing how good it was.

“May I have another?”

He poured, but now he was very worried. Her expression was incomprehensible.

“Shall we go?” he asked.

“Please, let’s dance one more time.”

He silently led her onto the floor, wondering why it felt to him as if it were their final dance. And his last dance, for he’d never dance again, if it wasn’t with her.

The band was playing the old standard by Irving Berlin, “Always”.

This time there was no bantering between the lovers. No flirtatious looks. He just held her as they swayed. And she held onto him as if she would never let him go.

And when the number was over, she let him escort her back to their table.

“Shall we go?” His voice was somber. Detached.

A few minutes later they were standing in front of his crackling fireplace. He knew he should say something, but all he could do was kiss her. Softly at first, as if he was waiting for her to leave his arms.

But suddenly, she was ravenous, desperate, kissing him as if she was afraid that he would disappear if she stopped. Her need was great. She didn’t break the kiss, even as she shrugged the glittering straps off her shoulders, and stepped out of her dress. She kicked off her shoes. And then she removed his dress jacket. And pulled off his pants.

“Please,” she begged.

He sensed her panic. Her anguish. Her need. He fell backwards onto the sofa, bringing her down on top of him. That was when he noticed her tears and tried to kiss them away. But tears kept falling even as she sought to arouse him.

Her fingers sought his heat, found his staff, and started stroking until he was aroused enough for her.

She mounted him, sighing as she sank onto his shaft.

“What, mon coeur? What is it?”

“Just one more time, Jean-Luc. Just one more time. It will have to last me a life time…”
He cupped her bottom cheeks, and lifted her then let her fall back onto his shaft. He did this several times before she began to rise up and down on her own. Then she stretched out on top of him, keeping him hilted as she moved against him. He rolled her over. He let his passion overrule everything else. He loved her with desperation now, not caring about finesse or skill. Her need fueled his own. He rammed into her now. And all she kept begging was more. Their mutual orgasms shattered through them, robbing them of breath and reality for a long while. And when they were calm, neither lover wanted to move, to talk, or to recognize that the world had returned.

Finally she rolled away, and picked up her dress, slipping it back on. She had no idea where her panties had been flung. Then she put on her sandals.

“You’re leaving?” He couldn’t bear to let her go.

“I have to.”

“You have recognized my name?” He sat up and fastened his slacks.

“It’s much more complicated than you know.”

“It is only as complicated as you make it, mon coeur.” Her unspoken fear was unsettling.

All expression vanished from her face. Her voice was devoid of emotion. “I came to Clarion on leave. From the Starfleet Medical Academy, Captain.”

He thought he understood. ‘You’re a cadet and I am a captain.’ He winced thinking of all the Starfleet regulations he’d just broken with this cadet. And then he realized that some of those broken rules might have serious consequences especially when it came to fraternization between a senior and a subordinate. “That is a problem, but it may not be totally insurmountable.”

She just knew he was thinking that he should have asked her age. “No, it’s not what you think. I am old enough. I’m a doctor. First year of internship. I just joined Starfleet Medical so that I could go to the stars.”

He breathed a deep sigh of relief. She wasn’t as young as she appeared to be. Fraternization was still a problem, but it wasn’t something that could get them both court-martialed. “There could be difficulties. I realize that I am older than you, but if we both…”

“You don’t understand!”

He could see that she was trembling. And crying. He pulled her into his arms, to comfort her.

“What is it that I don’t understand?” he whispered against her hair.

“Jack.”

His mind raced as he still held her, but the pieces began to click together. “My Jack Crusher?”

“Yes. Captain Jean-Luc Picard!”

His arms dropped. He was shocked unto the depths of his soul. And scared. He would lose her. He walked away trying to assume some semblance of control.

His voice was cold as he spoke. “Jack told me that he was going to ask you to marry him.”

“I told him not to. I wanted to think things through. That’s why I came to Clarion. To consider everything - all the possibilities.”
“I see.”

She thought she saw condemnation in his eyes. “I just wanted to forget about everything for a little while.”

“That is what your roommate meant by one last fling, isn’t it?”

“Yes. But how could I have ever imagined that I was going to meet you? I just wanted to have a little fun. To flirt a little. To dance…”

“Instead, I pulled you into my arms and we seduced each other.”

He demonstrated and kissed her, as if he wanted to remove all of her pain and guilt. It was his alone to bear.

“No, Jean-Luc…” She struggled.

He refused to let go of her.

His hands captured her head, cupping her face. He had to see her eyes as he asked, “Do you love me, Beverly?” It was the first time he’d ever said her name.

“Don’t ask me that. Jean-Luc.”

“You have to answer, Beverly. The only way we can survive this together, is if you are honest with me.”

“Please, Jean-Luc.” He let her go. She lowered her head, as red gold wisps fell about her collarbone. She rested her forehead on his shoulder.

“I love you.” The words were wrenched from her heart. She didn’t know how she could mean those words for she could count the time she’d known this man by the hours and not the years, but love him, she did.

Part of his heart rejoiced. But his mind knew better. He lifted her chin, so that he could look at her.

He knew that if he had not been party to everything, and had only learned the facts, he would have condemned her as a selfish, wanton woman who only cared for herself. And a whore who would break his best friend’s heart. But, he knew otherwise.

He hoped that one day Jack would forgive him for the choice he was about to make. He pressed a soft kiss against her lips to offer her some comfort. What they had between them was miraculous and too rare to dismiss. They would find a way to stay together. They would survive.

“We will get through this.”

“How?”

He pulled her back onto the sofa. “We do need to discuss how we will proceed.”

“I have two choices.” She sat down, but away from him, nervously stroking the velvet of her dress. “I can marry Jack. Or, I can love you, Jean-Luc.”

He already knew what she would decide in his heart. And he grieved for the pain they would inflict upon Jack Crusher. But it was the rest of their life together that worried him. “Beverly, how serious are you about a career in Starfleet medical?”
“Meaning?”

“I realize that you may not understand but I will only marry a civilian. I cannot marry an officer.”

“Because?”

“I could never order someone I loved into danger. If you were an officer posted to my ship, then that possibility would exist.” He saw the answer in her eyes. “You want to be a CMO, don’t you?”

“Yes. I had my life all planned out. And then you came along.” She wearily stood knowing there was only one honorable decision to reach. “I will tell Jack that I cannot marry him. Should I tell him why?”

It was his turn to bow his head. “No. We will tell Jack together.” He stood and held her hand. “We will do what is right, together.” He kissed her brow. “I want you to be my wife. But as long as one of us is a Starfleet officer, we will only be lovers. Or until we can find an acceptable solution.”

“Maybe when we retire…”

“A nice little cottage somewhere…”

She smiled at that thought. She knew the place.

“No! Nonononono…” Q complained. “You’re supposed to choose Jack, not the Captain!” Q yelled to himself. He scanned her with his powers. “Well, at least you’re preggers…,” he chuckled. But then he could only guess at the hell he’d pay if certain supreme beings found out what he’d done, so Q did what was the best thing for Q. Q blinked.

Picard was sent to his empty bed with only vague erotic memories to plague his dreams forever. And feeling bereft over the loss of an unidentified something.

And Beverly woke up in her dorm room with a hangover headache, wondering where she’d gotten the earrings. And the dress. There was something missing from her life. But she couldn’t quite remember what it was... That feeling would haunt her for years.

For Q had erased the memories of Jean-Luc and Beverly being together. It was truly a lost weekend. But Q had forgotten something important - their feelings… He couldn’t erase them.
The French Patient

Chapter Summary

Picard's plotting comes to fruition.

The bright white light was burning through his eyelids. Finally he had to open them. But when he saw Q, he wanted to go back to wherever it was that he had been. He’d been loving Beverly there. And it would take the power of a Q to drag him away from Beverly’s arms…

The operation was over. Somehow, Jean-Luc Picard had managed survive it. There was no logical reason as to why he should still be alive. Everything that medical science could predict contraindicated his survival. Picard should be dead. But he wasn’t.

Beverly sat by Jean-Luc’s bedside and watched. She was not going to leave him.

A large, warm hand rested on Beverly’s shoulder. She looked up to see Captain Jellico.

“Is there anything that you can do for him, right now, Doctor?” Jellico gruffly asked.

“No,” she admitted.

“No, you will get some rest. Don’t bother protesting. I will override you.” He glanced at Dr. Ogawa. “But you may sleep here, next to him if you wish. You have your babies to think of, Doctor.” She didn’t protest as a med tech brought over a bed.

Jellico stepped away from Beverly and into the main section of the sick bay.

“Thank you, Dr. Ogawa-Powell, for telling me.”

“She wouldn’t listen to any of us,” Alyssa explained. “I’ve known Beverly for years. She is one of the stubbornest people in Starfleet. And the universe.”

Understood.” He looked at the surgical crew. “Thank you for all coming so quickly at my request.” He purposefully stared at every doctor. He wondered if anyone would contradict him. No one did.

Jellico then entered the hallway, where all of the Enterprise officers were waiting for news. “Nothing yet. I’ve ordered Dr. Crusher to get some sleep. We’ll all be notified if there is any change.” He walked a few steps, made a decision, then turned and ordered, “Follow me.”

There was something in the tone of his voice, that suggested to all of Picard’s officers that maybe they should follow Jellico.
He took them to Geordi’s quarters. They all were somewhat surprised by Jellico’s destination.

“Mr. Data, check for bugs,” he ordered as they entered the suite. When they were all sitting, including a rather startled Geordi LaForge, Jellico took center stage.

“I appreciate what you all have tried to do for Admiral Picard.” He stared with barely controlled anger at Captain Riker and Commander Crusher. “And I completely understand why you did what you did.” He glared at all of them. “But do you have any idea how you may have jeopardized that goal, for which Jean-Luc may very well end up sacrificing his life for? How dare you endanger Jean-Luc Picard’s mission!”

“Captain, I do protest your assessment…”

“Shut up, Data!” Jellico ordered. “I have witnessed the extraordinary bravery of this man. A man who gave up the woman he loves and his children to be, the job he’d given his life for, all of his friends; a man willing to even submit to disapprobation and the scorn of his peers, and then to finally suffer horrific torture - all this in order to do his duty. To bring peace to the Federation. To destroy a silent enemy bent on controlling us.”

Jellico watched all of them. “You may have thought that you were doing the right thing. And if Picard lives, then you’ll be somewhat justified for thinking that you did do the right thing. But, ask yourselves - will Jean-Luc Picard believe that you all did the right thing? You all should have been concentrating on doing your duty - making Jean-Luc Picard’s mission a success - and not giving in to your own personal wishes.”

No one said a word.

“And what will you say to Picard, if he lives, but the mission is a failure? What then?”

Their silence continued.

Jellico glanced at Geordi. “Commander LaForge, Dr. Brahms, and Commander Barclay will be returning the Montgomery Scott to Utopia Planetia tomorrow. I do not want to have to worry about the security of a major Starfleet experiment, and maintain the security of this conference simultaneously.” He turned and looked at LaForge. “Starfleet has accepted my explanation of requesting that Mr. Data arrange for Dr. Crusher to come as soon as possible. By the fastest means possible. There will be no charges against you, Commander LaForge. Count yourself lucky that because of the conference, I could not find the time to file the well-deserved charges.” His head pivoted to look at Mr. Data. “Am I correct, Mr. Data?”

Data knew that he was being asked to confirm a lie. But he didn’t have to think about it. He knew it would save his friends’ careers.

“Yes, Captain.”

“You all should have consulted me first.” With that, Jellico left the room.

“Whoa.” Geordi muttered. “Did Captain Jellico just save my ass?”

“He saved all our asses,” Data replied.

Riker looked in the direction of the closed door. “Yes, he did, for now.” He glanced at all of his friends. “But what if he’s right?” He left.

Riker paced around the ship, walking the decks, thinking. He ignored his own physical pains. He
knew that Jellico was only suffering his presence. Riker had been so focused on Picard he had forgotten what was really important. And he felt an overwhelming guilt as he understood the mistakes that he had made including the guilt he’d felt because he hadn’t prevented Madred from stabbing Picard. He made up his mind. There was only one thing that honor dictated that he do.

The door to Jellico’s ready room chirped.

“Enter.”

The last person Jellico wanted to see was Captain Riker. His opinion of the man had not really changed.

Riker stood at attention in front of Jellico’s desk.

“Yes, Captain?” Jellico wasn’t bothering to be polite.

“Sir, with your permission…”

“What?”

“You were right. I was wrong. I apologize.”

Jellico finally looked up at him. “Meaning?”

“You are the better Starfleet captain. I will be withdrawing my name as captain of the Enterprise. You should be captain of the Enterprise E. Not me.”

Riker had finally managed to surprise Jellico. And Jellico studied Jean-Luc’s Number One rapidly reassessing his opinion of him. He had just read the report of how Madred had tortured Riker too. And the way Riker had behaved in its aftermath.

"Captain, I do understand and appreciate the magnitude of your offer. But what makes you think that Starfleet would offer the Enterprise to me if you withdraw?"

“There’s no one else as worthy of the captain’s chair of the Enterprise, Captain Jellico.”

Jellico started chuckling. “No, Will Riker. There’s you.” He motioned for Riker to sit down.

“Sir?”

“Picard saw something in you that I never did until now. So, I’m not going to second guess the great man. To be frank, I don’t want her any more. I’ve learned a few lessons along the way, myself. And what I really want is what I already have - and Nella. If I were the captain of the Enterprise I wouldn’t be able to have my wife and son on board with me. I understand Picard’s point of view on that subject.”

“Captain.”

Jellico interrupted him. “You’d better call me Edward, Will.”

For the first time in days, Will smiled. “Yes, Edward. So what can I do to help?”

Edward matched Riker’s grin. He still did have a few scores to settle with Will. “You’re fit for duty?”

Riker said yes, hoping Beverly would back him up. “No one knows this, but the Romulans are
arriving in six hours. Why don’t I put you in charge of them.”

Riker had never suspected that Jellico had had a mean streak as well as a sense of humor before.

Something had beeped. And she woke up. Ro Laren stretched on her bed in her new captain’s cabin. It was quite comfortable. She would have asked Tom if he liked it too, but he was snoring next to her.

Eventually, she began to realize that something was still beeping. “Now what,” she grumbled as she went in search of her clothes. She wasn’t about to answer a subspace message in the nude.

On the bridge, she found the proper button to hit.

“Data!”

“Laren!” They’d become friends during their communiqués, and she was finding that she actually liked him. Of course, knowing how Jean-Luc felt about the android, had been a major influence upon her.

“You are safe!”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Ro, the last we heard of you, you were being held captive by the Cardassians.”

“And so you thought to call me, just to see if it was true?” Data was taken back a bit by her attitude. Ro smiled. “Tell Jean-Luc that an old friend of his, the Vorlo Captain Ragner rescued us.”

“Us?”

“Tell Will that his brother is safe too.”

Mr. Data nodded. Then his expression saddened.

“What is it Mr. Data?”

“Jean-Luc Picard was gravely injured by Gul Madred. Captain Picard is on board the Cairo. Dr. Crusher was able to come and replace his heart. However, he is still in critical condition.”

She was close to throwing up. “Data, is there anything that I can do?”

“Yes.”

“What?”

“I do not wish to ask this of you, Ro Laren, but I must. I need you to testify about what Gul Lemec did to you and your father. Admiral Picard was supposed to testify about his treatment at the hands of the Cardassians, but he is not able to do so. We need you to testify, Ro Laren. Would you?”

“How would I get to Qo’noS! Won’t Starfleet try to stop me?”

“I have been assured that if you come to the Klingon border, Gowron’s personal flagship will escort
you.”

“How did you know to contact me, Mr. Data?”

“Admiral Picard mentioned that he was getting you a ship. I contacted DaiMon Behlk.”

“I understand, Mr. Data.” She didn’t have to think twice. “I’ll be coming as soon as I can.”

“Data, out.”

Hours later, Tom Riker found Ro sitting in the pilot’s seat. He realized that they were going somewhere.

“I can drop you off on Macias, if you wish.”

Riker wondered if he’d gotten out of bed in the wrong dimension, considering the night they’d just shared. “Drop me off where?”

“I’m on my way to Qo’noS, Tom. They need me to testify before the delegates at the conference.”

“You can’t go. You’ll be arrested!”

“Gowron says that he will offer me sanctuary.”

“Do you really believe that? Are you really going to trust a Klingon?”

“I don’t have a choice, Tom.”

“Of course you do, Laren!”

“Really?”

Riker shook his head in disbelief. “After all that the Federation and Starfleet have done to you, you still are Starfleet in your heart.”

“I am what I am, Tom.”

He stomped away. After a few minutes he returned holding two cups of coffee, and handed one to her.

“So, when do we reach Klingon space?”

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He croaked something. Merde…

She was right there, next to him, before he could try to say something again.

“Jean-Luc?” she prayed. She leaned closed to his ear. “It’s Beverly, Jean-Luc. You’ve got a new heart.”

“You have my heart?” Somehow he found the strength to brush his thumb against her cheek. “Don’t throw it away…”

Through the tears, she almost smiled. “Rest, my love,” she whispered. “I’ll be here when you wake
“The babies…”

“They’re fine, Jean-Luc. I love you.

“You… rest.” His eyes closed.

And then she cried great tears of relief. She ran from the room, straight into her son’s arms.

“He spoke to me, Wes,” she wept.

“He’s getting stronger, Mom. He’s coming back to us - his way.”

The news quickly spread through the ship that Picard woke up. There was hope.

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She just had to do it. Flaunt it. So Ro Laren replicated another version of her cat suit, this time in a flame red with a touch of burnt gold here and there. It was definitely not a sedate little outfit. Then she lowered the zipper a couple of notches.

Tom could only stare with admiring appreciation at his lover. She really was something else.

Tom had replicated a suit similar to those that Federation Terran diplomats wore. If he wasn’t clapped in irons the minute they set foot on Qo’noS, he wanted to blend in.

When they beamed down to the Chancellor’s great hall, the last person either expected to see was Captain Will Riker. He was accompanied by Klingon guards. They were armed.

“Oh no,” both Ro and Riker groaned.

Will just flashed his best Cheshire cat grin. He was going to enjoy this.

Will stepped up to Ro, took her hand, lingeringly kissed each knuckle, pulled her closer, and then pressed a rather sensuous kiss against her lips. “Good to see you again, Laren.”

He straightened up, waiting to see if Tom - or Laren - was going to take a swing at him.

But Will forgot that Tom was also him. And two years in a Cardie labor camp had taught him a lot about patience and waiting for the appropriate moment to act.

Tom grabbed Will’s hand and shook it. “Good to see you again. Long time since I’ve been with my evil twin.”

An eyebrow rose. Will instantly realized that Will had changed. This was going to be interesting.

“So, where are we going?” Ro asked as Will motioned up the steps. She looked towards the large amount of Klingon warriors on guard.

“You’re going to be briefed, and escorted, and you’re scheduled to testify tomorrow morning. By the way, you’re staying on board the Cairo. Gowron has literally run out of rooms for all the delegates and witnesses.”
“In the brig, no doubt,” Tom remarked.

“As long as you remain in the Klingon Empire, you’ll be treated as honored guests,” Will replied.

“You mean honored guests residing in the brig,” Tom mumbled under his breath.

Ro stopped. “You want us to beam up to the Cairo? No thank you! We’ll stay on board my ship - the Gale.”

“Together?” Will just had to ask.

“And what is that to you?” Tom bristled.

Will turned to confront Tom. “Ro Laren is many things. One of the things that she is, is my friend. I don’t want her hurt by the likes of you.”

“You mean us don’t you?”

“Yes, that’s why I won’t let you hurt her.”

“Boys, boys! The Klingon warriors are properly impressed with your posturing over a female. Now, let’s get going before this female kicks both of your asses.” Ro patted both their chests. “Now, let’s go. She then swatted both their behinds. A few warriors snickered. And she was touched by Will’s defense of her.

Will Riker was amused by Laren. And relieved too. For though she had been captured by Madred and Lemec, they obviously had not hurt her as severely as they had done before. After a few minutes, Will ushered them into a small room that he was using as an office.

Ro glanced about the room as Will closed the door. “Is it safe to talk?”

Will pulled out his Tricorder and checked. “Right now, it is.”

Will sat down opposite of them.

“How is Jean-Luc?” She did not bother to hide her concern.

“He’s still alive, Laren. He woke up a little while ago. But Beverly is keeping him comatose at the moment.”

Will noticed that Laren seemed pale. And her concern for Jean-Luc was obvious. He also wondered how Tom was handling this. Hell, he was jealous, and it had been years since he’d known Ro Laren as a lover.

Ro opened up a pocket, and removed quite a few data chips. “You might be interested in what I’ve uncovered, Will. I got info from the Vorlo captain Ragner, too. He had a lot to say on the subject matter of the Suliban. I’ve got names, dates, payoffs and cargo movement for them.”

Will Riker began to really understand what Jean-Luc Picard had seen in Ro Laren.

Hours later, they were almost done. But Tom was acting worried now. Ro was turning green. “Where’s the bathroom?” Tom asked.

“Two doors to the left,” Will answered.

Ro dashed, waving at Tom to stay.
What? Laren’s sick? Was it the Cardies?”

Tom thought about it and decided that maybe Picard’s first officer should know the truth. “Ro’s pregnant.”

“I’m going to become an uncle?” Will was suddenly pleased with that thought.

“No. She’s pregnant with Picard’s child.”

“Oh my God.” He thought of Beverly. And then he understood how complicated Jean-Luc’s life was rapidly becoming.

“That’s why Madred wouldn’t let Lemec rape Ro.” The hate still churned in Tom. “You don’t want to know how they tortured her. But the Obsidian Order wanted to use Picard’s daughter against Picard so they wouldn’t let Lemec seriously hurt Ro. But he still hurt her.”

Will felt the hate now, too. He also had to ask the question. “Are you lovers now?”

“Yes. I’ve sort of asked Ro to marry me.”

Will accepted this knowing he could do nothing about it. “Care for a Klingon ale?”

Tom was surprised by the offer but agreed.

Will decided to plunge right in. He didn’t want Tom to find out years from now. For Will might not like having an evil twin, but he was getting used to the idea of having a brother.

“Did Ro ever tell you about me?”

“You mean how much she hated you? What an ornery, Rigelian worm of an evil superior officer you were? Or the part where you slept with her?”

“Or the part where I let her escape?”

A servant brought two ales and a tea.

“Figured some part of you would support the Maquis, Will. After all, I do.”

“I let her go because she was Ro Laren, and not because it was for the Maquis.”

Tom drank some of the dark ale. He didn’t believe Will for a minute. “I think I’d like to play poker with you someday, Will.”

“I’d like that too,” Will grinned at the thought of a poker game with himself. It would be an interesting game. But there was more that Tom should know.

“Tom, there’s something else. Beverly Crusher is pregnant with twins.”

Tom put down his drink. “And here I thought you were the Don Juan of the Enterprise.”

“I don’t know if it matters, but this behavior is very atypical for Picard.”

“Yes, that helps a lot, doesn’t it.” Tom drank his ale. “Is Picard going to live?”

“I hope so.”

“Then I’ll punch him in the jaw when he’s better.” He drank some more ale. “It’s a real mess, isn’t
it? I’d planned on raising the baby as my own, Will.”

Will thought about it. “It’s possible Jean-Luc will agree to it. After all, you are me where it counts. And Jean-Luc has already asked me to take care of Beverly and her twins, if something should happen to him. I can’t see where he’d object to you.”

“I’m Maquis.”

“It might surprise you that a very good argument could be made that Jean-Luc is Maquis too. Or at least has Maquis sympathies.” Will jerked his head toward the door. “That’s why Picard started all this. He couldn’t reconcile his conscience with his duty. He had to resolve the situation.”

They talked.

“By the way Will, thank you.”

“For what?”

“For helping me escape the Cardie labor camp.”

Will didn’t deny it. “You’d been there over a year when I found out about it. Otherwise I’d have come to the rescue sooner.” They shook hands recognizing that they both were coming to accept each other. “I envy you. Laren is one helluva lady. Kiss her once for me.”

When Ro came back to the room, she understood that Tom and Will had reached some sort of accord about themselves. And her.

Will explained. “Ro, you don’t have to stay on the Cairo. Though Geordi and Reg are on board tonight. I know they’d love to see you again. They have to go back to UP tomorrow. And that is another long story. Anyway, you can meet Geordi’s wife, Leah Brahms. And if you’re not careful, Reg will talk about his fiancée for hours and hours on end. Plus there is a perfectly fine sickbay up there. I’ve contacted Dr. Ogawa-Powell to see if she can see you within the hour.”

Ro didn’t have to be told that both of the Rikers had ganged up on her about going to sickbay. She knew that they were right.

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It was the low murmur of voices that roused her. She recognized one - no, both of them. Alyssa and Laren. Then the adrenaline surged through her body.

Laren!

She woke up. Immediately glanced over at Jean-Luc and saw that there was no change. She heard Alyssa asking about the frequency of morning sickness. Beverly was about to interrupt, when she heard Alyssa gasp. “You were tortured?”

“Yes. Lemec considered me entertainment.”

Dr. Crusher came into the exam room. “Hello, Laren.” She spoke as gently as she could. She nodded at Alyssa. “May I?” She motioned for the Tricorder.

“Beverly?”
“Let me, Laren. I will take good care of you.”

“Never doubted that.”

“Your baby is fine and healthy.” Beverly wiped away a tear as she finished her exam. “You have suffered. But there was no permanent damage. We can fix those scars for you right away, if you wish.”

“Not until after I testify. I need to show all of my scars to the delegates.”

“Do you want me to pull the records from the last time?” Beverly remember what she’d seen then. And wondered how Ro could be so stoic about what she had recently endured.

Ro nodded. “Yes. I want the universe to see how Gul Lemec treated his prisoners.”

“I am ordering a full course of personal counseling. Once you testify, you’re going to need it to deal with the aftermath of your torture, and your emotions.” Beverly sat next to Laren. “It’s a miracle that you didn’t lose the baby. This baby is precious to you, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” Laren fought her tears.

“Jean-Luc doesn’t know yet, does he?”

“No, I don’t think so. I haven’t seen or talked to him in over six weeks.” Ro stood up. “Now what?”

“Dr. Ogawa-Powell will give you two vitamin shots, as well as a list of what you must eat. You’ve missed too many meals lately. You’re going to have to watch that.”

“And Jean-Luc?”

“He’s got a lot of explaining to do, don’t you think?”

Ro started giggling. Beverly joined in.

It was the laughter that awakened him. It seemed so long since he’d heard kind laughter.

“Doctor…”

Within seconds Beverly and Ro were by his side. For a second he considered himself the victim of a lousy practical joke by Q. Q had been in his dreams a lot lately. Then Beverly grasped one hand. And Ro, the other. He thought that maybe the better part of valor was to pretend to be sleeping again.

“How do you feel?”

He couldn’t ignore Beverly. “Better.” His voice was hoarse. “I’m thirsty.”

She gave him a little to drink. “You’ll get more in a little while.”

“Tyrant,” he mumbled.

Finally Beverly began to breathe more normally again. If he could be grumpy, then he was getting better.

“Crusher to Jellico.”
“Yes, Doctor?”

“Admiral Picard is awake.”

“I’ll be right there.”

Beverly turned to see Ro caressing Jean-Luc’s cheek. He wasn’t saying anything; he was just looking at her as if he missed her and was glad to see her. And Beverly wouldn’t have been human if she wasn’t jealous. Just a little bit.

He recalled Beverly’s presence. “The conference?” His voice was a little stronger now.

“Captain Jellico is coming. He’ll tell you.”

“What are we?”

“Orbiting about Qo’noS.”

“I missed a lot, didn’t I?”

Beverly chuckled. “You don’t know the half of it. Just to get me here, Geordi stole a top secret starship.” On his look, she added, “You can discipline him later.”

“Wesley?” He looked over to Ro. “Please Laren, leave us. I’ll talk to you later.”

He reached for Beverly’s hand. “Did Wesley use…”

“No, Jean-Luc. He didn’t. Not even when Will asked him to do so.”

“Will did more than ask, didn’t he…”

“Yes.”

“Tell Wes, I am proud of him. He did the right thing.”

He still clutched her hand. “Will. Is he all right? There was so much blood…”

“We took care of him, Jean-Luc. He’ll recover.”

He closed his eyes, relieved.

Jellico interrupted them. “May I come in?”

Beverly stepped back. “Not too long, Captain.”

“Good to see you alive, Jean-Luc.”

Picard wearily opened his eyes, then found the strength from somewhere, to draw his invisible mantle of command about him. “Good to see you too, Edward.”

“The conference is going well. The Romulans are now involved.”

“Co-operating?”

“Yes. So is the Cardassian Government. The Obsidian Order has been officially outlawed. They’ve turned Gul Madred and Gul Lemec over to the Klingons.” Picard closed his eyes. He accepted what the Klingons would do to the Guls. Madred and Lemec would never make it alive to Federation
And he did not care.

Edward waited until Picard opened his eyes again. “And your Ro Laren turned over enough information that we’ve been able to identify Suliban operatives on forty-two different worlds. The depth of the network is staggering. But we’re going to get a lot of them.” Jellico almost controlled his enthusiasm. “We’re going to do it, Jean-Luc. We’re redefining the zone itself. And even the Maquis are approving, so far, of the realignment.”

“Now that’s a miracle.”

“Yes, that is. By the time we’re done, we might be able to tear up Ro Laren’s arrest warrant. Not to mention yours.”

Picard was able to chuckle, albeit weakly.

Picard closed his eyes, drifting off again. He understood Kirk’s words all too well. If he were to die today, he’d have done enough to make a difference.

After Beverly checked on Jean-Luc, she joined Ro who was still waiting in the outer office of Sick Bay. Dr. Kil’dar approached her.

“Dr. Crusher, you’ve been on your feet for over sixteen hours. I’ve also been informed of your pregnancy. It’s time you ate something and got some real rest. I will call you when the Admiral wakens.”

“Yes, Doctor. Where am I supposed to go?”

Doctor Kil’dar personally escorted them. As they approached Beverly’s quarters, Ro casually asked, “May I talk with you?”

Knowing that she shouldn’t avoid it but dearly wishing that she could, Beverly allowed Ro to precede her into the room. It was a typical guest suite. Not as large as the Enterprise’s suites, but still acceptable in colors of grey and blue, decorated in a style to which no one would object. Or really notice.

“Two ginger teas,” Beverly ordered at the replicator.

She handed one to Ro, and then sat down on a grey armchair kitty corner to Ro’s position.

“Where shall we begin?” Beverly asked.

Ro took a sip of the ginger tea. And was surprised at how nice it tasted.

“Settles the nausea,” Beverly mentioned. “You’re about seven weeks pregnant.”

“Something like that. And you?”

“Going on four months.”

“So, how are we going to handle this?”

“I’m personally in favor of the old Earth tradition of tar and feathering him once Jean-Luc gets well. Then I’d like to see him teach kindergarten for at least a year.”
Ro laughed out loud. “Oh, he really deserves what’s coming to him. Maybe we should ask Guinan for some more suggestions.”

“That’s not a bad idea at all. She’s very good at bedeviling Jean-Luc.” Beverly pondered some more. “The problem is, I suspect that we both love him.”

“He might like me but he never said he loved me.”

Beverly laughed. “Considering your condition, I’d say more than like…”

“You’re not jealous?”

“Of course I am. But I can’t condemn him for doing that which I gave him permission to do.”

“Rather foolish on your part.”

“I know, Laren. I was being noble. And look where it’s got us. Pregnant, and having to be civil about it too. Jean-Luc has had other lovers around me but nothing quite like this.”

“I heard about Vash. I heard she was trouble.”

“I do tend to have that effect on people.” Laren wasn’t sure she should ask this, but she had to know. “In the future, I’d like Jean-Luc to know his daughter…”

“What makes you think that I’ll have a future with Jean-Luc? Other than with our children, that is.”

“I was the woman that Jean-Luc had sex with now and then. You have always been the woman he loved, that he worshipped. I knew that fact even when I served on the Enterprise. There weren’t many people on that ship that didn’t know you were the captain’s woman.” Beverly didn’t quite believe her. “And I knew it every time I was with him, and I saw him stare out of a port window looking for someone that wasn’t there.”

“Not all the time, apparently.”

“The first time we were together, he really didn’t have much of a choice. Ragner did like to play his despotic games. And as for the second time - I honestly had the impression that he might have been using me. That he wanted to give me an incentive, as it were, for joining him on his missions. He may not even have been consciously aware of doing it. Resolving the DMZ mess and forcing the Suliban into the light, was his primary focus. He would have done just about anything to succeed, including using me.”

“That doesn’t sound like Jean-Luc.

“I know he really didn’t mean to do it, which is why I’ll never tell him that I guessed. But I do think he’d have done anything to be able return to you.”

“Jean-Luc would never have gone that far.”

“Dr. Crusher… I know he cares for me, and I for him, but what we had was not true love.”

“I’m sorry, then. It wasn’t fair to you.”

“Oh I think things will turn out okay. For if it weren’t for Jean-Luc, I probably would have never met that transporter accident known as Tom Riker. He’s got all the charm of Will Riker, and none of
the, uh, baggage, Doctor. I won’t have to worry about women hiding in Tom’s closet for Tom
knows that if I found any, I’d shoot him. I do know that if Will Riker had ever been nice to me on
board the Enterprise, I probably would have joined the chasing after Will Riker happy bottom fan
club too. He was one hell of a lover.” She couldn’t hide her mischievous grin. “As you should know,
Doctor. Now Tom, on the other hand, may not have had all the varied experiences, but he still is a
Riker. And one hell of a lover, too. I am not going to let him slip away from me.”

“Ro, considering everything - and all the men that we have had occasion to share - shouldn’t you be
calling me Beverly? And I’ll call you Laren?” Beverly’s grin was devilish. “Imagine the look on
Jean-Luc’s face when he hears us talking.”

“By all means, Beverly. He should pay.”

“Yes.” Beverly thought some more and considered a few facts. “I don’t mean to be too personal, but
were you planning on getting pregnant?”

“Of course not, Beverly. Having a baby and being a Maquis - those two things don’t work together
too well.”

“So what happened. How did you get pregnant?” She glared at Ro to stop her from stating the
obvious. “I mean, did your birth control fail? What?”

“I really don’t know.” Ro could play the same game too. “We’re you planning on getting pregnant?”

“No. According to all the tests that I ran when I was on the Clara Barton, everything was the way it
should be. There is no way that I should have become pregnant either.” Beverly considered the facts
again. Then she tapped her comm badge. “Dr. Crusher to Lt. Crusher.”

“Yes, Doctor?”

“Robin, can you come to my quarters right away?”

“Your wish is my command, oh most revered mother-in-law of mine.”

“Who the devil is that?”

“My son Wesley is married to her - Robin Lefler. She’s quite something else, herself.”

A minute later Robin showed up. She kissed Beverly’s cheek, and then introduced herself to Ro.
“I’ve heard a lot about you - mainly from Wes and Geordi. Neither one of them condemned you for
joining the Maquis.” Robin added, with a twinkle in her eye, “Geordi tells the most interesting
stories…”

“Don’t believe a third of them.”

Then Robin noticed that Beverly was scanning her.

Beverly dropped back down in her seat. Then tapped her comm badge. “Dr. Crusher to Dr. Leah
Brahms LaForge.”

“Yes, Doctor?”

“Please come to my quarters immediately.”

Beverly had to know.
“I’ll be right there.”

A few minutes later Leah showed up, wearing a pink caftan. “Sorry,” Beverly commented as Leah came into the room. She introduced Ro. And then scanned Leah. “Dammit.” Beverly wasn’t tired any more.

“You’re pregnant, Leah. So are you, Robin. We all are pregnant!”

“But I’m on birth control,” Robin said.

“I’m not,” Leah mentioned. “Geordi has promised me at least six kids and I’ve been holding him to it.”

“Q!” Beverly shocked everyone in the room.

“What did Q do?” Robin asked. For she knew Q.

“Robin, if Wesley can kill him, please let him. Or else I am going to squash that Ardalian cockroach myself!”

“You rang, ma Cherie?” Q appeared, floating on his favorite hand-made ivory Kerman rug.

“I am going to file a formal complaint with the Continuum. Guinan taught me how! HOW DARE YOU! You have overstepped your boundaries by a couple of galaxies! And then some!”

“Tish Tosh. You just don’t think that you’re old enough to become a grandmother, that’s all.” He glanced about Beverly’s quarters. “I like the cottage a lot better. Does Starfleet get a kickback for every can of grey paint they buy?”

“Q!” Beverly warned.

Q jumped off his flying carpet. It disappeared. Then he noticed Dr. Brahms studying him as if he were some sort of lab specimen. “What?”

“You’re fascinating.” Q preened. “Your manipulation of all the temporal planes and dimensions are impressive. Would you ever consider submitting to a few experiments? I would love…”

“Tish Tosh. Data’s been after me for years. He hasn’t caught me yet.” He plopped onto the floor. “So, Beverly, how is mon capitaine?”

“The Admiral is getting better.”

“Wesley wouldn’t let me help. Otherwise, I would have. You know how I feel about Jean-Luc, don’t you Beverly?”

She nodded, a little bit. “Jean-Luc. Our pregnancies. You are playing games with our lives. Why?” Beverly was trying to control her righteous fury.

“Me to know and you to find out. Buh-Bye! Bye! Baby, Good Bye!” He vanished.

Leah finally spoke up. “Would somebody mind telling me what’s going on? And what was that?”

“For some reason, Q decided that we all should get pregnant. Why, I don’t know. But I will make him pay for it.” Beverly was still furious.

“Don’t you want to be pregnant, Beverly?” Ro asked.
“Of course I do!” was her indignant reply.

Leah announced, “Well, I’ve been wanting to get pregnant for years. I’ve been trying since my marriage to Geordi. I am very happy that I am pregnant.”

“Me too,” Robin spoke up. “I’ll have enough time to have the baby and join the Enterprise E when she is launched.” On Beverly’s questioning look, she added, “As if the launch of any new ship ever happens on time.” Then she took a really good look at her mother-in-law. “You know, I think we all really had better leave so that Beverly can rest. You do look beat, Beverly. Besides, some of us have husbands to tell.” Her grin was really big as she envisioned everything that she was going to make Wes do, now that she was pregnant.

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Things happened quickly once more of the evidence was presented to the delegates. As the governments came to realize that they were all duped by the Suliban Cabal resolutions were proposed, a more equitable division of the Zone was accomplished, so that within weeks, everyone who’d come to the table were now in agreement. Those who had settled planets in the Zone, were now free to choose. The Romulans were somewhat in accord too, though they weren’t quite willing to publicly admit that they’d been fooled as well.

Picard’s health was improving to the point that he was able to sit at the head of the conference table during the final days of the conference. Under Beverly’s intense supervision of course.

And Jean-Luc Picard was the first signature affixed to what would eventually be referred to as The Picard Peace Treaty.

The admirals were showing up now, at the conference. Most of them had never put a foot inside the Klingon Empire before, much less met Gowron. But now Gowron was the toast of the conference. He was the leader who had stepped in, made peace, and helped stop one of the most dangerous threats known to all of them. He also made sure that every faction knew what Jean-Luc Picard had done.

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Beverly was ready to start tearing out what was left of Jean-Luc’s hair. She always hated it when he was her patient. He did not take kindly to doctor’s orders. And now, he’d outdone himself, with Klingon cooperation. He was actively working outside the guidelines that she had set up to help him heal and to protect his health. He wouldn’t listen. And the Klingon’s just lauded him for his continuing bravery.

Even on board the Cairo, Jean-Luc managed to find ways to keep busy, without even the slightest consideration for his own health.

She had to do something. She called Gowron. He’d abetted. Now he’d have to aid. An hour later, she escorted the admiral to the conference hall. Except when they beamed down to Qo'noS Picard found himself by the door to the Gowron’s private quarters.

“You’re staying here from now on, Jean-Luc.”
They started walking towards the inner sanctum. "On one condition." Picard wouldn’t admit it, but he was glad she’d made these arrangements. He was drained.

“What?”

“That you stay with me, Beverly.”

“Do you think I am foolish enough to let you out of my sight ever again?”

He suddenly grasped Beverly around the waist and twirled her about until they were both giddy.

“Jean-Luc!” She knew she should be scolding him, but she was laughing with him instead.

“We did it Beverly.” He kissed her hard. “We did it.” Then he had to catch his breath.

“To bed. Now.”

“I’ve never refused that command from you, mon coeur.” He paused, and rested his hand against her stomach. “Stay with me.”

They walked into his former bedroom.

She wrapped her arms around him, and kissed him gently. “Our things are already here.”

A short time later, they lay in bed together.

“I knew I should have insisted on another doctor as my personal physician.”

She was in his arms, resting on his shoulder. “And why is that, Admiral?”

“Then I could lie to you about what he told me. And I could make love to you. Instead, my personal physician is a tyrant.”

“Another week of tyranny and then you can wreak your revenge on me if you pass your physical,” she reminded him.

“But by then will you be up to it?” He patted her tummy.

“Oh, you’re going to be the worst father-to-be ever,” she moaned as she felt his fingers stroke lower. He pleasured her. She understood his need to touch her. Unfortunately, he wasn’t well enough for her to reciprocate.

Then, they were quiet, just being grateful for the fact that they were together again. And thinking about their futures…

“Beverly, about Laren…”

“You know we’re friends, Jean-Luc.”

“I do. Rather unsettling, that.”

“You’re afraid we’re plotting something once you’re healthy enough to handle it.”

“If Guinan shows up I’ll run as far and as fast as I can.”

She should have known he’d guess. “You could just try begging for mercy.” She kissed him. “Have you decided what you’re going to do about Laren?”
“I can’t even decide what to do about myself.”

“Once the conference is over, we’ll have time to straighten out our private lives.”

They were quiet for a few more minutes.

“There’s one thing you should know.”

“What, Jean-Luc?”

“I told Jellico that I was going to marry you.”

He felt her stiffen. “Why would you do that?”

“I was anticipating an ideal future. With you.”

“So, are you going to do anything about it?”

“What would you have me do, Beverly?”

“Propose?”

He rolled over onto his left side, still feeling the stings of damaged muscles. “Is that what you wish?”

She rolled over to face him. “I want you. I love you. I need you. We are facing quite a few problems, if we wed. But that is nothing compared to how I will feel if I don’t have you in my life, Jean-Luc.”

“So, when I get around to it, I should propose?”

She kissed him with just a hint of passion. “Consider yourself engaged, Jean-Luc Picard.”

“Is my personal physician still going to be a tyrant with me, tonight?”

“When you no longer have those dark circles under your eyes. That’s when I’ll personally stop being your personal physician.”

“Those bags are not from being exhausted. I’m still too old for you, mon coeur.”

“You’ve never said that to me before.”

“Of course I have, Beverly. I used to tell you that in the beginning all the time…”

“Of course, Jean-Luc.”

He raised himself up on an elbow. “You don’t honestly remember me telling you, do you? I was having this dream, and I most certainly remember saying …”

“Jean-Luc. It was only a dream….”

He resumed his former position. “Yes, of course.”

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The conference was almost over. All that was left was the self-congratulatory banquets and parties - round one. Once Jean-Luc Picard and Gowron got back to the Federation, there would be more such
Jean-Luc Picard had beamed back to the Cairo. There were a few matters he had to settle. First and foremost, was Ro Laren.

He commandeered the command conference room, and sent for Ro. They did have quite a lot to talk about.

First thing she did when she entered the room was kiss his lips as if to remind him that he was no longer her commanding officer.

He allowed her that gesture.

“So, what now, Jean-Luc?”

“I’ve been going over the data you brought back…”

Ro sighed. He only wanted to discuss business. Sooner or later she was going to have to have a private discussion with him, since there just simply hadn’t been a chance once he was well enough to join the conference.

About an hour later, he stood, and slowly walked to the replicator. He ordered his usual, and then looked over at Ro. “Coffee, Laren?”

“No, I’d prefer ginger tea.”

“Beverly’s blend?”

“Exactly.”

He brought her mug to her. “I am glad that you and Beverly have reached an accord.”

“So now we’re going to talk about us?”

Picard mentally groaned as he sat back in his chair. He started to tug down his tunic, and then remembered that he was wearing an admiral’s uniform now. It didn’t need tugging.

He remembered Madred’s threats. “I was told that you are with child. Is it our child?”

At least he wasn’t in a snit thinking that Tom had replaced him in her bed too quickly.

She spoke softly. “Jean-Luc, it is your daughter. I was already a month pregnant when I met Tom Riker. And it took the Cardies to force us to become lovers.”

“Do you want this child?” For he had remembered a lover’s conversation not that long ago.

His very lack of emotion told her how much her answer would mean to him. “With my heart and soul.”

He nodded as if it were an every day kind of declaration.

“And you?”

He chose his words carefully. He never wanted to be in disagreement with Ro about their child. “I want our daughter. Laren, I will love her more than you can even imagine. She will always have a home with me.”
“I think I can imagine, Jean-Luc.” She reached over and held his hand.

He forced himself to withdraw from her touch. She was not upset. Clearly he still felt something for her if her touch bothered him.

Then he studied his padd. “You were tortured.”

She recognized another Picard tactic. And she knew it was all about his guilt.

“Jean-Luc, Madred was looking for me long before we joined forces. You were not responsible for my kidnapping and torture. Madred alone did this.”

“The Klingons arrested Madred and Lemec. They never made it to Starfleet custody.” Picard looked away for a moment. “They are dead.”

“Good. Swift justice for a change.”

In his heart he agreed with her. “The nightmares? Have they returned?”

“Yes. Tom is helping me now. I’m going to undergo counseling once everything is over.”

He nodded. “I have learned to accept counseling, Laren. It does help.”

He wasn’t sure what answer he hoped to hear from her. But he had to ask. “And our daughter?”

“I will keep her Jean-Luc. Beverly and I….” She heard him groan. “…we’ve discussed this. Beverly agrees with me. She wants the sister to your twins to be part of your lives too.”

“It will be difficult.”

“Tell me about it. Unless he changes his mind, I am going to marry Tom Riker. Tom wants to raise our daughter as his. However, I think that you should have an active part in her life. How big a part that is will depend upon what happens in the future. But, there are many families that consist of two fathers, so it may not be too confusing for our girl.”

“I want to formally declare her as my child. She’s entitled to know about her Picard heritage.”

“I would prefer it if you did it informally, Jean-Luc. Tom wants her to legally be his daughter.” She knew what she was asking. The Picard name might be a liability too close to the DMZ.

He understood though his heart ached with the thought of it. “That might be for the best. The Riker name is an honorable one too.”

“I won’t argue about that with you, Jean-Luc.”

He stood, and picked up his tea, turning away from Ro to look at the stars for a while. “Our time together is something that I will always remember with fondness. I could have very easily found myself…” He didn’t have the nerve to finish the sentence. He could only smile.

“I could have very easily found myself too…”

They shared a smile. “I will miss those days. And I will miss you, Laren.” He sounded wistful. “I knew more freedom with you - even on board the Adama - than I did on board any of the starships that I’ve ever captained. And contrary to what you once implied, I never did use you Laren - other than for mutual carnal delights. You will always be a very dear friend to me, Ro Laren. And you can always count on me if you are ever in need.”
“Thank you. I feel the same, Jean-Luc.”

He didn’t have to say it. She knew it was over.

She went to him and hugged him. And then he kissed her. The kiss was passionate. And both knew it was the last time they would ever kiss with passion again. It was the end to their love affair. And her heart was breaking more than a little bit.

When they broke apart, he sat back down. After a few deep breaths as he mentally pulled himself together, he added, “One more thing, Laren. The first time I threw you into the brig on this ship, there was a reason.”

“I had the feeling that you wanted to see my ass in a prison jumpsuit.”

He chuckled. She was never going to change. And he was glad of it. “There was another reason besides your accurate guess. I wanted to see what you would do with the Bank of Nagus accounts.”

“You didn’t think I would abide by your requests?”

“Cool your temper, Laren. I already had measure of your character. I just had to have proof to show Admiral Nechayev that she could trust you too.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I’ve always said that my DMZ missions were based on what you once asked of me. I’ve made this statement many times. And it might interest you to know that Admiral Nechayev, the moment we actively began setting up my missions, ex post facto dismissed all Federation and Starfleet charges against you. I recanted my charges against you, saying that what you did was necessary for my missions. I didn’t help a prisoner escape from the Cairo. According to the official Starfleet record, if it ever is declassified, you were an undercover operative who had joined the Maquis.”

She didn’t like this. “Why would you do this? Don’t you know that there still are some Maquis who will kill me if they even get a hint of me being called Starfleet?”

“There’s more.”

“What?”

“I don’t know if you’ll be pleased or insulted.”

He picked up a small box that was on the table. He shoved it toward her. “These were mine.”

Laren opened it then croaked, “Is this a joke?”

For inside the box were four shiny pips.

“Nechayev created a paper trail for your promotions. Considering all the praise that will be heaped upon you because of your actions, no one will question it if you choose to return to Starfleet as an officer. A captain.” He paused, then added, “If you accept, and if you wish it, I will formally announce that you are the first Maquis officer to become a captain in Starfleet.”

“What about Tom?”

“Tom Riker has been given a pardon, and if he wishes it, he may return to Starfleet as well.”

“I think I know enough about the Riker psyche to know that Tom could not live with a wife that out
ranked him - by several ranks.”

“Well, you could consider Gowron’s offer.”

“I’m almost afraid to ask.”

“He thinks that you should teach classes to his officers on the use of guile.”

“Any other options?”

“Yes. Option three is to join the Federation council as a formal ambassador for the Maquis. You and Tom can help resolve the problems that will arise from the new treaty.”

“I’ll have to think about it.”

“You can take your time. All options will be open for quite a while. And my option of joining Starfleet will always be open. Unless you decide to use the Gale to torpedo an admiral’s yacht or something like that.”

She grinned. “I rather like option number four.”

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Will Riker breathed a sigh of relief as the last of the Romulans left Klingon space. Klingons and Romulans do not mix. And it had been a major headache trying to keep both sides from proving it to the detriment of the conference. He walked down the corridor to give Jellico his final report when he bumped into Wesley and Robin.

“Commander Crusher, I’ve been meaning to ask you…”

“Yes, Captain?”

“Where’s the Mae Jemison?”

He stifled his grin as he watched Wes blench.

“I’ll go double check and let you know, Sir?” He ran away from Will just as fast as he could go.

Robin just giggled after her husband left. “You are a wicked and dangerous man, Captain Riker.” She patted his chest. “I’m going to love serving under you.”

“Always love it when a beautiful, pregnant lady says that to me.” He patted her tummy, ignoring the looks from everybody else in the corridor.

“Thank you for remembering about the Mae Jemison, Robin. Considering everything that has happened, the fact that you still sent that message to the Isaac Asimov to pick up the yacht was greatly appreciated. By me and Woody Nakamura.”

“Wes has always seen the big picture. He just has a problem recollecting the little details.”

Still chuckling, Riker dropped off his reports. He was about to head back to his quarters for some long overdue sleep when he got a page from Beverly. She asked him to come to her quarters.

When Beverly opened the door, he was surprised to see that she was dressed in a robe.
“Come in, Will.”

“Beverly. Get any rest?”

“A little. Not as much as I need. I’ll be going to sickbay shortly.”

Wes was surprised to see coffee ready and waiting by the couch. Beverly motioned for him to sit down, and then she handed him a mug exactly the way he liked it. She sensed his surprise at knowing how to fix it. For coffee klatches with Will alone had been few and far between on the Enterprise D.

“Will, I’ve seen the way you fix your coffee for staff meetings for over six years. Did you think I wouldn’t remember?”

“What’s up, Beverly?”

"Jean-Luc died when Madred sliced through his artificial heart with his knife.”

“What?”

“It was Wes who brought him back and kept him alive. That stasis shell he put around Jean-Luc, was not real stasis - it was Wes’ own life force. He risked his own life until I was able to go in and repair the damage and save Jean-Luc’s life.” Beverly touched Will’s arm. “No one must know this, Will. Especially not Jean-Luc.”

“Then why are you telling me this, Beverly?”

“Because for my son’s sake, I didn’t want his captain to think that Wes would not risk everything - even his own life - to save Jean-Luc Picard’s life.”

“Does anyone else know?”

“Mr. Data. He’s helping me alter the records so that no one will question what kind of stasis it was when it comes up for review. The doctors who worked on the transplant may be suspicious about certain elements, but without positive proof they’ll not voice their opinions.”

“Do you need my assistance with the records?”

“If I do, I’ll let you know.”

Will drank his coffee. “Thank you for telling me, Beverly. I must admit that I just couldn’t accept that Wes wouldn’t help Jean-Luc. I’m relieved to know that in the things that really matter, Wes is still really Wes.”

With a spring to his step, Will went off to his bed.
Chapter Summary

Jean-Luc makes a miserable patient. And the Picard Treaty is signed. And there's a wedding too.

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Captain Jellico looked up to greet the person who had just buzzed his ready room door.

“Jean-Luc! You’re looking better.”

“Amazing how good one feels once the weight of the fate of the universe is lifted off of one’s shoulders.”

“Please, sit down.” Jellico immediately went and ordered an Earl Grey for Jean-Luc. He brought it over to the Admiral. “What can I do for you?”

“I was going through my messages, and I saw that you’d requested a meeting a few weeks ago. I was just wondering what you wished to discuss with me.”

“Oh, that.” Jellico looked a little chagrinned. “I just wanted to take you to task for helping Ro Laren escape from the Cairo.”

“I do apologize, Edward. It was part of the plan.”

“I suppose I should believe you, Jean-Luc,” Edward agreed. “And I thought that I knew how to strategize and plan things in advance.”

“Everything propitiously worked out. We know how easily it all could have ended in disaster. Up until the moment I beamed aboard your ship, I seriously thought I’d be arrested.”

“That can always be arranged.”

They both smiled at that thought.

“Edward, there are some new galaxy class ships coming down the line. Would you be interested? I hear that one of them will be named the Cairo. They are planning on decommissioning your ship.”

“Yes, I’d heard that. I think I want to remain captain of the Cairo. I think I’ve been a good captain to her.”

“I agree. Then the new Cairo shall be yours.”

“Thank you, Jean-Luc.”

“Edward, I have a favor to ask of you.” Picard seemed a bit embarrassed. “I’d like you to marry Beverly and myself. We want a quiet ceremony…”
Jellico rapidly shook his head. “With all of the admirals in Klingon space? They’ll want a three ring circus with skyrocketing exploding asteroids.”

“That is exactly what we do not want. Just a simple ceremony. With a few close friends.”

“Of course, Jean-Luc. But wouldn’t Will be the better choice to marry you?”

Picard was glad that the differences between Riker and Jellico appeared to have been settled. “It seems that the Enterprise E will not be commissioned for quite a few months at least. The Admiralty wants more testing on the worm hole drive before they put it into a galaxy class ship. And I do not wish to wait until Will is a captain of the Enterprise E. Beverly can’t wait either. The babies are due in four months. And it may be old-fashioned of me, but I would prefer it if my children were born bearing my surname.”

“Just tell me when, Jean-Luc.”

Both men walked onto the bridge and were greeted with a scene that Jellico had never envisioned. Jean-Luc on the other hand, was very familiar with this kind of chaos. He immediately ducked behind Jellico.

For Deanna was standing there trying to kiss her husband. And Lwaxana was trying to hug him, all at the same time. Mr. Worf was trying to be a stoic Klingon, still at his duty post. The look of horror on his face when he saw both Captain Jellico and Admiral Picard appear in the ready room doorway was memorable.

Jellico quickly took charge. “Mr. Worf, kiss your bride. That’s an order.”

Picard grinned. He never thought that he’d actually come to like Edward Jellico. The captain had unexpected depths.

Jellico pointed at Lwaxana. “And you, leave them alone.” Jellico ignored her then as he sat in his captain’s chair. Jean-Luc saw the expression on Lwaxana’s face as she discovered a new masterful man to bedevil.

“He’s engaged, Lwaxana,” Jean-Luc casually mentioned. “And so am I!”

“Tish, Tosh. You both ain’t married yet.” Lwaxana moved to stand in front of her prey. “I am Lwaxana Troi, Ambassadress from Betazed. Guardian of the Holy chalice of Rixx. How dare you order me about!” Lwaxana was at her royal impressive best in her neon purple dress with a plunging neckline and crawling tilsit trim that revealed about all of her ample assets. She made sure that Captain Jellico could view them.

“Jean-Luc,” Jellico mumbled, trying to hide his panic.

“You’re on your own,” Picard whispered as he patted Jellico’s shoulder. “You might want to introduce the lady to Nella - and her Aunt.”

Picard went over to Worf and Deanna who were still kissing. “Ahem.” He cleared his throat. That caught Deanna’s attention. She finally broke free from Worf’s arms to throw herself into Picard’s arms. She was still tearful as her hormones overfloweth. And she was very, very pregnant.

“Deanna. It’s so good to see you. How are you feeling?” He kissed both her cheeks, and then kissed her briefly on the lips. He’d always wanted to do that, but never could as captain. “Your presence just might be what I need to get my tyrant of a physician to lengthen her leash.”
“Nice try, Admiral.” Deanna placed her hand on his arm. “When can we talk?”

“Ever the counselor, eh Deanna?”

“When it comes to you, then yes, Jean-Luc.”

“An hour, then.” He nodded toward his Klingon who was now standing in a stiff pose. “Mr. Worf just started his duty shift.”

Jean-Luc took pity on Edward who was trying to prevent Lwaxana from sitting on his knee.

“My dear Lwaxana, will you permit me to escort you to your rooms?” He whispered to Worf, “Find some rooms for her as far away from yours as you can - Woofie.”

“Yes, Sir” Worf would permit Woofie from his man.

As he led Lwaxana away from the bridge, the lady asked, quite innocently, “I understand that Beverly is having a boy and a girl. How wonderful.”

“Yes, I do think it’s wonderful.”

“Did you know that Deanna is having a boy?”

“Yes, I’d heard. That’s good news as well.”

“My grandson and your girl and boy, playing together. Becoming friends. We must see that it happens. It will be good for them.”

Picard could not disagree.

Lwaxana bestowed a beatific smile on her Admiral. He didn’t know it, but he just had approved of her plans. If Deanna had heard the conversation, she would have started banging her head against the nearest bulkhead for her Mother was matchmaking for her grandchildren.

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Picard’s session with Deanna did not go that well. Partially because he wasn’t willing to admit anything to Deanna. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to tell Deanna. But because it was Will Riker’s torture that he had been forced to watch. And he didn’t want to leave any of those images in Deanna’s mind.

Picard didn’t want to know the specific details about Deanna’s relationship with Worf and Will. That was their business. But still he understood that Deanna was emotionally close to Will.

It took Deanna a while to figure out why Picard was being more difficult than usual.

“It was that bad?” she whispered. “When I talked to Will after he’d been rescued, he just brushed it off. And I thought that all the feelings I’d sensed was the result of my out-of-control hormones.”

“Deanna, in your condition - there are just some things that you should not know.”

“Then how has Will seemed to you?”

“He been Will. No discernible change.”
“Which means he’s acting - putting up a front.”

She glanced over at Jean-Luc. Will didn’t just know his captain. The captain knew Will too. “Yes. The only difference is that Madred took days to torture me. Madred only had a few hours with Will. But it was intense. He threatened rape. Will was injured anally.”

She knew then. “So now Will knows what Madred did to you. That won’t change Will’s opinion of you.”

“In my head, I know that. But still, I feel the shame.”

“You’re going to try to help Will cope anyway…” Her voice trailed off as she got a strong impression of Ro Laren in his thoughts. “You helped Ro, too, didn’t you? I know I was never able to help her very much. She wouldn’t let me in. But she let you…”

“I understood what she’d undergone. You showed me how to cope. To help. So I showed her…”

If Deanna hadn’t already respected and adored Jean-Luc Picard before, she most certainly did so now.

“As for Will, I’ll see what the counselors on board can do to help.” She shifted in her seat as she felt her baby kick.

“May I?” Picard reached out his hand.

“Of course.”

After a moment Picard said, “He’s a feisty little fellow, isn’t he?”

“Believe me, I know he takes after Will. And you’re sidestepping your issues, Admiral.”

“Jean-Luc,” he reminded her.

“As you wish, Jean-Luc. How much has resurfaced from your past memories?”

“The moment I stepped onto a Cardassian ship, it all came back to me. Especially the paralyzing fear.”

“And how did you deal with it…”

Almost an hour later, Deanna decided that Jean-Luc had talked enough for now. His psyche was not in as fragile a state as the last time. Deanna credited the change to Beverly. Now that Beverly was close to Jean-Luc in every way, he was finding ways of coping that he’d never previously imagined.

Picard helped Deanna to her feet, Will came into the room, after patiently waiting for quite some time.

“When, get some rest,” she ordered.

“You’re a tyrant, too,” he grumbled. But he added a smile to his words. He patted Will on the shoulder, and left to go find Beverly.

Deanna threw herself into Will’s arms, hugging him with all her might. “Imzadi…”

She stroked his face, trying to get a sense of him. She recognized that all his emotions were tightly under control - the same kind of control that Captain Picard used to have.
“You’re going to have to talk to someone, Will. If it’s the last thing I do before I go on maternity leave, I will insist that you have counseling.”

He moved a little bit away from her. “I am not an idiot, Deanna. I just haven’t had the time to do anything yet. Besides, it wasn’t my physical pain that was the problem. It was watching what was happening to Jean-Luc. That was the worst torture of all knowing he was forced to watch what Madred was doing to me.”

She understood.

“Now, let’s go find Worf. I don’t want him to get too jealous. Otherwise I might not survive our next holo deck bat’leth encounter. “

“Actually, that is an excellent idea. You and Worf should do that routine together. You’re a physical person, Will. That kind of exercise will help you cope.”

“In that case, I think I’ll ask Tom to join us.”

Will’s smile was not nice.

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That night, Jean-Luc and Beverly invited all of their friends to a private dinner. It was held in the ship’s lounge, Six Forward.

Deanna had sensed Beverly’s repressed excitement during the day so she showed up in her best dress, in spite of being nine months pregnant. She casually mentioned the possibility of a wedding to Will. Especially when Admirals Nechayev, Nakamura and Wiley showed up, escorted by Gowron and several Klingon captains.

Beverly was lovely in a turquoise blue velvet gown with a bolero style matching jacket. She was carrying a bouquet of glittering ivory roses sprigged with lavender. Her long hair was swept up, highlighting a pair of blue earrings that she’d owned forever.

Jean-Luc wore his new best dress admiral’s uniform.

Will was the best man. Wesley gave the bride away then acted as a groomsmen. Deanna was the matron of honor. Robin and Laren were bridesmaids. Beverly had asked Laren, and Laren had suggested that she be the one to give Jean-Luc away. Both ladies had laughed when they considered Jean-Luc’s reaction to such a suggestion.

Then Edward Jellico said the ancient words marrying the two lovers against a background of starlight. Simple gold rings were exchanged.

Jean-Luc had thought about rings and decided that he would surprise Beverly with a ring from his grandmother’s jewelry when they finally made it back to Earth. There’d been a perfect star sapphire ring surrounded by blue diamonds in that inheritance. It was as if the ring were made for Beverly as her engagement ring. Strangely enough, it matched her earrings.

And in the background, Admiral Winston Holt Wiley whispered to the other admirals, “Only Jean-Luc could pull this one off. Having an ex-mistress as a bridesmaid. And another ex-lover as part of
the wedding party.” He motioned toward Nella who was standing with her aunt.

Nechayev politely smiled.

Gowron made several impolite comments in Klingon to his captains about his Arbiter of Succession’s sexual prowess. Mr. Worf was just grinning as he refused to translate what was said to Deanna.

Lwaxana understood the Klingons, though. She’d picked up quite a few languages over the years. She was also eyeing Gowron in a new light, for she’d just learned that the Chancellor was a widower. And considering how good a marriage her daughter had made, Lwaxana now considered adding Klingons to her husband quest list.

As wedding feasts go, this marriage was definitely low key affair, but it was greatly enjoyed by everyone in attendance.

At the dinner, Jean-Luc stood to toast his bride. All he said was, “Beverly. Mon coeur.”

Her toast was to kiss her husband, much to the cheers of the crowd.

Alynna Nechayev brushed away a tear.

Mr. Data stood and was still. Then he spoke:

“Let me not to the marriage of true minds

Admit impediments. Love is not love

Which alters when it alteration finds,

Or bends with the remover to remove:

O no! it is an ever-fixed mark

That looks on tempests and is never shaken;

It is the star to every wandering bark,

Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.

Love's not Time's fool,

though rosy lips and cheeks

Within his bending sickle's compass come:

Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,

But bears it out even to the edge of doom.

If this be error and upon me proved,

I never writ, nor no man ever loved.”

There was quiet for a moment. Then Jean-Luc softly spoke. “Thank you Mr. Data. I am honored that you chose Shakespeare. It is very appropriate.”
Relieved, Data sat down. He had gone with his emotional choice and it had been the correct one.

Will just wished them the best - which they already had, because they had each other.

Wesley stood. “To my Mother and Jean-Luc. Even as a child, I thought that Jean-Luc would be the perfect husband for my mother and father to me. Little did I understand what I was wishing for, but somehow, I knew that it was what should be. With the happiest of hearts, I declare Omnia vincit amor.”

More toasts were offered.

Gowron stood. Mr. Data joined him and played the t'lingDagh, a stringed Klingon instrument as Captain Kargan played the may’ron, a Klingon accordion. Gowron then sang his favorite love aria from Gav’ot toH’va. Worf joined in. So did Kargan, and Kang.

After the guest’s toasts were over, Jean-Luc ordered more champagne for his guests and much to his surprise, Guinan, dressed in a cerulean blue outfit with a hat of extraordinary proportions, served the flutes. He was glad to see Guinan.

As Guinan gave Beverly a small amount of champagne in a flute, she whispered, “Things are going to get bumpy, but you will survive this too. Remember that you love him.”

Beverly gasped for Guinan seemed very serious. But her face didn’t reveal a thing.

Jean-Luc stood and raised his flute. “To those we love because they hold our hearts, to those we respect because we share and believe in their sense of honor, to those who suffer us because they are our family, to those who before they are born have already become beloved members of our extended family, to those who suffer us because they are our friends through heaven and hell, and to those who helped us create a better future for us all, with some even making the greatest sacrifice of their lives for us. To all who have gone before us. To the Enterprise in all of her incarnations, to Starfleet and to the Federation!” After the clapping stopped, he added, “Beverly and I invite everyone to a slightly larger wedding and birth celebration in a few months, in LaBarre, France.”

Everyone insisted that Jean-Luc and Beverly have at least one wedding dance. Nella, who had been tipped off by her fiancée, had the appropriate music prepared to play as Mr. Data sang. Data’s first choice was Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered.

“You’re a bit rusty, my love,” Beverly teased as her husband slowly danced with her.

“A long time ago, I decided that you were the only one with whom I really wished to dance.”

“So why did you so rarely dance with me when I asked?”

“I had a difficult time holding you in my arms, and then letting you go, Beverly. Dancing with you depended upon how much willpower I had that evening.”

Picard began to remember some of his moves, and was able to prove that he still knew how to dance.

Then Data picked up his violin and played Placer d’Amor, a love song which had been sung for over a thousand years, with many changes of verse from Italy to France to England to Elvis.

Beverly thought that it was one of the happiest moments of her life, waltzing with Jean-Luc…

Beverly took off her jacket at the end of this waltz for she was getting hot. Winston Hold Wiley noticed the dark blue rhinestones that formed her spaghetti straps and the way the design highlighted
Tom Riker got his saxophone and played several numbers including Night Bird. Will had to concede that Tom was the better musician for he’d hit all the notes.

And then Winston Holt Wiley started remembering another dance; another place.

When Jean-Luc decided that he wanted to dance with Beverly one more time, she pushed him down in his chair, handed him another glass of champagne, and then walked straight up to Gowron and invited him to dance. Data didn’t think that Aktuh and Maylota was something that Beverly could dance to, so he played Go Home to Bonnie Jean from BRIGADOON instead. Beverly, in spite of her pregnancy could show Gowron the steps. He quickly picked it up, and Beverly’s husband, after watching her break a sweat suggested to Wesley that it might be wise to go rescue his mother. He would pay Data back for the pun at a later date.

Winston sat next to Jean-Luc. Winston was in a jovial mood thanks to a third tankard of blue ale.

“Marvelous wedding party, Jean-Luc. Always knew you were going to marry Red. That’s why I didn’t court-martial you back there on Clarion. When I first met Beverly, I knew she was a cadet. But I saw how you were dancing together. And then you sent me a fancy bottle of champagne to bribe me. I’ve always liked your style Jean-Luc. As I recall, Red was wearing a dress like the one she’s wearing today, too. You must like her in blue velvet. I knew you meant to have her when I saw those blue diamond earrings. Figured you wouldn’t be spending that kind of latinum on a floozy…”

Deanna dropped her water glass. “No!” she screamed. Everyone stared at her. “Captain Picard!” she yelled. She ran over to him, shook his shoulders and cried over and over again, “Stay with me, Jean-Luc. Stay with me…”

Picard did nothing. He just sat, staring into nothingness, blankly.


“Now what,” Jellico wondered. Life had been a lot calmer when the crew from the Enterprise was not around.

Once again, everyone waited out side of Sickbay. Jellico stood around for a little, considered the sickbay corridor, and the rooms opposite it and decided that it was time Sickbay had its own waiting room. He’d get Life Services to redo the nearest storage compartment.

Inside Sickbay, Deanna and Dr. Kil’dar were examining Jean-Luc.

“It’s some form of fugue state, Doctor,” Deanna explained. “I don’t know what set it off. He was just sitting there talking with Admiral Wiley. Something the admiral said must have triggered it.”

Dr. Kil’dar kept looking over the physical stats of his patient. Deanna went to the outside door to Sickbay. “Is Admiral Wiley here?”

“I will get him,” Worf growled.

Will privately pitied Wiley if he tried to refuse coming back with Worf.

Beverly sat in a chair watching the doctors work on her husband. What had now been the happiest day of her life, had suddenly turned into another day of fear. Then she remembered what Guinan had said earlier. “Wesley?” He was at her side immediately. “Please go get Guinan. She knows
something. Maybe it’s Q.”

Deanna came over to Beverley. “Has Jean-Luc been doing or saying anything odd the past few days? Since he was rescued?”

Beverly thought for a while. “Actually, it started before his kidnapping. He mentioned something about Starbase 74 having a turquoise bathroom. It was nothing really. Except the quarters that we shared on SB 74 had a pink bathroom - not blue. He’s been saying other odd things too. He recently told me that he’d said he was too old for me when we first met. But he never once said anything like that.”

Winston came to Sickbay. “What can I do to help?”

Deanna motioned for the Admiral to be seated. “Admiral, can you remember exactly what you said to Admiral Picard?”

Winston looked at Beverley. “I was talking about how I first met you, Red. On Clarion.”

Beverly carefully chose her words. “I don’t remember meeting you on Clarion, Admiral Wiley.”

“You must. You were dancing with Jean-Luc, heating up the floor. Anyone watching you knew that you were lovers. Hell, you’re even wearing the earrings that Jean-Luc gave you that night.”

Beverly touched her earlobe. “I don’t know where I got these earrings. I’ve just had them in my jewelry box for a very long time. Though Guinan did pack them…”

“Beverly, they’re blue diamonds and sapphires. I bet Jean-Luc spent a year’s salary of latinum on them.”

Her fingers trembled as she removed an earring and studied it, willing herself to remember.

Wiley continued. “When I went to your table, Jean-Luc tried to bribe me with a bottle of champagne. First time he’d ever tried bribing me. I didn’t know he had it in him. That’s when I decided he was my kind of captain. That and the fact that he was risking his career and his starship for the love of a very beautiful red-haired cadet.”

“Sir, you’re mistaken. I did not meet Jean-Luc on Clarion. I was there three weeks before my wedding. And I didn’t meet Captain Picard until right before my marriage to Jack Crusher. Besides, we all know that Jean-Luc Picard did not like dancing in public. He never willingly danced with me or anyone else, until today.”

“Nonsense. Why pretend now, Beverly? You and Jean-Luc spent a long hot weekend In his hotel suite. Even Woody mentioned you to me when we played poker during that Clarion shore leave.”

“I’ll get Admiral Nakamura,” Worf announced.

A minute later, Woody came into Sickbay too.

“Woody, tell Beverly about the first time you met her.” Wiley gave the lady a sly look.

Beverly didn’t understand.

And Woody blushed.

Deanna calmly asked, “Did you meet Beverly and Jean-Luc on Clarion, too, Admiral?”
“Well, I didn’t actually meet Beverly at that time. I sort of interrupted them while they were playing some sort of, er, game, in the waterfall pool attached to Jean-Luc’s suite. You were rather involved with each other, so I walked away. Later on I asked Wiley to find out who you were, Beverly. I heard Jean-Luc laughing out loud. I still can count on one hand hearing that kind of laugh from Jean-Luc in all the years I’ve known him.”

“You heard me? You didn’t see me?”

“Beverly, you were naked. I didn’t think I should come barging in. Especially since Jean-Luc was nude too,” Woody explained. “I wanted to get to know any woman who could get Jean-Luc naked in the middle of the day, and play games with him. I knew he needed someone like you in his life rather desperately. I just never thought that it would take decades for you two to actually get together. Hell, one of the reasons why I recommended you to be CMO of the Enterprise was because of how I thought the two of you felt about each other.” He could see that Beverly didn’t like the idea that she hadn’t earned her CMO position. “Don’t get snitty on me, Beverly. You were qualified as CMO. I just hoped that you and Jean-Luc could work something out too.”

Deanna went to Beverly. “You do remember going on leave on Clarion, don’t you?”

“Yes. You know, one of my roommates kept teasing me about…” Her voice trailed off. “…my romantic Frenchman. I thought she was joking.”

Deanna conferred with Dr. Kil’dar. “The etiology of this event has to be the Clarion mention. Clearly something happened then.”

Beverly’s own ideas began to form. And the more she thought about it, the more she jumped to a conclusion. “The pregnancies!” she whispered. In a louder voice she spoke to Deanna. “I got pregnant on my honeymoon with Jack Crusher. And that was three weeks after my Clarion shore leave.” She paled. “Oh my lord, what did Q do?” She froze at the thought of what might really have happened. “Jean-Luc…” She rushed to her husband’s bed side. “Jean-Luc, it’s all right. It’s all right. I understand now. Come back to me. And watch me kill Q!”

Beverly had lost her temper. She understood - not everything - but enough to know that Q had been fouling up her life for decades now.

But it was Wesley who acted. He took a needle and pricked himself. Suspended the blood droplet in mid-air. Then he did the same to Picard. Suspended that blood droplet in mid-air. Waved his hands about. The droplets glowed green. And Wesley started cursing in several languages unknown to the Alpha and Beta quadrants.

He quickly turned and knelt in front of his Mother. “Q manipulated my DNA. I am Jean-Luc Picard’s son. But he didn’t want you to know. That’s why he altered the sequences to make it look like Dad…” He had to take several breaths before could continue. “That Dad was my father. Q tricked us both.”

“It’s got to be about the pregnancies.” She turned to Will. “Contact Reg and see if Mela is pregnant.”

Winston and Woody just sat there, trying to figure out what was going on.

Wesley snapped his fingers. And every person in Sickbay who did not know of Picard’s personal rapscallion, no longer knew what was being discussed about the Admiral’s condition.

Will casually whispered to Wes, “I wonder how many years in the brig wiping an Admiral’s brain might get you.”
“Wesley, did you just do what I thought you did?” his mother asked.

“Yes.” He walked over to the admirals. “Please, leave us gentleman. My mother needs to rest.”

The two admirals dutifully left.

Wesley then snapped his fingers again. “I’ve set up a privacy shield. No one can hear anything we say. And no one can enter without my permission.”

Will then received a subspace message from Mela. “Mela’s pregnant too. They just got married.”

Beverly looked at her son. But she was seeing a Q. “Do you know what this is all about? What is Q doing?”

“I can only guess, Mother. It has something to do with the Q gene.”

Beverly felt a headache coming on. And then she felt weak. Worf caught her before she fell. Now Beverly was on a bed in sickbay.

Guinan walked into the room. She brought with her a small bottle of something. She handed it to Wes. “Give Beverly a few sips of this. It will help.” Beverly felt better but Deanna wouldn’t let her get out of bed.

Guinan looked at Will. “Get the conference room. I’ve got a lot of explaining to do. And invite Jellico and Nella, and her Aunt Carrie too.”

Then Guinan walked over to Jean-Luc. She placed her hands on his shoulders, and lifted him into a sitting position. “Fugue state diagnosis is almost correct, Deanna. I think Q’s manipulations put him into a Dissociative Fugue. If that’s the case, I’ll be able to bring him out of it.” Before Deanna or Beverly could say anything, Guinan added, “I’ve been a doctor a couple of times during my life. Not much difference between being a psychiatrist and being a barkeep.” Then she focused on Jean-Luc. “Come back to me, Jean-Luc. It’s safe, Baldy. It’s safe.”

Jean-Luc awoke, moaning. “I couldn’t have done it. I couldn’t have done it. He was my best friend. Yet I love her…What did I do? How could I do it…”

Guinan waved Beverly back.

“You didn’t do it, Jean-Luc. It was Q!”

And then his voice sounded more normal. “I know it was Q…” He closed his eyes.

“Oh Lordy, I am going to filet Q when I get my hands on him. And he thought I was difficult when he didn’t pay me my alimony…”

Beverly rushed to the nearest sink and vomited. Stress was taking its toll. She now understood what had triggered Jean-Luc’s fugue state. Because of his health and his mental stresses, discovering what Q had done had just been too much for him.”

Deanna put her arms about Beverly’s shoulders and helped her back to the bed. She looked at Guinan. “Am I correct in assuming that Jean-Luc thinks that Q made him fall in love with Beverly? And therefore his love and the life he’s lived ever since, was based on deceit? That everything that was and is, is a lie?”

“Close but no Vulcan cigar.” Q’s voice filled the room. He materialized wearing a surprisingly
tasteful tuxedo, and shiny patent leather shoes.

“I didn’t make Jean-Luc or the red-haired witch do anything that they didn’t want to do on Clarion.” Worf took a threatening step closer to Q. “Heel, Woofie.”

Worf grrred.

“Wake up, Jean-Luc,” Q ordered.

“I don’t want to,” was the admiral’s reply.

Guinan picked him up again. “Jean-Luc, you love Beverly. Beverly loves you. You’re having twins. Time to get up and deal with it.”

“Guinan…” Beverly’s voice was weak.

“Time to kiss Sleeping Beauty here, Bev.”

Beverly didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. So she went to her husband and kissed him. A moment later his eyes opened. He reached up and brushed her lips with his thumb. “What happened?” Beverly started hugging him and kissing him at the same time.

An hour later, they all were in the senior officer’s conference room. Jean-Luc had recovered somewhat from his collapse.

Surprisingly, Q had not disappeared. Guinan had convinced him to stay.

Jean-Luc surveyed everyone in the room. Beverly, Wes, Robin, Worf, both Rikers, Ro, Mr. Data, Captain Jellico, Nella Daren, Carrie DelaChancie, and Deanna. He was about to begin when Lwaxana swept into the room. “Mrs. Troi, this is a private conference.”

She ignored Jean-Luc. “Like my caftan, Q?” She twirled about showing off her hot pink and gold silk caftan. “I’d worn it in hope that Jean-Luc would have wanted a traditional Betazed wedding ceremony.”

Q swept her into his arms. “Oh, my cherry.”

“Let my mother stay, Admiral. It’s the path of least resistance,” Deanna observed.

Jean-Luc didn’t quite have the strength to glare at Deanna, or Lwaxana.

“Oh, Jean-Luc is impatient,” Q complained. “I suppose I’d better start at the beginning. He glanced around the table. Then smiled. “Hello, Carrie. Long time no see.”

“You have not improved at all over the years.” Everyone stared at Nella’s aunt. “Q and I were engaged once,” Carrie explained. “But we broke up when he questioned my taste in music!”

“What the hell is going on?” Jellico wanted to hurry the proceedings along. They all were giving him a headache.

“Babies.” Wesley stared at Q. “The Q Continuum needs heirs. That is why Tau Alphan, the Traveler took me to the Gamma Quadrant. He didn’t want me around while Q played his games.”

“Well they weren’t games to me. I thought I was helping.” Q harrumphed. “Somehow along the way, the Q lost the ability to reproduce amongst their own kind. So, a few brave souls such as myself, went in search of wild, wild women - or men.” He glanced at Lwaxana. “And some times if
we were really lucky, we’d find one.” He grinned at the Betazed Ambassadress. “Anyway, I was put in charge of tracking down the Q gene in this quadrant. It seems that a lot of the Q like having sex with human beings. So over the centuries there’s been a lot of babies being born with Q genes out there.”

Beverly observed, “You were using human beings as breeding machines for the Q.”

“Not exactly. Many humans have the gene. But most when they mate, do not give birth to bouncing baby Qs. What they do give birth to is a smart kid. Or someone who has an exceptional talent. Or is destined to do something great.”

“The Eugenics Wars?” Beverly acerbically observed.

“We had nothing to do with that! But apparently, some of those super genes found their way in to the human genome. And then they mixed with the Q genes, and lo and behold, along comes you, Dr. Beverly.”

“He’s telling the truth, Beverly,” Guinan added. “Q wasn’t interested in Jean-Luc. He was interested in you at the beginning.”

“Sorry, Johnny. Hate to burst your egotistical bubble. But you screwed up all my plans. That’s why I’ve been bedeviling you for a few decades.”

“Q, would you please explain what is going on?”

Q saw that Jean-Luc really did look pale and tired. “Not the way to start a honeymoon, eh? Of course, you and Red had quite a honeymoon on Clarion.”

“You erased our memories?” Beverly asked.

“But he didn’t erase your feelings for each other,” Guinan explained.

“Actually, I did erase your feelings. Only problem was, I hadn’t created them in the first place, so I couldn’t take them away. You both really did fall in love at first sight. I am truly sorry for what I did to you.”

Beverly almost believed the apology.

“And all the pregnancies?”

“You all have the Q gene. And considering how well Wesley turned out, I thought that I should encourage you all to go forth and propagate. With each other. So I altered your birth control.”

“Women have killed men for less,” Ro casually and calmly observed.

“Bloodthirsty. That’s why I’ve always stayed away from Bajoran women,” Q mumbled.

“We are not lab experiments!” Worf roared.

“No, you’re not,” Guinan calmly replied. “But people who have part of the Q Continuum within them, are just naturally attracted to other people like them. We can sense each other on some level. Something to do with the pheromones and how we perceive beauty and art. All that sort of nonsense.”

Q walked over to Beverly, then glanced at Wesley. “You were supposed to marry Jack Crusher. He was your destiny. And you were supposed to eventually fall in love with Jean-Luc - after Jack
Crusher died. Jack was supposed to be Wesley’s father. For he did have the Q gene too. But then I screwed up and you met Jean-Luc before the wedding. Once I realized that you were pregnant, well, I just figured it was safer for everyone, including me,” he glanced over at Guinan to see if she would hit him, “if you believed that Jack was the father. So I did a few things to change Wesley’s DNA around. But only when he was being scanned. Not in reality.”

“You didn’t think you were being unfair to Jean-Luc, denying him knowledge of his son?”

“Well, eventually Jean-Luc got the chance to be a father to Wesley. But when you first met, he didn’t have the time for a family. That’s why you were supposed to marry Jack in the first place.”

“Surely you knew that this wouldn’t be covered up forever,” Jean-Luc finally observed.

“Well I was hoping you’d all be dead before you found out.” Q was getting snarky. Then he went to Jean-Luc. “I’m sorry, I didn’t realize how injured you really were, Jean-Luc. You are what you are. I may have meddled, but you fell in love exactly the way you are supposed to love. I didn’t make you love Beverly, And I certainly didn’t make Beverly love you. You came up with that loverly idea all by your selves. I wouldn’t have minded having a son like Wesley, if I were you.” He looked at Wes. “I’m sorry about the mess.”

“If you’re omnipotent beings, why can’t you just do what you want to do?” Jellico was a little shaken by all this Q talk. He’d read the reports about the Q, but he’d never really believed half of what he read - until now.

“There are rules, Captain Jellico,” Wes explained. “I was born with the gene from both of my parents. And for some reason, I’m able to harness some of the Q’s powers. But there is only one way to become a real Q. And that is to use your powers. The greater the demand for power with each using, the closer you become a Q. That’s why if I had interfered and saved Admiral Picard and Captain Riker from the Cardassians, I would have hastened my powers along too much.” Wesley apologetically smiled at Will Riker. “That’s why Admiral Picard ordered me not to save him, or you, Captain. I was very tempted to do so, but Admiral Picard didn’t want me to change over. I’m not ready to advance quickly. I need more time being human before I’m ready to evolve to the next level.”

Jellico dearly wanted to get himself a drink. This day had just too much excitement. And he hadn’t a clue how to write his captain’s log entry for this stardate.

“How much of this does Starfleet know?” Jellico always worried about the details.

Picard chose his words carefully. “It’s a very fine line to keep their secrets, and to keep a log as well. I have always believed that if it concerned people, then it wasn’t any of Starfleet’s concern. Unless it interfered with their doing their duty. And then there is the problem of other people trying to exploit the Q into doing their bidding. With a fledgling such as Wesley, there are outside forces that could force Wesley to do things against his will. It could hurt people I love and care about.”

Carrie spoke up. “I’ve lived with this knowledge a long time, Edward. I’ve come to believe that some of the best that the universe has to offer, is based on the intermingling of the Q with human beings.”

Robin was not willing to let Q avoid answering the important questions. “So what happens to our children when they are born?”

“You raise them. All their mistakes will be on your heads. The Q ain’t babysitters.”
“Will you interfere with them?”

“Ordinarily we do not - unless they make the mistake of marrying a Klingon.”

Deanna groaned. Suddenly understanding a few things, she glanced over at her Mother, who was playing with her crawling tilsit. And she knew. Her Mother had sold her soul to the Q in order to get Deanna married.

Lwaxana knew her daughter’s thoughts and answered them. “Some day you’ll thank me, Little One.”

“And that is it?” Robin continued.

“Actually, yes.” He stood, pirouetted, and announced, “My work is done. Enjoy yourselves! Tata for now.” He disappeared, this time with a puff of smoke.

Everyone looked at Wesley. “I honestly didn’t know what the Q were doing. But if you knew, would that really have changed anything? You are all with the people that you love. The Q didn’t have anything to do with those feelings.” Wes glanced at his Mother. “They might have helped move events along, or not, as the case may be. But in the end, we all made our own, free-will decisions.” And he smiled at Robin. “And I rejoice in my choice.”

Beverly, sensing how tired Jean-Luc was, ordered in her best physician’s voice, “Admiral Picard needs rest. If we have anything more to discuss, we’ll do so tomorrow.” Reluctantly almost everyone left.

It was Worf who asked the important question. “Wesley Crusher. Are you Starfleet or Q?”

“Starfleet, Mr. Worf. If I am given an order by my commanding office with which I disagree, I will explain why I am challenging that order. But I will obey that order.” He glanced at Riker. “I wouldn’t be wearing this uniform if I weren’t willing to follow its rules.”

“This new worm hole engine. You or the Q?” Jellico had grave reservations about Commander Crusher.

“Commander LaForge, Dr. Brahms, Commander Barclay, Mr. Data and I created that engine, Captain. The only magic I used was my intelligence. Dr. Brahms was already close to coming to the same conclusions and designs as myself.”

Picard spoke up now. “Then what you saw and learned with the Tau Alphan. You won’t use the knowledge now?”

“Sir, so much of what I’ve learned I cannot use because it is too advanced for us to use now. But there were no restrictions placed on my knowledge. When I can use my knowledge to help, I will.” He came and touched his father’s shoulder. “If you will forgive me, Sir, it is time that you rest.” He leaned over and quietly added, “We can discuss other matters tomorrow.” He helped the admiral stand, and handed him over to his mother. He kissed his mother’s cheek, and whispered “Goodnight, Mother.” And then, he unexpectedly kissed Jean-Luc’s cheek. “Goodnight, Father.” With that he left them to go embrace his wife.

Picard walked slowly, trying to assimilate the events of the day. “I have a son,” he whispered to Beverly.

After watching them leave, Robin asked, “You already knew, didn’t you Wes?”
“The first time I met Captain Picard, I knew that he was part of my family. I never questioned it. Years later I learned of some of the powers of the Q. And I began to suspect, but I never really knew for sure until tonight.” He kissed her briefly. “I’ve got to go do something right now, with Mr. Worf.”

“What?”

“See if my father’s reputation with the Klingons needs saving. I don’t think that Klingons understand phrases like Dissociative fugue states…”

Mr. Worf had the same idea. Fortunately the two captains had not changed their opinion of Jean-Luc Picard. And Gowron invited both of them to drink with him at his Palace. Though Wesley did suggest to Mr. Worf that Deanna might not be so understanding. Gowron and Wesley spent the whole night talking and drinking. Gowron had always wanted to talk to a Q.
Parties

Chapter Summary

Jean-Luc and friends throw another party. And The Enterprise is finally launched.

Jean-Luc walked among the grapevines, smelling the fertile earth; listening to the caw of crows. He breathed deeply of the air, still redolent with summer’s waning scents. He was enjoying the peace of the day.

And he was listening to Reg prattle on about the harvest. Reg was applying himself to learn how to be a vintner. For Mela loved it here at Château Picard. And Reg had found that he loved coming home to the wine country. The house he was restoring was the first permanent home he’d ever had. He was living there with a wife who adored him, and children whom he loved.

“Funny how much can change in a year,” Reg observed. “I never thought that I’d ever meet a woman who would love me much as I love her, much less marry and have children of my own.” For Reg now had a son - Geordi Data. And he had adopted Mela’s children.

“I agree.” Picard looked towards the Château down the road. Preparations for the wedding/christening parties were being made. It was going to be a very long and busy weekend. All of their friends were coming, along with all their children too.

The real question was, would Will and his crew make it? For Beverly had joined the Enterprise E as CMO. The new Enterprise E was supposed to be christened in three weeks. Mr. Data was Will’s Number One. Worf and Deanna held their original posts. They were their with their son Jean-Luc. Geordi had accepted the offer of being the chief engineer. Dr. Brahms and their daughter Lal, were going to travel with the ship, too. Leah was conducting continuing tests on the new worm hole drive, as well as a host of other experiments.

Wesley, Robin and their son Jean Jackson would be joining the crew. When Wes was done at the Academy, he’d be the Science Officer. Robin was a senior pilot.

Ro Laren and her husband Tom, along with their daughter Gale Guinan, were coming to the party. Ro had accepted the role of being a Maquis Ambassadress. Tom was supervising the rebuilding of war damaged DMZ cities. He was also building their home on Salva II.

Edward Jellico and his wife were still on the old Cairo. The new Cairo was finally at the UP for the finishing touches before launch.

As for all the others who had been a part of their lives they were already on Earth.

Jean-Luc knew how busy they all were especially Will and Beverly in getting the Enterprise E ready to go. He’d been there and done that. And it was an imposition that they all take time off to come to LaBarre. But Jean-Luc also knew that the odds were pretty slim for everyone who should be at the party, actually being at Sector One all at the same time again. The decision was made to have one grand party. Mr. Data was planning everything. Unbeknownst to Jean-Luc, Will Riker was helping
As for Jean-Luc, right now, he was taking care of his twins. Along with the help of Marie and Guinan. For some reason, Guinan assumed that she was the Picard family nanny, and Picard couldn’t quite decide if it was a good thing or not.

Jean-Luc and Beverly had named their daughter Deanna Marie, and their son, William Robert. Though it would be Winston Holt Wiley who would create William’s nickname of Billy Bob. And nothing that Jean-Luc could say or do would stop that nickname from sticking. Deanna’s nickname became Annie. Will, Laren, Worf and Deanna were the god parents.

Q had been very upset when they hadn’t taken his suggestion of Suzie Q as the daughter’s name

Jean-Luc would be on board the Enterprise E when she was launched. He was going to be an Ambassador Ad Litem for the Federation, and his first assignment would be to deal with issues that had arisen on the Cardassian and Klingon Empire borders. The Enterprise E would be considered his personal flagship, as well as the Federation flagship. Though pleased with this arrangement, he knew it was a temporary one. He had to give Will a chance to be a captain in his own right, away from constraint of possibly deferring to Picard.

Reg and Jean-Luc ambled their way back to Château Picard. Reg went to his home on the other side of the field where the party was going to be held. Jean-Luc decided to see how the party preparations were going. He was surprised to see Mr. Data on site.

“Mr. Data.”

Data, still wearing his duty uniform, nodded as Jean-Luc approached. “Sir.”

“How goes it?” There was an expression on Data’s face that Picard couldn’t quite identify. He looked harried. “Is there anything that I can do to help?”

“You could deal with Marie, Jean-Luc. She is over in your wine tasting center. I think that she is underestimate how many cases will be needed.”

“Of course, Data. I'll go talk to…” his voice trailed off as he saw Guinan running toward them, her puce hat threatening to fly off of her head. “Guinan?”

“Jean-Luc. The twins are sleeping.” She paused to take a couple of frantic breaths. “There’s been a mix-up that I’ve got to straighten out. Feed the babies when they wake up.” And with that she disappeared. She’d also neglected to mention just how many babies were asleep in the nursery too. Jean-Luc would have his hands full that afternoon. And if he didn’t know any better, he would suspect that Guinan had planned this, as he took care of his twins, as well as Mela’s sons. He fed, cleaned up, diapered and played with all of them.

That evening, Jean-Luc joined Marie for dinner. Reg, Mela, and Woody Nakamura were there too.

After a pleasant dinner, Jean-Luc went to check on the babies. Then, he went down to the salon for some quiet conversation, and a glass of good brandywine. He found it surprising at how easily he’d slipped into becoming not only the father but primary caretaker for the twins. Beverly came when she could, but he was in charge of his children.

He remembered his last days on board his Enterprise D lamenting the fact that he was the last of the Picards. And now there were at least three of his children who would call Château Picard home. Though considering the way all three would be raised, the stars would be their playground. He wondered if any of his children would be willing to stay on Earth and make wine. Still, he was
pleased with the direction his life had turned.

Jean-Luc would always miss being a starship captain. He would miss it every day for the rest of his life. But for now he could accept his happiness. He’d paid dearly to achieve it.

After a snifter of brandy and some conversation, he went upstairs to bed. It was going to be a long weekend, and he wanted to at least get some sleep.

But Beverly had other plans. She’d beamed into their bedroom without alerting anyone else. She missed her husband and children, and just wanted a little quiet time with them by herself.

He greeted his surprise with a kiss full of promise. “Beverly, welcome home. How was your day?”

“Did you know my captain is a slave driver?”

“Really?” He’d never been privy to Beverly complaining about her captain before. Not like this.

“He’s nearly as bad as my former captain.”

“Really?” He pulled her into his arms, and removed her duty jacket, casually asking, “And is there anything that your former captain can do to make amends?”

“Scrub my back?”

He kissed her neck. “You wish is my command.”

After a fairly long, intimate shower, they got ready for bed. He pulled his bride onto his lap as he sat down on a comfy, burgundy upholstered bergere. “I’ve been meaning to give this to you, mon coeur.” He reached over and picked up a small box that was on top of an inlaid library stand. He opened it. “I believe it was my granmere’s ring. He slipped the oval blue star sapphire and blue diamond ring onto her ring finger. “The minute I saw your earrings at our wedding, I knew that this ring was a perfect match. It is an extraordinary coincidence.” He softly kissed her. “The fates have decreed that we were meant to be, Beverly.”

“It’s beautiful, Jean-Luc.” To prove that she liked it, she kissed him. A while later, Beverly slept in his arms. He hadn’t felt this content in years. Neither had she.

The next day dawned bright and beautiful. Jean-Luc heard the sound of Data’s voice in the courtyard. He nudged Beverly. “Rise my love. It’s begun.”

Beverly just mumbled.

“All right, I’ll go check on our twins. You sleep.” He was smiling to himself as he dressed. A few minutes later, he picked up Deanna. She was always the first one to get fractious in the morning. He was just grateful that now both twins were sleeping through the night.

A soft voice behind him whispered, “Let me.” He turned and handed their daughter to her mother. Beverly opened up her robe to breast feed, then sat on a rocker. Jean-Luc watched for a while, then asked, “Have you enough milk for Will? I can prep some of your stored breast milk, if you wish it.”

“No, I think I’ll be fine this morning.” She sighed, then she studied her husband as intently as he’d been gazing upon her. “Have you decided?”

“You know I don’t want to leave them behind.”

“I don’t either. I just think that it is best for them that they do stay with Marie. At least until they
She shook her head. “I know you’re surprised at my stance. But babies need constant attention. I can’t give that to them on board a starship.”

“But I can,” Jean-Luc countered.

“Yes, while we’re traveling to where we are going, you can. But once you get there you’ll be so wrapped up with your mission, that the twins will have to take second place to your work. If I have a light load that day then it is fine. But what if I don’t have a light load? Then what? Dragoon some yeoman into taking care of them?”

“Actually…,” Jean-Luc began.

“You want to ask Guinan,” Beverly guessed.

“She’s offered.”

“Then I have another suggestion.”

‘What, Beverly?’

“Considering how many of us will have babies on board the Enterprise, why don’t we work out a schedule where one of us is tending to all of the children, with the occasional help of a nursery aide. Guinan can volunteer and take care of Will’s Happy Bottom Riding Club Lounge (aka Ten Forward) at the same time.” She had it all worked out.

“I’d be delighted to do so.”

“You would be willing to volunteer?”

“I took care of our twins and Mela’s boys all afternoon yesterday. I found it enjoyable.”

Beverly shook her head as she wondered how Jean-Luc would cope with all the babies having a cold at the same time. She smiled to herself as she envisioned it. Then she motioned for Jean-Luc to bring her Will. “I’ll say yes on one condition.” She settled William on her other breast, and handed him Deanna. He burped her.

“And that condition being?”

“That you dance the tango with me tonight. Otherwise I will let Will Riker see that recording of you changing your son’s diaper for the very first time.” Her grin was evil as she recalled what happened. He’d had to change his piss soaked shirt.

“Then I accede to all your demands, you red-haired witch.” He trailed his fingers through her loose hair. Then he kissed the top of her head. “I’ll go see to our breakfast. It’s catch as catch can in the kitchen today.”

As he left the room, Beverly called out, “Jean-Luc.”

“Yes, mon coeur?”

“Will’s been grinning like a Circassian cat all week whenever the party’s been mentioned.”

Jean-Luc nodded. “Yes, I know that he’s plotting something. It’s his nature to be plotting something.”
Trouble is, Mr. Data has been smiling too.”

Jean-Luc’s smile began to stiffen as he watched all the hundreds of people coming to the party. Mr. Data had his own list. Marie had her list. And unless he missed his guess, Lwaxana had a very long list too.

Everyone he’d cared about had arrived early willing to help. Even Ro had greeted him with a quick kiss, as she arrived arm-in-arm with Tom and Will.

Marie was guiding those parents with babies to the upstairs bedrooms at the Château. She’d brought in a lot of extra staff and neighbors to take care of the nursery, the food and the party.

The merchant’s sales building was where all the food preparation was going to be. Thousands of floating candle lights formed the ceiling for the large dining tents which had been placed next to the wine tasting rooms. Those rooms had been converted into the bar.

An open dance floor with another ceiling of floating lights had a stage for the band. It was set by the courtyard near the gardens, folly and maze. Mela and Reg’s house would handle the overflow if necessary.

All of the couples involved took turns at the greeting line. Otherwise Picard would have had to stand there most of the day. Considering his experience with other parties that Data had planned, Jean-Luc was not too surprised at who had accepted the invitations.

Then Jean-Luc met Riker’s surprise. Visions of legendary brawls crossed his mind as he greeted Chancellor Gowron and his entourage. Moving next to Mr. Data, Picard whispered his orders. “Mr. Data. You do not throw the first punch!”

“Do you wish to designate another person to throw the first punch? Captain Riker, perhaps?”

“No brawling at all, Mr. Data!” His voice was a bit louder now. And stern. And then he saw Mr. Data’s grin. The android was pulling his leg.

Picard’s laughter was heartfelt when he met Gowron’s date - Alynna Nechayev. Apparently the Admiral had maintained her contact with Gowron from the Enterprise D’s wake.

And then Jean-Luc heard it. The sound of a shuttlecraft landing where it was not supposed to land. He looked up and saw the Starbuck. He’d once spent a memorable few days on that shuttlecraft. For it had been with Ro. A minute later a tall Vorlo free-trading pirate ran up to Picard and socked him. Picard almost fell backwards if it hadn’t been for Data’s swift catch.

“You can’t imagine my surprise when I received your invitation Johnny!”

Picard heartily greeted Ragner, shook his hand, braced himself and flipped Ragner into the dirt. “Glad you could come.” The Vorlo guffawed. “Where’s my charming cantankerous Bajoran?”

“That’s Ambassador Cantankerous Bajoran to you, Captain,” Picard replied as he offered his hand to the Vorlo to help him stand up. He saw Beverly and Worf approaching rapidly. “Captain Ragner, may I introduce you to my wife, Beverly, and one of my best friends, Worf. Perhaps you’d care to
arm wrestle later on.”

Picard didn’t know who had the odder look on their faces. Beverly, when she realized that this scruffy, scraggly haired, very dusty Vorlo was the pirate who had almost killed Jean-Luc, or Worf realizing that Picard had called him a best friend.

Ragner’s eyes widened when he saw Beverly. He whispered to Picard, “You have to tell me your secret! He glanced around. “Where’s my favorite Bajoran? I can console her.”

Picard grinned. “Laren’s here - with her husband.”

Perhaps the highlight of the afternoon was when Nagus Behlk arrived, bearing gifts. He only kissed Jean-Luc’s feet once. Then he quoted the 236th Rule of Acquisition: You can’t buy Fate.

Behlk wandered around Château Picard under the watchful eye of Mr. Worf. Behlk may not have known the artistic value of much of what was inside the Château, but he did understand old and craftsmanship. And the value of property, land and wine. He was impressed. And mentally started revising upwards the bills he would later on present to Picard.

It was also the first time that a Ferengi Nagus had come to Earth. Many of the admirals in attendance were trying to figure out all the reasons why.

During the cocktail hour before the actual banquet, Admiral Winston Holt Wiley pulled Jean-Luc aside. “Thought we’d have a little round up poker, later.”

“The room is already ready,” Picard concurred. “May I propose a new member?”

“Admiral, you can propose whomsoever you wish. You’re an admiral now. You get to wield the power.”

“Thank you, Winnie.”

Wiley laughed. “Wondered how long it would take you to use that nickname instead of the usual old Horse’s Ass.”

“Winnie, I can genuinely say that I have never called you that out loud.”

Wiley knew better. “But you thought it.”

Picard joined Nella and Edward. He paid the proper compliments to Nella for she was glowing. Picard had his suspicions. And then he pulled Edward aside, motioning toward the garden. They walked over to a more quiet corner framed by floribunda, and lavender.

“Yes, Jean-Luc.”

“Congratulations. Nella looks very happy.”

“Thank you and yes, we are happy.” He stopped. “You know Nella is pregnant?”

“She has that look, Edward. I’ve been around quite a few pregnant ladies lately. I’ve learned to recognize it.” He shook Edward’s hand. “How is your son Franklin?”

“Frank is excited. He’s getting along very well with Nella and the thought of a sister. And being on board the Cairo. He wants to go to the Starfleet Academy.” Edward couldn’t accurately express all the pride he’d felt.
Picard had some news to impart. “I’ve also heard that your new ship should be going into its final completion phases very soon. That will give you at least six months to set up the new Cairo. Do you still wish to continue flying your Cairo during the final stages, or would you rather come to UP and work from there?”

“May I think about it, Admiral? I know what I would prefer, but it might ease Carrie’s mind to have Nella on Earth with her during the last trimester of her pregnancy.”

“I’m sure we can work out a solution.”

“I want to thank you for the party, Jean-Luc. It’s a wonderful gesture for all of us.” Edward turned to leave.

“There is something else, Edward.” Jellico waited. “Have you ever heard of the Admiral’s Round Up?”

“Actually, I have.” Jellico held his breath. For rumor had it that if you weren’t invited to be part of the round up when you got your first captain’s chair, you were never going to be promoted to admiral. And after decades as a captain, Edward had assumed that he would never be asked, much less be asked by this man.

“We’re going to be playing poker, later on. Would you care to join us?”

“You sure, Jean-Luc?”

“Only if you bring plenty of credits.”

“Will Captain Riker be there?”

“He has not yet been invited to a game.”

“I am looking forward to playing poker with you, Jean-Luc.” Jellico was mystified. He had long given up hope of becoming an admiral, and yet now, Picard of all admirals, was inviting him into a very exclusive club.

“Jean-Luc, why you? Why now?”

“You’ve always been considered a steady, reliable starship captain. But the way you handled the peace treaty and my own rather complicated situation showed depths that I had never suspected you to have. Also, Mr. Worf and Mr. Data respect you. I have always valued their opinions. But I would have never invited you to play poker if I had not thought that you are a starship captain whose talents are greatly needed. I hope that you will consider me to be a friend.”

He offered his hand to Edward. And they shook hands as friends.

With a slight smile, Edward added, “And I did have the good sense to marry Nella.”

“Yes, that too. Marie has some of Nella’s special tea blend in the house. Just ask one of the waiters. Though how you can drink her herbal teas is beyond me.”

As Jellico walked away, he remembered what he’d told Nella. That he would keep silent about the Q connection to Picard and the children-to-be. It wasn’t for Picard’s sake, but for the sake of the children. Considering what they’d be born into, trying to give them some semblance of a protected, normal life was the decent thing to do. And in spite of all of his flaws, Captain Edward Jellico was a decent man. Then Jellico chuckled. The great Jean-Luc Picard had just offered him, however
discreetly, a bribe. Picard was a mere mortal after all, willing to do anything and everything to protect those he loved. They could be friends, after all.

It was time for the banquet. The dais held all the couples who were celebrating. Jean-Luc and Beverly, Tom and Laren, Will, Worf and Deanna, Edward and Nella, Wes and Robin, Geordi and Leah, Mela and Reg and Mr. Data (Who was godfather or honorary uncle to every new born babe).

As the meal neared its completion, only the champagne was yet to be served. Picard stood and raised his champagne flute.

The tents quieted down.

“I wish to thank you all for coming. It is likely that we will never all meet again like this, so your being here is an honor to all of us.” He looked about the dais tables. “We are celebrating the continuation of life from our marriages to our children. And I wish to honor and thank our hostess,” he motioned in Marie’s direction, “Madame Marie Picard, Comtesse de Holl and the provider of all the wine which we are to drink tonight.” Everyone cheered and applauded. “So, mon ami, all that we ask of all of you is to eat, drink, laugh and to enjoy yourselves. Live now! Make now always the most precious time. Now will never come again...”

Riker stood, holding his glass high. “First, to Jean-Luc and Beverly…” He lauded every other couple. “Only one phrase says it all. Live long and prosper!”

Jellico stood next and toasted all the brides. And so it went, down the table.

Deanna leaned over and suddenly grabbed Will’s sleeve, and whispered, “Do you love me, Will?”

Somewhat startled by the question, Will said yes.

“Then dart down the aisle and tackle my Mother before she gets to the stage!”

It took Will a moment to find Lwaxana. She was holding a champagne glass in her hands. He groaned. And then swiftly moved to intercept her. But then he stopped. For something bizarre happened. Q stepped into the lady’s path, passionately kissed her and then led Lwaxana away from all the lights, and into the darkness of the courtyard. Will didn’t know whether to be grateful or worried. Or both.

After all the toasts were almost done, Gowron stood, raising his glass. “Chec’tluth, qong’daq, par’Mach and opera. May my Arbiter of Succession and his warriors have a full life!”

Mr. Data then stood. “As Chancellor Gowron has just said, I wish all of my friends wine, lovers, a bed, true love and song. Which now means that the band, which consists of my fellow musicians from Harvard and the University of Michigan, is now ready to perform. So I ask that all of the happily married newlyweds whom we are honoring tonight, dance the first dance.” Data drank his wine then threw his glass onto the floor and shattered it.

Picard grimaced. Beverly whispered, “Please don’t tell me that was the ancestral Baccarat.”

“No, it’s replicated.”

Crashing glasses could be heard around the banquet area. “Send in the servo units,” Picard ordered a waiter.

And so the dancing began on a perfect evening, under a candle lit canopy floating beneath the stars.
Mr. Data held the baton, and sang Blue Skies.

As expected, all of the couples began trading partners during the second number. Jean-Luc Picard surprised a number of people, when he stepped up to where some children were watching, and politely bowed in front of Harla wearing a cherry red dress. The now eight year old young lady, curtsied, and accepted Oncle Jean-Luc’s invitation. It was the highlight of her night. Not to mention bringing tears to her mother’s eyes.

And some were wondering where the vicious rumor got started that Jean-Luc did not like children…

Jean-Luc danced with many ladies that night. He even asked Ro Laren for a waltz.

For a few minutes, they said nothing. He didn’t recognize how well they danced together, though some noticed. Then he whispered, “Ma belle, are you happy?”

There was a sheen to her eyes that might have held a tear or two. “Yes, Jean-Luc. I actually am.”

“And our daughter?”

“She’s the miracle in my life that I never expected.”

“Laren, if ever there is a problem in the future, Gowron has promised me that he’ll protect you and our daughter. All you have to do is ask him. You can believe that, even if for some reason the Federation goes to war against the Klingons again.”

“Thank you.” She started relaxing in his arms, and then realized the hidden dangers. She chose another path. “I was actually thinking of asking you and Beverly to come and visit. Tom’s building a huge house. There’s plenty of room. It would give the twins a chance to get to know their sister. I’ll ask Wes and Robin as well.”

“Or, you could also come to Caldos. We’ve been building an addition to Beverly’s house. We’ll have plenty of room in a few months too.”

He felt her trembling, and without thinking, he guided her off the dance floor into the shadows.

“What is it, Laren?”

“Sometimes, when I’m with our daughter, I just wish you were there.”

He understood the ache in her heart. For he had it too. Without thinking he pressed a light kiss on her lips.

“Ahem.” The voice came out of the darkness.

Startled, Jean-Luc stepped away from Ro.

Guinan appeared. Her golden gown and flapping chapeau seemed to have a lighted power source of their own. “Just taking a walk, watching out for my goddaughter.”

Jean-Luc suddenly comprehended how kissing Laren might be misinterpreted if someone had seen them. He was surprised by his personal error. Turning to Laren, he kissed her brow. Then he looked at Guinan and offered his arm. “I believe they are playing our song, Guinan. Shall we dance?”

“I don’t dance.”

“You do, now.” He offered his other arm to Laren. They all casually strolled back to the dance area,
as if daring anyone to say anything about their actions.

And Jean-Luc discovered that Guinan really couldn’t dance. His toes would hurt for days.

A few minutes later he was waltzing with Marie. “I wish to thank you, Marie. For everything.”

“I should be thanking you, Jean-Luc. In the space of a year, how things have changed. Château Picard has family again. You know how strongly Robert valued the family. I’d just never realized how much you do too.”

“I didn’t for a long time, Marie. I let my bitterness blind me to what I was missing. I will regret my foolishness the rest of my life.”

“But now you do understand. And that is what counts, Jean-Luc. I was guilty of not insisting that Robert reconcile with you a lot sooner. But, you live your life. And you have to learn as you go.”

“I just am grateful that Robert married you. You are the best of sisters.”

Marie was touched that he hadn’t added in-law.

He danced next with Mela. He was not too surprised as to how graceful she felt in his arms.


“No, I should thank you. When I met you, it was one of the luckiest days of my life. Thank you for your kindness toward Marie. And for marrying Reg. You’ve made a remarkable difference in his life, and in all our lives.” He escorted her back to her husband, then bowed and kissed her hand. He smiled at Reg. “You’re a very lucky man, Reg. For everything that you’ve done for my family, I thank you.” Reg was speechless.

On his way to check with Beverly, Jean-Luc bumped into Edward and Nella. With just a bit of deviltry, he politely asked if they’d like to sing a duet. He added that Mr. Data had suggested it.

Edward grimaced. Nella shoved Jean-Luc onto the dance floor.

“I specifically told Data that we would not sing!” Nella hissed as they danced to some sort of popular song from Risa. (For Data and his musicians had a very varied repertoire.) “He’d already asked.”

“I know.” Jean-Luc smoothly dipped.

Nella stumbled when he pulled her back up. “You’re dancing! You told me that you never danced.”

“Beverly has been making me take lessons. Apparently when I’m a diplomat, I’m supposed to dance.”

Nella laughed. “And you hate it.”

“Depends upon the partner.” He twirled her. He noticed the way she kept glancing towards Edward, standing at the edge of the dance floor. “You’d rather be in Eddie’s arms?”

Nella shuddered. “Don’t ever call him Eddie. I can’t even get away with it. He prefers Edward but will answer to Ed. And yes, Edward is a good dancer too.”

Picard grinned to himself. He knew that some time tonight, that little bit of information about Eddie would come in useful during the poker game.

He began to maneuver her towards her husband as they danced. He softly asked, “Are you happy,
All she saw on his face was the concern of an old friend. And she smiled in reply. “Very, Jean-Luc.”

He handed her back to her husband and then kissed her hand with a flourish, as if he were an ancient cavalier. Surprisingly Edward didn’t seem to mind.

And Picard recognized just how solid their marriage was. He was pleased.

Jean-Luc wandered amongst the crowds as a host greeting friends, villagers and relatives. Normally he would have disliked such activities, but tonight, he felt the strong pull of ancestral ties. This was his family, his land, his house, his friends, and his people. He finally began to understand the pride that Robert had felt toward Château Picard. The bonds went back centuries.

He felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned.

“My turn to dance,” Deanna said with a smile.

“May I have the pleasure of this dance, Deanna?”

He smiled back, admiring his favorite counselor in her dress of amethyst silk. “You look lovely tonight.”

Picard swept her off into a slow fox trot.

“You’re happy, Jean-Luc. That’s an emotion I’ve rarely felt in you.”

“It’s taken me a long time to accept my life. But now that I have, I don’t know when I’ve been happier.”

Jean-Luc pulled her a little closer. He’d always had admiration for Deanna as a counselor, and as a woman. Now that he no longer was a starship captain, many of the formal barriers between Jean-Luc and his friends were gone. “Thank you Deanna, for everything. You’ve saved my life, and my sanity, many many times.”

“I am just glad that I could help, Jean-Luc.”

“I just wish for your happiness too, Deanna.” He kissed her brow, and then let Will cut in.

He couldn’t resist. Data was conducting a song that had been played at his wedding - about the Pleasure of Love. He saw his wife with Marie, talking with the Mayor of LaBarre and a priest. Picard smiled as he walked over, introduced himself, and then let it be known that the waltz being performed had been played at their wedding. Within a moment he had his bride in his arms. And all was right with the world.

Beverly nestled her head next to Jean-Luc’s chin. “I do love you, Jean-Luc. Remember that.”

He indulgently smiled. Then there was a tap on his shoulder. He turned his head and gave the intruder his best annoyed captainly stare. Didn’t work though, because it was Geordi standing there with Leah. Sighing, he switched partners, instinctively knowing that Leah understood every nuance about the exchange.

They danced. Picard silently admired the lady in her gold evening gown, then offered her a polite compliment.

She ignored it. “Do you know how much courage that took for Geordi to switch partners?”
He eyed Leah, trying to figure out what it was that had upset Geordi’s wife. “Please don’t tell me that Will made a bet with Geordi.”

“No, I did.”

They moved about the floor. He noted that she was a very good dancer which surprised him since most hard core scientists were not known for their dancing abilities. “Why?” he finally asked.

“It’s time that Geordi got over his hero worship of you, and got to know you better as a human being. Geordi’s your friend, Jean-Luc. Are you his?” Her words bore no hint of accusation, but he felt her disapproval quite strongly. What was worse, he knew that Leah Brahms LaForge was absolutely right.

He had gotten complacent, always assuming that Geordi would treat him as he always had. Jean-Luc had automatically assumed that he would be forever Geordi’s captain - and admiral - with the deference and respect to rank to which he’d become accustomed. But it wasn’t an equal relationship. Geordi was also his friend. Just like Will. And deserved far more than what Jean-Luc had previously proffered by way of friendship. It was time that he repaid the debt he owed Geordi. He could do it now. He no longer was a captain bearing a captain’s burden. He could actually be friends with his officers.

There had always been an innocence, a naivety and an optimism about Geordi, that never seemed to waver regardless of what he’d experienced. And Leah had assigned herself the role of protector of her husband in ways he really would never understand. Jean-Luc’s estimation of the lady rose greatly. Especially since she was right.

As the number ended, he led Leah back to Beverly and Geordi. He kissed Leah’s cheek, then whispered, “You were right to reproach me. Thank you.” Then he put his arm around his bride. “I was thinking…” He paused. Beverly did not disappoint. She did chuckle at thought of her husband thinking. “…Geordi and Leah, we’d like you to come for the wine festival. Come for a weekend at least. Or a week. It’s been quite a while since we have really had a chance to simply talk. I’ve been keeping up with both of your work in the journals, and I have quite a few questions for you…”

A flustered Geordi replied, “Sound like fun. That is if my Boss will let me take time off.”

Leah laughed. “We’d love to come. Did I ever tell you how I beat Will at poker?” Jean-Luc took the bait.

Geordi tried to stifle his grin. What Leah wasn’t mentioning was that she’d been Fleet poker champion for two years. She was setting Jean-Luc and Beverly up. And Geordi truly admired his wife’s deviousness. He adored the way she dealt with the universe.

They said their farewells and walked back to their rooms in spite of the early hour, his arm still about Leah’s waist. It was time for them to go to bed. Eventually they’d get some sleep.

In a dark corner of the Château Picard, Laren and Tom kissed. Ro had gone up to the nursery to breastfeed Gale. Tom had accompanied her. Afterwards, she just had to see what the Château looked like. So they went exploring. When they entered the library, Tom found the cellarette hidden inside of a free-standing inlaid wood terrestrial globe. He looked at the sterling labels on the ancient crystal bottles. “Laren, we have our choice of scotch, whiskey, brandy or port. Which would you prefer?” Tom picked up two cut crystal glasses. He whistled. “We get to drink it out of antique glasses too. How elitist is that?”
Ro was examining some of the bookshelves, reading the titles. Most were in French. She fingered an odd looking flute in a case. “I’ll take the brandy, Tom.”

Moments later they were seated on a tufted leather couch. “Should I light the fire?”

Ro sipped her Fine de la Marne brandy, then whispered, “No. It’s hot enough in here with you.” She pressed a brief kiss on his lips. Then she snuggled closer to her husband.

“What is it, Laren?”

She put down her glass and kissed Tom. Then she casually asked, “Remember our first night together when you slipped me a mickey?”

“Every detail, Laren.” Tom slipped his hand under the neckline of Ro’s ruby red evening gown. “I remember how I touched you.” He showed her.

“What was the mickey, Tom? What kind?”

“Something from Sirius.”

“That’s what I thought you’d said.” She slid onto her husband’s lap. “I finally got around to asking Mr. Data about Sirius mickeys in general.”

“And?”

“Did you know that some of them are love potions too?” She squirmed a little to encourage him as it were.

“Yes. I had heard. But those potions only last a couple of days.” He nuzzled her neck. “Not years.”

“You sure about that?”

“I didn’t need a drug to help me fall in love with you, Laren. The first time you shot me, I knew I was in deep trouble.” There was a fire gleaming in Tom’s eyes, as he felt her inquisitive fingers. “Here?”

“I’m sure were not the first to tryst in this room.”

“You’re insatiable, Laren.” He grinned. “Just my luck. Just my very, very good luck.”

She straddled him and lifted her skirt, undoing his slacks. A moment later, she guided her husband into her hot core. They kissed and loved.

Guinan quietly closed the library door. “Now that’s guramba,” she observed to herself.

A while later, as they were straightening up, Laren observed, “I almost feel sorry for Will. He’s got his captain’s chair. And not much more.”

“His choice, Laren. It’s one that I might have made too, if I had not met you. Thank the Prophets.”

The topic of their conversation was climbing the back stairs, up to the rooms converted into nurseries. After checking a few doors, Will found his son.

Even though there was a nursery maid, it was Will who changed the diaper. He was so rarely alone with his son, that there wasn’t anything that he would not do. He was still coochy-cooing when Guinan came over to him.
“Will.”

“Guinan.” He made a silly face at his son.

“There’s something I’d like to show you.” Guinan judged that he’d had a couple of drinks in him, since he’d willingly changed a diaper. He was very sociable tonight.

Will kissed his son goodnight and then ambled after Guinan. She walked down a long corridor then into her room. It was another suite, this time decorated in an eclectic mix of the Louis styles.

Guinan poured two snifters of the most expensive brandy in the Picard cellars. It was a Fine de la Marne champagne brandy. She handed one to Will. “To Jean-Luc Picard!”

He willingly toasted the man. Then really appreciated what he was drinking, savoring it for a long moment. He asked, with a bit of curiosity, “What did you want to show me?”

“Me.” Guinan dropped her golden robes then pushed him down on the rug by the fireplace, kissing him.

After the second time that they’d mated in front of the fire, Will gave up pretending that he was there under duress. Guinan was clearly offering doctoral courses in lovemaking, and he wasn’t about to refuse. Especially since the last time he’d made love had been to Deanna over a year ago. He’d never been a big fan of abstinence.

A while later, they managed to make it to the massive four-poster bleu de roi canopied bed.

Will thought that he knew a lot about the sensual arts. He quickly realized he was an amateur compared to Guinan. Though under Guinan’s tutelage, he was becoming a talented amateur.

“Well, Captain, how are you doing?”

Will gazed into her fathomless eyes. “Care to tell me what this is about other than heart pounding, very pleasurable exercise? Jean-Luc mentioned that I’d be inheriting…” His voice trailed off as realization dawned. “You’re Jean-Luc’s lover!”

“I was when we needed each other. I’ve always been a counselor to the Enterprise captains. But I’ve only been lover to one, Jean-Luc.” She rose and stared at him, licking her lips. “And now you.”

“Why?”

Exasperated, she glared at him. “Do you think you’ll still be able to pick and choose amongst the Happy Bottom Riker Fan Club, when you’re captain of the Enterprise? Unless Deanna changes her mind about really making you her husband Number Two, I’m the only option that you’ll have for meaningless magnificent sex.” She leaned over, offered her breasts, and waited to see if he’d kiss her anywhere. He did.

“Is this what you really want?” Will had concerns that somehow this arrangement was not quite all her doing.

“Oh yes. Let’s just say that Jean-Luc liked to have a lot of meaningful philosophical conversations.” As Riker positioned her on top of him waiting for her to slide down his pole, she added, “I’ve been looking forward to less talk and more action.”

Will created a new lady killer grin just for Guinan. Then he thought about her words. He stopped thrusting. “Are you saying that you had Jean-Luc for his mind, but wanted me for my body?”
Guinan did something that caused him to moan. “Are you complaining?” Her voice was nonchalant. The internal contractions of her muscles indicated otherwise.

“No,” he gasped, as he was quickly losing control - again. She bit a part of his body that had heretofore never been nipped during sex before. He spasmed.

“Will,” she ordered, “Recite the periodic table. It’ll keep you harder longer.”

He was no longer sure that staying aroused was such a good thing at this point, but he did try.

“Good. You’re learning,” Guinan stated with satisfaction. Guinan was thoroughly enjoying herself. After a few more minutes of rousing and arousing rumpy pumpy, she permitted him to come, not showing Will her own satisfaction. She’d always keep Will guessing. It would do wonders in shaking up Will’s sexual ego.

Then she slid off of him, wiped herself off, and slipped her robes back on. She just stood there and stared at him. And waited.

“For your information, I haven’t had sex with anyone since Deanna and Worf were married.”

“I know.” She still waited for him to get out of bed.

Wondering how the hell she could know, eventually he gave up, crawled out of her bed, and picked up his clothes, walking with as much dignity as he could muster into the bathroom. A few minutes later he emerged, completely dressed in formal civilian attire.

She casually commented, “For future reference, and if there isn’t a red alert claxon going off somewhere, after we enjoy this kind of vigorous physical exercise, I’d prefer to take a shower with you.” She saw him gulp. “One more thing.”

“What?” It sounded like a croak.

She walked over to him and kissed him softly, with great fervor. And humor. She whispered, “Will Riker, I surprised you tonight, didn’t I?” He nodded. She kissed him again, more as an offer of comfort rather than passion. Then she warned, “You’ve grown complacent, Will. The captain of the Enterprise must never be complacent. I’ve a lot to teach you.” And then she grinned her best mysterious grin, taking a page out of his playbook. “Will, I began instructing Jean-Luc while he was captain of the Stargazer. He needed every lesson I could teach him in order to help him cope with the enormity of what was coming when he was in the big chair. You won’t need as many lessons as Picard.”

He studied her, watching her fix her flopping chapeau which had fallen on the floor by the fireplace. And he understood his first lesson. “Thank you, Guinan.” He pointedly looked at the bed. “I’m looking forward to our next lesson.” Then he tried to top her grin. “I’ll never take you, or the universe, for granted again.”

“That’s how you stay alive, my Grizzly Bear.”

He grimaced and knew that if he said anything about the nickname, she was perfectly capable of bestowing something even more awful on him. His eyes widened. “I don’t suppose you’d care to tell me what you called…”

“My lips are sealed, unless Jean-Luc really pisses me off tonight.”

“What?”
“Stick around Jean-Luc after the poker game to which you weren’t invited to join, is over.” She gave him a quick kiss. “Next time you will be invited.”

By the look in her eye, Will was suddenly glad that he wasn’t in Jean-Luc’s shoes tonight.

=W=

Worf was dancing a very slow dance with Deanna. He was aware of the fact that Gowron did not think that dancing with one’s wife, was an appropriate action for a Klingon officer. But the way Deanna felt in his arms, was worth every bit of the Klingon heckling he would receive.

And then things changed. Deanna moved closer to him, brushing herself against him with every step.

He looked down at her. It wasn’t his wife in his arms. Her seductive secretive smile told him it was his lover. On any other night this would not have been a problem. But she was trying to arouse him. The way she was brushing up against his genitals was not an accident. And then he realized the probable source of her arousal. Riker was having sex with someone. And Deanna was being aroused through her Imzadi.

He groaned. Worf would have groaned louder if he’d realized that Deanna still had a connection with Tom as well as Will…

Worf warily glanced over at Gowron, Kargan and his entourage. They no longer were just drinking. They had the alert look of warriors about them. They’d smelled Deanna’s scent - her pheromones. He had always welcomed this sexual perfume when he was alone with Deanna. But tonight, and with all the wine the Klingons had been drinking, it was akin to waving an honor challenge in front of them all. For if Worf did not satisfy his wife’s desire and soon, they all would fight for who would answer Deanna’s siren call, the Klingon way. Over his dead body.

“We leave,” he ordered. She didn’t mind, for clearly it was her intent to be alone with her husband. Data watched them leave the dance floor. He’d also noted the way Worf had been watching the other Klingons.

Worf didn’t know where to go. Gowron and his warriors were between them and the Château. He reached for his comm badge. And then remembered he’d left it on a bed stand in their suite.

Deanna seemed to understand her husband’s problems. “Rose garden,” she suggested.

Worf picked up his bride and ran towards the entrance to the elaborate gardens. But his senses told him there were other couples in the secluded corners of the gardens. Having sex was apparently the goal of many couples this late into the night. But then he remembered the maze. With his superior Klingon senses, he could navigate it with only the floating overhead candles and the stars to guide him.

He’d almost reached the heart of the maze when he heard the voices of Mela and Reg. And judging by their moaning, he knew exactly what they were doing.

And then he saw a dead end. It had a bench. Before Deanna knew what was happening, she found herself perched on the edge of the cold white Carrara marble bench. Worf tossed her dress aside, ripped off her Parisian lingerie, and then bit her breasts before licking her clitoris, feasting as if he were a Klingon gone mad. She climaxed several times, urging him on every time. And then he stood
and took her, roaring when he achieved his own pleasure.

She didn’t know what had gotten into her husband, though she suspected maybe he was feeling some of the arousal feedback from Will’s considerably long fornicating session. Whatever the cause, she was thrilled with the results. For now her husband had her legs about his waist as he pounded into her with a vigor she hadn’t felt in a long time. Ever since the birth of their son Ian, Worf had been treating her with kid gloves. He’d been so considerate. And now her wild warrior was back. She exalted in him. And oh how she had missed this passionate wild man side to him. She reached her ecstasy many times without him. And quite a few times with him. Their last loving was calmer, slower, and more precious to him than she knew. Deanna was his woman - his warrior woman.

When sanity returned, Worf was horrified as to how he’d let his Klingon nature dominate their matings. He was worried as to how badly he’d hurt Deanna. But the woman who cuddled him in her arms was not moaning in pain or complaining. She was sweetly kissing him. “Thank you, my warrior.”

When they were finally calm, he held her in his arms.

As for Reg and Mela, they were a little afraid to come around the corner considering what was going on by the tall, dense hedging next to theirs. After a while Reg got some inspiration too, much to Mela’s delight.

And when Deanna found her dress and straightened out her husband’s clothing, Mr. Data dared to approach them. “I watched your back,” was all he said. Then left.

Deanna didn’t understand. Worf did and would thank Data later. Worf eventually would tell Deanna why they’d had such a passionate tryst, but first he was going to corner Will Riker and physically impress upon the man his need to control his libido - especially around other Klingons drinking bloodwine.

Later on that night, Winston Holt Wiley started rounding up the admirals for the poker game.

Beverly didn’t mind Jean-Luc’s disappearance since she had many partners willing to dance with her. She’d been observing Jean-Luc all day. She’d never been happier. Or had a greater sense of well-being. Everything was all right for the first time in a long time.

Later on she went upstairs to feed her babies before they were put to sleep. As she quietly walked up the staircase, she heard someone singing. She paused at the door to her nursery. Tears welled in her eyes. Data was singing. He held her twins in his arms as he rocked:

“Twenty tiny fingers, twenty tiny toes,
Two angel faces, each with a turned up nose.
One looks like Mommy, with a little red curl on top
And the other one’s got, a big bald spot,
Exactly like his Pop. Pop, Pop, Pop,
Pop a-dop, Pop…” *

*(AUTHOR’S NOTE: I REALLY AM NOT MAKING THIS SONG UP.- IT IS LEGIT! DATA’S SONG IS “TWENTY TINY FINGERS” BY THE STARGAZERS,1952.)*
When he was finished, he looked over at Beverly.

“I hope you do not mind. I heard them crying.”

“I could never mind you, Data. Would you care to baby sit some time?” Beverly had learned a long time ago to corral every babysitter whenever she could…

“I would be honored.” He handed Beverly her twins, and then understood that Beverly was going to breast feed them. “May I stay?”

Because it was Data, she agreed. She handed him Will. Then she got a towel, and uncovered her breast to feed Deanna. Annie greedily started suckling. The look of awe on Data’s face touched her deeply. “You’ve never seen a mother nursing her child before?”

“Not like this, with emotions. I find myself strangely envious. And sad, that I will never have children of my own. Lal was the closest I ever came to having a child.”

“Data, you will always be a member of our family.”

“Thank you, Beverly.”

After a while, Beverly asked for Will and then gave him Annie. Data put her in her crib. When her daughter was contentedly sleeping, Beverly fed Billy Bob, put him to bed and joined Data in the hallway.

She kissed his cheek then asked, “Are you going back to the band, or would you care to dance with me?”

“I would love to dance, my dear Dancing Doctor. But I shall leave after the tango. I do not wish for Carrie to get too tired, so we are going to go home.”

There was something in the way that Data said home that caused Beverly to pause on the stairway. “Data, are you and Carrie lovers?”

“Yes. We have been for some time. At first, I had asked her to be my lover because I wished to learn how to make love properly. But once we became close friends, I find that I enjoy her company in all ways. I regret that it will end soon, once I become first officer.”

“Perhaps you could persuade Will to invite her…”

“Carrie does not like starship travel. The only reason she tolerated the Cairo was because of Nella. She has already declined Captain Riker’s invitation.”

Beverly patted his arm in sympathy. “She knows her limitations, Mr. Data.”

“Carrie has said that I will always have a home with her whenever I am on Earth.” And he could smile over that offer.

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The poker room was a side room off of the tasting rooms. All of the admirals were very pleased with the location and the accommodations. They were also determined to seriously deplete Picard’s
The players included Jellico and Wesley. And these admirals: Picard, Nechayev, Wiley, Nakamura, Haden, and Gregory. Winston Holt Wiley had also insisted upon Wesley joining them, for some reason. Of course, considering how quickly Wes had gone from disgraced cadet to Commander, none of the admirals questioned Wes’ right to be there.

Several hours later though, the final three players left were Wesley, Winston and Jean-Luc. The admirals and Edward watched, fascinated by the show down. Picard was privately wondering if Wesley should consider becoming a civilian for if he beat Winston, he would soon wish that he was a civilian.

It was Winnie’s turn to deal. Wesley politely requested to cut the deck. Someone gasped. Winston glared his anger at such gall before he let Wes cut the deck. The game was Texas Hold ’Em. They each held two cards. Picard folded. Wes went all in. Wes had the slightly larger stack, so Winston was not a happy man as he matched the bet. Wes laid down a pair of Queens. Winnie had spades, an ace and a ten. As the cards were dealt the first two that were turned over were diamonds. But the next three were spades. Winston had won the hand and eliminated Wesley.

And Picard breathed a sigh of relief that his son hadn’t committed career suicide. As for Picard, the last hand was five card stud, nothing wild, and the sky’s the limit. He had a pair of threes. And lost to a straight. But he wasn’t upset. For he was very lucky in love.

Picard walked out into the night, followed by Wesley. The party had quieted down a bit after the children had gone to bed. The dancing was still going on strong.

Picard sat on a low stone bench near the wall that surrounded part of the ancient garden, taking in the sights and the sounds of the party, and the scent of the roses. It was near to heaven. He’d brought half a bottle of cabernet, and was planning on drinking it.

Wesley joined him. “I didn’t cheat, Admiral.”

“Not even to lose?”

“No, Father.” Wesley always sound stiff and formal when he called him Father.

Picard winced. “Are you now ready to talk to me? Or are you going to still keep avoiding the conversation?”

“What do you want me to say?”

“You’re heir to all this, Wesley. The Picard family has always followed the antiquated law of primogeniture. You’re not obligated to accept, but it is something that you should consider.” He offered the bottle to Wes. Wes drank a bit then returned it.

“You didn’t.”

“I had the stars in my blood, Wes.”

“I do too.”

“Yes, I know that. But there may come a time when you’d wish for something different, for a few decades. I find a peace here, that is unexpected but welcome. The Picard family ancestry can be traced back to the 16th century. And when the Reign of Terror began, the people of LaBarre protected the Picards. They never turned over any Picard to the guillotine. There are few other
“Sir, please don’t take this the wrong way, but I am not going to publicly declare that Jack Crusher is not my father. I won’t do that to his memory.”

“I understand, Wesley. And I will respect your wishes.” He looked toward the vineyard. “If you ever decide that you do wish the vineyard, I will make arrangements in my will - as an inheritance to my step-son. Will you accept that at least?”

“I’d rather have the Galen…”

Picard laughed. “I suppose I can let you borrow it now and then. But you’ll have to bring her back in one piece. No dents. Let Robin pilot her.” For a while they stood there just looking at the party. “I am pleased that we all could get together. Probably for the last time like this.” Father and son were of one mind then.

Jean-Luc decided to broach the matter that was the barrier between them. “Your Mother and I did not plan what happened, Wesley. We certainly didn’t know, thanks to Q. And at the time if I had retained my memories, I probably would have told Jack the truth of my feelings for your mother. We did fall irrevocably in love. You were the result of that love. And that is not something for which I am ever going to apologize.”

“I never asked you to do so, Father. I only have vague memories of Dad. And the tape that he made. What I truly resent is that I never had a real father growing up.”

“I tried to do the best I could when you were on the Enterprise, Wes.”

“I know that, Sir. But you were my pretend father - not my real father. And I resent all the time that we lost. All the family that I never knew.” He looked about the courtyard. “I would have loved to have known my Uncle Robert and Rene. Other than Nana, Mother had no other relatives. I was a lonely child thinking that Mother was the only family that I had. It wasn’t until I joined the Enterprise, that I ever even had some true friends. I always felt isolated as a child.”

“I regret the lost time, too, Wesley. Son. It’s been difficult. I literally became your father and a grandfather almost at the same time. And there were times, especially considering everything else, when I was very overwhelmed by the events of our lives.”

Wes paused, as if he needed to say something more. “I’ve been thinking about what you said, Father.”

“You have?”

“I have a few conditions.”

“Which are?” Jean-Luc couldn’t quite pinpoint Wesley’s attitude at the moment.

“‘I will never call you Dad. That was and always will be Jack Crusher to me.”

‘I have no wish to be called anything but Father every now and then.’

“We cannot, or rather should not change the past.” “But there is always the future, Wesley.”

Wesley sat next to his father. “And then what?”

“I can only love you, Wesley. And try to guide you if you ask for my help.”
“Perhaps I can guide you.”

Picard considered this point and accepted it.

Wes sort of laughed. “Maybe warn is the better choice of words. You know that of all the babies that were born, my brother and sister - Deanna and Will - are going to be Q. Guinan and I felt their power even when they were in the womb. If you think you had a difficult time with me as a know-it-all kid, wait till you have to deal with two Qs in their terrible twos. That’s the real reason I’ll be joining the Enterprise E when she is launched. To take care of them, protect them and protect you.”

“And Gale?”

“Gale has some powers too, but no where near equal to Deanna and Will.”

“Oh.” Picard considered all these new possibilities. “Does my grandson have…?”

“Yes, Jack is Q as well. Possibly the strongest of all the children. As his father, I wonder if I’ll have any hair three years from now.”

“Odds are you won’t,” Picard teased. They sat in companionable silence for a while.

“Father, I was sort of wondering. Could I ask you a question?” Picard nodded. “I sort of heard about what happened with Mom and Ronin. The official report was uninformative. Could you tell me what really happened?”

“Wesley, I want to live long enough to reach my second wedding anniversary. If you’re Mother found out that I’d told you about Ronin, I would probably end up divorced - if I were lucky enough to survive.” They laughed together. Both were wise enough to fear Beverly on the war path.

“You should know - Will heard about the round up.”

“I do owe him an explanation as to why he wasn’t invited,” Picard agreed. “Though he may wonder why you were invited.”

Wes grinned. “Do you know why Admiral Wiley wanted me at the game?”

“No, I don’t.”

“When I took the Academy entrance exam the first time, Admiral Wiley was at the tests, and then he was playing poker in the lounge. So I sat and watched the game. I started nodding or shaking my head when I saw him do the correct play. He finally got so irritated with me, that he said that if I could do better, I should join the game. I only had 5 credits worth of latinum with me. A couple of hours later, I had wiped out the table, including Wiley. I must admit at the time, I didn’t realize the kind of powers that I had. I may have inadvertently used those powers to influence the outcome of those games.”

“I’m amazed that you ever got into the Academy.”

“Actually, the second time around, I think Wiley arranged it. He wanted to keep an eye on me.”

Jean-Luc chuckled. “When will you join the Enterprise?”

“I haven’t told Robin yet, but I’ll be on board her when she’s christened. Reg is going to hold down the fort at UP. Captain Riker already knows.”

“Then we’ll have time to talk when I baby sit.”
“You’re trying to rope me into doing double baby sitting duty, aren’t you, Father?”

Picard grinned. “A father’s prerogative.”

They both heard footsteps approach.

Wesley stood. “I’ll see you later, Father.” Wesley didn’t sound quite so stiff now when he said the word.

Woody Nakamura approached. After Wesley left, Woody commented, “He’s a good man, your step-son. Jean-Luc. You wouldn’t believe all the stories that I’ve heard about him lately. Any of it true? Or wild gossip?”

“Wesley is somewhat unique. He will always use his special talents for Starfleet and the Federation.”

Woody accepted the Jean-Luc’s non-answer. “He’s Jack’s son, Johnny. Couldn’t do anything else. So how do you like being an admiral?”

“I’d rather be a starship captain.”

“Wouldn’t we all. If you thought that they gossiped about you before, just save the universe again and see how much everyone speculates about you now.”

“I have no doubt that my life has been source of much conjecture over the past year.”

“Well, you are a wellspring of juicy gossip.”

“Doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

“But you’d have done it all over again, wouldn’t you, Jean-Luc. You also won the heart of the fair maid.”

“Only trouble is, Woody, I still don’t remember what happened on Clarion.”

“Well maybe it will all come back to you.”

“I hope so…” Picard changed the conversation. “There’s going to be another poker game tomorrow night. A free-for-all. Care to come?”

“Will Captain Riker be there?”

“He’d better be.”

“Then I’d be glad to help you fleece him.”

Woody left and Guinan showed up.

“Nice party, Jean-Luc.” She looked into the night.

“Thank you.” He paused, sensing something. “For everything that you did too.”

She handed him an open full bottle of wine. “You’re going to need this in a few minutes.” Picard knew better than to ask why. He poured some of the cabernet into his glass. “I can’t answer your questions, Jean-Luc.”

“I haven’t asked anything yet.”
“You could say that I’m now the official governess for all of my cousins.”

“Meaning what, Guinan?”

“I’m only here to guide, Jean-Luc.”

“I can accept that.”

“The children will have stubborn minds of their own.”

“I do not doubt it - considering their parents.”

“You’re going to enjoy the next part of your life, Jean-Luc. In fact I predict that one day you’ll be better known as an ambassador than you will as a captain.”

“I hope not.”

Guinan flashed him an ageless grin. “You’ll never get everything that you want, mon amour, but you’ve finally learned to enjoy what you do have. You’ve matured into an exceptional man.” Much to his surprise, she kissed him on the lips. It had been quite a while since Guinan had kissed him with any sense of passion. “I regret that some things have to end.”

He kissed her with a sense of finality. “Thank you.“

Guinan’s smile turned wicked. “Now, it’s Riker’s turn to start inventing new curse words to describe me. He’s already had his first lesson.” Guinan disappeared.

Jean-Luc was still chuckling when Will showed up. “Beverly is looking for you,” he too-cheerfully stated.

Picard knew his Number One too well. “I lost tonight. So did Wes. Winston won.”

“Pity I missed the game. I thought I’d already been invited to join by Woody.”

“Now was not the time. I couldn’t invite you, Will. I’d already invited Edward Jellico…”

“I see.”

‘No, I don’t quite think you do, Will. Technically, you’re a captain without a ship. You need to be seated in the Enterprise’s big chair, before you can actually join in the Admiral’s round up.”

“I see.” Will relaxed. He hadn’t offended Jean-Luc which had been his chief concern.

“And Edward deserved the invite, more than you, Will. He’s waited decades for that invitation. I believe I know why the invitation wasn’t issued sooner for Jellico. I think that most of the admirals didn’t think that he had the imagination necessary to join the round-up. It’s only been recently that his abilities have really been allowed to shine. We all owe him.”

“Yes, we do.“ Will struggled to find the right words. “I’ve just been feeling the odd man out, lately.”

“I know the feeling, Will. I had it for too many decades.” He glanced at his friend. “Are you willing to take some advice from an old friend?”

“Of course, Jean-Luc.”

“I never understood what was really missing in my life until the Kataanian incident. It was as real to
me as my talking to you is now. I loved a wife, Eline, a daughter, Mirabor, and a son, Batai. I treasured that life. When it ended, I was disconsolate. I also discovered that being the captain of the Enterprise was no longer enough for me. Whether I acknowledged it or not, ever since Eline, I was searching for that sense of completion again. Regrettably, I'd denied my feelings for Beverly so many times before, that I truly had to labor to prove to her that I was changing. We complete each other, Will. A captain needs a life that will make him a better man.”

“I know that, Jean-Luc.”

“I’m not going to pry into what is going on with you and Deanna and Worf. But I do know you love Deanna. A three-party marriage would not hurt your career.”

“That’s been discussed.”

Suddenly Picard was serious. “Be very careful, Will. Your walking a very narrow tightrope between the personal and the professional with your situation.”

“Speaking of walking a tight rope…”

Jean-Luc mentally sighed. Will was not willing to discuss it. He supposed he’d been like Will too, a long time ago. “Find someone to love, Will. If it’s not Deanna, then someone else.”

Will nodded. “Jean-Luc, Beverly was wondering when you were coming back to dance with her. She said something about a Piazzola Tango.”

Picard groaned. “Not in front of all these people.” He mentally cursed the day that Beverly had talked him into taking private dance lessons with her. She’d called it exercise. He now knew that she’d had ulterior motives.

“Jean-Luc, look at it this way. Most of the guests are drinking too much of your fine wine to even notice if you trip over Beverly’s feet.”

“But you know our Mr. Barclay. There’ll be vids.”

Will warily eyed Jean-Luc. “About Guinan…”

Picard chuckled. “Enjoy the lady. She does not grant her favors or her friendship easily. I always follow her advice. And I learned not to try to keep track of her. She will come and go as she pleases. And never ask your computer where her quarters are. How she gets around those protocols is something I chose never to investigate. Life will be much easier that way.”

“But will I survive her?”

“I did, and look at what happened to me.”

Will laughed.

Another person appeared in the darkness. Will quickly left Jean-Luc alone with Alynna Nechayev.

“Comte de Holl,” she stated, as she held out her empty wine glass. Jean-Luc poured some from his new bottle. “Holding court in the rose garden, Jean-Luc?”

“It seems that way. He motioned for her to sit next to him. “Alynna, I am glad that you could come.”

“You’re very forgetful, Jean-Luc.”
“How so?” He was mystified.

“There’s a lot that you seem to forget to mention in your reports, Jean-Luc. You inherited a title. Wesley Crusher is Q. Little things like that. Plus you did promise to be my starship captain.”

He decided to drink some of his own wine before he spoke. “I did not wish to inherit that title. Now, it’s only use to me is to perhaps impress some diplomat. You’ve known about the Q for quite a while now.” He privately thought: Before me, I think. “Commander Crusher is a Starfleet officer. He will always do his duty. Any so-called powers he may have, will theoretically be used for Starfleet’s benefit. And as for my being your starship captain,” he took another sip of wine, “Fate chose otherwise much to my deep personal regret.”

“You shouldn’t have thought up your damn scheme to bring peace to the DMZ, damn you.” She drank her wine, then took his bottle and poured herself some more. “And as for having a Q as a stepson, well as long as it doesn’t interfere with my plans, it’s your business. Do we understand each other, Jean-Luc?”

“Of course, Alynna.” There was silence for a moment. “Alynna, I just want to thank you for trusting me. For supporting me.”

“Thank Lwaxana.”

Now that surprised Jean-Luc. “Meaning?”

“Lwaxana and I have been friends for more than forty years. She has a unique way of discerning the true nature of people. Whenever she gives someone her trust, then I trust that person too. She is especially fond of you.” Alynna poured herself another glass. “Aren’t you going to ask what Lwaxana did?” Jean-Luc gulped. Alynna grinned as if her muscles weren’t used to such a movement. “Lwaxana wasn’t just a husband-hunting Betazed, Jean-Luc. It was also a test. It was how the men that she targeted treated her that told her what kind of men they really were. It’s the small things that reveal true character. If they were kind, able to survive the extreme situations that she always created, with aplomb and diplomacy, then she’d tell me who they were. If they didn’t, then their careers were doomed.”

“I see.”

“Jean-Luc, there will always be smiling, ambitious sycophants crowding around admirals. Lwaxana helped me discern those who would put duty ahead of themselves, and those whose ambitions superseded everything else.”

“You mean her tormenting…”

Alynna laughed. “I don’t think that the Ambassador would call it that. You didn’t just pass the test, you know. You passed with flying colors and then some.” She finished off her wine. “Do you remember meeting her after the loss of the Stargazer?”

“It was at the Rigelian embassy?”

“Something like that. She cornered you. You danced with her. You escorted her back to her suite, after you thought she might have had too much to drink. You were the perfect gentleman - kind, considerate, and tried to help her in spite of your annoyance with her. In short, you were you.” Alynna finished off what was left of the wine in Jean-Luc’s bottle. “And that is why I, in my own way, advocated for you to become captain of the Enterprise D. I didn’t particularly like you back then, but Lwaxana did. So I’ve put up with all of your nonsense ever since. Including your going
rogue to accomplish the Picard treaty.” Picard took umbrage. “Stow it, Jean-Luc. By the way, I think that you are going to be an even greater diplomat than you ever were a Starfleet captain.” She saw that her words had stunned him. “The Federation needs you more as a diplomat than as an officer, Jean-Luc. I know that you will do your duty.” She stood and walked a step away, then turned to looks at Picard. “By the way, you’re an official member of the Kirk Cabal. You’ll find out more when I choose to tell it. Beverly is still waiting for you to dance with her.”

And then Picard heard more footsteps coming toward him. He finished off his glass and idly wondered if he could grab another bottle. He’d been hoping for a peaceful end to the evening. So far, he’d had no luck.

Beverly and Laren stepped into the light arc cast by garden lamp posts. He choked when he realized what had been niggling at him all evening. Laren’s dress was a reverse image of Beverly’s dress. Beverly was wearing a black silk glittering tight gown flaring at the knees with a ruby red fishtail underskirt. Laren’s was the reverse - a red silk glittering gown with a black underskirt. He heard a maniacal chuckle. It took only a glance to confirm that Guinan was on the portico watching him. She was holding Will’s arm. And Picard thought that he glimpsed Q sitting on the roof.

Suddenly his wine glass was full. Hoping that it was Q and not Guinan that had given him this beneficence, he did not savor the fine burgundy. Instead he gulped more than half of it down by the time that both ladies had reached him.

“Laren.” He hopefully smiled at his wife. “Beverly.” There was another glint added to Beverly’s eye as he suddenly realized that he’d said Laren’s name first. “What can I do for you?” He watched a crowd gathering on the other side of the low garden wall.

He saw Deanna in the background. Her face told him there was no conciliator there. Worf muttered something in Klingon. Picard translated it into something about his going to Stovokor… Soon.

“.Shall we dance?” they both said in unison.

Judging by the inflection that both ladies gave to the word dance, he suspected that Laren knew his secret lover’s meaning of the word dance too.

Beverly took his goblet out of his hand, finished it off, then tossed it over the wall. Q obliged his host by causing the shards to disappear the moment the goblet hit the flagstone.

Picard escorted both ladies. Whatever they were planning, he’d have to grin and bear it. As if he were a prize bullock being led to the slaughter, the ladies guided him along the gardens until they reached the inset dance floor. He paled. And started sweating.

“You know the steps,” Beverly informed him, as she nodded to Mr. Data.

Spotlights hit the dance floor. Piazzolla’s Oblivon began. And Picard knew there was only one thing he could do. He had to dance the tango. And if he stepped upon a lady’s toe, well so be it. He started dancing with Beverly. And after a minute, Laren tapped Beverly’s shoulder and cut in. Another minute later, it was Beverly’s turn to cut in. In short, they were sharing him. He danced as if his life depended upon it. And as he changed partners, he comprehended Beverly’s intent. “You thought this up?” he whispered into Beverly’s ear as she pivoted and kicked about his body to the tango.

“We both did,” she muttered through clenched teeth.

He tried to contain the mirth that was threatening to bubble up. Beverly had planned her revenge
well. She’d picked one of the most difficult dances to do. She knew how much he just loved to
dance in public. And Laren and Beverly had tackled head on all the exaggerated rumors that had
been swirling about the three of them ever since the treaty had been signed over a year ago.

There was only one thing he could do now. He heard the cues coming for the last dance pattern of
the tango. He didn’t let go of Ro as he should have if he’d been following Beverly’s choreography.
Instead, he twizzled Ro about then caught her in his arms, and kissed her on her forehead. He
released her. He grabbed Beverly about the waist, twirled her for a moment, then dropped her into a
deep dip, passionately kissing her in a clinch. In front of everyone. He’d made his public declaration,
again. Then he pulled her upright keeping her by his side. He caught Ro’s hand as well. Somehow
he’d managed to stay in rhythm too. Until he tripped over his own two feet. He landed on his ass.

Everyone just stood there watching as the music faded away. And then his laughter erupted. So hard,
so loud, so unrestrained, that he had to catch his breath. Somehow both women found themselves
laughing too. Tom rushed onto the floor, grabbed his wife about the waist, twirled her, kissed her
hard and then extended his hand to help Jean-Luc stand up. But Picard was still laughing too hard.
So was Beverly. Picard grabbed Beverly’s hand and kissed it. She saw understanding in his eyes. He
saw forgiveness in hers.

Tom joined in. Then Will and Deanna. Worf roared. Then Worf walked over and simply picked
Picard up. Data thrust a goblet of bloodwine in Picard’s hand. Gowron sang bawdy songs in
Klingon, and soon they were all laughing, drinking and having a grand old time.

And any speculation about the nature of Jean-Luc Picard’s relationship with the Maquis Ambassador
was put to rest. The Picard triangle amoureux rumors finally were forgotten at the Admiralty.

“And there goes the dignity of the Starfleet Admiralty,” Woody Nakamura remarked as his guided
the woman he adored into the maze. He kissed her.

“Couldn’t be in better hands,” Marie agreed.

Hours later, Jean-Luc helped Beverly climb the stairs to their bedroom. She was in a decidedly
giggly mood. To speed things along, he carried her. Beverly decided that her husband was being
very romantic.

Towards dawn he awoke, slipped out of Beverly’s arms, donned a robe and went down to the
kitchen for some tea. He stepped into the shadows when he heard Marie’s voice. She was coming in
through the portico. What surprised him was the man who with her. They went up the back stairs.
And then Jean-Luc smiled. He was rather pleased. Plus it was something that he could casually
mention to Woody during the next poker game.

There was a reason as to why the admirals referred to their round-up games as ‘cut throat’.

He was about to return upstairs when he heard the unmistakable sound of heavy boots on the portico.
He stepped outside.

Chancellor Gowron, Captain Kargan and the entire Klingon escort stood in front of him, at attention.

Gowron stepped up to Picard.

“We - I - have dishonored your house, Admiral. We will accept your final judgment and
punishment.”

By the very lack of emotion to Gowron’s voice, Picard stiffened. It was serious. “What happened?”
“We insulted one of your officers. Threatened his wife. It should not have happened.”

“Was anyone injured?”

“No. But we behaved with dishonor.”

“Have you apologized to my officer? And his wife?” He knew it had to be Worf and Deanna, but for the life of him, Picard couldn’t figure out what had happened.

From the shadows, Worf and Data stepped up.

Worf stared at Gowron, saying nothing. Something changed between them. Gowron had the unsettling feeling that though Worf had accepted his apology, Worf would never respect him the same way again.

Data spoke. “The matter has been settled, Admiral. There will be two new Klingon cadets at Starfleet Academy at the start of the next term. Is that acceptable, Admiral Picard?”

“Yes.” He stared at Gowron. “When next I come to Qo'noS there will be no need to discuss this further.”

“Honor is satisfied.” That was all that Worf said.

All the Klingons saluted them and beamed away.

Picard relaxed and picked up his cold cup of tea. “Mr. Worf, the next time you involve me in a diplomatic incident which you then settle without my guidance, I would prefer not to be in my night clothes when it occurs.” He took a sip. “I am assuming that Deanna is all right since I haven’t noticed any blood. Or bodies.”

“My wife is fine.”

“And you?”

“No.” Worf did not care to elaborate.

Picard accepted this. He recognized an implacable Klingon when one spoke. “I want your full report by the end of the day. Whether or not I choose to forward it to the Admiralty will be my decision - not yours.”

Worf knew he was dismissed. And walked away.

Jean-Luc looked at Data. “What happened?”

And Mr. Data explained.

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Nothing moved. Everyone and every thing was frozen in time - even the dust motes. Carefully Wesley walked the corridors of the USS Stargazer, searching for his Dad. He paused at the bridge, wondering if Picard’s Number One would be there. His Dad wasn’t.
But an alien looking Jean-Luc Picard sat in his captain's chair, with hair. Wes stared at the motionless figure, and noticed that this Picard seemed far more relaxed than the Picard he knew from the Enterprise. For Jean-Luc seemed to be laughing heartily.

The year was 2354, and it was the day that Jack Crusher was going to die in an explosion.

The Q had always warned Wes of going back into his own personal past, but Wesley had some questions that he needed to have answered. Wes thought that he was finally mature enough to ask the questions, and accept the answers. So he donned his Lieutenant Commander’s uniform, and went to find his Dad.

He found his Dad in his quarters. It was before the Nensi anomaly phenomenon crippled the Stargazer causing an energy buildup in a nacelle. Commander Jack Crusher and Lieutenant Peter Joseph would volunteer to go out of the ship and cut the damaged nacelle off before the ship blew up.

Wesley stared at his Dad for quite a while, memorizing every detail down to even where Jack kept the holographic pictures of his Mother and himself.

Finally, Wesley blinked, and the breathing Jack found himself a step out of time, with a stranger who seemed oddly familiar.

“What the f…” was the first thing out of Jack’s mouth. “Who the hell are you?”

“I am Wesley.”

Jack muttered to himself, “I know I didn’t have that much scotch after my shift last night….”

“I am a time traveler.”

“You’re a time traveler wearing some sort of Starfleet uniform?” Wes stood still as his Dad inspected him. “A Lieutenant Commander time traveler?”

“I am Wesley Crusher.”

Jack snorted in disbelief. “Did Jean-Luc put you up to this? He always told me to watch my back after what I did to him during our last shore leave together.”

“In a way, he did.” Wesley smiled.

And for the first time, Jack saw something in this man. Something in his eyes that reminded him of Beverly. To be sure, he went to the door to his quarters.

Wesley waved a hand and it opened. Jack looked up and down the corridor and saw everyone in it frozen in time, including an ensign jogging down the corridor. The jogger was stopped in mid-step with neither foot touching the deck. Now Jack was becoming a little bit afraid of this being.

“What are you?”

“I was born with the capability of manipulating temporal planes. I cannot elucidate. It will be years into the future before my abilities will be explained. There is something I wish to ask you about… Daddy.”

It was the way Wesley said ‘Daddy’ that convinced him. “Wes!” And he opened his arms.

Wes stepped into them. For a long time neither spoke as they hugged. Then Jack’s brain began to
think again. “If you had to come back into the past to speak to me, that means I am dead in your future, aren’t I?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“Soon.”

“That means I never saw you as a five year old again. Correct?”

“Yes.”

“Never to kiss Beverly again…” His voice trailed off. Suddenly he began to realize his sorrow. Jack’s voice broke as he asked, “How is your Mother? Is she well? And you?” He touched Wesley’s collar. “You followed in my footsteps.” His heart was proud.

“Mother grieved for a long time, Dad. Then she accepted the position of CMO of the USS Enterprise D.” “Great. CMO of a galaxy class starship. That was always her goal. And you?”

“I was fourteen at the time when Mom became CMO. We lived on board the Enterprise for almost eight years. I grew up on board ship until I left for the Academy. Then I quit the Academy to explore the possibilities of my skills. And when I returned, I helped design a new starship drive. And here I am.”

“Who was your captain?”

“Who else? Jean-Luc Picard was captain of the Enterprise.”

Jean-Luc? Captain of the Starship Enterprise? He achieved his goal too. Good for Johnny boy…”

Jack sat back on his bed. “Was? Is he…”?

“An admiral.”

“Johnny away from a starship.” He chuckled at the thought. Then Jack opened a drawer in the bed stand. He got a bottle of scotch. “May I pour my son a drink?”

Wes picked up the glass on the nightstand.

His Dad complied. Then tapped the bottle against the glass in Wes’ hand. “To life! And your future!”

“To my Mother!”

“The great love of my life!” He toasted her. And then he sadly asked, “Does she still remember me?”

“She’s telling her grandson all about you already.”

“Why did you come? Is it because of your Mother and Jean-Luc? When did they marry?”

“How do you know they married?”

“I knew Jean-Luc was in love with Beverly, Wes. It changed him. Oh, he never said anything to me. And he certainly never did anything about it or even tried to do anything about it. He’s the most honorable man I know.”
“He still is, Dad.”

“That’s Johnny. He would always be constant to his true love. I always knew that if anything should happen to me, he’d be there for you and your Mother.” Jack took a swig from the bottle. “I also knew that Beverly loved him too. She never said anything. But sometimes she’d look at him so puzzled. As if she couldn’t admit to herself that the human heart can love more than one person at a time.”

“Yes, they both did love you. And each other.”

“We were all such good friends. I am happy for them.” He sighed. “I’m glad they’re together.”

“They’ve been married only a year.”

“What? What took them so long?”

“Grief. Guilt. Jean-Luc had to order you to your death, Dad. It broke his heart. He’s never quite forgiven himself.”

“I didn’t want that for Johnny. If he could of died in my place I know he would have.”

“Yes.”

“And your Mother blamed him?”

“No. But being that Mother and Jean-Luc are two of the stubbornest people in any universe they had a lot to straighten out.”

“No, that’s all Jean-Luc’s doing. He’s a master traveler at going on guilt trips.” Jack took another swig of his scotch. “I tried to tell him once that if anything should happen to me, then he was free to love Beverly.”

“I tried to tell him that too when I was fourteen. I knew he loved my Mother.”

“So then what did Jean-Luc do?”

“He made me an acting ensign. I became one of the Enterprise’s bridge crew. I even got a field promotion to full ensign. On my first day at the academy, I showed up in my duty uniform. Problem is, they couldn’t give me hell for it, since it was my regulation uniform. I was an ensign and a cadet. Woody Nakamura then talked me into resigning my commission to become just a cadet.”

“Woody, eh? I’d love to hear more.”

“I’d like to talk. But I can’t stay much longer.”

He worked up the courage to ask, “How do I die?”

“Bravely. Captain Picard had to save his ship - or save you. I think that this choice broke his heart.”

“So what’s so important that you had to come here to see me?”

“I needed to know about you. To see you.” Wesley sat next to him on the bed. “Mother had twins. A boy and a girl.” He held his Dad’s hand. “And I am married to the woman I love, Robin. We have a son named Jean Jackson. Robin and I call him Jack.”

“I live on then, in you. That’s a kind of immortality.”
“And I still love baseball.”

Jack said nothing for a while. “What are you really, Wesley Robert Crusher?”

“Some would call what I am an angel. A guardian angel. The scientists would argue that I am an evolutionary leap for humankind. I just wanted to be reminded that I was your son.” Wes stood. “My strength is ebbing. I have to go. But know this, there isn’t a day that goes by that we don’t miss you.”

“A man can’t ask for more than that. To be loved. To be proud of his family. And to know that he did make a difference. It’s not a bad legacy.”

Wes reached into his pocket and showed a holographic image of the future. Tears rolled down Jack’s face as he gazed upon the future. “Tell your Mother that I will always love her. And I love you.”

He hugged his son, grateful that at least he knew that those he loved would have a good future.

“I love you Dad, and I will teach your grandson what you taught me. Goodbye, Dad.” And Wesley cried.

Jack faced the future now.

And Wesley wasn’t angry any more…

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“Where did you go, Wes?” Robin sat up in the bed that they always shared together when staying at Château Picard. It was a beautiful room with many fine Louis XIV antiques upholstered in blue and ivory toile.

“I wasn’t gone that long.” He quickly undressed.

“In this time period you weren’t gone that long. But the place where you went?” She always knew too much.

He slid under the antique coverlet, naked. “I went to say goodbye to my Dad.”

“Wes…”

“Dad knew about Jean-Luc loving Mom.”

“How did that make you feel?”

“Oddly glad. Dad accepted Jean-Luc’s marriage to my mother. He was pleased that they did wed.”

“So who are you to begrudge them?”

“I know. I should be happy but I still feel some resentment. I’m not even sure as to why.”

“How about the obvious, Wes?”

“Which is…” Wes tried to distract his wife. He knew where to caress.

She smiled, encouraged his stroking, and still stated, “You were the only man in your mother’s life
for so many years. Now you’re not. Add to that a little sibling resentment…”

He silenced her the best way he knew how.

And then Jack started crying.

“Hold that thought,” she commanded as she slid out of bed and found her robe. “I’ll be back soon.”

Wesley could only smile in anticipation.

Just after dawn, Wes went looking for his Father, and found him currying his white Arabian mare, Ardra.

“Care to join me for a ride, Wes?” There was a glint of a challenge in his father’s eye.

A few minutes later they were trotting towards a large pasture. Much to Jean-Luc’s surprise, Wes was almost as skilled an equestrian as he was. Wes was riding a bay Thoroughbred gelding, and clearly knew what he was doing.

And then Picard saw it. The grand oak tree in the middle of the pasture. He remembered many times climbing that tree, reading books in that tree and looking at stars in that tree. Picard grinned and nudged his horse. “Race you to the tree!” Wesley took off after him. Wes pulled up by the ancient oak tree just a few paces after his father. They laughed together.

“Not fair, Father! I wasn’t ready!”

“Whoever said that life had to be fair, Wes?”

“’You’ve got a point.” He was still laughing.

“Where did you learn to ride so well?”

“Nana taught me to ride when I was a kid. I’ve just kept it up ever since then.” Wes dismounted, appreciating the grandeur of such a huge oak tree.


“Deep dark secret time, Father. Mother doesn’t like horses. She knows the basics, but I’ve never seen her willingly ride.”

“Now that explains a lot.” Then he told Wes all about this tree and what it had meant to him as a boy.

Father and son watched the sun rise over land that the Picards had owned for hundreds of years.

It was an impressive fact.

After a long moment, Wes announced, “I talked with my Dad last night.”

Picard stilled. “You went back in time?”

“Yes. For a few minutes. I saw it all, Sir. First I talked with Dad, and then I watched the explosion.”

“How could you do that, Wesley?”

“Jean-Luc, when I first learned of my Dad’s death, I blamed you. As I grew up, I knew I was in
error. But I finally came to understand that I had to know for sure.”

“And you weren’t tempted to change history?”

(Of course I was tempted, Jean-Luc. But as a temporal agent, I’m sworn to protect the time line, and not destroy it. Besides, no one, not even the most skilled of the Q can predict everything that might happen if you do change the time line.” He smiled at his father. “I no longer harbor any doubt, Father. You didn’t kill my Dad. It was simply cruel fate.”

Jean-Luc expressed a quiet sigh of relief.

“Father, Dad knew that you’d loved Mother from the moment that you’d met. He approved of your marriage to my Mother, though he did criticize you for taking way too much time to marry her. He thought you should’ve married Mother within a year of his death.”

“I thought Beverly did blame me for Jack’s death. At the funeral she said something to me …”

“You should have come back sooner.”

“What did you just say about changing the time line, Wesley? But you are correct. I should have contacted your mother more often.”

“Speaking of changing things, I heard that Mr. Data is organizing a poker tournament tonight. So many people wanted to play that the best player from each table will be in a show down at the final table.”

“Yes, we will play after the christenings, and when every one who’s left dines en famille, Wes.”

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The poker tournament turned out to be the highlight of the weekend. Mr. Data was responsible for the arrangements and choosing the draws for the player table placements. Though eyebrows were raised when Will Riker and Tom Riker found themselves at the same table for the first round. Their luck was rotten but Robin Lefler’s wasn’t. Her husband pitied their captain. She wasn’t going to ever let Will forget that she’d bluffed him.

Hours later the final table was set. Robin, Admiral Wiley, Admiral Nechayev, Wes, Dr. Brahms and Picard were all seated around the table. Picard dealt first, picking his usual game of five card stud. He won that hand. Then his luck turned. Hours passed until they were down to the final three - Wiley, Nechayev and Lefler. Wiley eliminated Nechayev.

The last hand was Robin’s game. She picked five card stud. And successfully bluffed an admiral.

After being too jovial about his loss, Wiley pulled Will aside. “Make sure your lieutenant plays in the intra-fleet poker tournaments, Captain. I intend to play her again!”

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Jean-Luc woke up with a start. He looked about, and then cursed, “Merde! Ce que le diable!” He slid out of bed and stared about the room. He glanced over to see if Beverly was still with him. She was sleeping. This bedroom was definitely not in LaBarre though it seemed somewhat familiar.

“Bon jour, mon ami!”

Picard groaned out loud. “Q!” He glared at the man sitting on a floating rust woven kelim mat above his head.

“I thought I’d make up for past sins.”

“I won’t live that long,” was Picard’s tart reply.

“Tish Tosh, Jean-Luc. I’ve decided to restore your memories if you wish it.”

“We’re on Clarion, in my hotel suite?”

“Correct, mon ami.”

Picard was about to correct Q for the thousandth time and tell Q that he was not his friend, when he was shocked to realize something that he’d been deliberately denying for quite a while now.

Q was his friend.


Q fell off his flying carpet.

“Same as you,” Q muttered, after he picked himself up off the floor.

Picard handed Q a mug, then motioned toward an azure upholstered armchair and loveseat. Q warily sat down in the armchair, facing Jean-Luc.

“You’re offering to bring back our memories?” Jean-Luc casually asked.

“If you want them.”

“What do you think? Should I?”

Q’s jaw dropped. “Who are you and what have you done with the real John-Luck Pickard?”

Picard was rather amused. “I have given up, Q. No matter what I do or say you keep turning up in my life wreaking havoc. I surrender. You win.”

Q was genuinely stunned by this turn of events. “But whatever will I do with you if you aren’t complaining about something outrageous that I’ve just done?”

“We could just have tea…”

“…and sympathy. Or better yet a beer?”

“Something like that, Q. Someone pointed out to me a while back, that if you hadn’t been part of my life, the Borg would have won and the Federation would have been lost.” His words confounded Q.

“And let us not forget the primordial ooze.”
“No, I can’t forget that either, Q. It led to the events that ended up with my marrying Beverly. Thank you for that as well.” Picard drank his tea, then stood, motioning at the replicator. “Breakfast?”

“No,” Q snapped his fingers. Fresh fruit, croissants, honey butter and Caldosian whiskied orange marmalade appeared on the table next to them.

Picard helped himself then sat back down.

“You’re being so reasonable about this,” Q argued.

“That’s what friends are for,” Picard idly stated.

“Friends?” Q croaked.

“You would prefer that I call you something else?”

“You’ve called me everything else, Jean-Luc!”

“I was in error.”

“I must be feverish. I must have caught the Antarian bubonic plague. That’s the only explanation.” Q felt his own forehead. “The great Jean-Luc Picard admits to making a mistake? Impossible.”

“I am beginning to believe that I did make one this morning, considering the way you are now behaving, Q”

Q suddenly chuckled. “You’re beginning to understand the Q too well.”

“From what I’ve been told, I need to know the Q very well. Apparently Deanna and William are Q.”

“Oui, that they are. The best and brightest hope for our kind. And then there is Jack. He’s going to be a handful, that one. Already knows how to read - Klingon.”

“How do I raise Deanna and Will, Q?”

“Obey Beverly in all things.”

Picard chuckled. Then he made the mistake of asking, “You’re not serious, are you Q?”

“I am.” In a loud stage whisper, Q added, “The flame haired witch is awake, Jean-Luc.”

“Did you transport us the way we usually sleep in bed?” Q nodded. Picard stood and ordered two robes. Then he brought one over to his bare bride. He quickly explained Q’s presence. And then ordered a hot chocolate for Beverly from the replicator.

She strode into the bathroom, then came out a few moments later. “We’re on Clarion, aren’t we?”

“Yes, mon coeur. Q is offering to restore our memories if we wish it.”

Beverly squeezed next to Jean-Luc. Based on the way she kicked him, Picard suddenly had the suspicion that Beverly had indeed heard his jest.

Q suddenly knelt before Beverly pleading, “I would have obeyed you in all things, if you’d had just given me the chance, Comtesse.”

Picard groaned. Beverly pinched him. “Q, nothing personal, but you obeying me won’t mean
anything to me. My husband on the other hand…”

“I can explain…”

“What, dear?” She waited a moment before she let him off the hook. “The dowager Comtesse Marie de Holl instructed me in all my duties for the fete that we just held at Château Picard.”

Picard was relieved, for he’d never bothered to really discuss his title with Beverly. By the look in her eye, he knew they’d be having a conversation on the subject in the very near future.

“So, do you really want to know everything?”

“Beverly, it is up to you.”

“It might be inspirational,” Q interjected.

“About our children…” Picard attempted to change the subject.

“As I said, obey Beverly. She did a superb job with Wesley. Her sane, cool head will help guide the twins. Especially when they learn the concept of good and evil twin. Just be grateful that they aren’t identical.”

Beverly didn’t know what to make of Q’s praise. So she ate a chocolate croissant. “I don’t know about you, Jean-Luc, but I’d like to know what kind of cad you were back then.” Her smile wasn’t pleasant.

“Then inspirational, it is,” Picard agreed, silently wondering if he was out of his mind.

Q grinned, snapped his fingers and disappeared. And as an afterthought, Q’s voice floated over, “I left the Galen with the hotel valet…”

“We’d better call Earth and let everyone know where we are,” Beverly suggested.

Minutes later Jean-Luc confirmed that Q had taken care of everything including his ship and the hotel. Marie and Guinan were watching the twins. Riker had received a message that Beverly was taking a few personal days, which was okay with Will since once again the launch of the Enterprise E was being delayed.

They replicated clothing. “Now what?” Beverly asked, as she walked about the suite. She’d sensed that things weren’t quite like she almost remembered it to be.

The lodge was now decorated in tones of greens and blues. The furniture was different. And there now was a fountain with a series of small stepped basins cascading by the fireplace.

“Let’s go for a walk.” Beverly opened the door.

Picard joined her. “I think I went for a walk down to the amphitheatre. I remember stopping to see the performers along the way in the park.”

Beverly nodded. “I know. I danced there…” She stopped moving. She knew now. “That’s how we met. You admired my dancing.”

Picard clasped her hand. “Rachmaninoff I believe.”

He raised her hand to his lips, lightly kissing each fingertip. Beverly placed her hand over his.

“I was yours the moment you kissed my palm.”
She stared at the waterfall. “If I remember correctly…”

“Computer, privacy screen,” Picard ordered. Then he swept her up into his arms.

“Don’t you dare, Jean-Luc…,” she warned.

But he did dare. When she surfaced, he offered her his hand. Apparently he’d yet to remember everything.

When he floated up, she shoved him back under. Then she waited until he surfaced again, before she ranted, “Galatea indeed! You were going to teach me everything I needed to know about sex!!!”

He had forgotten that conceit. “Actually, I think I did a pretty good job.”

For this remark he was the lucky recipient of a swat with a wet blouse. He tossed it onto dry land. Then dove down, came up behind Beverly, and unhitched her bra. He had to struggle with Beverly in order to remove it successfully. Then he realized that she was struggling with him, deliberately thrusting her breasts into his arms; his hands. He pulled her into his arms and kissed her with all the passion that heaven allowed.

A very long time later, they reclined on a ledge by the waterfall, lazing under the warm sun.

“Very inspirational indeed,” Beverly murmured, as she leaned against her husband’s shoulder.

“I was an arrogant ass, back then,” Picard noted.

“You won’t hear any disagreement from me. I still think I could have taken that Nausican.” He groaned and muttered something about beautiful foolhardy women… She turned and entwined her arms about his neck. “But you can be magnificent on occasion. I think it must be something that you learned from me, my love.”

“Oui, mon coeur.” He softly kissed her.

She leaned against him again, content “How much time do we have before we have to get back?”

“Actually, Will first cursed Dr. Brahms, and then said you could take three weeks off. He suggested that we actually take our long delayed honeymoon. I think that by the time the Enterprise E is actually launched, our grandson will be graduating from the Academy.”

“It’s funny. I had this thought that our lost weekend seemed like a real honeymoon to me back then. It’s what I’d wished for little knowing what I’d get.”

“We anticipated our actual marriage just a little bit.”

“I regret all the lost time, Jean-Luc. Though I’m also glad that I didn’t have the memories. It would have short-changed the way I loved Jack, and I would have never wanted that to happen. Now, I have no regrets about the way I was Jack’s wife. It was real for both of us. And now there is time for us.”

“I am rather relieved that you didn’t have that moral dilemma back then, Beverly. Oh, I envied Jack, but I also knew that I had to be a starship captain. You would have been a major distraction. And it comforted me over the years, that Jack had you as his wife and mother of his child. He had that happiness.” He crossed his arms over her breasts, enjoying the texture, the touch of her sweet flesh. “I can’t even regret our mutual stubbornness. For we are now what we are. If things were different, would the changes have been for the better? I doubt it.”
“Well, there would have been fewer cold showers if we’d been less stubborn. “ She kissed her husband. “Much as I find it difficult to believe, Q did us a favor again.” Beverly sighed. Life was funny indeed.

Picard kissed below her earlobe. “Yes, Q did.”

Knowing where his nuzzling was going, Beverly moved away from him. “Jean-Luc, since we have the time, let’s go to Caldos. We began our actual life as lovers there.” Her grin was naughty. “And we’ve never made love on board the Galen. Don’t you think it is time you do so,” she archly added, “…with me?”

A few hours later, they were on their way to Caldos. And Beverly was moaning in ecstasy. For Jean-Luc was nibbling his way down her body. And when he started licking her labia, and probing her depths, she started coming right away. Picard, as always, watched the pleasure roll through her.

“Come back up here, Jean-Luc.”

He went into her arms, kissing her deeply. Soon he was hilted in her heat, slowly thrusting, waiting for her to desire him again. She started lifting her hips to match his movements. He smiled as he bent to kiss and suck her breasts. She pulled him closer. And her moaning started again. He moved faster and faster, almost as if he were a randy young man again. They moaned together as their orgasms flooded over them.

“Remarkable,” Beverly observed, as she rested in the shelter of his arms. She sometimes believed that these times, when they were flesh-to-flesh in each others arms, were the best moments of her life. He kissed her temple. “Magnifique.”

“Jean-Luc, there is something that I’ve always been meaning to ask you…”

“What, mon coeur?”

“If you’re such a romantic Frenchman, why do you speak with an English accent?”

He chuckled. And then whispered his explanation, between nips to her ear lobe.

=\=

Merde…

His arm was stiff. And though he wouldn’t admit it to his tyrant of a personal physician, old wounds were aching too. But it didn’t matter…

Jean-Luc Piccard looked about him, and sighed, slightly bemused by his current position. His beloved Beverly was sound asleep, recumbent against his left shoulder. She’d been napping for a while now. And Jean-Luc’s shoulder was definitely getting stiff. He would never complain about holding Beverly, for he’d been starved for her touch for far too many years.

She had not changed much since their first meeting. Her hair was a bit shorter. He noted it was also tangled up between his shoulder and the backrest of the wrought iron chaise lounge upon which they both were resting. He carefully detangled her silken strands.
For a very long time, he’d had only dreams of her to sustain him. Now she was here in his arms, forever.

The scents of lavender, roses and camellias were drifting and intermingling upon the low breezes. The still bright colored petals of the many flowering plants, swayed their way through the twilight’s descending shadows. The sounds of the lazy trickle of water that flowed into a fountain water basin seemed to be music. All of these elements formed his impression that this Caldosian garden was only a few steps away from being called an Eden. It felt like home. He could rest.

And when his mind permitted itself to relax, if only for a little bit, he acknowledged to himself, how much he needed the soothing peace of this home. He’d worry about the construction plans of the additions, tomorrow.

He must have dozed for a while, for when he was in that twilight zone between sleep and awareness, he realized that Beverly was missing. He stirred.

“Finally,” a pleasant teasing voice was heard.

“It’s your fault that I’m so tired, mon coeur,” he grumbled. “You kept me up all night.” He eyed his wife. She was wearing an ivory cotton dress with a cherry red sash for a belt. She looked cute which was a style choice she did not often attempt.

“Well, I don’t have to do it again tonight.”

“Actually, you do.” His grin looked silly. “We’re finally on our long-delayed honeymoon, and I’m not going to let anything disturb us.”

“Guess again, my love.”

He knew that tone of voice. “What now?”

“Ruby MacPherson invited us to tea. And we’re about ten minutes late.” She leaned over and kissed him. “If you wanted to be totally alone with me we should have stayed on board the Galen.”

He just shook his head and then stood, trying to straighten out his ivory shirt and khaki pants.

“You look fine. And it’s only Ruby. She’s seen you in far less,” Beverly wickedly observed.

“I did not really care to know that fact,” he muttered.

“She cares, Jean-Luc. You should have seen how protective everyone was of me when you were gone. How many pots of stew she made for me.”

“Gowron had a hand in it. He sent guards.”

“Yes, I know. They’re still talking about a Klingon battle cruiser landing on the green.”

She held out her hand. He took it. And then she stopped, staring at her engagement ring. A ray from the afternoon sun had hit a facet. Suddenly she was looking at blue firelight dancing with starlight on her finger.

“Beverly, what is it?”

“This ring. It’s not your granmere’s is it?” He couldn’t say anything. She looked into his eyes and guessed the truth. “You bought it during our lost weekend, didn’t you?” He mutely nodded. “You didn’t even know my real name yet you wanted to marry me…”
She sighed, “Oh, Jean-Luc…” She kissed him thoroughly.

“I loved you then, Beverly. I knew you were the love of my life. And the depth of that old love is miniscule compared to the love I feel for you now. You’re my wife. The mother of my children…”

She brought his hand to her lips and softly kissed his palm. Then she nipped it, her tongue tasting salt, feeling the calluses from where he held the reins, his epee…

“You’re my husband, and the father of my children,” she whispered. She straightened up. “Let’s just have a quick cup of tea, talk for only a few minutes, and then tell Ruby that we’re still on our honeymoon. She’ll understand.” She twined her fingers through his. And they walked the two kilometers over to Ruby’s house.

“Ah, there you are,” Ruby cheerily greeted them.

“I’m sorry we’re late,” Jean-Luc politely said.

“No. You’re fine. I’m still waiting for my son.”

“Your son? I’ve never met him, have I?” Beverly walked into a kitchen similar to hers but the smells emanating from it were familiar. The copper gleamed, the old pewter was burnished, all the furniture smelled of beeswax, and there were herbs drying everywhere.

Ruby started to pick up the tea tray, but Jean-Luc took it from her hands. He placed it on the tea table.

“You knew Quintin as a girl when you came here to live, after Arvada III. We all were impressed by how brave you were, Beverly Howard.”

Beverly was taken back by Ruby’s words. She’d never even discussed the tragedy with Jean-Luc. “I wasn’t brave. I just did what I had to do.”

“And isn’t that the definition of bravery, Jean-Luc?”

Jean-Luc had observed the sorrow in his wife’s eyes. “Yes, I do believe it is.” He reached for his wife’s hand. “Beverly has always been the bravest, sanest person I know.” He looked at Ruby. “Tell me what she was like as a young girl.”

“Well at first, she was quiet and subdued. Felisa was very worried. She was such an old soul in a young girl’s body. It took a while, but all the children in the village tried to coax her out of it. We just wanted her to laugh again, like any twelve-year-old girl should.”

Beverly suddenly stood. “The mud pie. We’d had a rain storm and there was mud everywhere. Your son threw a mud pie at me! He got my new pink dress dirty.”

“Yes, Quintin was a rascal. Still is, if truth be told. Ah but then Beverly lost her temper. She chased him straight through the village, flinging every clump of mud she could find at the poor boy’s head. She finally tackled him and gave him a good what for…” Ruby chuckled. “And to make matters even more fun, I made my son apologize to Beverly.”

Ruby sighed. “Quintin is always late. If there aren’t any scones left by the time he comes, it will be his own fault.” She reached for her Brown Betty teapot. “Earl Grey, Jean-Luc?” He nodded. Ruby then picked up the Flight Barr teapot. In the “Imari” pattern. She poured a cup and handed it to Beverly. “Black Irish with a touch of cardamom.” She then offered Jean-Luc and Beverly a tray of her scones. Both Jean-Luc and Beverly picked the almond cherry variety. Jean-Luc went for the
brandied strawberry preserves. Beverly didn’t.

Picard glanced about the cottage. It was rather similar to their cottage, but Ruby’s tastes were more floral. Every piece of fabric in the parlor had some sort of rose motif. Cabbage roses. Tea roses. Roses of every type and kind. In many colors. And it all should have clashed with the grey MacPherson of Pitmain tartan. But it didn’t. Instead, it all seemed to go well together from the cushions to the oak antique corner cupboard filled with old pewter tankards to the needlepoint fireplace screen. Picard instinctively recognized the kind of fine eye and skill it took to create a room like this. He doubted it was a random haphazard effort.

“Mother…” A voice called out. A huge bouquet of red roses entered the room being carried by somebody. The bearer’s face was hidden behind roses.

It was then that Picard knew. For he recalled a similar scene with Marta Batanides. And Jean-Luc Picard started laughing. And laughing.

“Hello, Mother.” Q handed his mother the roses, kissed her cheek, and then he started laughing too.

It took Beverly a while to see the humor of it.

“You’re Q?” she asked, ignoring the two hysterical men. “All this time?”

“Yes, dear. I’m this rascal’s mother.”

Beverly buried her head on her arms, resting them on the tea table.

Jean-Luc couldn’t decide if she was sobbing or laughing. His laughter faded away as he reached over to her. He realized that she was laughing. And hiccupping.

Q blinked and a scone floated through the air, landing on his tea plate. He blinked again, and his empty tea cup became a beer stein filled with amber ale. “Care for some, mon ami? I’m a bit of a connoisseur when it comes to beers.”

Picard nodded. “Surprise me.”

And Q did. It was the finest ale that Picard had ever tasted. “Where did this come from?”

“1796 England, a little smuggler’s inn that I found in the Cornwall.”

Picard knew Q well enough now to believe that he wasn’t joking.

“I wasn’t lying you know. It’s always been Beverly who fascinated me.”

“Thank you, I think,” Beverly replied. “Dare I ask what you found so fascinating about me?”

“You threw mud pies at me. I had to get even.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t turn me into a dog. Then.”

Q did laugh at that statement. “My petty little revenge, just a few decades later. You’ve always been my favorite, beautiful red-haired bitch.”

Beverly made a face at him.

“Oh, Beverly, it was your courage, your grace, your intelligence, and your common sense that drew me to you. And the fact that you were a very distant cousin to the Q. At first, I considered wedding you
myself.”

Picard sat upright at that statement.

“Calm down, mon ami. By the time I considered courting Beverly, she had met Jack. And since Jack was a Q cousin too, I didn’t mind stepping aside. I prefer my freedom, as any one of my former wives will tell you.”

“I still don’t understand.”

Ruby answered her question. “To put it simply my dear, Felisa wanted me to find a suitable husband for you. She approved of Jack, so I instructed my son to make sure that your courtship and marriage would proceed without difficulties.”

Picard choked on his beer.

Q continued. “Little did I imagine that Jean-Luc here would be a Q cousin too. You danced for him. Turned him into a Denebian rutting boar. That’s when I became interested in you, mon ami. I was a bit jaded back then. What’s the difference between a Jean or a Jack?”

Ruby rapped Q’s knuckles with a spoon. “Idiot. By the time I learned what he had done, the damage had been done. But then things got complicated, and Quintin erased your memories. Though once I saw the pair of you together years later, I knew that fate had interfered. It wasn’t totally Quintin’s fault.”

She offered Beverly more tea. “I do apologize for that. But I think when all is said and done, things are right and proper now. You’re with the man you love and who loves you, and you both are where you’re supposed to be in this life.”

Picard finally spoke up. “Are you telling me that everything that happened to Beverly and I, is because you were next-door neighbors to Beverly?”

Ruby answered. “Yes.”

Picard shook his head in disbelief. “And then the Federation would have been destroyed along the way, if it weren’t for two match-making ladies. I should have listened to Deanna Troi’s woeful stories more closely.” Ruby complained. “You see what I’ve put up with all these millennia?”

“But you love him,” Beverly sighed. “He’s your son.” She sighed again. “Please tell me that my children aren’t going to bedevil me like Q?”

Ruby patted her hand. “Oh Quintin is a good boy. Not like so many other Q children. They can be imps.”

“Oh Mother, I heard from Pops. Pops says that he’s done with his current job. And that as soon as he finishes off with the details, he’ll resign his commission and come and stay for a while.”

“Commission?” Picard’s curiosity was piqued.

“Yes. Pop’s an ensign in Starfleet named Steck.”

Picard lost it.
The Enterprise was being launched, finally, from Utopia Planetia. Jean-Luc and Beverly were invited. In fact, Jean-Luc was the guest of honor.

He grumbled. He wished people didn’t make such a fuss all the time over him. Others had helped. He hadn’t done it all by himself. But the Picard name now was the one that seemed to get mentioned the most.

He stood in the doorway of his Château’s master suite, watching Beverly twist up her silver-shot gold and red hair. She’d grown older with such beauty and grace.

He sighed.

“What, Jean-Luc?” Beverly got up from her dressing table. “Penny for your thoughts?”

“Do you ever regret our life together…?”

“Of course not, mon coeur,” she teased.

As with all marriages there had been sorrows and joys, white hot times and frigid icy times, ordinary boring times and too busy, hectic times. They’d been apart on many occasions, especially when she was on the Enterprise E or he’d been on a diplomatic mission. But underneath it all had been a deep current of love to support them. That, and the fact that on occasion, Wesley had helped reunite his parents with the blink of an eye, even if it only was for a night or two.

“We’ve had a good life, Beverly. Better than most. More blessed than most.”

“Where is all this maudlin talk coming from?”

“It’s just the realization that today is another milestone time in our lives.”

Beverly lightly kissed his lips. “Yes, that’s true. Remember this Jean-Luc Picard, you’re the one who offered to seduce me, but I’m the one who chose to walk into the embrace of your loving arms. And in spite of everything, I’d never have wanted it to be any other way.”

“Agreed.” He kissed her. “It’s time to go, Beverly.”

Jean-Luc and Beverly boarded the captain’s shuttlecraft that had come for them. They both wore the dress uniforms of Starfleet Admirals. They were going to join the others at Starfleet Academy, and then all would go together for the traditional captain’s shuttlecraft transport to his ship for the first time.

Beverly held his arm as they entered the shuttlecraft. “Geordi. Leah! Good to see you.”

“Geordi just had to pilot the new captain himself.” Leah smiled. “Our kids are going to meet us on board.”

“And the grand kids. I’ve lost track of how many there are now,” Jean-Luc teased.

“So have I,” Geordi mentioned, as he shook Jean-Luc’s hand. “Good to see you again, Jean-Luc.”

Beverly smiled. “Jean-Luc knows exactly how many grandchildren we all have. He just wishes that half of them weren’t named Jean.”

“Hey when you have seven kids, and four grandkids, naming them Jean makes it easier to get
Geordi was dressed in civilian clothing now. He’d left Starfleet to become the head of the Daystrom Institute a while back. Leah was still head of all the propulsion departments. The BLF (for Brahms/LaForge) drives, which were formerly referred to as worm hole drives had been standard on galaxy class starships for more than thirty-five years. They were constantly being improved, and the new Enterprise NCC-1701-Q had the latest version as its warp drive. The new ship was also twice the size of Picard’s Enterprise D.

The letter ‘Q’ was out of sequence. But for some reason Fleet Admiral Picard insisted upon that letter.

As Beverly was comparing grandchildren notes with Leah, Jean-Luc took the seat next to Geordi.

“Do you want to pilot her in, Jean-Luc?”

“You mean you trust me not to hit your baby?”

“Yeah. She’s not just my baby, Jean-Luc.”

“But you’re the engineer, Geordi. You’re the heart and soul of its warp drive. You’ve sweated every detail of her design. And the way you’ve improved the ships over the decades has been extraordinary - true genius.”

“I had to Jean-Luc. She’s the Enterprise.”

“You do that for every ship, Geordi. Funny how my off hand remark about a shuttlecraft engine turns into an Enterprise built by you. What an accomplishment.”

“And if the Enterprise D hadn’t crashed on Veridian III, I might never have ended up working for Leah, or marrying her. Leah and the kids - that’s the great accomplishment of my life. Building ships is just my job. Though I do hope I’ll die while building them.”

“I always thought I would go down with my starship. It’s what I wanted. Yet that has been denied me. I never wanted to be the Fleet Admiral. But here I am.”

“And here you are, watching your grandson take the big chair, Jean-Luc.”

“Jack will be a better starship captain than me.”

“That’s never going to happen, Jean-Luc. There’s never going to be a better galaxy class starship captain than Jean-Luc Picard.”

“Thank you, Geordi. There is however, James T. Kirk,” Picard added.

“That Enterprise wasn’t a galaxy class ship, Jean-Luc.” Picard chuckled. “Gale and the grandchildren said that she’ll meet us on board.”

“Geordi, your son Jean-Luc and my daughter Gale have been busy again. Another baby. Don’t tell me that my son-in-law wants as many kids as Leah had.”

“Jean-Luc, what can I say. It runs in the family. And your namesake is the changeling in our families. He just loves Earth and doesn’t want to go anywhere else. As for Gale, who’d have ever thought that she’d be the agricultural expert in the family.”

Picard sighed. Lwaxana’s match making determination had gone into motion once all of his officer’s
children started entering Starfleet Academy. Their many grandchildren were the result.

Will and Deanna’s son Ian William Martok had married Geordi’s daughter Lal. They were both counselors attached to UP. Jory was still a bachelor and along with Gale, was now in charge of Château Picard, and all of its subsidiary vineyards on several planets. Harla had married Geordie’s second eldest son, William Worf. They both were professors of proto-Vulcan archaeology at Alpha Centauri University. Mela’s John Luke was Starfleet. He was first officer of the Constitution Class USS Amerigo. And Reg’s son Geordi, was a Lt. Commander and an engineer now assigned to the Enterprise Q.

As for Beverly and Jean-Luc’s twins, they were at a university somewhere in the Q Continuum. They came home every now and then. They’d both graduated from the Academy but delayed accepting their commissions and instead joined their honorary uncle Q with something he had called studying at the academy of life.

Over the years, all the Q cousins had spent time with the Continuum on their own. And when they’d come home they talked of all the fun that they had, but never actually mentioned what Q had been teaching them. Picard knew that the pact that he’d made with the Continuum years ago had been for the best. All the Q heirs had been given choices about their future. But only the twins had preferred the Continuum.

Geordi landed the shuttlecraft at the Academy.

Will and Deanna were the first to board her. Wes and Robin came next, wearing their dress Admiral uniforms. Greetings were exchanged. Picard pulled Admiral Riker aside. “Is Chancellor Worf coming? I’ve received no response to my sub-space messages.”

“I haven’t heard either. In fact, I haven’t heard from Worf since Deanna finalized their divorce.” For ever since Worf had been forced to challenge Gowron and kill him during the Dominion War, he had been separated from Deanna and Will. When Worf had resigned from Starfleet and left, Worf had also divorced Deanna. Will then married Deanna officially. Worf was still legally Ian’s father, but he hadn’t seen his son since he’d left. The Rozshenkos always remained a part of Ian’s life.

Picard could only accept Worf’s decision. He mourned the loss of his friend. And what could have been with the Klingon Empire if Gowron had lived. Though Worf was now the Klingon Chancellor, relations with the Klingons had been strained for some time. The golden possibilities that Gowron and Picard had created were beset by too many outside influences. Picard felt it was one of the greater failures of his life.

The Picard treaty still survived. It was now as permanent as the Khitomer Accords.

Finally, Captain Jean Jackson Crusher arrived. He hugged his parents, greeted all of his relations, and then bowed before his grandfather and shook Jean-Luc’s hand. He hugged him.

There were tears in Jean-Luc’s eyes as he gazed upon the future that he’d literally helped create.

Geordi stood, “Admiral, would you care to pilot?”

“Only if Admiral Riker will be my Number One.”

Will sat next to Picard. They flew toward UP, and slowly circled around the new Enterprise.

Her new captain came and stood behind his grandfather and Riker, placing his hands on the shoulders of both men. There was silence for a while as everyone stared in awe at the beautiful big ship. Then Jean-Luc flew into the shuttlecraft bay and landed.
There was a reception after the swearing in ceremony. Will Riker and Data had arranged it. It was not too extreme. There were no Orion slave girls.

Everyone who mattered to the Picard family and friends had been invited. And most had showed up. Including Annie and Billy Bob.

Waiting for them on board, after they had arrived was Chancellor Worf and Admiral Kargan. Some of the burden that Picard’s heart felt over the Klingon situation, lifted. As for Will, he had to watch Deanna kiss Worf in public. And then pull the Klingon out of sight during a quiet moment.

Picard was determined to privately talk with Worf before the Klingon left.

Guinan was there as well, supervising the younger members of the next generation of Q cousins.

Data was there with Nella and Edward whose son Franklin, was captain of the Cairo C. Data’s friend Carrie had passed away leaving Data her Baltimore mansion. Data had wanted for Nella to own the house, but Nella insisted that Data take care of the house for her. For Nella and Edward’s daughter lived with Mr. Data when he was on Earth. Their daughter Annabella was a concert pianist and composer who was well known through the galactical classical music world.

All in all, watching as Picard’s grandson was sworn in as captain of the Enterprise had been one of the better moments of Jean-Luc Picard’s life.

Will and Jean-Luc decided to stroll about the decks. They’d already had the official tour, but each of them wanted to see for themselves. They talked quietly of their lives and of their ships.

“Deanna’s with Worf?”

“Yes, they had some things to work out. Deanna knew with the way the Klingon problems were happening, that Worf would have to choose. We both didn’t think that he would leave though, and for so long.”

You’re not jealous?”

“Was Beverly jealous of Laren?”

“Actually, if she was, she never told me. She just accepted Laren’s place in our lives. I have, over the years, discovered that Laren owned a part of my heart. The way Tom and Laren raised Gale was wonderful. Yet every time I saw Laren with Gale, part of me wanted to be part of that equation too. I envied you.”

“Jean-Luc, we wouldn’t be human beings if we weren’t capable of knowing more than one love during our lifetime. As for that so-called three-way marriage that I had, I was never Deanna’s lover after she married Worf. I was only an honorary Number Two husband.”

“That’s why I divorced Deanna so quickly, Will. I knew what I had to do, and I didn’t want Deanna waiting for me. It was your turn to love your Imzadi.”

Both gentlemen turned to look at the Klingon standing in the doorway of the officer’s conference
Picard spoke first, quietly, without revealing any of his emotions. “I thank you for coming, Chancellor Worf. It means a lot to me.”

“You are my cha’Dich, Jean-Luc. And, it’s the Enterprise. The happiest days of my life were spent with both of you on board her. So it means a lot to me too.”

“I take it that you’re not overly fond of Klingon politics,” Riker politely observed.

“If I had my choice, I would still be serving with you, Admirals. But I could not ignore my duty. I am going to close the distance between the Federation and the Klingon Empire. Or die trying.”

“I’d rather have you living, Worf.” Riker extended his hand. Worf shook it. “Deanna still misses you.”

“Yes. But I could not bring her or Ian to live in the Empire. The threat of assassination was and still is too great. I am not a popular leader.”

“You could resign,” Picard suggested.

“Would you, Jean-Luc?”

“If I thought that I could do no more good.”

“That is the problem, Jean-Luc. Will. I have a hope that I can do more good, one day.”

Riker considered Worf’s words about assassination attempts. He quietly asked, “Your people - you sent bodyguards didn’t you? To protect Deanna and Ian?”

“All of you have your guards,” Worf gruffly stated.

“Don’t you think you should have told me, Mr. Worf?”

“No. The threat of danger to you and our family still is too great. If you needed to know, Mr. Data would have told you who they were. The bodyguards do change, so that if you cannot detect who they are, odds are my enemies will not either.”

“Were there guards even on the Enterprise E?”

“That was up to Mr. Data. He supervised the scheduling when he thought they were needed.”

Riker shook his head. “All these years and I never guessed? I must be slipping.”

Picard chuckled. “Yes you are, Will. Your decline began when you became an admiral.” He put his hand on Will’s shoulder. “Gowron assigned guards to Beverly when I was playing pirate. He never removed the order. To this day, Beverly has no idea that there are two sets of guards around her. Though I did have to explain to Starfleet personnel about the second unit.”


Worf suddenly seemed nervous. “There is something I must tell you.”

“What, Worf?”

“Whenever Lwaxana used to take Ian for summer vacation, what she really was doing was bringing
Ian to see me. Sometimes on Risa. Betazed. Or Clarion.”

“Why didn’t he tell us?”

“Ian did not wish to upset his Mother.”

Will breathed a sigh of relief. “I am glad, Worf. I knew you loved Ian. And that Ian loved you. Now I know why he didn’t seem to miss you that much.”

“But Deanna does, Will. She has invited me to dinner tonight. Should I come?”

“I know. I told Deanna to invite you Worf.”

Worf stiffened, then looked curiously at Will. “You did? Why?”

“You’ll find out why when we dine.” Will didn’t bother mentioning The Phase. Worf would find out soon enough. It was the one thing that Deanna’s husband could give to his Imzadi that she wanted more than anything else in the universe - having both of the men that she loved in her life together again - and in her arms…

Riker put his arms about the shoulders of both men. “I think we need to go find some beer…”

“You go.” Picard moved closer to the window. “I just want to stay here. I’ll watch the stars and delude myself that I’m just a captain for a while. Then I’ll come.”

He was alone for a moment, and then he smelled Deanna’s exotic floral perfume.

“Deanna.” He glanced over at the still beauteous Betazed in her royal blue commandant and counselor’s dress uniform dress. A few years ago, Admiral Jellico had issued an order that certain Starfleet counselors were permitted to wear uniforms of their own choosing. Picard knew the rumor that the change was due to a lost poker bet was true for he’d been at that game.

“Jean-Luc, you’re pensive.” She placed her hand on his. “What are you questioning?”

There was one deep fear left in Picard’s heart. “Do you believe in love at first sight, Deanna?” She nodded. “In my youth, I always considered myself a romantic soul. But I also found it highly improbable that someone could glance over, look another person in the eye and think that they’d just found true love in an instant. The universe just doesn’t work that way. Lust in first sight, yes. Love, no. Consider the years it took for you and Worf to become lovers.”

“True. But I fell in love with Will the first time I saw him. And that was when I was gazing into his beautiful blue eyes and before I noticed the rest of his beautiful,” she sighed, “body. That clinched it. Romantic love to me has always been about intellect, emotions and sex.”

Picard suddenly blushed as he recalled that Deanna had met Will at a Betazoid wedding.

Deanna laughed. “Your conservative attitude about sex has always been a puzzlement to me, Jean-Luc.”

“That’s part of the problem, Deanna. Deep in my soul, there is a part of me that still wonders if I was manipulated by the Q into falling in love with Beverly. And if that is the case, then I have to ask myself why.”

She remembered the first time she’d worked with Jean-Luc Picard, and how he’d been seduced by an ancient one bent on destroying the Federation. “Quintin is not Ariel. Surely your twins would tell
you if the Continuum is plotting something nefarious?”

“I would like to think so.”

“Perhaps your real problem is that your rational mind just can’t accept your emotional self falling in love at first sight. Did it never occur to you that you and Beverly have both been described as an old soul on many occasions? Maybe it was simply Fate reincarnating two long lost lovers who have finally found each other.” She kissed his cheek. “Or maybe a cigar is just a cigar. You were meant to love Beverly, Jean-Luc. And Beverly was meant to love you. And that is all there is to it. Trust your heart, Jean-Luc.” She kissed his lips. “And, technically speaking, you fell in love at first sight, twice. And then you loved Beverly from afar for decades before you fell in love with Beverly all over again - at last. From my point of view, I’d say you’ve been pretty consistent and constant most of your adult life.” She sensed that the light was finally, truly dawning in the heart and mind of one of her most cherished, but difficult patients ever. “I’ll see you on the bridge in a few minutes.”

After she left, Picard sensed that Q would be joining him. He’d been sensing Q’s presence all day. Whenever his pate prickled, he knew Q was around.

“You didn’t think I’d miss my protégé’s swearing in ceremony, did you, mon Capitaine?”

“No, I did not think you would, Quintin.”

Q shuddered. “I hate that name. That’s why everyone calls me Q.”

“I know.”

“You’re still an evil man, Jean-Luc.”

“Would you have me otherwise?”

“No,” Q admitted. “I’m fond of you, even though it pains me grievously to admit it.”

“And I, you. In your own way, you’ve been a good friend.” It was a major concession, and Q knew it.

Q casually stated, “Your suspicions are correct, mon ami.” Picard froze. “I did contrive to bring you and the red-haired witch together. But she’s the one who put a spell on you. What you have together is magic, Jean-Luc. But it’s your magic. I merely introduced you. I didn’t have anything to do with what happened after that when you first lusted then loved.”

Picard considered Q’s words. “You had objections to Jack Crusher?”

“He may have had the Q gene, but to be frank, I thought he was a bit too nice. Too dull. Beverly needed someone who was her equal. Jack wasn’t ever going to challenge her the way that you do. Beverly blossomed with your love, Jean-Luc.”

And then Jean-Luc understood. “You love Beverly.”

“From the first moment she set foot on Caldos after Arvada. She was such a brave soul - truly the best of humanity. And I loved her too much to let her throw away her life on me. So I searched the universe for the perfect man for her. I just miscalculated the time line by a few weeks. Still things worked out for the best.”

He glared at Jean-Luc. “You’re trying to distract me from my real purpose.” He huffed. “The time is coming when you’re going to have to decide, mon ami.” He gave Jean-Luc a warning glance. “And
“Don’t ask about what. You already know what. You have your choices. I can give you immortality. I can extend your life so that you can live past two hundred years. With Beverly. Or, I won’t do a thing. You choose.”

“I’d like to live forever with you, Jean-Luc, but I think helping extend our lives is the wiser choice.” Beverly stood in the doorway. “I’d like to see Jack married one day. With a family. And considering how difficult it is to get captains of the Enterprise to the altar, I know it’s going to take some time for that to happen.”

Jean-Luc studied his bride. “I would have said no forty years ago, Q. But perhaps I am a wiser man now.” He held out his hand to the love of his life.

Beverly stepped by husband. She surprised Q by kissing him on the cheek. “I want to be like your Mother, Q. Who is looking for you, by the way.”

“As you wish,” Q left. But not before saying, “Thank you for naming a ship after me, mon capitaine…”

Beverly offered her husband her arm as she felt his silent laughter. “They want you on the bridge, my love. Our Jack would have been so proud.”

“Yes, mon coeur.” He knew why she sighed. He still missed Jack Crusher too, after all these years.

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It was time for the Enterprise Q to begin her first official mission. All the dignitaries were on the bridge.

Geordi was proudly explaining Leah’s design of force field seat belt restraints to the chairs. If the stabilizers detected any disturbance, the chair’s force fields would automatically materialize, keeping the occupant in its seat. But it was only a partial restraint. They could still reach their com panels, in spite of the ship being tossed around. And the restraints disappeared if one stood.

And then the ceremonies began.

Beverly, Will and Jean-Luc stood close by the captain’s chair as they watched Captain Jean Jackson Crusher sit in his chair for the very first time.

A tear formed. Beverly wiped it away from Jean-Luc’s cheek. He was so very proud.

Wesley and Robin joined them. Wes came round the chair to shake his son’s hand. Robin just ruffled the brown hair on the top of her son’s head smiling at the thought of her little boy sitting there. And praying.

The bridge crew were in their positions.

Anticipation was building.

All the invited guests and the media were waiting.

Then Data spoke. “When I first joined the Enterprise 1701-D, I was privileged to escort Admiral, Dr. Leonard McCoy on a tour about that ship. He said something then which I believe is the appropriate
quote to say now.”

Data used McCoy’s voice: “This is a new ship, but she's got the right name. Now you remember that, you hear? You treat her like a lady and she'll always bring you home…”

Some of the invited guests laughed.

Will spoke up. “Captain Crusher, my greatest achievement as Captain of the Enterprise was when I crashed the Enterprise D into Veridian III. I lost the ship - but I did not lose the life of a single crew member. You can love a ship, but remember that it’s the people that really matter. Doesn’t hurt to follow your gut too. My instincts kept me captain of the Enterprise for twenty-six years.” He then walked over to the left arm side of the dark blue captain’s chair.

Jack accepted these words of wisdom. “I will, Sir - Captain Riker.”

Jean-Luc moved over to the right side of the chair.

“The sky is the limit, Captain Jack Crusher.” He squeezed his grandson’s hand. “I only have a little bit of advice to offer that James T. Kirk passed on to me. Have fun. And make a difference. That’s what we’re here for, Captain. James T. Kirk first said this too: Space, the final frontier. These are the voyages of the starship Enterprise. Its mission… to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no one has gone before. It’s not just an unofficial motto of Starfleet, Captain Crusher. It’s what the captains of the Enterprise do.”

There was silence. And then cheers and applause.

“Thank you, Captain Picard.”

Captain Jack Crusher faced his view screen, looked at his bridge crew, nodded at his Number One and then quoted his grandfather.

“Let's see what's out there. Engage.”

THE END

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