The Portrait
by lori (zakhad)

Summary

It took a little searching to find this again. Several computers and websites later, it did not appear on my latest website so did not get added here.

This was born of an idea about keepsakes and artworks, and what happens to them over time. Old things have no more and no less the value we decide they have. As with most things in life, meaning is given, not present in the object itself.

As a short one-off, it ties to nothing else in the series beyond the characters themselves.

She finished it in three days. It was perfect. When she hung it over the mantel, her friends noticed and commented. They all thought it was commercial art, because she didn't paint nudes, she did still life and nature.

When he came unexpectedly for a visit she didn't have time to hide it.

"What have you done?" he exclaimed, his voice ringing through her house. He strode toward the fireplace as if to tear it off the wall.

"Wait -- you can't," she blurted, getting between her painting and him. "I knew you wouldn't stay -- I know I'll probably never see you again. I'm not stupid. I painted it for me, because, because. . . that day was beautiful. I painted this because it will stay with me forever and remind me that there is at least one person in the universe who is beautiful in word and deed. You gave me one perfect day of sunshine and I want to keep this. It will remind me that once someone really cared."
He studied her face, shook his head. The iron in his voice remained. "You have more friends than -- "

"They don't care about me. You did."

"Did? Do you think I would have come to see you before I shipped out if I didn't care? Why do I have to stop caring simply because there's distance and time between us? Even if I never saw you again -- "

"Stop. Just stop," she cried. He stared at her in dismay and reached for her, but she pushed his hand away. "It was a poor choice of words. You cared for a while in one way, but you care now in another. You only prove my point. You'd die to save my life, the same way you almost died saving those people."

"But that's not the same. It's duty, it's not -- "

"It *is* the same. It is. You care. I'm not talking about love, or commitment as in a relationship. You're different, and none of the people who come to my parties or invite me to theirs can measure up to you. I know that you will go on to greater things, that you're never going to come back, but I'll hear about you from time to time in the news. I will never tell anyone this is you -- I'll never sell it. It will be my secret pleasure, so that when I do hear your name I can look at it and remember that I was once someone to you. It's all I will have left of you except memories, and those fade so fast."

"The pictures you took -- "

"I burned them. They identified you -- this is my secret. I want it that way. Please, let me keep it."

"Lorena -- "

"It doesn't show your face. It's just what I had of you that day, your body. It's all I had and it's all I expected. And it was beautiful, and now you're going away to leave me to live out my normal boring life here, so is it too much to ask for one reminder of you?"

He looked up at the painting. Sun on skin, ripples of muscles. Sighing, he shook his head, grinned, and even laughed a little. "Do I really look like that?"

Lorena smiled. "I try to be very accurate. You're not mad at me?"

"I suppose not, if it's so. . . . What would you tell people?"

"Nothing. It's a work of art. That's all anyone will think, and it's what I want them to think -- I call it Portrait of a Day."

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"All right, let's see -- the next thing on the list is a painting, called 'Portrait of a Day.' Do you see it?"

Rennie edged between boxes and pulled a painting-sized box from behind a large crate labelled 'paint supplies.' "Got it. Where does it go?"

"Nothing specific mentioned in the instructions she left in the will. Add it to the stuff in the front room."

"How much do you think you'll get at auction?"

"No idea. We'll have to wait and see. Mom always had it hanging in her living room, no matter
where we moved -- it's probably something one of her friends did, she never did nudes."

"Oh!" Rennie picked with her fingernail at a staple holding the box together. "It's *that* one."

"What about it?"

"You know, that was the first time I ever saw a naked man? That first time you had me over? Your mom caught me staring at it. I was so embarrassed!"

"Everyone stared at it."

"I used to have a boyfriend who looked kinda like that. Do you mind if I take it?"

"Aw, what the hell, consider it your payment for helping me sort through all this stuff."

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"What an interesting portrait," Carmichael said.

True glanced at him. "That's something I bought from Renoit Talbot."

"Renoit?"

"Rennie. She used to live on the same street in Terrace, on Balvin. We lived there for a while before we moved back to Earth. She had parents who loved Impressionist painters and named her after their favorite artist." True looked up at the portrait. "I used to think it was her husband, but she said no, Bill never looked that good in his life. It's probably some model, with some exaggeration by the artist thrown in."

"Why'd she sell it?"

"Just clearing out odds and ends before she moved. Bill took a job on Bajor after the Occupation ended. I thought this would be a neat thing to hang in the library. Makes people think I have taste. You should see people when I have a party, last week I was even asked if it was my boyfriend."

Carmichael grinned. "Did you tell them yes, it was?"

"I want to introduce you to people. I don't want them to think I'm a liar."

The grin vanished. Carmichael studied it, lips pursed. "You know, it's really not that good."

"Most people don't notice that. The subject matter seems to distract them from that little detail." True laughed suddenly. "You're jealous!"

"Of a painting that's probably some hack painter's fantasy? Don't think so."

"I saw a guy built like that at the gym just last week."

"I just don't like it, okay?"

"It's art, for -- don't look like that, Car. Come on. It's a painting, it can't compare to a real live hunk like you. . . . Right. Pouting is going to help."

"It always worked before."
True laughed again. "You know, I'll bet I could get a lot for it, from the right person. Maybe I'll advertise on the Art Net. It would help if I mentioned I got it from a Talbot, I'll bet."

"Lot 4,345, 'Portrait of a Day' by an unknown artist. Initials LRMB in lower right hand corner. From the collection of Niles and Ballinger, London, England. Originally purchased from the daughter of Garrett Talbot, renowned art collector and enthusiast, this fine painting was purchased at auction by Lloyd's of London in the buyout of Art Net. Opening bid, 2,000 credits. . . ."

"We have quite a few paintings, too." Michael tried not to look at Qualog. Ferengi always made him nervous.

"The franchise is stupidly restrictive, like most hoomon ventures. I am to sell prints, not originals."

Michael hated this part of the job. "Look, I'm representing the owner's daughter, who inherited this store and everything in it. The owner stocked prints and originals; the front is an Exquisiprints franchise, the back a private gallery. The daughter was very specific -- all or nothing. Flat fee of 56,600 credits for the lot, plus furniture, and those special racks to hold the prints will cost you half that new anyway. The paintings were all picked up from private collections by the owner, who had a fine eye for good art." That's what the daughter said, anyway, and Michael had kept his expression pleasant as she showed the two dozen paintings like they came straight from the Louvre. Most were mediocre at best.

They entered the main gallery where the paintings were hung. "Okay, here's the original stuff. One sculpture up front. Twenty-six paintings, ranging in size from sixteen centimeters to sixty-six, all framed and behind protective clearsteel because of the value and quality of the work."

The Ferengi sneered up at a nude portrait. "What is *that*?"

"Um...." Michael checked the list. "Portrait of a Day, Artist Unknown. Priced at 3,500 credits."

"For that? It looks. . . grotesque! Is it male or female?"

"Male. It was originally part of the Talbot Collection. An important collection at one time, and most of the paintings have since gone into other important collections, but this one came to us through an auction."

"Your 'collections' mean nothing to me, hoo-mon. I told you, I am only interested in the prints."

"Our collections mean something to us," Michael blurted, finally losing it. "The prints are fine but many humans appreciate originality. These are all one-of-a-kind artworks. They aren't turned out by the hundred thousand like the prints your franchise gives you. These were all painted by one artist, by hand, and painstakingly preserved -- some of these are two centuries old! Each one is unique, no two like it in the universe."

Qualog sucked air through his peg teeth and shivered. "I hope not! You say. . . hoo-mons like the
"Many do. The franchise probably caters to folks who don't have a lot to spend, but I'll bet you could keep these in a back room for those special customers. Ones with rank or money. Ones who have an interest in making a statement."

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"It's certainly a far cry from the well-appointed starbases we're used to. It still has some of the familiar chain stores, though." Deanna passed Simple Pleasures, Rigellian Toys, Bath 'n Sonics, and stopped in front of ExquisiPrint. "This is a new one."

"Yes, it is." A Ferengi stepped from behind a display of prints on an upright rack. "ExquisiPrint is new to starbases everywhere, but I can guarantee you I have unique items that you can't find elsewhere. I have something to bring color to your standard-issue walls, something you won't be able to resist, or my name isn't Qualog!"

Deanna smiled, faintly unnerved by the overenthusiastic storekeeper she couldn't sense. "Really?" She exchanged amused glances with Natalia.

"Oh, yes, my dear," he purred, taking her arm and guiding her into his well-lit store. "I absolutely do."

"Looks like a bunch of cheap prints." Natalia stuck her hand in one of the rotating racks and pushed, and the print holders clattered around on the spindle. "You'll probably see these at every starbase."

"Are you interested in something original, then? Come with me, to the gallery! Everything here is one-of-a-kind." He took them into a back room. Natalia followed closely, overprotective, but Deanna actually appreciated that this time. "This, for instance -- I just brought this all the way from Cavallis colony. It's an original painting. The price is a reflection of quality, and really less than it should be, for such a fine work."

Qualog had made the painting the central attraction on the wall opposite the door. In a simple black frame, about a meter tall, the painting featured a nude human male from the back. He stood in a doorway overlooking a grassy yard. The artist had chosen to paint the subject from the shoulders down, filling most of the canvas with him, left elbow and most of the right hand beyond the edge of the painting, with only hints of door frame and yard.

Deanna stared at the broad, muscled shoulders cast in sensual relief by strong light from an unknown source, the curve of the spine down to the buttocks -- the subject was shown in partial profile, one leg just starting to bend as if about to take a step, but not bent enough to hide the half-erect penis and its accompanying testicles in accurate detail.

"How striking," she managed at last.

"That's just what others have said -- you see the fine detail, every muscle in the torso and the leg shown plainly -- quite a fit specimen, and every female who comes in stares at it just as you're doing. You see how the color of the skin -- "

"How much?" Deanna asked.

Qualog straightened up, smiling broadly at the prospect of a purchase. "I knew you'd appreciate fine art! A mere four thousand credits, and I'll only charge you two hundred for the frame, which is worth a good deal more than -- "
"One thousand, with the frame."

"Oh, now," the Ferengi chided, caressing her arm, "certainly you can see -- "

"This is accurate but it is not fine art."

Qualog clasped his hands in front of him, looked at the painting, and shook his head. "Three thousand. And one hundred for the frame."

"One thousand five hundred, with the frame."

"Come now, Commander -- surely you see how the brush strokes -- "

"I have seen fine art, in Paris and London museums. I have seen the masters. This is an amateurish attempt -- there is no sense of balance, no real point to the painting. It's a sensationalistic nude. My offer stands, take it or leave it."

In the end, after much bickering from Qualog, he parted with it for one thousand seven hundred fifty and wrapped it, then tried to charge for the wrapping. She glared him into giving it to her. Natalia followed her out looking askance at her for the purchase.

"Are you going to hang it in your office?"

"Goddess, no, it's not going to see the light of day again. I'm putting it in storage."

"But why buy it if it's -- " Natalia stared at her, a little cross-eyed in shock. "It's him."

Deanna glared at her, glancing around to make sure no one was near. "Forget you ever saw it. Please."

"But how -- "

"I don't know how! I have to find out if this is the only one. Please, just forget I have it."

"But what if it isn't him? It could be someone else -- it could be the artist's imagination."

"Are you suggesting that I don't know what he looks like?"

Natalia followed her without another protest and actually felt amused, after the shock wore off. Deanna, having no patience with that, left her at the transporter room and took the painting directly to the cargo hold where some of her family's personal items were stored. But standing in the cavernous hold with the parcel staring at the containers devoted to holding their allotment of spare personal items, she realized there was nowhere to put it where it would not be found. The only container large enough was also the one in which Jean-Luc kept his wine, and he often came down himself to retrieve a bottle when there was an occasion. Leaving it out loose might result in discovery by someone else.

She took it back to their quarters, hid it in several locations and took it out again, then decided. Leaving it under the mattress temporarily, she went to find some materials with which to execute her plan. She'd wall it up in a closet, keep it there until she figured out what to do.

She returned to find Jean-Luc had come in for some reason -- she could sense him there, and heard him humming in the bathroom. Quickly she tucked the large sheet of gray laminate in the back of the closet and was across the room when he emerged.

"Cygne," he exclaimed happily. "I've concluded my business with the station commander early. 
Since the children are still in school and you're off -- "

"-- we could go shopping," she finished.

He raised both eyebrows. "Well, that wasn't exactly what -- didn't you just go shopping?"

"Not with you."

"What are you up to?" He palmed her chin, making her look him in the eye. "Have you got something up your sleeve?"

"Maybe." She flirted with her eyes, took a handful of his jacket, and placed a teasingly-light kiss on his lips. "Would you like to look up my sleeve?"

"Maybe. You should probably hide that somewhere other than the bed, by the way. I heard something crack when I sat down."

He pointed, and she experienced a moment of what she was sure must be heart failure. He'd pulled the painting out and leaned it against the wall on the other side of the bed. Then she realized -- he probably wouldn't know what it was even if he did look at it. How many people ever saw themselves from behind?

"Oh -- that was temporary. I meant to put it somewhere better but hadn't thought of a place yet. I just didn't want the children to find it. Would you like to see?"

"It's not a gift for me, I take it."

"Oh, no, it's -- for my mother." Who would probably appreciate it, actually. The only trouble was she'd also hang it somewhere she could see it often. Like her bedroom.

Deanna wanted to smack herself. What was she thinking? She laid the parcel out on the bed and pried up the flaps of fiberboard then layers of tissue. Jean-Luc stared, chin dropped, for a few minutes. "Where did you get this?" he breathed.

"On the base. It's an interesting portrait."

He stabbed a finger in and shoved away a fold of tissue paper, revealing the signature in the lower right corner. "Why did you buy this?"

Somehow, he knew. She'd thought it must have been done from memory. If he recognized it, knew the signature, then it argued in favor of his knowing the artist who had painted it. She swallowed, glancing from his face to the painting and back. Hoped it appeared to be confusion rather than stalling for time.

"It seemed the sort of thing she would appreciate. She has a marvelous statue -- you probably remember the one in her greenhouse? I know it isn't to your taste, Jean, but I never intended to hang it up here."

He stared at her, questions and anger and surprise dancing in his eyes, and then a whole new problem occurred to her. If she kept pretending not to know who was in the painting, would it hurt his feelings? He turned away to pace in a tight circle. "You bought it for your mother."

"Well... I thought about myself first. But it's not something you would appreciate, I'm sure, it's certainly not really *good* art, in a classical sense, but it's appealing in other ways." Inspiration came slowly, the words formed, and she went along with it. "In fact, I thought at first that it was you -- but
it can't be you, how could it be? Unless you've been posing in the nude without telling me?" She started packing it away again, trying very hard to be nonchalant. "I would never give it to Mother if it was you -- I don't know quite what I'd do with it, but I certainly wouldn't give it away."

"You thought it was -- me." His hands fell limp at his sides. "You thought it was, but you decided it wasn't?"

She smoothed the packing tape over the fiberboard, turned around, and crossed her arms. Contemplated him while he stared at the package. "Are you saying there is a chance that it is?"

He backed without looking and bumped into the table. Leaning against it, he groaned, palm to forehead. "How could it be?"

"That's what I asked you. Is it?"

"It must be. But she said -- " He fumbled for words, pressing the heel of his hand into his eye socket. "Hell. Lorena said she would never let it -- Where did you find it?"

"In ExquisiPrints. How do you think it got to a half-finished starbase in the Gamma Quadrant?"

"I don't know."

It sunk in at last what she was doing. She went to take her husband's hands. "I'm sorry. I thought you wouldn't recognize it. I didn't know you knew it existed. I knew who it was, and I meant to find out where it came from and make sure it was the only one before I got rid of it. I never would have shown it to anyone. Although, there were probably a lot of customers who saw it before I found -- "

"You did recognize it," he interrupted accusingly.

"I thought you wouldn't. I didn't want to embarrass you."

He laughed, incredulous and scornful. "So you're not giving it to your mother?"

"Absolutely not. Who is Lorena?"

The momentary smile vanished. He pondered while she moved in for a hug, pushing herself into his arms. "I don't know any more," he murmured. "It's been decades. It can't have escaped your notice that I'm not quite like that any more."

"Except you are. I've seen you stand just like that in doors, one hand on each side, half-turned, looking back at me. It's your body, in shape and proportion. She even captured your skin tone and the faint scar on your thigh."

"From when I tried to climb a fence when I was a boy. Yes, she was quite accurate. She took a picture of me. I saw her a few days later, and she'd done the painting from the picture. A departure from her meticulous renderings of flowers and fruit, wouldn't you say? She promised she'd never tell anyone who it was or let it be sold. I can only imagine that she must have died. . . ."

Deanna kissed his cheek. "Let's go. I know exactly what we can do -- how would you like to watch me question a Ferengi to find out where it came from?"

"Let's try something first."

She watched him re-open the packaging and flip the painting over. Labels had been affixed to the back. She went to bend over his shoulder as he sat on the edge of the bed and read.
"These are auction labels. See, the lot number, the auction house -- it's been auctioned twice. Once from Lloyd's of London -- good God. And this is a collection label. Taft's Gallery, and a handwritten price. What were they asking for this on the base?"

"Qualog wanted four thousand. He must be having trouble selling the paintings, there's an entire room full of them and the station hasn't even been finished yet. I told him one thousand and negotiated to one thousand seven hundred fifty."

"That much?" He flipped the painting back over and wrinkled his brow. "Lorena was a still-life artist, and she wasn't even very good at that."

"What was she like?" Deanna moved to sit on her knees next to him. "How well did you know her?"

"Hardly at all. I was on leave on a colony, it escapes me which one -- I spent a day with her after meeting her in a small gallery near the hotel I was staying in. I stopped in a few days later to say good-bye and she'd hung this over the mantel. I was horribly embarrassed, but she insisted she wanted a souvenir of the time we spent together. As if it were so remarkable. I don't remember her face, even..." He drifted for a moment in reverie. "I think she was blond. She laughed a lot. She said this would be her secret, that she'd never tell anyone who it was, they could all think someone else had painted it and she'd always know and remember spending time with me."

Deanna studied the painting again, touching the clear surface over it. "She painted this in a few days -- she used such fine brush strokes, such attention to every little variation of pigmentation. She must have lost sleep doing this. It's a work of love."

"Oh, I doubt it was that -- it was only a day."

"But it was a day with you. She valued it highly. How long ago?"

"I don't even remember. I think I was a lieutenant, possibly lieutenant-commander. At least forty years. Probably more."

"This painting traveled all the way to the Gamma Quadrant for me to find. I find that fascinating."

Deanna smiled at the portrait, ran a fingertip down the leg. "If only it wasn't a nude, I'd want to hang it. It's like Lorena sent me a present."

Jean-Luc looked at her as if she'd just suggested that they pose for a nude portrait with the crew.

"In her own way, for the time she knew you, she loved you," Deanna said. "She must have at least known you well enough to understand you wouldn't appreciate this being easily identifiable."

"How would you feel if our positions were reversed?"

"If you want me to pose for a portrait similar to this one I'll -- "

"Never mind. Bad example." He began wrapping the portrait again. "It's obvious that this was auctioned after she died, and that it's been passed along until this opportunistic Ferengi bought it while purchasing enough merchandise to start his store here."

"What will we do with it?"

"I'll just put it in the closet for now. Let's go back to what we want to do with our free afternoon." He stood up with the box.

"Can we take off the uniforms?"
"Certainly. But what would you like to do?"

"I think I can figure that out once I get your uniform off."

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"Mom, can we see what's in this?"

Deanna turned to find Cordelia had picked a thin, tall box. Hunting through the attic was quickly becoming Christmas in June. So far they'd discovered disintegrating Christmas ornaments, an ancient bicycle, and pictures of Jean-Luc when he was a boy. Not to mention a treasure trove of keepsakes that had been appraised in numbers that would keep the winery running for fifty years whether they actually made wine or not.

Together they carried the box to the table they'd set up and pried it open. Cordy brushed her hair back from her face; she had her father's flyaway hair in her mother's hair color, and her long relaxed curls could go to frizz in any humidity. The threatening clouds hadn't yet turned into the early summer storm they promised, but Cordy was suffering.

"It's a picture." Cordy peeled back layers of ancient tissue. "A painting. Wow."

Deanna blinked. "Oh, dear."

It was the portrait. All these years, it must have been hidden up here when she'd thought it had been destroyed long before.

"Look, Mom, there's a note. It's got your name on it."

Jean-Luc had said he would 'take care of it.' He'd said later, after the painting vanished, that he'd 'taken care of it.' And here it was, with a note from him. She took the paper from her daughter. Jean-Luc's handwriting, rarely seen anywhere due to the proliferation of padds and standardized type, but she knew it immediately. It was dated but the numbers held no immediate significance.

'My darling Deanna,

I thought long and hard about what to do with this picture and decided that it should go to you. Lorena may have had a day, and she may have been inspired to paint this because of it, but I gave you myself when we married and therefore you are the painting’s rightful owner.

I only wish that I could have been so young for you, chérie. Thank you for the happiest years of my life. At times I feel that I must have been reborn in your arms.

All my love,

Jean-Luc'

"Mom, what's wrong?"

Deanna wiped tears away on the back of her hand and folded the note into a pocket. "Nothing, dear. Please put this back in its box and leave it over there against that wall. A friend gave it to me a long time ago, but it really doesn't go with anything. I'll decide what to do with it later. I'm going downstairs, do you want anything to drink?"
"No, thanks. I still have some water over there."

"I'll be back in a bit."

Deanna clomped down the narrow stepladder and hurried through the chateau to the stairs. On the ground floor, she strode through the rooms and found Jean-Luc in the study, looking out at the wind in the branches of the trees.

"Hello, cygne," he said, smiling up at her. "How is it coming?"

"Fine, Cordy's helping tremendously. I thought I'd come see how you were."

He looked down at the book in his lap. "Maupassant and I were just talking about you."

"Him again? Would you care for some tea?"

He closed the book and placed it on the table at his side with great care. Hands on the arms of the chair, he rose, steady and slow, and took the first tentative steps, after which he moved much more easily. "I would like tea. Especially if a beautiful girl joins me for a cup."

"I'll call Cordy down from the attic."

He laughed, raspy and ending with a cough. One arm went around her. Dry lips brushed her cheek. "Thank you, I already have a beautiful girl. But you can ask her just the same, if you please."

"I love you," she whispered.

He raised an eyebrow and studied her at close range. The surgery on his eyes had done away with the incessant squinting, but he still seemed to have trouble focusing. "I wondered. You've found something in the attic that's upset you. I can still tell, you know."

"I know you can. Remember the portrait?"

"Ah, that. With a note. I don't recall what it said. Something maudlin, or perhaps sentimental?"

"It doesn't matter. I boxed it again and put it aside. Cordy was impressed, of course."

Jean-Luc chuckled, his shoulders shaking. "Oh, dear. I hope you didn't tell her who it was."

"No. But it reminded me of things I like to remember."

He struck out for the kitchen. "I like to remember a lot of things. How you used to hide underwear in my uniform drawer. How you teased me but always made me feel like I was the luckiest man in the galaxy that you did."

"I always felt I was the lucky one."

She matched his slow pace, and as they came down the hall they heard Cordelia on the stairs. "Mom?"

"We're about to have some tea. Put the pot on, won't you?"

Cordy smiled at her father and rushed over to kiss him on the cheek. "Sorry, couldn't help it. Handsome men do that to me."

"Flattery will get you everywhere, chérie." Jean-Luc's fingers brushed his daughter's arm. "But you
do realize I'm a married man?"

"I did not know that," Cordy stated, winking at him. "I assumed this lovely lady was merely your escort for the evening." She whirled about and had the tea pot out of a cupboard in an instant.

Deanna provided a stabilizing arm for her husband as he sat at the kitchen table and bent to kiss him, on the lips, the cheek, and after a shared smile and a meeting of the eyes, on the lips again.

"Are you sure you're married?" Cordy asked. She turned on the stove burner and set a full pot on it.

"Absolutely." Jean-Luc's jaw trembled, and for a few seconds his eyes lost focus; he blinked, and suddenly all was right again. He smiled up at Deanna. "Cygne. I've got something to tell you."

Deanna sat down and reached for his hand. "Really?"

"I heard from Will. He's bringing John and Bell to see us."

"That's wonderful," Deanna replied, smiling. "Did he tell you this?"

"Oh, yes. I hope we see Bev and Tom this year. Do you think Lora will be able to get away?"

"I'll be sure to ask when I hear from her. It's about time for another letter from her."

The tea pot whistled. Cordy soon had a tray ready, and brought it to them. "I'll pour, Mother," she said, picking up the silver heirloom pot she'd put the hot water in. "Papa, would you like sugar and milk?"

"Ah, no, just a little sugar. If you stir it with your finger that should suffice."

"Papa's such a flirt," Cordy said, grinning. It was their usual exchange over tea. Deanna had no such ritual, and Cordy prepared her tea as she liked it and passed her the cup.

They sipped and nibbled on shortbread biscuits, and when tea was over Cordy cleared the dishes. "I'll be upstairs," she announced, heading back to the attic. "We have a lot to do yet."

"I'll be up shortly," Deanna called after her.

"Marvelous girl," Jean-Luc said. "Takes after her mother."

"Would you like to go back to the study?"

"The living room, I think."

She steadied him as he rose, let him cross the distance between kitchen table and living room sofa unaided, and offered an arm that he ignored. He patted the cushion next to him and pulled her half on his lap when she sat.

"Jean!"

"I love you, Deanna."

She leaned into his arms, which had too quickly lost their strength, and carefully turned so she could put her head on his shoulder without leaving her weight on his thighs. "I love you, too. More than ever."

"I know," he said softly, bowing his head. Tears streamed down his face. "You're still here."
His cheek felt like parchment against her palm. She pulled him to her lips, then rested her own cheek to his. "I'll always be here, Jean-Fish. Always."

"Even if I'm not like I was in the painting?"

"Jean-Luc, you have never been that man in that portrait to me. You were never my Portrait of a Day. You will always be my husband, my hajira, and that means more to me than anything."

His hand tangled in her hair, stroking it, and he sighed heavily. "Thank you," he whispered. "Thank you, ma belle."

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