In the Footsteps of Another

by jamelia116

Summary

After her lover Tom Paris is lost to her, Ro Laren leaves the Maquis and returns to her home planet of Bajor, where Vedek Bareil welcomes her to the House of the Prophets. Although she anticipates her sojourn will be short while she decides what to do with the rest of her life, the Prophets lead Ro onto unexpected paths, and into an encounter with a most surprising partner on the way.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
Sanctuary

In the Footsteps of Another

A Sequel to The Mercenary

by jamelia

The path to the Supplicant's Gate of the House of the Prophets was old, uneven and rocky. The tall woman who progressed up the path with a large duffel bag hanging from her left shoulder hardly seemed to notice. Her strides were long, eating up huge chunks of ground with each step. She was obviously in very good physical shape.

Her emotional state -- ah, now -- that was more questionable. Her eyes were puffy, as if she had cried recently. And she had. When she left the transportation center after landing on Bajor, the tears burst from her eyes, unstoppable. For over fourteen years, the young woman had been an exile from the world where she had been born. From the first time she'd heard the Cardassians had finally left her devastated home planet, she had looked forward to the day she would be able to return to her homeland. She would have liked to think the tears flowing down her cheeks were tears of joy at her return.

Ro Laren knew better.

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"Who comes?" A disembodied voice floated from behind the huge wooden door of the gatehouse.

"One who would seek the Ways of the Prophets," answered Ro. Her ritualized reply satisfied the voice from behind the portal. An ancient steel bolt could be heard scraping the loops of matching metal as it was withdrawn. In truth, the bolt meant nothing, for even in a time of civil disturbance, it would have been pulled back to allow any to enter. This sect was known for its succoring of the disenfranchised, the weak, the lost. It was the secret, really, of its power on Bajor. That, and the fact that the late, greatly beloved Kai Opaka once dwelt at this monastery.
"Enter, my child." Ro stepped through the shadowed opening to come face-to-face with an old woman wearing the robes of a vedek. Dipping her head in respect as she crossed the threshold, Ro was relieved to see the welcoming smile on the old one's lips. To this vedek, she must seem a child indeed, although it had been a very long time since Ro had considered herself young. There had been a brief time when she had been turned into a child again on the Enterprise, of course, but the temporary effects of a molecular inversion field hardly counted. Even then, Ro had felt old, no matter what age she might have appeared to be on the outside.

"What brings you to our House, child?" Ro was asked.

"I wish to see if I am called by the Prophets to serve them, in this House . . . or wherever they might need me," Ro answered simply. "I spoke to Vedek Bareil a few months ago. He said I could come here to find sanctuary while I decided what direction my life should take." A hint of a grim smile flitted across her features, even though her red-rimmed dark eyes had no glint of humor in them. "Now I need guidance even more than I did back then. I never thought my life could get worse than it was when he offered, but it has."

The elderly vedek nodded her head in understanding. "We will certainly grant you asylum in your time of need, but you do understand that one does not run away from their troubles to serve the Prophets, one comes in answer to Their Call."

"I do understand this, Vedek . . . "

"My name is Vedek Jaxa, my child. And your name is . . . "

She had been prepared for this question, but the answer Ro had expected to give, Ria Larys, slipped out of her mind. Instead, she replied, "Parys Folaren." I wonder where that came from, thought Ro, but immediately, she knew. Paris. She was very forlorn from losing Paris.

"Come, Supplicant Parys. You are fortunate you did not come yesterday, when our Vedek Bareil was away at Deep Space Nine. He is in residence today. Follow me."

Following the vedek up a long set of stairs, the young woman paused when her guide stopped before another door and opened it. Vedek Jaxa stood aside to allow Ro a breathtaking view of the Gardens of the Temple. A long path wound through lush, semi-tropical growth. High above, an arched, clear roof protected the gardens from the harsh winters suffered in this temperate zone of Bajor. Even at the worst of times during the Occupation, the Cardassians were wise enough to leave that miraculous feat of engineering undamaged, though they had been destructive enough in other ways to the temple and its grounds.
"Take that path, turn right at the lower gate, and follow the third path to the left up to Vedek Bareil's office. I will let him know you are coming, my child."

Ro thanked the holy woman and strolled through the vegetation, her duffel bumping against her back. By the time she had found the third path to the left, her heart had already found some solace, just from encountering such beauty. There was something about this place that exuded sanctity and peace.

"Parys Folaren? Ro Laren, you don't think I would betray you to the Federation after offering you asylum?" Despite his words, Vedek Bareil was smiling, his hands extended in welcome.

"To tell you the truth, I'm not quite sure where that came from. I was going to give something very close to my real name, but that just jumped off my lips."

"The Prophets are already speaking through you, perhaps?"

"More likely it's because the name Paris has been on my lips so often the last few weeks." And in my heart and my soul, she reflected silently, before adding, "I've been living with an old friend from my Academy days. He . . . he . . . uh. I'm sorry." The tears flooded her eyes again. This had to stop, she couldn't spend the rest of her life crying like this. All her firm admonishments to herself were futile, as her mind cried out, Tom! Thomas Eugene Paris! You stupid, heroic, self-sacrificing bastard!

"Ah. He's still with the Maquis?"

"No. We were on Delistor II, working for the Maquis. Starfleet was after me. He . . . he . . . by the Prophets! I can't keep doing this every time I think of him!" A huge shudder rocked her slender frame before she shook her head and said, in a quavery, yet resolute voice, "Tom saw they were after me. He took the robes I was wearing, to draw them off so that the rest of us could escape. He knew they would capture him. Since he was with me, he knew he would be taken for a Maquis. Tom, . . . he . . . he sacrificed himself so we could get away. And for his trouble, my cell leader still thought he was a spy and a traitor to us! Even though everyone got away except for Tom . . ."

Ro could no longer hold in her grief. As her body wracked with sobs, the only thing the sympathetic vedek could do was hold her hands in his and stroke her hair as she allowed her bitterness to
expunge itself in weeping.

When she finally was capable of sitting without sobbing, Bareil went out of his office and returned with a basin of lukewarm water and a cloth. He encouraged her to bathe her eyes and face while he elicited the rest of her story: Ro's tortured decision to defect to the Maquis, betraying Captain Picard, her mentor, when he refused to let her come out of her undercover assignment when she no longer could tell what was right; her confusion when she was with the Maquis, where she never felt comfortable; her chance meeting with Tom Paris, also a Starfleet pariah, when he was injured and in trouble; and finally, how the long friendship between the two was transformed into a brief, incandescent love affair that ended only with his capture.

"People think that Tom is cocky, flirtatious, sex-obsessed and shallow. My cell leader Chakotay once said he was 'a disaster waiting to happen.' Not in my hearing, though; I heard about it afterwards. And I guess maybe he is all those things -- except for shallow. He keeps himself hidden so deeply behind those masks of his that everyone has trouble seeing the real Tom. But he's also funny, considerate, loving, brave, and the most loyal man I ever met, once he's given you his trust. He's not perfect, but he always tries, which is more than I can say for a lot of people I've met. And I've lost him. We just found each other again and now he's going to be in a Federation prison for only the Prophets know how many years. All because of me."

"Laren -- I may call you that in private, I hope? From what you say, Tom wanted to keep you safe. You said he wanted to give your life back to you, when he sacrificed himself?" At her affirmative nod, he went on, "I won't tell you not to grieve for his loss, but your Tom knew what he was doing. He offered you his life out of his love. Even if that is the last thing he can ever give you, how much more precious a gift can someone give? I have no doubt he's a very good man, just as you say, to willingly yield his own freedom for others, some that he'd never even met. But if you let your grief get in the way of your living your life, if you let your sorrow overwhelm you, he will have made his sacrifice for you in vain."

Dabbing at her now red and puffy eyes, Ro nodded her head ruefully. "I know. I just miss him so much. For almost twenty years I couldn't cry, and now I can't seem to stop. He gave me so much more when we were together, not only just my freedom when he was captured. He gave me back my life... in... in some other ways, too." She hesitated, not feeling comfortable admitting to the sexual aspects of the relationship, and then she remembered to whom she was speaking. Until the Cardassians had finally left Bajor, Vedek Bareil had lived on an occupied planet all his life. Ro knew her story was far from unique.

"I was sexually mistreated by the Cardassians when I was a child in a relocation camp. Actually, it happened off and on until I was rescued by the Resistance when I was fifteen. Until Tom helped me, I never received much enjoyment from being in anyone's bed. He gave that part of my life back to me, too." She smiled at one of her last memories of him, when she helped Tom attach his silver Bajoran earring and felt his pagh. She had teased him that he should become a vedek himself. She thought he might actually have considered it. If only she'd been able to sense their coming doom! Foretelling the future obviously was not a talent of hers.
"He must be a wonderful young man to have given you so many gifts. Did you give him nothing in return? Isn't this the man I've heard about, the one from Caldik Prime? You said he was troubled himself."

She grimaced. Even here on Bajor, in a great religious temple, Tom's misstep at Caldik Prime was common knowledge! Maybe he would have needed to escape to the Beta Quadrant to escape his notoriety. "Yes, it's the same Tom Paris. He was a pretty lost soul when we met, I guess."

"So, a wounded, lost Ro Laren met a wounded, lost Tom Paris. They helped each other find something that was missing in each of their lives, and now the Prophets have parted them. Perhaps the two of you have destinies you are fated to find separately. Yet I think both of you are better equipped to walk on your own than before you met."

"I should be grateful for that, you mean, Vedek Bareil?"

"What do you think?"

Ro's "eagle" between her brows flew deeper into the bridge of her crinkled Bajoran nose. "I think I hate that counselor-answering-a-question-with-another-question answer, Vedek Bareil. Deanna Troi always used to use that trick on the Enterprise whenever you wanted her to help with some problem."

He laughed. "She must have been a very good counselor then. One thing you'll find here, Laren, is that one question often must be answered with another question, and another and even another, before the true answer can be found. That is the way of the Prophets, too. And by the way, just call me Bareil if we are speaking together like this. Titles can get in the way of a good counseling session."

Ro couldn't help smiling back, although it made her reddened eyes ache. "All right, Bareil. I'll try. Although I still think you should have been Kai Bareil."

"I am content. I have enough trouble finding the time to visit Deep Space Nine as it is."

"You meet with the Emissary often?"
"From time to time, but it's his assistant I visit. Major Kira Nerys. We love each other, but her work keeps her there and mine keeps me here -- when I'm not off on some errand for Kai Winn. I know about missing the one you love, Laren."

"At least you get to see her sometimes. If I tried to visit Tom when he gets to prison, I'd be arrested myself. I've been tempted to give myself up, to tell you the truth, if only I could be assured of going where Tom was." Ro's dark eyes met the vedek's warm brown ones. He was a skilled negotiator. Maybe he could relay this desire to the Emissary and the authorities . . . no, it was impossible, and she knew it. She couldn't give herself up. He had known nothing, while she knew too much. It was better for the Maquis this way, even though it was so painful for Tom and herself.

"No one knows what the future holds for us, Laren. Even looking into the Orb of Prophecy does not guarantee what may come. Only the Prophets know that."

"Perhaps."

"So, are you willing to stay here for a while before you return to the Maquis? Or are you looking to follow a different path?"

"I have no idea, Ved . . . Bareil." She smiled as she caught herself. "My life's taken so many side trips already. I think what I really need is to stay in one place for a while, to meditate and pray. Maybe then I can find the path that the Prophets have planned for me. When I pick a path out for myself, it doesn't seem to work out very well."

"You'd better be careful, Laren. You're starting to sound like a vedek already." She smiled, a genuine one, this time, as they exited his office. The vedek was relieved to see that his troubled guest already seemed calmer than she had upon her arrival. He was confident that Ro Laren would find the peace and the answers she sought while dwelling in this House.

First, there were other errands, including a visit to the office of the Domiciliary, Vedek Lixan. Ro, who from now on in this House was to be known officially as Supplicant Parys Folaren, needed a room, some food, and candles for saying her prayers.

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Stretching her back and sighing deeply, the new supplicant arose from her knees. The candles on the floor before her were still flickering, but now the flames were being used for illumination rather than for the symbolic raising of prayer. The room was not large. The three candles provided sufficient light for the occupant of the cell to find her path to the large shuttered window. Ro threw open the
wooden panels and looked out upon the north end of the gardens. It was still so early in the morning, the starry night sky sparkled high above the transparent roof, although Ro couldn't really see them. The slight distortion from the plas-glass roof covering obscured the stars. It didn't matter. Ro had seen plenty of stars in her time.

The former Starfleet officer stretched her shoulders one at a time before arching her back. Vedek Bareil had assigned her to work in the gardens. He had started his life as a religious doing the same tasks Ro Laren was doing now. Digging, planting, watering, trimming, pinching off spent blooms and runaway shoots, harvesting berries and herbs -- all were tasks almost as new to Ro Laren as they were to Ro's alter ego Supplicant Parys. Horticulture had never been an overriding interest of hers, but it had its advantages. Since it was such hard work, she'd had no trouble sleeping. The rigorous labors she performed all day helped banish troubling visions of a certain pair of blue eyes throughout the night.

Occasionally, Ro had gone into one of the horticultural bays on the Enterprise to help Keiko O'Brien complete her tasks while they chatted. When Keiko and her husband Miles transferred to Deep Space Nine, Ro and Keiko had said their good-byes to each other with their hands buried in dirt. Keiko hadn't really wanted to leave Enterprise. She had continued to dig and plant right up to the last minute of her time on the flagship of the fleet.

Ro looked up, although she knew she could not see the station. *I wonder if Keiko and Miles . . . and Molly . . . are still up there?* Ro reflected. So close, and yet so far away now. As a Starfleet renegade, she wouldn't have any opportunities to look up old friends on Deep Space Nine.

Ro had never had a lot of friends on the Enterprise, of course, although she'd had more there than anywhere else she'd ever lived. Besides Miles and Keiko, Guinan was probably the one she'd been closest to. Geordie La Forge, too -- she'd always been comfortable around the Enterprise's chief engineer. They'd "gone to the other side" together once. And Picard . . . no, don't go there. Not tonight.

Sighing again, Ro was about to turn away from the window when she heard a soft voice call to her, "Supplicant Parys? Are you awake?"

"Yes," she whispered in answer. "Who is it?"

The short, somewhat stout figure of Vedek Terzy came into view. "You're certainly up early. Or is it late? Did you ever get to sleep?"

"Up early. I was so tired from all that digging you had me doing yesterday, I could barely finish my
prayers before nodding off to sleep. I'm still stiff and sore. I'm not sure I actually finished all my prayers, so I decided to say them again this morning."

"Whether you finished them or not, saying them again won't hurt," he laughed. After glancing inside her window, he raised his left eyebrow quizzically. "Three candles? Are you from Kalyani Province?"

Ro looked back over her shoulders at the three candles, arranged into a triangle. "My mother was. Does that have some significance?"

"Why, the Rabini Sect of the Northern Kalyani District uses three candles arranged in a triangle for prayer. Didn't you know that?"

"No. I always use three candles because my mother did. She's been gone for many years. I never thought to ask anyone about it before. I just thought it was some kind of family ritual. What is the Rabini Sect?"

"Fairly mainstream, actually, but never had a lot of followers. You don't know what the three candles mean, then?"

"No. Do you know?"

"Why, yes, of course. The apex of the triangle is the candle of Faith, the candle to the left of the base is Good Works, and the candle at the right symbolizes Mercy. I always thought the symbolism was quite beautiful in its simplicity. The emphasis on good works, the giving of the self to others, compassion; it's all quite powerful. I'm sorry it isn't more generally known. I learned about it when I was a young man, when I visited several temples and monasteries trying to decide where the Prophets had called me to serve."

Ro considered carefully what she should say, then decided there wasn't much she could do except to be honest. "I don't want to seem ungrateful to this monastery, but where is their temple? Could I go there to study their teachings?"

"The Cardassians tore it down to rubble about fifteen-sixteen years ago. Seems that the 'Good Works' were interpreted by most of the Rabini to mean sympathizing with the Resistance. You may be one of the few left on Bajor to pray with three candles now, Supplicant Parys."
"Oh." The disappointment resonated in her voice.

"Perhaps you can revive the custom, make it better known. That could be what you've been called to do, you know!"

"That's rather difficult when I don't really know anything about it myself."

"The library will have information about it, I'm sure. Much has been lost, but I'm sure our monastery will have what you need to know. And now I think it's time for our Dawn Greeting prayers in the Temple."

Looking up to the roof, Ro could see that the darkness was giving way to a pearly light to the east. "Yes, I guess I'd better blow out the candles."

"Always blow the left one first, the Good Works one, then the Mercy one to the right, and then the candle of Faith."

Following his instructions, Ro realized that was how she always had blown out the candles. Something she still remembered from her mother, perhaps? Hard to say. As she made ready to walk to the door opposite the window, Vedek Terzy called out, "You don't need to walk all the way around. This window is easy to climb in and out of, if you want to go through the gardens. Going through the Sister House takes longer."

"Sounds like you have experience with these matters, Vedek Terzy."

"When I was young, I did. Not now! There's a reason only the youngest vedeks and supplicants have rooms at ground level. But I still remember how it was. Come, Parys. If your clothing gets caught, I'll help you out the window."

Though Terzy was her immediate superior in the gardens, Ro shot him a frigid glance. "I can do it, sore or not!" Gathering up the fullness of her robes, she made one quick hop to the sill, a jump down to the ground outside, and quickly pulled the drawstring to close the shutters.

"Ah, to be young and limber again!" joked Vedek Terzy as he led Ro down the path to the Temple.
After the prayers in the temple and an hour of preliminary tasks in the garden, Ro found herself seated for breakfast in the Refectory between Vedek Lixan and another supplicant to the order. Tir Graxom was still a very young man, barely in his twenties, yet his eyes were old -- not unlike her own, Ro decided. He had nothing to say throughout their breakfast of botan biscuits and jumja tea, even though only the midday meal was supposed to be eaten in silent reflection.

Vedek Lixan more than made up for him. By the end of breakfast, Ro had received a running commentary on exactly how many candles, linen sheets, and pieces of soap were needed per week to keep the inhabitants of the monastery satisfied. She was about to listen to a lecture enumerating the resources needed to clothe the House for a year when the vedeks and supplicants of the House were called to the closing prayer of thanksgiving given by Vedek Sharom, Bareil's first assistant. Ro hoped she would be forgiven for giving more thanks for the ending of the meal rather than for the food.

Respectfully bowing her head towards the table where Bareil was seated next to Sharom, Ro gathered her dishes to bring them to the kitchen alcove, where they were to be collected for cleaning. As she stood in line behind several older vedeks, she was startled to hear, "Ro Laren, are you here for the Prophets, or are you here for justice?"

Whipping her head around, she saw that the low, hoarse voice had come from Tir Graxom, who stood behind her. Looking into the eyes of the younger man, Ro saw a burning intensity beneath deceptively hooded lids. A chill ran down her back. Any thought she might have entertained of maintaining her anonymity at this monastery was torn away as an ephemeral illusion. To answer one way or the other seemed impossible, yet some answer she must give.

"So, you can talk, Supplicant Tir. I was beginning to wonder if the Cardassians had stolen your tongue."

His eyes wavered for a moment, and then a sardonic grin slowly spread across his face. "No, but they tried."

Lifting his chin, the young man slipped one finger beneath the high collar of the shirt under his robe and pulled it down from his throat. The hoarse sound of his voice was explained by the ugly scar across his larynx. Ro grimaced at the sight and said, contritely, "I'm sorry, Tir. I wasn't expecting what I said to be so close to true."

Ro had come to the small alcove window. After handing her dirty dishes to Vedek Kyl, one of the
cooks, she waited a few seconds for Tir to hand his own over, allowing him to catch up to her. Side by side, they left the Refectory.

"You didn't answer my question, Ro," he croaked.

She walked in silence for several more seconds before replying, "I don't answer to that name now, Tir. If you address me as I wish to be addressed, I'll be happy to answer you."

He grunted. "As you wish. Are you here to find the Prophets, or are you here for justice, Supplicant Parys?"

At the doorway to the gardens she turned to study his face. "I came in search of my true way, Supplicant Tir. Whether that way leads to a calling as a vedek or to my return to the Maquis is now known only to the Prophets."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Some of us find we don't need to make a choice. Both paths are open to you at this House. Any time you wish to learn more, come see me." Smiling humorlessly, the reed-thin young man walked away from Ro to the carpenter's shop, where his day would be spent.

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For many years in adolescence, Ro had not followed her religion. At the Academy she had made a few hesitant steps to explore her heritage, but it was not until she had been imprisoned in the Jaros II stockade by Starfleet after the massacre at Garon II that she found her faith again. A return to her Bajoran roots supplanted the Starfleet career she had thought shattered beyond repair when the blame for that disaster was fixed upon her head. When Picard had unexpectedly salvaged that career, Ro's faith had remained, although she practiced it privately. But then Picard abandoned her, and after her side trip to the Maquis and to Tom, she now explored a vocation that she had never thought to follow before.

It's easier to find faith when in trouble than in good times, she reflected, which meant trouble for the faithful should prosperity ever return fully to Bajor! Of course, prosperity for Bajor still seemed a long way off.

Many crippled cities, ruined buildings, played out mines, poisoned farmlands, and damaged people still could be found across the face of the planet. Supplicant Parys could do little for most of them. For the last two, however, she found she had an unexpected knack. Some of the plants grown at the
monastery were experimental, developed to see if they could grow in the devastated areas. Ro had some quick success with several plants that not only thrived in the sabotaged soil but even appeared capable of reversing the effects of the poison. Vedek Terzy praised her, proclaiming she had "fertile hands."

Somewhat to her chagrin, Ro had even more success as a counselor. Her no-nonsense style, coupled with Bareil's lessons about "actively listening" to those spilling out their innermost secrets, turned out to be helpful to many who came to the Temple in need of guidance. Bareil made a point of sending women who had been mistreated by the Cardassians to Ro. Aware of her own reluctance to speak of being raped, she knew to keep her mouth shut and just listen to their stories until the right moment came to speak of her own trials. Much of the time, she found it wasn't even necessary. Often, all that was required was asking a question at the right time. When she did need to say something, Ro's message often was simply that what the Cardassians had done to them did not mean all men were untrustworthy. Whenever she said this, the face of a blue-eyed, blond-haired human with a gorgeous smile and a ready wit came to mind.

As the weeks passed, thinking of him hurt less. She only wished there were some way she could ease Tom's mind the way his memory comforted hers. To send him any word at all would probably bring the Federation down on her head and disaster upon her place of refuge.

Instead, Ro found comfort in helping others find their way. Many times she found herself thinking, "What would Deanna say now?" As a result, she found herself answering a direct question with, "What do you think?" often enough to be mortified -- especially since that question really did usually work.

The morning sun was glorious on the day Ro answered the summons to Vedek Bareil's office that she had received shortly after breakfast. He had returned from visiting his Major Kira on the space station late the previous evening. "Parys, how are you doing?" Bareil asked solicitously. On the surface, his question was innocuous; it was the undercurrent in his tone that made Ro uneasy.

"What's wrong?" she replied immediately.

"Why do you say that?" he answered.

"How many questions are we going to ask each other without either of us answering any?" she rejoined, rolling her eyes. His questions were sincere, but she could tell there was more on his mind than a simple desire to know her status at the monastery.
"I should have known better than to try to distract you," he said, sighing. All pretense of inconsequential chatter vanished. "I have something to show you, if you want to see it. I warn you, though; it may upset you. It's about Tom Paris."

Ro kept silent, dreading what he would have to say. Pulling open an ancient wooden paneled door, Bareil revealed a very modern communications unit. After he touched the units of the control panel, a newsnet segment from a few weeks before was displayed.

:::Thomas Eugene Paris, the only son of Starfleet Admiral Owen Paris, was convicted today of treason in San Francisco, North America, Terra. Young Paris, who had been cashiered from Starfleet three years ago for falsifying reports after a fatal shuttle crash, was sentenced to ten to twenty years at Auckland Rehabilitation Colony for crimes against the Federation. A known member of the terrorist group the Maquis, young Paris fired upon a Starfleet vessel and was instrumental in the escape of a Starfleet deserter who was also wanted for treason . . . .

The newsnet piece included a visual log clip of Paris as he was led out of the courtroom, arms and legs encircled by electronic shackles. A man in the uniform of a Starfleet admiral was visible behind the convict, comforting a distraught, hysterically crying woman.

Tears sprang to Ro's eyes. "Alicia . . . Tom's mother . . . and his father. How she must hate me for what I did to Tom! She was always so nice to me . . . when we were in the Academy, she made me feel like part of the family . . ."

"I think we know you didn't really do anything to Tom he didn't want done." Ro flashed her eyes back to the vedek at the double meaning she perceived in his words. He was as calm and enigmatic as ever, yet she was very sure he knew exactly how ambiguously he had worded his comment.

Smearing away the tears that threatened to spill onto her cheeks, Ro agreed, "Well, yes, I guess Tom never did anything he didn't want to do when he was with me. But I'm still sorry for him. Ten years - - that's too long! He was only traveling in a scout ship that used to belong to the Maquis! I'm sure he didn't do anything else! They're throwing the book at him because they haven't gotten hold of me."

"It could have been longer, according to Kira."

"Yes, he could have been sentenced to twenty-five or more years." Oh, Tom, now I know you're gone from me. I kept hoping they didn't really catch you. She breathed out a great sigh. "Bareil, there's one person who should see this, the man who thought Tom was a spy, Chakotay. But if I
send a message, they'll be able to trace it to me here."

"Perhaps not. I was thinking about that. Isn't there some way you can bounce the signal off the station communications relay to disguise the point of origin? You've been trained in that sort of thing, haven't you?"

"Vedek Bareil! I didn't know you could be so duplicitous."

"Not usually, but I gave you sanctuary, and I intend to keep my promise to you."

It didn't take Ro long to send an encrypted message by a complex route with a copy of the newsnet report to Chakotay's rooms at the Maquis base at Langaredoc: "So, do you still think he's a spy, Chakotay?"

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Her message sent, Ro sat listlessly in Bareil's office. The vedek looked upon her with concern. Ro had made much progress since her arrival at the monastery several weeks before, but the message about Tom had visibly deflated her. Studying his options, Bareil knew what the Prophets were telling him to do. He had hoped to wait a bit, but now, clearly, was the time appointed. A short sigh escaped from his lips as he said, "Pray with me, Parys."

Her dull eyes met his, but she followed him in his chant, one which she had never before heard. Gradually, the words penetrated her brain. "Prepare me to be worthy to meet you, prepare me to see you in your truth, prepare me, oh Prophets, for this time of your prophecy . . . "

Understanding dawned in her eyes as she met his gaze. "What is this . . . "

"Come with me, Supplicant Parys Folaren, who is also called Ro Laren."

The vedek left his office by the inner door and climbed narrow steps located at the end of a short hallway. Ro closely followed him. When they reached the third landing, Bareil ushered Ro into a large chamber.

The sparsely furnished room was brightly suffused with early morning sunlight, flooding through large windows which overlooked the outer gardens of the monastery. Only a long wooden bench, richly carved and beautifully finished, was visible in the room proper. There was an alcove opposite the windows, however, which contained a cabinet covered in carvings echoing the bench in style, although not in the actual designs.

Ro felt her heart pounding in her chest as Bareil opened the cabinet. She knew what must be resting behind that door.

An orb. The Orb of this House. The Third Orb, that of Prophecy and Change.

"Ro Laren, your time to look into this Tear of the Prophets has come. You already have known many changes in your life, often seeming to leave you worse off and more bitter than you were before. Whether change has come into your life to transform it ultimately into something better or
worse, we cannot know. If you choose to gaze into this orb, I cannot predict what you may see. It may bring you pain or joy or confusion. Many Bajorans pass their entire lives without ever having this opportunity, so consider carefully what I'm offering you. The chance to do this may never come again. Will you look into the Orb of Prophecy and Change, Ro Laren?"

Her entire body shuddered in agonized excitement. From her studies since her entrance to this monastery she knew every word Vedek Bareil had said was true. No predictions. No guarantees. What was revealed might make her cry in anguish or exult in the glory of the promise of what might be. She might see nothing at all -- that had been known to happen, too. With a terrible anticipation, Ro uttered, "Yes, I would see."

Bareil nodded gravely, walked over and opened the cabinet containing the orb. Its blue light shone out of the oval windows of its case. He stepped aside to give her complete, unfettered access to the orb. After a few seconds of hesitation, Ro carefully opened the double doors of the case.

As Ro stood raptly before it, the light pulsed out of the interior of the orb, rivaling that of the sun outside in intensity, yet her eyes did not squint because of the brightness. And then she fell to her knees as that brightness carried her inside the orb.

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A solid weight rested in her arms, which curved around a small form. A squirming, living form, wrapped in a soft blanket. Her left breast felt a tightening, and she heard a low-pitched voice. "Look at him latch on to that tit!" The pride in the masculine voice was unmistakable. From her right side she saw a man's bare arm, dusted with dark hair that she found herself longing to stroke. He reached around her to touch the back of the child she held. Her child, Ro knew; the caressing arm belonged to the father of her child. A sense of wonder and of accomplishment overwhelmed her.

She was lying in bed, held by one she loved, cuddling a small someone that she was learning to love more and more with every second of his new existence.

A draught of cool air chilled her bared shoulder, yet Ro was content as she felt the rhythmic pull of the small rosebud mouth on her nipple. The baby's tiny wrinkled Bajoran nose somehow was able to take in sufficient air, even though his nostrils seemed to be buried in the flesh of her full breast. One tiny hand rested next to his mouth, intermittently patting the exposed part of her areola in counterpoint to the strong sucking of his mouth.

Ro's right hand was curved around the back of the child's velvety soft head. The boy had dark hair; his little body radiated warmth into her lap. The warmth helped to soothe what she now realized was
her very sore bottom. She felt her own voice vibrating in her throat to the man lying next to her, "You never thought he wouldn't love to suck on my tits, did you? He is your son."

The warm male body rumbled in laughter. "My little Tommy. My namesake. The sucker of tits." She felt a kiss on her right cheek. Her mouth curled into a crooked smile as she succumbed to the urge to turn her head to face Tom.

A scratchy, tickling kiss and a voice that was richly deep in timbre, she realized, as she faced the father of her child . . .

. . . and found herself confronted with the beaming, bearded face of Commander William T. Riker, first officer of the U.S.S. Enterprise.

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"Ro, are you all right? Ro?"

Awareness returned to her. The brightness of the room vanished, fading to the ordinary glory of a sun-filled day.

The door to the cabinet was closed, concealing the Orb of Prophecy and Change within its depths. Ro realized she was gasping, as if she had run many kilometers in terror. Nothing in her vision had been terrible or remotely threatening, yet it had been so very disappointing. This vision was more like a dream, mixing what would never be with something of her past. She had lain in bed with William T. Riker once, on the Enterprise, when neither of them had any memory of their personal animosity. They had shared one night of passion, but no baby had come from it, thank the Prophets.

No child to hold her on the Enterprise, to prevent her from going to Advanced Tactical Training. No child to keep her from having her misadventure with the Maquis. No defection from Starfleet. No rescue of an injured Tom Paris. No life-altering love affair with her oldest friend, and no horrible sense of loss at his capture.

Was that what this vision was about? Telling her that Ro Laren should have remained on the Enterprise and become the lover of Will Riker, bearing him a child? That all of those changes in her life should never have occurred? Or was she to take the name and not the face as the prophecy? Should Tom Paris have fathered her child? Was it her destiny to share his imprisonment? Then why did she see Riker's face and hear his voice? Nothing made sense.
"Bareil, I don't understand any of it. It didn't seem to be a prophecy for my future, but what my life should have been like. The faces I saw were from my past, not from my future. Or have I misunderstood what this orb shows us?"

"I can't answer you, Ro. Usually the visions from this orb are of a possible future, of what may or may not come. There have been times when the past has been revealed, to shed light on the present or the future. Remember also that sometimes what seems to have been the past can turn out to be the future."

As her breath and hammering pulse came back under her control, Ro felt a bit of her old confidence return. Will Riker and Ro Laren? Oh, yeah. Sure.

To her spiritual adviser, however, she said calmly, "Vedek answers again, Bareil? Can't ever give a straight one, can you?"

He laughed and patted her on her elbow. "I'm sorry, I can't help it. I've been doing this too long. You aren't the first and you won't be the last to be so stunned by your vision you couldn't believe what you saw. Time will tell you whether your vision was truly prophecy or some dream-like memory of what once was or what could have been. I can't help you any more, I'm afraid."

She shook her head. "You warned me I might be confused. I should have taken you at your word."

"That's the Ro Laren I know. Or is it the Parys Folaren I know? Sometimes I don't know what to call you myself!"

"May I ask you something? Have you looked into this orb... wait, of course, I'm sure you have. I mean, can you tell me what you saw there, or is it too private?"

Bareil's smile broadened. "Since it's come true, I don't mind telling you. I saw Kira Nerys in my vision, long before I ever knew who she was. When I saw the reports that identified her as the Bajoran liaison to Deep Space Nine for the first time, I knew I had to go to her. And now we are together, as often as we can arrange it. She's coming this afternoon for a visit, as a matter of fact. If you wish, I'll introduce you."

Ro's mood faded somewhat. "Better not. She might know who I am. I don't want to get you into trouble."
"Kira might surprise you. She isn't so far from the Resistance fighter she once was that she'd turn you in, especially if I tell her your whole story."

"I'd rather not chance it."

He nodded in acquiescence as he led Ro down the steps to his office.
Vedek Terzy turned his ankle on a small stone later that morning, just one of those little accidents that always are happening to someone, somewhere. As a result, the head gardener delegated Supplicant Parys Folaren to complete a task he had promised to perform that afternoon. Jov Rersti was delivering some newly hybridized plants to be propagated by the monastery for Recantha Province. The legumes showed greater promise than any other strain yet developed for the removal of toxins left in the soil by the departing Cardassians. Vedek Terzy's sprained ankle seemed an inconsequential mishap. Because of his injury, however, Supplicant Parys was still standing next to Vedek Jaxa, deep in conversation with the civilian horticulturist about the new plants, when Kira Nerys arrived at the gate of the monastery for her visit with Bareil.

The man who was still the leading vedek of Bajor to many came immediately to greet his beloved. Naturally he introduced the major to the vedek, the supplicant, and the scientist. The five Bajorans spent several minutes animatedly discussing Jov Rersti's vital work. For Supplicant Parys to have ended her conversation with them so could abruptly return to her duties in the gardens would have been far more suspicious than simply going along with the flow. The Prophets had obviously ordained her meeting with Major Kira Nerys.

There was no doubt in Ro's mind; she saw recognition flashing in Kira's eyes at her introduction to Supplicant Parys. The two women smiled graciously at each other, as the conventions of civil discourse were followed. Bareil chatted as if nothing at all were amiss. Vedek Jaxa and Scientist Jov remained blissfully unaware of any tension from the encounter.

When the horticulturist took his leave, Supplicant Parys excused herself by saying she needed to take the seedlings to Vedek Terzy. Bareil and Kira also politely said their good-byes to the gatekeeper, exiting through the doorway to walk the path across the gardens to Bareil's chambers.

As soon as they were alone, Kira hissed, "Ro Laren! Are you crazy? She's the subject of a manhunt from Cardassia to Vulcan! What could you possibly have been thinking, giving that deserter sanctuary?"

"Nerys, if you heard her entire story, I don't think you'd be so quick to condemn her. She's more disturbed by her defection than anyone. Don't convict her without all the facts, because I'm sure you haven't heard them all . . ."

"I've heard enough."
"Listen to me, then . . ."

". . . You mean she actually told Picard how confused she was, but he didn't make her come out from deep cover? I can't believe it; she was his protégée!"

"The Emissary might be able to find out the truth and share the information with you, if you told him you might be able to obtain information about her whereabouts."

"You're not saying I should tell him she's here?"

"Oh, no, no -- just that you've heard something that might lead to her, but you need to know if this source is telling the truth."

"Why do I listen to you?" she sighed. "It's my duty to turn her in."

"This monastery is a place of sanctuary. It was for you, too, once."

"Yeah, and I got kidnapped from this place of sanctuary."

"I'm still trying to make it up to you, Nerys."

She smiled indulgently. "You'd better."

Night. The darkness enclosing the gardens was almost complete. A few windows from various outbuildings of the monastery glowed with candlelight, but most were dark. Ro leaned out of her open window. Her own prayer candles were extinguished over an hour before. Good Works, then Mercy, finally Faith. These qualities now burned only in Ro's heart.
I need another candle tonight, for Remembrance, Ro thought, as she gazed into the night. The vision she'd seen in the orb had consumed her throughout the day -- if it was a vision. The weight of the child in her arms, his mouth suckling her breast, it all had seemed so real, as if this life in the monastery were the vision and that her reality.

She sighed deeply. Ro Laren had given up any desire for husband and children years before. For years, the night brought terror and rape by Cardassian guards in the relocation camp where she'd lived, an orphan, alone and unloved. Rescued by the Resistance and taken to a place of relative safety off-planet, Starfleet had become her refuge. Instead of home, husband, and Blessings from the Prophets, Ro Laren would live a life of adventure, battling the Cardassians into defeat and submission -- when she was not off exploring the mysteries of the cosmos.

It had seemed an acceptable trade off until her career crumbled.

"Damn them all!" she muttered in frustration. Was she never to know peace?

"Yes, 'Parys,' damn them all . . ." a hoarse voice croaked. Out of the shadows, Tir Graxom came to her window. "Are you ready to rejoin us, Ro Laren?"

"I thought it was my choice if I wanted to help you, Tir."

He glared at her impatiently. "We could use a good pilot right now. There's a mission coming, and our source suggested we ask you again."

She stared back at him. "I was recognized today, Tir. If I step outside this place, I'll be arrested for sure. I wouldn't be much good to you then. I couldn't fly anything for our 'friends' from inside the brig of a starship."

"I thought seeing what they did to your friend Paris would convince you. He did nothing to warrant being convicted of treason, or so I've been told by one who's in a position to know."

"I'm sure he didn't. That doesn't change anything for me. They'd be able to justify a charge of treason for me, that's for sure."
"Are you afraid, Ro Laren?"

"Petrified. Can't you tell?" She snorted sarcastically, then went on earnestly, "He gave up his freedom for me, Tir. I'm not about to waste his sacrifice by letting myself be captured now. Another time, when I might be able to make more of a difference, it might be worth the risk."

The silence grew long. The singing of the barinthia beetles filled the night air, but from the carpenter's apprentice, Ro heard nothing. When she finally decided to close the shutters, thinking he must have left quietly, Ro heard a deep cough and a whispered, "Until you are ready, then, 'Parys.' " She thought she heard a hoarse laugh coming from the darkness as the rustling of plants parted by his passage reached her ears.

All that night, Ro tossed and turned, her sleep tormented by the memory of the feel of Tom Paris' body inside hers, but with the voice and face of Will Riker swimming before her, calling her name. Laren, Ro Laren. My beautiful Laren.

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Time passed without incident. Ro worked in the garden and counseled women sent to her by Vedeks Bareil and Sharom for guidance. More often than not, it was Vedek Sharom who did the sending. She was often in charge because of Bareil's many absences. Kai Winn needed his skills as a negotiator. There were whispers that secret talks had been going on for some time with the Cardassians. Change was in the air.

Change was to come again to Ro Laren first, however.

"Parys, Vedek Bareil wants you," Terzy called to her one afternoon after speaking for only a few seconds with one of the lay sisters, who immediately left on another errand.

"He's back? When?"

"Just now, I believe. Better not keep him waiting."

"Of course." Ro stood up, brushing as much soil she could from her work clothes and hands. Her fingernails were black; no help for them until she could wash up properly. Ro never liked wearing gloves while gardening -- what was the point? The best part of the task for Ro was feeling the loam
as she packed it around the roots of a plant, giving the seedling the proper support and sustenance for nurturing sturdy growth. She never felt that connection when gloves blocked her from the dirt.

Her mind was still on the soil she was picking away from her nails when she arrived at Bareil's office. He was standing just inside the door as she entered.

"Hello, I was just in the garden and . . . " Ro hesitated, seeing there was another occupant of the room. "Major Kira. Good day to you. I'm sorry I'm not in a position to shake your hand at the moment. My . . . duties can be messy at times." She smiled quickly. Neither Bareil nor Kira looked like they were in a mood for casual chatting. "What is it you needed to see me about?"

"Supplicant Parys, please, take a seat." Bareil waved to a chair.

"I'm going to get some very bad news, aren't I? Well, get it over with." All pretense of civility left her. She faced Major Kira, dreading her arrest, not so much for herself as for the reputation of Bajor's foremost monastery. It had also crossed her mind that if one Maquis were to be arrested here, a thorough investigation might uncover many more, if Tir Graxom's approaches meant what she thought they did.

"Please, sit down, Ro Laren," said Kira.

Ro sat down.

"I've known who you are since that first time I saw you here. I haven't come to take you into custody. I'm afraid I do have bad news for you, though. It's about Thomas Eugene Paris. Bareil told me he means a lot to you."

Ro nodded her head slowly in acknowledgment.

"I met him briefly a few weeks ago on Deep Space Nine. He'd been assigned to a new Starfleet vessel, U.S.S. Voyager."

"Tom, back in Starfleet? Are you kidding?"
"He wasn't exactly in Starfleet. He was assigned as an 'observer,' a consultant, really. Captain Kathryn Janeway and her crew were looking for a group of Maquis on a ship called the Val Jean. I believe you know them, too?"

Ro nodded again, her sense of dread increasing. "Are you trying to tell me that Tom was a Starfleet spy?" It couldn't be. She wouldn't believe it.

"No, he'd been paroled to Janeway's custody because she thought he might be able to lead them to some of the hideouts the Maquis use. There was an informer planted among the Val Jean crew, though. He was working undercover. A Vulcan named Tuvok. Did you know him?"

Ro shook her head. "I never met any Vulcans working for the Maquis. I'm not sure I would have trusted one. Rebellions aren't usually very logical." Of course, Chakotay would never have thought of that, would he?

Kira shrugged her shoulders in agreement before going on softly, "The Val Jean disappeared in the Badlands a few weeks ago. Voyager was trying to find out what happened to it, and to Janeway's undercover man. Now both ships are gone. Starfleet's investigation is finished. Today both ships were declared lost with all hands. I'm sorry."

Ro felt herself go numb all over. Her eyes went out of focus for a moment. "I knew it. The last time, when he said good-bye to me. I knew I'd never see him again," she murmured as if to herself. Shaking her head as if to bring herself back to the here and now and meeting Major Kira's eyes, she added in a husky voice, "Thanks for coming to tell me in person, Major. I appreciate it." Ro looked away then, her eyes filling with tears. Losing Tom had helped her learn to cry. She was going to be utilizing that ability again, she suspected, for the next several days.

Stepping forward, Bareil took Ro's hands in his. "We'll say the Death Chant for him, if you wish, or do anything else you want."

"No, I don't think Tom would have appreciated the full chants. I'll do the brief forms on my own, if you don't mind, Vedek Bareil. And now I have to get back to Vedek Terzy. His knees are bothering him again."

"Parys, you don't need to go to your duties at a time like this. Give yourself a chance to grieve."

"Thank you," she said dully. "I did a lot of grieving for him when I first came here, because I knew
I'd lost him then. This only guarantees I'll never get him back. I'd rather just go plant something in his memory -- if you don't mind?" Ro locked her gaze with her superior's, who barely nodded his head to give her permission to go. She started to leave, but at the door she paused and looked back over her shoulder to address Kira.

"Major, if you ever do decide to arrest me, all I ask is that you let me leave the monastery in civilian clothes. Let it happen out on the streets. I'll go any time you say, but I don't want to embarrass anyone here. They've been too good to me for that."

A softly whispered, "Of course, Ro. But I don't want to arrest you, and I won't if I don't have to."

Kira lay her head upon Bareil's chest as the empty-eyed fugitive walked away down the path, back to where Terzy was awaiting her assistance. "She isn't at all like I thought she'd be, from what everyone's said about her."

Bareil enclosed his love within the circle of his arms. "Most people aren't, Nerys."

Supplicant Tir Graxom paced back and forth before the Sister's House. The three candles were lit in Supplicant Parys' quarters again. Night after night, she prayed for her lost lover, yet she would take no overt act against those who were directly responsible. It was obvious to all that the Cardassians had destroyed Val Jean and Voyager. Why was she so blind! She would get her revenge by rejoining the Maquis.

How could Ro Laren continue to ignore his pleas? The Maquis were desperate for pilots. He, Tir Graxom, would love to bring her to his contacts. A Starfleet-trained pilot -- what a difference she could make in their cause!

He was sometimes tempted to abduct her. Hit her on the head, knock her out, and steal her away to her glorious destiny. He burned to take Ro away with him. For hours every night, his mind was filled not with chants to the Prophets but with visions of her leading their people to victory against the Cardassians, with Tir Graxom at her side.

Anything, to get back at the despised Snakes for all they had done to him.
Tir Graxom also knew, if she gave him even half a chance, that he could make Ro Laren forget all about her lost love.

They would work together, for glorious freedom.

And he was certain that he would bring her to a happiness she had never known with her human lover.

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Ro Laren sat down to breakfast next to Vedek Terzy, at the end of one of the long refectory tables. There, she would not have to speak to too many people. Terzy, if he spoke at all, would speak of his plans for what needed to be done in the garden, concrete tasks which would occupy her mind and her muscles all day, as chanting and fatigued sleep did at night. It wasn't healthy for her to dwell on Tom; she knew that. He was gone. Forever. Ro knew her period of mourning needed to come to an end, but gradually, in its own good time; she wasn't ready to let go just yet.

When she looked up from her breakfast, the face peering intently at her across the table gave her a start. Tir Graxom. For the life of her she could not fathom why he kept bothering her. When would he take the hint? She sighed in resignation. 'He's dense, or driven, and I don't want to have anything to do with men who are either at the moment.'

Whether her thought drew his attention or his eagerness to engage her in conversation simply could not longer be contained, she could not say, but on the heels of her thought, he spoke. "Suppliant Parys, when will you have a chance to help me with the task I asked you about?"

She ruthlessly suppressed the urge to shout, "Never!" and to smash his face across the table. Strong women becoming vedeks was a long tradition on Bajor, but violence was discouraged. Most of the time, Ro was getting very close to the end of her tether, but she managed to say, mildly, "I have no idea."

Later in the day he came again, when she was working in the walled grounds outside the Temple. They were alone, and she was less polite. "Tir, the more you pressure me, the less likely I am to agree to whatever it is you want me to do. Leave me alone!"

"You're our best chance for success, Ro. We're going to hijack a starship. We need you to help us."


"Find someone else. I'm not going to stir off these grounds unless Vedek Bareil or Vedek Sharom tells me to, understood? There's enough for me to do here. My heart tells me this isn't the time for me to do anything like that. I'd be a liability."

"If this mission succeeds, we may break the Cardassian's hold . . ."

"I don't want to know, Tir. I'm not going to get involved right now. The less I know, the better." Ro felt her heart lurch. That was too close to what she'd said to Tom once, when he had wanted to help her.

"If this mission fails, it will be your fault for not getting involved," he hissed.

"If this mission fails, it will be because it wasn't planned or executed properly! Don't try to pin the blame on me! No plan should depend upon one person who's already made it clear she doesn't want to be involved!" she flared back.

The young man glared at her, then stalked off.

Sighing, Ro returned to her task of tying vines to their supports. This all felt wrong, somehow. Ro knew she would be willing to help the Maquis again, but not like this, under pressure from someone she simply didn't trust. There was something about this young man that was twisted and fanatical. For a second she thought that perhaps if she'd had her throat cut, she might have become a little crazy, too. Then she regained her sense of proportion. No, instead, she'd 'only' been raped and tormented for years. Giving him the benefit of the doubt for his obsessions didn't make sense.

One last thought made her hiccup a humorless laugh. Chakotay would probably have thought Tir was the best thing to come his way in years. She closed her eyes a moment and said a quick prayer for the too-trusting Chakotay, lost in the Badlands. And B'Elanna Torres, had she been with Chakotay, too? If B'Elanna had been still alive, she certainly would have been with him. Ro resolved to remember the half-Klingon woman in her prayers this evening.

Would Seska have been with them, too?

Ro really would have liked to be able to say a prayer for Seska. Forgiving someone like Seska is what vedeks are supposed to be able to do. Somehow, Ro knew she could never bring herself to do it.
Two weeks later, Tir Graxom came to her again. This time, he was not begging her for her help. The plan had been modified and had gone on with another former Starfleet officer leading the plan. The Defiant was stolen from the space station. Several Cardassian installations were successfully attacked. Perhaps it was better that Ro had not gone on this mission, Tir confided morosely. The Cardassians caught up with the Defiant, thanks to the double-dealing commander of Deep Space Nine, the Emissary, Benjamin Sisko. The ex-officer had been captured and would be in prison for the rest of his life, although the other Maquis on board had been permitted to return home to Federation space, along with the Defiant's hijacked crew.

Tir Graxom had never been told the name of the captured officer, and thus he could not share it with Ro. Had she heard the name, Ro would have been shocked, perhaps, but undoubtedly fascinated, in view of her puzzling orb experience.

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The Death Chant was said not long after in the House of the Prophets in the capital city of Bajor, but not for Tom Paris. Despite a valiant effort by Deep Space Nine's Doctor Julian Bashir to save his life, Vedek Bareil Antos succumbed to the injuries he had sustained in a transport ship accident, which had occurred while he and Kai Winn were en route to secret peace talks with Legate Turrell of Cardassia.

The entire monastery attached to the temple mourned, but no one felt more bereft than Supplicant Parys. Ro had followed Vedek Bareil's path; he was one of the most trustworthy men she had ever met. He had never failed her; he had never failed anyone on Bajor, for his life was sacrificed so that the treaty with the Cardassians could be reached. Ro trusted the Cardassians to keep that accord about as much as she thought they would keep the treaty with the Federation regarding the Demilitarized Zone -- namely, not at all; but Bareil, she knew, had acted in good faith -- at the cost of his life.

The night before his body's shell was interred in the crypt below the temple, Ro accepted the task of reciting the verses of the Death Chant which were to be said in the last hours before dawn. The other vedeks and supplicants of the order had taken other hours. Expecting to be alone for most of her turn, Ro found she was mistaken when she arrived in the chamber where the corpse was lying in state. Major Kira Nerys knelt next to her, listening to Ro's warm alto voice take the chant almost to its ending. The final verses were to be left until dawn, when the interment would take place.

After Ro finished her sections of the chant, she and Kira stayed quietly in place for a long while, their faces illuminated by the flickering candles positioned at Bareil's head and feet. The golden light on her face was comforting to Ro, as was the unexpected presence of the major. She did not wish to face the darkness alone tonight, any more than Kira did. Too often of late, Ro had been alone, chanting verses to comfort herself for the loss of Tom. Now, another loss. She was beginning to think the Prophets' lesson for Ro Laren was that she must learn to live a completely solitary life.
Eventually, with a catch in her voice, Kira broke the silence. "Thank you for being here tonight."

"If I've been able to help you in any way, I am content. This is so hard for all of us, but it must be hardest for you . . ."

Tears rolled down Kira's cheeks. "I can't believe I've lost him. He was always giving so much of himself to me, to everyone he met . . . I can't imagine what it's going to be like now, knowing I'll never hear his voice again. I miss him so much already."

When Kira's sobs had subsided somewhat, Ro said, "A very wise man once told me something. The Prophets sometimes decide that two who love each other must have separate destinies. Even now, as you mourn, remember this: because of the love you shared with Vedek Bareil, you may be better equipped to walk alone than you would have been if you'd never met him."

"Let me guess who the wise man was. Bareil, right?" At Ro's affirmative nod, Kira choked, "Sounds like something he'd say." She began to weep quietly again.

"I know. Major, if you need someone to talk to, or if I can be of any help to you at all, just let me know." Ro reached out to grasp Kira's hands.

Kira squeezed Ro's hands back and bit her own lip. "I know how much you've suffered through your own loss, Ro. Just having you here tonight is enough. I don't feel I need to say anything to you. You already know."

Ro nodded, tears gleaming in her own eyes. They both knew.

They knelt together for the remaining time until dawn, silently remembering.

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The pattern of the days at the monastery seldom changed, except for special feast days or days named by Vedek Sharom for a special celebration. On one such day, cold and snowy outside but pleasantly warm within the enclosed Gardens of the Temple, Supplicant Parys Folaren recited the vows of the order. Several years of study still loomed before her, but from this day on she would be known as Vedek Parys.

Ro herself was surprised she was still at the monastery. She had thought her restless nature could never spend so long a time in one spot, on one world of the galaxy, even if that world was her home planet of Bajor. Ro had learned to listen to her inner voice, however, which told her that for now, this was where Vedek Parys, born Ro Laren, was meant to stay. So she stayed. Somehow the rhythm of the days suited her, even though she was desperately lonely.

How ironic! For years I lived among men who would have been only too glad to sleep with me if I'd given them the time of day, but I wasn't able to bring myself to go with them. Now I've finally learned that I can be happy sharing love with a man, and I have no one I can share love with. I guess I was meant to live my life alone!

Periodically, contact purportedly from the Maquis was extended through lay brother Tir Graxom, who remained at the monastery. He had refused to take vows of any kind. Ro gradually became aware that she was not the only former Maquis seeking refuge in this house. Several of those who lived here continued to be active for the cause. One day, she expected resignedly, something would happen to drag her back into the movement.

She never expected it to be at the request of her spiritual leader, Vedek Sharom.

"Good afternoon, Vedek Parys. Sit down, here, please. Are you comfortable?"

Taking the seat indicated in what Ro still thought of as Bareil's office, she nodded in affirmation. The petite but strong woman went on, "I want to talk to you about an assignment I'd like you to consider taking on for me, now that you have taken the initial vows of the order. Do you think you're ready to take on more responsibility?"
Ro murmured her willingness to help in any way she could.

"Good. You've been one of our best counselors for some time, particularly to the women who come here. I've been asked to provide a team of counselors to go to a prison camp run by the Cardassians, to provide spiritual comfort and guidance to those incarcerated there. Most are serving life sentences. Many are women, and . . . well, I know you're familiar with what can happen in such a situation. I think you would be a great asset in this spiritual task. I know you haven't left these grounds since you came to us, quite a long time ago, but will you leave the temple to do this holy work?"

Visiting a prison camp run by the Cardassians -- now there was an entertaining thought! One of the most wanted of Maquis fugitives willingly sticking her head behind the gates of a Cardassian prison. Ro wondered sardonically if she would ever get the chance to leave again. If the Cardassians found out who she was, she knew she wouldn't. This was the first such assignment she'd been offered, however, and she had to admit Sharom was right. Ro was uniquely qualified for this particular task.

"If you want me to go, I'm willing, Vedek Sharom."

"Excellent! I knew you would. Take the rest of the day and prepare yourself for departure. You'll leave in the morning. You're to be accompanied by Vedek Shaldir, Vedek Jilya, and lay brother Tir Graxom."

Ro's enthusiasm for the trip immediately plummeted. Shaldir was as involved with the Maquis, Ro knew, as Tir was. Jilya was Shaldir's wife. And to have to listen to Tir Graxom's mumblings! Oh, well. She'd given her word already, and perhaps if they were actually going someplace, Tir might leave her alone about working for the Maquis.

"Are we going to be leaving from Deep Space Nine?" Ro asked.

"You'll take a shuttle up there to change to a deep space vessel, but I'm afraid you won't be there long enough to do any sightseeing."

"That's fine. I was only curious about how we were getting to the prison." And not spending much time on Deep Space Nine is no problem. The last thing I need to do is to run into Miles or Keiko O'Brien . . .

"There's a vessel already chartered for this, called the tajIq. A Klingon freighter, but it has enough
berths for you all to be comfortably accommodated."

B'Elanna's masterpiece, and definitely a Maquis vessel, not just a Klingon freighter. *In the Names of All the Prophets, what I have I gotten myself into?* Ro thought savagely, but outwardly, she was the picture of reverent calm, saying only, "If the *tajIlq* is a Klingon vessel, 'comfort' may be a relative term. And with relations between the Empire and Cardassia deteriorating so drastically right now, do you think it's wise to travel in a Klingon ship?"

"Oh, I've been assured of both your comfort and your safety, Vedek Parys."

Ro smilingly took her leave while her mind worked furiously. She shouldn't have been so quick to say, "Yes." Not many in the Maquis had really known her, of course. She hadn't been with them long enough. Any slip by someone who recognized her, however, and Ro Laren might indeed never leave that prison. And besides, what was a ship equipped to ambush the Cardassians doing on a trip like this? There was something more going on here than she was being told, and she didn't like it.

As she walked down the path to her own cell, Ro paused to look towards her spiritual leader's office. With all the Maquis ties here, what was Vedek Sharom's agenda? Was it possible that the leading cleric at the House of the Prophets Temple in the capital city of Bajor was herself a Maquis?

"Parys, what's the matter? You look troubled."

Ro started when Terzy arose from behind a clump of foliage. Lost in her own thoughts, she had not noticed him as she walked by. Lack of attention would be dangerous where she was going. Shaking off her gloomy thoughts, she admitted, "I'm leaving."

Terzy dropped the clippers he was holding and came to her to take hold of both her hands in his roughened, slightly grubby ones. "Parys, I thought you had found a measure of peace here."

"Oh, I have, Terzy. I'm not leaving for good. At least, I hope I'm not leaving for good." In a few brief sentences, she filled him in on the mission of mercy to which she had just agreed to participate. "And if it truly is a mission of mercy, to offer spiritual comfort to the imprisoned, I would have no qualms. I'm just concerned there's a, shall we say, a political element to it that deeply concerns me. I fear there will be serious repercussions, if not for me, for anyone in a Cardassian prison who seeks succor afterwards. That's if I'm guessing right, and this mission has more to do with the Maquis than
I has been revealed to me."

Terzy nodded sympathetically. "May the Prophets walk beside you and protect you from harm, Parys. At least you will have Jilya and Shaldir with you," he hesitated before adding, "and Tir. Maybe you can help him. I worry about that boy. He's been here a long time, you know, ever since everyone in his village was killed by the Cardassians. They left him for dead, too. That's why he speaks the way he does. The cut his throat. He was barely alive when our people found him. He'd lost so much blood, I don't know how he survived long enough to be discovered."

"I know. He showed me his scar once."

"I'm sure he did." Terzy gazed warmly into her eyes. "You know, he has quite a crush on you."

"Oh, he's made that very clear," Ro said, with a shake of her head. "He scares me the way he materializes out of nowhere. He'd right there at my elbow, whispering to me, telling me the Prophets sent me here to help the Maquis. Terzy, I really have found peace here within the walls of this House. I don't want to lose what I've found here. I'm worried this mission will do just that."

"And perhaps not. Perhaps this mission of mercy will do quite the opposite. It may ease one of those poor souls locked away from all the Prophets have to offer. It may even do that for you, Parys."

"Terzy, you're not a closet Maquis, too, are you?"

He laughed. "Oh, my, no, my dear. Not at all. I've never been a political man. From the time I was very young, I've known that finding new ways to feed our people from the land was my true calling. I never needed to become a vedek. My charges have always been plants, and the soil that nourishes them, and finding ways to keep them all healthy. That's why the Prophets finally led me here, to a place where undoing the devastation done to our world is one of the ways we support and raise the spirits of our people."

"You do it very well, Terzy. I..." Ro hesitated. She feared that to put her thoughts into words might make them come true, but she might never have another chance to say them, so she continued, "I want to say that coming here, meeting you, and working with you... when I said I found peace here... you helped me find it. You, and Vedek Bareil. I'm very grateful to you. Thank you, so much."

The old man's eyes misted over. "Ah, Parys, what a lovely thing to say. And I will pray you will come back here after this is all over and again find the peace you deserve." Terzy patted the back of
her hand. "Just do one thing for me. Even though he can be a bit strange, be kind to Tir. You know, when he came here, he was mute for two full years. He's never really been quite right in his head since everything happened to him. I wouldn't let him near any Cardassians myself, but if he has been Called to go with you, well, perhaps you can keep him safe, if anyone can."

Ro closed her eyes. The last thing she needed at a time like this was to play nursemaid to a love-sick, obsessive, would-be Maquis who had spent much of his life under the protection of well-meaning people like Terzy. Yet she could not deny her mentor. His request came from the heart, from the same desire to protect the helpless as his calling to restore the poisoned lands of Bajor through the plant life he developed within this garden.

"I'll do what I can to keep him safe, Terzy, as long as he listens to me!"

"I know you will, Ro Laren. In fact, I'm sure of it."

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Tir Graxom's joy was complete. This mission was bound to succeed now that he'd been able to get Ro Laren involved. So easy -- a simple suggestion to Vedek Sharom by Jilya, recommending that the best counselor for women be allowed to go along on an errand of mercy, and what he had spent so much time dreaming about was accomplished.

When they were about to leave the House of the Prophets for their mission, she arrived at the gates, slender and beautiful in her golden robes and triple peaked veil. Tir's heart swelled with pride and longing. To have this woman in his life consumed him. In the Maquis. In his bed. If only he could make her see how much he cared for her!

The only thing she said to him upon her arrival, however, had been a brief, "Hello, Tir." Then she'd actually turned her back on him to spend the minutes while they awaited Vedeks Shaldir and Jilya in conversation with old Vedek Jaxa.

It would be different aboard the tajTq. There'd be plenty of time then to let her know how he felt about her.

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"This is the plan? You're going to use us to get into the prison to break them out? Who is the architect of this obscenity!" Ro spat at the group of Maquis around the table.

"Now, Vedek Parys, wait. You haven't heard the whole plan yet . . . "

"I've heard enough! This ship can do plenty of damage to Cardassian ships that don't expect it to be armed the way it is, but to expect it to be able to stand up against the defenses of a prison and pull out a bunch of prisoners -- AND manage to get safely out of Cardassian territory -- is asking too much. I know this vessel. I was involved when it was made over into what it is. I know what it can and cannot do. Unless you have at least one other vessel backing us up, there's no way we're going to escape. The Cardassians will shoot us to pieces. And that's not all . . . "

"Now, now, you don't know all the equipment we have available to us. We have a secret weapon that will help us." Shaldir tried to placate his angry colleague.

"Fine. Maybe you're right, and we'll be successful. And what happens afterwards if any other prisoners of the Cardassians should actually want spiritual comfort? Do you think the Cardassians will ever let any of us near any more prisoners? This is an unbelievably short-sighted idea."

"And what do you suggest, then, Vedek Parys?" asked Vedek Jilya.

"We go in, and we do what we've been asked to do. We offer comfort to the prisoners, but we keep our eyes open. Let this be an intelligence-gathering mission. From what you've told me, we don't know enough about this prison to be able to hatch a really good plan. We learn all we can, and then, a few months from now, let someone else break out these prisoners. A supply ship, perhaps, maybe even the tajtlaq. That way they won't necessarily associate the vedeks with this action. I'm sure there's a way to do this without ruining things for the future. We're supposed to be spiritual leaders, after all! How can we do something that will mean we abandon the souls who are left in other prisons?"

The former Starfleet officer, trained in Advanced Tactics, looked around at the faces of her fellow clerics. Her heart sank. She could see they were closed off to anything other than their own plan of action, as doomed to failure as it surely was.

"Vedek Parys, it was hard enough to convince the Cardassians to let us bring any vedeks to Lazon II as it was. I doubt they'll ever let us come back, even if several months do pass before the breakout is attempted. Besides, the Maquis needs these prisoners desperately. Many are experienced former Starfleet officers. They'll make a difference for the cause."
Time for bitter truth. "I know. Things aren't going well. I hate to say this, but I have to. That treaty wasn't right; I'm the first to say that. Scream it, even, but maybe it's time to listen to what the Federation has been saying. If the fight is lost, then it's lost. We should pull our people out of the Demilitarized Zone. Let them start over somewhere else. Why should more lives be lost unnecessarily to fight battles that are futile? If the fighting stopped, maybe the Cardassians could be convinced to release their prisoners."

Tir Graxom stood up to address them. "A battle may be lost, but the fight is not over! We can beat the Cardassians! Our cause is just! We have to fight on until the Federation admits its mistake!"

The fanaticism in his raspy voice was frightening. The man was delusional. Ro looked around the table, however, and saw only approbation on the faces of Shaldir, Jilya, and the three Maquis officers from the vessel who were at the meeting. They all must be crazy!

Shaldir spoke. "Don't worry, Vedek Parys. We won't involve you. You just do your work, and we'll do ours."

"You really think that's going to make a difference to the Cardassians? By the Prophets!" Ro put her face in her hands, shook her head, and groaned. When she raised her eyes everyone was looking at her expectantly, obviously seeing her as their salvation. Sighing heavily, Ro gave in. "All right. Tell me about this 'secret weapon' of yours. Maybe it will make a difference. Probably not, but if I'm going to give my life in a lost cause, at least let me give it my best shot."

Tir Graxom beamed. He had turned Ro Laren back to the right, back to their cause. Now, to attain the rest of his dreams . . .

The "secret weapon" turned out to be a compression pulse wave device that would detonate in the stratosphere of the prison planet, jamming all electronics within a given area. The shield generators and disruptors at the prison would fail. It would also affect anything electronic carried by the vedeks themselves, of course, but since the tajtlaq itself would be outside the atmosphere, its systems would remain intact. The sophisticated sensors on the freighter should be able to locate and transport aboard all the non-Cardassian personnel in the prison, prisoners and visitors alike. With any luck at all, the freighter and its humanoid cargo would be far away from the prison long before the Cardassians could reestablish communications with their other forces.

Of course, if there was another base or ship on a moon or another planet in the system, or if the Cardassians happened to have shielding that would prevent the pulse from affecting the systems, or if
the they had any weapons, such as knives or swords, that wouldn't be affected by the pulse, or if they simply ran out of luck . . .

Ro shook her head. There were so many ways this could go wrong. She pointed them all out to her colleagues, but it made no difference.

So, Ro Laren would trust in the Prophets. Vedek Parys would go to the prison and do what she promised she would do. She would speak with those who wanted spiritual comfort, give them what she could, and then, whatever was to be, was to be.

In the meantime, she would stay as much in her cramped quarters as she could, avoiding Tir Graxom, who was always staring at her -- at her body, especially. Sometimes she felt guilty hiding from him. He obviously had no control over himself, but it was still too annoying for her to tolerate for long. Despite his frequent expressions of his desire to free his "fellow Maquis," she doubted Tir really was as interested in the expertise of Ro Laren, former Starfleet officer and former Maquis, as he was in Ro Laren, the woman. If he made any advances, despite her promise to Terzy, Ro feared she was liable to do some very unvedek-like kicking him in his posterior.

Or anywhere else he needed to be kicked.

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In Lazon II Prison

Gul Tevran eyed the motley group of "spiritual advisors" that had landed at his prison. He had been adamantly opposed to permission being granted for this visit, but Gul Dukat had overruled him. It would be good for relations between Cardassia and Bajor, Dukat had said. There was a treaty between them, after all. With the explosive Klingon situation threatening to boil over at any second, staying on the good side of the Bajorans, and therefore the Federation, seemed to be a prudent course. So the delegation had come.

"Why would you want to subject yourself to the conditions of a Klingon freighter?" demanded Tevran. "We would gladly have sent one of our ships to you so you could travel in comfort."

"We're sure you would have, Gul Tevran," said the older of the two male vedeks, who was called Shaldir, "but we did not wish to inconvenience you."

"Hmmm. It would have been no trouble at all." The tall female vedek raised a shapely eyebrow, but said nothing. Tevran addressed her. "Did you have something on your mind, Vedek . . . "

She shook her head, a crooked smile on her face. "Nothing very important."

"Surely, Vedek . . . "

"Vedek Parys."

"Vedek Parys, important or not, I'd like to hear what you are thinking." The Cardassian warden leaned back in his chair, his fingers steepled before him as he stared at the vedek. The very attractive vedek. He couldn't help thinking that he would very much like for her to be a permanent resident of Lazon II. Perhaps he could convince her to stay on for a while as the prison's spiritual advisor?

Vedek Parys expelled a few puffs of air as the smile grew more crooked. "Well, if you really insist upon knowing, I was just wondering how long we're going to continue this useless conversation. Since we aren't supposed to be here longer than three days anyway, talking about travel arrangements that have already taken place is taking away from the time we should be spending with those who are awaiting our spiritual gifts. Klingon freighter or not, we're already here."
The other vedeks looked extremely uncomfortable, but Gul Tevran only laughed. "I always did like Bajoran females. So stimulating." His gaze grew intense, but Vedek Parys neither flinched nor looked away. Her brown eyes stared back to him, much the way a snake charmer would never dare glance away from a cobra ready to strike.

After a couple of minutes of silent staring, Gul Tevran gave in. "Give them access to any of the prisoners who desire 'spiritual guidance.' For their benefit, I'd suggest that your guidance should include suggestions that cooperating with the guards would be in the best interest not only of their spirits, but also their health."

Nodding his head to his subordinates Gandak and Dokan, Tevran swung his chair around. His back faced the door through which the vedeks passed as they left his office and entered the bowels of the prison proper. Gul Tevran thought all Bajoran religion was so much garbage. If it meant his prisoners would become more tractable, however, he was willing to let them have their vedeks.

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Ro hoped that in a prison like this, the women would not have been treated the way she had been as a child in the resettlement camps on Bajor. Unfortunately, they had been. Rape and sexual abuse of all kinds were rampant. Some of the guards had developed a taste for Bajoran females during the Occupation. At least none of the prisoners here are children, Ro thought, resignedly. From talking to the female prisoners, she could tell that many were murderously furious at their captors, while others had come to terms with their fate. For almost all, however, praying with a vedek was seen as a way to make their trials easier to bear.

By the middle of the second day, Ro was glad that all the prisoners who had requested to speak with her, having been informed of her past and counseling specialty, had already been accommodated. Turning to Dokan, the guard who had been assigned to accompany her around the prison (guarding her was more like it, Ro thought), Vedek Parys asked, "Are there any other prisoners who might be interested in talking with me?"

"All who have expressed an interest have met with you. Do you wish to return to your ship?"

After thinking a moment about the Cardassian way of doing things, Ro asked, "Is there anyone here who might not have requested speaking to us because the prisoner didn't even know we were here?"

The guard laughed mirthlessly. "Oh, there may be a prisoner or two in solitary confinement who
wouldn't know. That's all."

"Take me to where those prisoners are housed, then."

"I can't. Solitary confinement means they can't speak to anyone! No visitors."

Ro stared at the guard and then smirked at his reply. "Tell me, Dokan, how many visitors do you get for anyone housed in this prison?"

"Not many," he agreed. "In fact, you're the first."

"Don't start an interstellar incident then. Take me to the unit where the prisoners in solitary are, and I'll spend a little time with them. You can even lock me into their cells for the 'visit.' Just let them talk to me for a little while."

The guard studied her. This woman had some nerve to demand to see prisoners in solitary! "There aren't any Bajorans in solitary confinement at the moment."

"Oh? No one's in solitary?"

"One man. A human. He wouldn't listen to your Bajoran religious mish-mash anyway, Vedek."

"So, if he tells me to get lost, you've done your duty and I've done mine. What harm can come of it?" she asked briskly.

Dokan breathed in deeply. He loved that firm, strong voice Bajoran women so often possessed. Wonderful to listen to, especially when begging for mercy.

"All right, Vedek Parys, but by then, perhaps I'll be in need of a little 'spiritual comfort' myself."

"We'll see, Dokan. We'll see."
Most of the prisoners at the camp labored to remove dilithium crystals from the rock strata surrounding the prison. Hard work and delicacy was needed to carve the precious crystals from their stone matrix without damaging them. Many would be ruined if much in the way of mechanical equipment were utilized. Prisoners were ideal laborers; people serving life sentences had no need to worry about how long they had to work to obtain good crystals. All the prisoners in Lazon II were serving life sentences. They had the rest of their lives to perfect their stone carving techniques. Their quarters were located in buildings on the surface of the planet. While they lacked creature comforts, they did, at least, get to see the light of day.

Those in solitary confinement were not coddled with sunlight. The way to the isolation wing, where the human was being kept, was down a long corridor cut into the solid rock walls surrounding the prison. The prisoner down here, Vedek Parys was informed, was left alone except when he was under interrogation. It amused Gul Tevran to treat him so.

Ro had no illusions about what "interrogation" meant to the Gul. Torture would undoubtedly be the accurate term.

It was a very long way down. Their path took them down a steep ramp for close to half a Bajoran hour. Three times Dokan had to stop and enter codes into keypads, to shut down and then reset force field blockades in the passage. Ro could not prevent herself from shivering, even though the artificially crafted tunnel was not particularly chilly. This was one prisoner the Cardassians obviously intended to keep.

As she walked behind Dokan, Ro wondered if she would merit the same treatment if Gul Tevran found out her true identity. Even though Ro Laren was very much a wanted criminal, she doubted they would go to this much trouble to imprison her. Who was locked away here, so far down that the compression pulse wave device would be unlikely to affect all of the force fields in the passage?

Shortly after reaching the third barrier, the passageway opened into a larger room. From the array of instruments lying on some benches in the right-hand corner, Ro guessed that this area was a "pleasure" area for Gul Tevran to "play" with his prisoner whenever he wished. Ro could see several doorways on the far end. One crackled with an energy field and was dimly lit from within.

Pointing to the lit chamber, Dokan informed the Bajoran, "There's your prisoner, Vedek Parys. Hey, 'Commander.' You've got a visitor. I'm sure she's prettier than most of your visitors. Of course, she's not your type. She's a woman 'blessed by the Prophets.'" The guard laughed sarcastically at his own pun. Ro had yet to hear a Cardassian whose laugh wasn't an evil cackle -- when they laughed at all.
Ro walked up to the doorway and saw a human male doing pushups on the floor. He studiously avoided any glances towards the opening of his cell. The man was stripped to the waist. From where she stood in the doorway, Ro could see a pattern of scars on his back, probably from energy whips. The wounds had been left to heal without any treatment, judging from the scoring. The prisoner was tall, dark-haired, with a dark beard. As she stood in silence watching him, he did thirty pushups without a pause.

At first Ro felt a bit put out. She'd come a long way to bring comfort to this man, and he apparently was avoiding her. Then she reconsidered. Knowing the Cardassians, they might have dangled the possibility of a visitor to this prisoner in the past as a hoax, to increase the man's isolation when he found out no one was coming after all. Ro decided to make the first move.

"My name is Vedek Parys, 'Commander.' If that's really your rank."

The man immediately collapsed upon the stone floor and stared up at her in astonishment. Her guess about past hoaxes being perpetrated upon the man was quickly confirmed. The prisoner scrambled to his feet, turned away, and grabbed a grubby shirt lying on the cot near the far wall. "I'm sorry, I thought it was a joke."

At the sight of his face and the sound of his voice, memory came flooding back to Ro Laren. It was her turn to be astonished when the man turned back to her, his blue eyes squinting as he murmured more apologies for his rudeness.

"Will Riker? You're the 'commander?' " Ro felt her knees go weak.

Dokan laughed harder. "You see, Riker? Why don't you just admit who you really are? Confirm that Starfleet was behind that entire Defiant incident? Maybe Tevran would even let you out of this hole if you'd admit it openly, for all the newsnet audience to see."

"Sorry, Dokan. Can't do that, because it isn't true. I've told you the truth. All you have to do is check with the Enterprise and see that Commander William T. Riker is still first officer. Unless he's been promoted to captain of some other ship, of course. Or maybe even that one. He certainly was hanging on like that's what he was hoping for."

Clasping his shirt closed the best he could, since the closures no longer appeared to work, the prisoner faced Ro. "I don't know how you know Will Riker, but I can't say I've never answered to that name. We were the same person for a long time. For many years, as a matter of fact. And then we became identical twins. Just one of those wild and crazy things that happen when you're in Starfleet."
Still speechless, Ro couldn't keep her eyes from traveling up and down Riker's body. Just the same, but a lot thinner. And dirtier, but she was fairly certain that was his jailers' fault, not his. Finally, she managed to whisper, "Identical twins? I never heard Riker say he had a twin brother. In fact, I'm sure he was an only child."

"He was, as a child. There was a transporter accident. He got saved at Nervala IV. I got left behind by the Potemkin because they didn't know they'd lost me. They had him, you see. Apparently I'm something new and unique in the galaxy, an identical twin formed at the age of twenty-six. Did you know Will? My 'twin,' I mean. I'm sure I'd have remembered you if I'd ever met you."

Dokan suddenly stared at Ro suspiciously. "Vedek Parys, how did you ever meet William Riker?"

"I was . . . transported once on the Enterprise. I met him then. I had no idea about this, though. I can't believe it. Two William T. Rikers?"

"Not any more. I go by the 'T' now -- Thomas Riker's the name I go by. Makes it easier. Or did, when I was out and about the galaxy. Now, I'm sure, it hardly matters."

Suddenly, Ro Laren flashed back to another day, to an overwhelming day in her life, the day she'd learned that Tom Paris had been convicted of treason. On that day she'd looked into the Orb of Prophecy and Change and saw a man named Thomas tenderly caressing her and her newborn baby - - a man who bore the face that gazed with interest upon her now. The man who, from that scenario, was the father of her baby.

"Vedek Parys, are you all right? You look a bit pale." Reflexively, he reached out to Ro as if to support her, but with the force field in the way, he could do nothing but pull back his proffered hand and look upon her with concern showing on his features.

"I . . . this is all very strange. I need to sit down. I don't . . . uh . . . Dokan, you couldn't let me go inside with . . . Thomas . . . and let me . . . do what I came to do?"

"Provide 'spiritual comfort' to this traitor? Why would you want to? Riker, you aren't interested in Bajoran religions, are you?" challenged the guard.

A slow smile spread across the tall human's features. "When 'spiritual comforts' arrive looking like this, I'd say I'm very interested."
Gulping back a laugh, Ro said, "Now I guess I can believe it. That comment sounded just like the Riker I met."

He grinned back at her, yet as Ro looked into his eyes, she realized that no, this was not the same man whose supercilious attitude she'd had to endure on the Enterprise. She glimpsed a profound loneliness there that she'd never seen in the eyes of the Will Riker she had known. She turned to the guard, who now was looking at them both as if there was some conspiracy afoot to get him into serious trouble with his Gul.

"Dokan, will you let me go in?" asked Ro.

"I think not."

"Dokan, how can it hurt? If you want you can just let me rot in there with him. You know I don't have a way of getting out unless you release me."

The Cardassian glanced back at her again, extremely suspicious, but finally he nodded, a hint of a smile on his reptilian face. "All right. I'll allow it. But I'll have to search you first, to make sure you haven't anything like a weapon on you."

"She's a priest, Dokan. Why would she have anything like that on her?" Riker argued heatedly.

"If you knew more about Bajoran vedeks, you wouldn't say that, Riker. Now, do you want to go in, or don't you?"

Seeing Riker's glare, Ro bobbed her head and shushed him to let him know she was complying willingly. Putting her hands well above her head, Ro leaned them against the wall to facilitate Dokan's searching her. The guard separated her legs forcibly. Easing his hands down her body, Dokan was very thorough as he caressed her buttocks, rubbed her seductively between her legs, and squeezed her breasts roughly. Ro, teeth clenched, kept her eyes tightly closed and endured his violation of her body.

She could hear Riker, though, his anger emanating palpably from behind the force field. Grunts of disgust could be heard escaping from him as he watched helplessly from his cell. After Dokan had spent a considerable length of time exploring Ro's body, much to his own satisfaction while infuriating Ro and the human prisoner, the guard finally stepped away from her. Ordering Riker to sit
on his cot, which Riker did with great reluctance, the guard dropped the force field to the doorway. Roughly shoving Ro in the back, Dokan pushed her inside Riker's cell and immediately raised the force field again.

"If you decide to give him any of your favors, Vedek, just yell for me so I can watch." Laughing at his own joke, the Cardassian strolled back to the last force field barrier in the corridor and worked the controls to pass out to the passageway outside the chamber.

As Ro had landed on her knees when she'd been thrown into the cell, Riker jumped from the cot to help her to her feet. "I'm sorry. You shouldn't have let him do that to you. I wouldn't have minded talking to you through the force field."

"I would have minded. He's been itching to touch me like that the entire trip here. It was only a matter of time. If I get the chance, I'd love to pay him back. For now, I feel safer in here with you; there's no telling what he was planning to do to me out there." Ro looked up at him. Despite her height, Riker was a good half head taller than she was, perhaps more. "At least I think I'm safer in here. Just how much like the Will Riker I know are you, anyway?" she asked quizzically.

He laughed. "Not very much, I'm afraid. My doppelganger is the one who gets all the beautiful women. At least he didn't get to you, since you're a religious."

She glanced away guiltily.

He groaned. "Not you, too! God, he has all the luck. So he can even get a priest in bed with him? Or is it priestess?"

Ro said, apologetically, "I wasn't a vedek then, and it's not like you think." Looking up into Will Riker's double's face, however, she thought, _No, that isn't true either. It really was like he thinks, except for the extenuating circumstances!_

She sighed. "Well, maybe it was like you think, but I would never have done it normally. Your alter ego and I didn't exactly get along. It only happened because none of us on the _Enterprise_ knew who we were. We'd had our memories wiped out, so we uh . . . did things that we . . . thought we might want to do . . . we all went with the people we thought we should be with, but . . . I, uh . . ." She halted, totally embarrassed. "The more I go on about this, the deeper I'm digging myself in, aren't I? I think I need to just shut up."
Stealing a glance at him, Ro saw Riker's aghast expression resolve into a bemused one as he took her hand in his. "I've actually almost gotten used to it. On the *Gandhi* everyone loved telling me stories about Will Riker's prowess with women -- when they weren't going on and on about his illustrious career. He isn't me, and yet, he is me, or the me I would have been if I'd been the one rescued by the *Potemkin*. Sometimes I feel I ought to apologize because I turned out to be such a . . . um . . . " He hesitated, scratching his head as his mind churned to come up with the right word.

"Turned out to be such a prick, you mean?"

He laughed heartily, if painfully. "That sounds about right, although I wouldn't have expected to hear you say that! I guess I do need to learn a bit more about Bajoran vedeks."

"If it makes you feel any better, when we got our memories back Deanna Troi was really pissed at him . . . I mean, really, really mad at him for taking up with me instead of her." Ro couldn't believe the coarse language she was using. She was starting to sound the way she did when she was in the Maquis.

He laughed again, not seeming to mind. "I feel a little better, but not much."

She squeezed his hand again, thinking about how strange it was to be talking to Thomas Riker like this. A man she'd never known existed, yet a man she'd seen in a vision so many months ago. This man who could become the father of her child.

Thinking of the intimacy that implied, she blushed.

"Are you okay? Your face is turning colors again."

"I'm just fine," she assured him, smiling sheepishly.

"Good. I was starting to think I was making you sick!"

Ro risked looking into those blue eyes again. They weren't as striking as Paris' eyes, but they were beautiful, nonetheless. Even more compelling to her was that despite his isolation, there was no sense that he was making any untoward advances to her. Interesting. When Riker isn't being a prick, he's really a very nice guy.
They spoke of all kinds of things, including the people both had met on the Enterprise. Concerned that the Cardassians might have listening devices installed in Riker's cell, Ro was careful to identify herself only as an "employee" of Starfleet who had been on the ship for a "few" months before being transported back to Bajor. All perfectly true, in its own way, although so much was left out of this version of her history that it added up to a complete lie.

Ro soon realized that she hadn't missed meeting Riker on the Enterprise by much. She'd left for her Advanced Tactical Training Course three weeks early, not so much to allow time for travel as to enable her to take a short leave on Risa. Her introduction to physical love with William Riker when she'd had no memories of her history had prompted her to try a repeat experience when she was fully aware of her past. It had not been entirely satisfactory, either for her or for the young Bajoran scientist she'd met on Risa. She'd promised herself then that she would never attempt to make love with anyone unless she really cared for him -- a promise she fulfilled when she again met her oldest friend from the Academy, Tom Paris.

Understandably reluctant to share these memories with Riker, Ro mentioned, "You know, I think I actually boarded the shuttle taking me to a transport ship while the Enterprise was bound for Nervala IV. The Stardates are about right. I only missed you by a few days."

"I'm sorry I didn't meet you then."

"We probably wouldn't have gotten along very well, since I never got along with your 'brother.' "

"Maybe I would have won you over with my stories of how I survived alone at an abandoned science station for eight years."

"It's a wonder you didn't go crazy, being alone so much," Ro commented.

"I'm not sure I didn't go crazy a few times, but I knew that if I was going to survive, I had to do certain things to keep the station running -- complete the basic maintenance schedule for the equipment, keep the food replicators on line, make sure that sufficient power was available to maintain life support. I couldn't lose it completely, or I'd die. So, I thought about things. Fantasized . . ."
"About Deanna, I suppose?"

His laugh was soft, conveying more pain than humor. "She was a big part of my life then. Dreaming about what we were going to do when I was rescued occupied a lot of my time when I was all alone. The idea that we wouldn't resume our relationship never even entered my head. Silly, really. I mean, I'd been gone for eight years. She could easily have married someone else and had a bunch of children in that amount of time . . ."

As his voice faded away, Ro longed to ask him if he still dreamed of Deanna in this new exile at Lazon II, but the question seemed to stick in her throat. Her mind thrashed around, trying to find a neutral topic for discussion, when he saved her by asking, "What's been happening with the Maquis? The Cardassians tell me that the movement's been crushed."

"It's not crushed, but most of the news we hear is bad. There isn't much I can do to sugar-coat the truth. Now we hear the Klingons may get into the fight. The Dominion is already involved. Changelings may be everywhere, for all we know. And the Romulans are always ready to take advantage of an opportunity. The Maquis fight is getting to be almost peripheral. I worry about what's going to happen if the Demilitarized Zone becomes the battlefield for a bigger fight, especially to the children. Some of the remaining Maquis have begun to think about what to do with the rest of their lives, I've heard. Others want to fight on until death, which will probably be fairly soon at the rate things have been going." She looked away. "I'm sorry. I know I sound bitter. It's just that I knew some good people who gave up their lives for this cause. I wonder sometimes why everyone didn't find someplace else to settle when they had a chance."

He offered his hand, which she accepted gratefully, but the conversation lapsed until Riker asked her something about the monastery where she lived. That's a safe enough subject, I hope, she thought. To her relief, it was. Riker had an almost insatiable curiosity about the life of a vedek. Like all humans, he had many misconceptions about what Bajoran religious life was like -- the idea that vedeks had sexual lives was astounding to him, for instance -- but he asked intelligent questions that she answered freely. They talked for a long while, oblivious to the number of hours passing, establishing an easy rapport. This version of Riker was easy for her to talk to -- not that Commander Riker hadn't been easy to speak with, far from it. Although Ro hadn't ever gotten along with him, virtually everyone else did. This Riker clearly had the same capacity for intelligent, witty conversation, even if he hadn't been able to practice it for years at a time.

Ro was amazed that no one had ever mentioned his existence to her. When he'd been found, she had been out of touch on Risa, of course. During her time at the Advanced Tactical Training School, she'd had a few short messages from Guinan, Geordi La Forge and Captain Picard, but none had been allowed during the first few months of the training. Perhaps everyone assumed she'd already heard about him from someone else. When she'd returned to the Enterprise after finishing her training as a full lieutenant, she'd barely started to unpack when she'd been offered the ill-fated
undercover assignment. She’d had no time to catch up on gossip. Still, a twin formed in the third decade of life -- that should have caused some kind of stir, even off the Enterprise, but if it had, somehow Ro had never heard of it.

Eventually they became aware of the length of time they had been left alone. Riker stood up and walked over to the doorway. "I wonder what happened to Dokan? He's usually in here by now laughing at me. Just before ‘dinner’ is served, such as it is, he likes to tell me they aren't going to waste food on me anymore. I'm not particularly fond of Cardassian food, but when it comes, I'd be happy to share it with you. If they let you stay, of course."

"I'd rather eat a big plate of wriggling Klingon gagh than Cardassian food. I hate it, except for larish pie. That's pretty good."

"Never had it."

"It figures they wouldn't bring you anything you might actually like." Ro stood up by the cot and stretched, fighting back the sudden urge to stand behind him and touch his back as he leaned against the stone surrounding the doorway. Managing to bring herself under control, she said only, "Thanks for inviting me, though."

"My pleasure. I don't get very much chance to entertain visitors here. Even if it is with a phantom meal."

Ro's loudly rumbling stomach apparently accepted his invitation to the invisible supper. They both laughed. Ro walked over to him and looked out the doorway. It had been a very long time since Dokan had brought her here. Maybe he'd taken her up on her offer to be left to rot in this dungeon.

If she were to spend the rest of her life here, there were worse companions to have than Thomas Riker. As that thought struck her, Ro felt the heat and color rise to her face again.

She was spared another comment from Riker about her flushed face when all the light in the cell and the chamber outside abruptly disappeared. The darkness was total. Riker uttered a muffled curse, then said, "What the hell? Vedek Parys, come here. The force field's down, too."

"By the Prophets! I never thought that device would work."
"What device?"

"The one that was supposed to disrupt the electronics. I never thought it would be able to affect things this far down," she said absently, as she removed her veil and swung it tentatively through the doorway. There was no barrier; not even a sparkle of residual energy crackled around the fabric as it passed through the opening.

"Disrupt the electronics? What the hell are you talking about?"

"The reason I'm here is that this isn't only a mission of mercy, it's also supposed to be a jail break."

"A jail break?" He sounded incredulous, a credit to his intelligence, Ro thought.

"That was the whole point of us coming here. I, uh, forgot to mention that there are a lot of Maquis sympathizers in my monastery. They wanted me to come along because they thought that with my Starfleet experience, I'd be able to make a success of this idiotic jail break idea. They have a device that knocks out electronic systems and weapons. I didn't think it would work, not this deep underground, anyway. Well, are you coming? I don't think the Cardassians will treat you very well after this, even if you do stay put."

She felt his hand on her back and heard him mutter, "I guess I really do need to learn a lot more about Bajoran vedeks," as they cautiously stepped out of the cell. The deep, total black of their surroundings hid her smile.

"Come on," she said softly. She didn't know if making a lot of noise would hinder their escape, but it seemed a wise precaution not to be too loud.

Riker seemed to agree, as he whispered, "If we touch the left-hand wall, we should find the tunnel to the surface. I don't remember any side branches, but I'd been beaten pretty badly when they brought me down here. Maybe I just don't remember."

"No, I don't remember any openings other than for the other cells off this chamber. I paid attention in case I was going to have to fight my way out."

"Fight your way out? Is that something Bajoran vedeks usually do, too?"
"I told you I haven't always been a vedek. I was in Starfleet, too."

"I thought you were . . . wait a minute. Was Parys your name when you worked for Starfleet?"

"No, I was called Ro Laren then."

"Ah, now that's a name I've heard before."

"I'm sure it is. So, how long are we going to keep on chatting here? Until the Cardassians decide to come back to strangle us?"

A coughing laugh erupted from his throat before she heard, "Wait a second." Ro could hear his steps lead away, a rustling as he touched something, probably the cot, and then a tiny, scraping sound before he returned to her. "Got the water bottle. They don't give me much. Want some?"

Realizing she was thirsty, Ro accepted the bottle from him, their fingers brushing with the exchange. After taking a sip from it and replacing the cap, she handed it back to Riker. She could hear him unscrew the cap to take a drink himself, then heard him say, lightly, "Lead on, MacDuff."

MacDuff. That had been the name of the fake commander when everyone on the Enterprise had lost their memory. When she and Will Riker had . . . Now's not the time to think of that, she thought to herself forcefully. Especially with Will Riker's double so close to her, filling her nostrils with his strong but not totally unpleasant musky male scent. The situation was far too desperate for such thoughts.

After a little fumbling in the dark, his warm hand grasped hers firmly. Proceeding with care out of the cell, Ro held her left hand out, grazing the stone wall with her fingertips. She hesitated each time she passed an opening to another cell, but at last she was certain they had passed them all and moved more confidently.

"Ouch!" Ro cried as she barked her shins against an obstruction.

"Are you hurt?"
"Only my pride. There's some kind of bench in the way here."

"We must be where Tevran likes to play 'Twenty Questions' with me. He has lots of games he likes to play. I'm always 'it,' too."

"I thought as much. I saw it on the way down to you. We must be near the tunnel entrance, then."

"Yes, Vedek Parys . . . Ro . . . what do you want me to call you?"

"Parys will do. I haven't been advertising my real name here."

"I don't blame you. Wait a minute. I wonder if there might be anything we can use as a weapon here."

"If they're electronic, they won't work."

"The handles of the energy whips could still do some damage if they're thrown. They're heavy."

"Not a bad idea. Are they here, do you think, or locked away somewhere?"

"Oh, they're here. Just a minute." She heard the sound of a hand slapping around the benches. Finally, he said, "Got it! There's a couple of them here. Parys, let me give you one, too."

She heard his footsteps before feeling something shoved against her forearm. As she grabbed the object, Ro inadvertently felt her thumb slide on switch. She suddenly cried out in shock when a sparkling rope of light and energy shot out from the end of the handle she held. For a split second, the energy discharge illuminated Riker's astonished face. Fortunately, he was not in the way of the whip's business end.

"Be careful, that thing can hurt us. Wait. Didn't you say all the electronics were supposed to be disrupted by that device?"
"Yes, Riker. If this weapon is live, then the cell force field should still have been active, too."

"Why would it be off, then?"

"I don't know." After holding out her hand until she could touch Riker to be certain of his position, Ro cautiously held the torture device away from them both and hit the switch. Energy shot out of the end. Using the weapon like a wrist light, Ro walked toward the force field, across the corridor where they needed to exit. When the energy whip made contact with where the force field barrier should have been, there was no effect. The barrier wasn't on. "I don't like this at all," Ro said, turning the weapon off again. "Most prisons have redundant systems for energy barriers. I can't understand why this one doesn't."

"This one does have a redundant system, Parys. I saw it in action a month ago. There was another prisoner here, Wavrin Kelnir. When Tevran was 'entertaining himself' down here before they killed the poor bastard, the shields went down for a moment before flickering back on. After he had his minions drag away Wavrin's body, Gul Tevran assured me that I couldn't escape because of the backup energy system. The only way I was ever going to leave this prison was the same way Wavrin did."

"So, if the system itself wasn't disrupted, what happened?" she wondered.

"Someone must have taken it off line. Do you think your friends managed to take over the prison?"

"That crew? Impossible. I figured I was going to get killed for sure."

She could hear a chuckle, and then, with a hint of admiration in his voice, "And you came to me anyway? I'm flattered."

"Just my duty, Riker. 'To bring comfort to the troubled and weary.'"

"I'd still like to thank you, but it'll have to wait until later. We need to move out of here. They'll come back eventually. If I'm going to get killed, I want to give them a hard time first. I don't like the idea of hanging around here like a sitting duck."

"I agree." She reached out and made contact with his hand again. They took a few more cautious steps forward. "We must be clear of the barrier again, Riker," she said.
Ro groped for the wall again. When she reached it, she felt Riker's body come close to hers and his voice to murmur, "Parys . . . Ro . . . whoever you are. I've changed my mind about waiting to give you that 'thank you.' There's something I've been wanting to do since you first came into my cell. I'd like to do it now, while I'm still alive to enjoy it. I hope you don't mind." Turning to face his voice, Ro felt a pair of arms come around her, gently holding her body in place until his touched hers. One of his hands was around her back, near her waist. She felt something touch her shoulder, then her face. It was his other hand, cupping her jaw as if he was trying to locate it in the dark. A warm mouth surrounded by beard touched her face and softly made contact with her lips.

He demanded nothing. No tongue assaulted her; no attempt to plunder her mouth. Just an ephemeral, friendly kiss, yet erotic despite its gentleness. She felt his bearded face lean against her cheek as his arms held her close. Into her ear he whispered, "We may not get out of this alive, Ro Laren, but your coming to see me means a lot. You're pretty nice to hold, too."

She leaned her body into his for a few seconds. He was pretty nice to hold, too; but she said only, "You're welcome. Now, shouldn't we get moving so maybe we can get out of here alive?"

His answer was a chuckle that tickled the ear that bore her Bajoran earring. He withdrew his arms from around her but kept his hand on her shoulder. "Lead on . . ."

"I know. MacDuff, right?"

"I was going to say Vedek Parys, but whoever wants to can take the lead. I don't care, just as long as we get out of this tunnel."

The feel of his hand on her shoulder as they walked up the tunnel's grade was comforting, although she didn't mention it. If they managed to stay alive, maybe she'd tell him about it. Maybe she'd have a lot to tell him, if they survived.

The climb up the tunnel seemed ten times as long as it did coming down. The upgrade alone made walking uncomfortable after only a short while, but the angle of ascent and the distance were minor points. Not having any idea, by this time, what might be awaiting them at the end was nerve-wracking. Nerve-wracking, yet exhilarating, too. Both of them had been trained for this sort of action by Starfleet; but both of them had forfeited the chance to exercise these skills long ago. For some reason neither could have explained, it made the entire venture even more exciting.
Before they could perceive any sign of light that would mark the tunnel's entrance, distant noises came to their ears. Some were shouts, others the distinct crackling of energy weapons of various types. Neither doubted for a second that the guards were engaged in battle by some unknown enemy.

Riker stopped and bent his mouth next to Ro's ear. "Let me go up and see who's up there with the Cardassians."

"But you wouldn't know if any of them are the people I was with. I should go."

"Shall we both go?" he asked, a hint of amusement audible in his query.

"Yes, but give me a few seconds first," said Ro. "I need to hitch up my tunic. I don't want to trip."

Putting the energy whip down so that it touched her foot, making it easy for her to find again, Ro ripped the back veil of her headdress down the middle, using it as a belt to anchor the long end of the tunic around her waist, allowing her freedom of movement. The loose-fitting, lightweight trousers beneath were not at all restrictive.

"I'd love to know what you're doing," whispered Riker. She could almost feel his smile in the dark.

"Nothing exciting, believe me. You'll see when we get up top," she replied, a soft chuckle escaping from her lips. Ro bent down to pick up the weapon and felt Riker's hand on her arm again. Ro expected to hear him speak, but he said nothing. Just a gentle squeeze of her elbow, then the sensation of his body barely touching hers from behind, following her up the tunnel.

As he trailed Ro closely, Riker was less aware of the indistinct shuffle of their shoes against the stone floor as he was of their breathing, which was harsh from exertion. As they moved closer to the end of the tunnel, the whine of weapons, while intermittent, was louder than before. Gradually, he became aware of a shadow passing quietly in front of him. There was just enough light to see the silhouette of his benefactress. She must have become aware of the light, too, even though it would be harder for her to distinguish the subtle change in the light levels than it had been for him. He had her to use as a point of reference as he shadowed her.

Ro slowed down perceptively. Creeping ever more slowly and quietly, they rounded a slight bend in the tunnel, then immediately stepped back. Figures could be seen ahead of them, not moving at the
moment, but lying in wait. Their backs were to Ro and Riker. Clearly, they did not anticipate any threat coming from their rear. First Ro, then Riker, leaned forward to spy around the corner.

Riker counted five Cardassians ahead of them. There was little chance that any of them were Ro's confederates, but to be sure, he looked to her for confirmation. Pointing in a line from ear to shoulder, he indicated the rope-like sinews of a Cardassian neck and spread out all five fingers of one hand. Even in the dim light, he could see her nod and imagined her smiling at him. She had quite a smile, he recalled from their conversation. Not a good time to recall the enchanting smile of a woman, but he indulged himself. After all, it could be his last opportunity.

They chanced looking out again, each in turn. He still could not see any indication the Cardassians had sensed even the barest hint of danger from behind. They must not have heard Ro rip her veil for her improvised belt. Perhaps they were confident the shield system could not have failed in Riker's dungeon. Maybe they hadn't even remembered he was down there in the midst of all the fighting. Riker could not suppress his grin at that thought. A fatal mistake, if that was the case.

Grabbing Ro's hand again to get her attention, Riker signaled to Ro that he would cross to the other side of the tunnel. Creeping silently forward, thanks to his slipper-like foot covering, Riker took his position. They were only five or six meters from the backs of the Cardassians from their current position. If any of them turned back to look now, Riker would be in plain sight. None of them turned.

When they'd discovered the energy weapons, Riker had grabbed one for Ro and three for himself. One he had shoved into the waistband of his trousers. The other two he'd held in his right hand during the journey up the tunnel. Now, with a little light available, he studied one of the weapons. It was a fairly standard design with a very simple control panel. The thumb switch could be locked into place. He noted a slide away access panel on the handle, below the switch. Holding his breath, he slid it a little way. There was no noise, and he carefully exhaled. Slipping one of the weapons he had held into his waistband next to the one that had been there all along, Riker slid the access panel of the remaining whip all the way over. As he'd suspected, pulling one of the chips partially out of place and leaning it against another caused a glow to start. Glancing over at Ro, he saw that she was staring at him. He held the whip at an angle so that she could see the glow. He nodded once, twice, three times. She answered him with three nods.

The handle in his hand started to hum slightly. The nearest Cardassian may have been able to hear something now, for he tilted his head as if to try to catch a sound. This was the time to strike. Grabbing one of the energy whips from his waistband, he nodded three more times, turned on the whip in his hand, locking on the switch, then flipped it so that it spun around as it flew at the Cardassian closest to them, who had started to turn around.

They saw a shower of crackling sparks and heard a grunt of surprise from the Cardassian, whose face resembled a whipping post as the tossed energy whip snapped around it. A second later, feeling
the whip in his hand start to rumble and hearing the whine signaling an overload explosion, Riker threw it in back of two more of the Cardassians, who were bending around to see what had happened. They turned their faces into an explosion of energy from the sabotaged whip and went down.

Both of the ex-Starfleet officers jumped up to attack the remaining two Cardassians. Screaming loudly, each was armed only with an ignited energy whip and their courage.

Riker would have loved to ask the Cardassians how many banshees they thought were chasing them out of the tunnel. He never had the chance. The weapon that the soldier who had become a whipping post had dropped was "liberated" by Ro, who fired immediately at the remaining two Cardassians. She hit neither, but when they stood up to react to this threat from the rear, they exposed themselves to shots from outside the tunnel. Both were hit by what Riker judged from the sound to be a Klingon disruptor. As the Cardassians fell, twitching in death (no stun settings on those weapons, Riker noted grimly), he ran up to grab any other weapons he could find.

Taking cover where the last two Cardassians had crouched before their demise, Ro and Riker began to shoot in the direction of other Cardassians whose backs were now exposed to their fire. He glanced over at her once and noted the gleam in her eyes and her cynical smile.

Damn. He really was going to have to find out more about Bajoran vedeks. If Ro were a typical example, they weren't like any religious he'd ever met before.

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At first the fire from the tunnel confused Balth. The Klingon commander had yet to make an assault on his enemies in that position. When he saw that the fire erupting from the cavern mouth was targeting Cardassians, he ceased to worry about it. The enemy of my enemy is my ally, he thought approvingly. Balth ordered his warriors to the right, to complete the flanking maneuver initiated by the fire from the tunnel.

The battle ended quickly once his warriors had flanked the enemy. The Cardassians were slain as they tried to defend themselves from the rear and the side simultaneously. At the end of the battle, many bodies were scattered about. Most were Cardassian, but some belonged to hapless prisoners, stranded in the middle of the conflict when the Klingon troops arrived. Balth was not overly concerned. The prisoners had lost their honor once they were captured. Some of the fallen were Klingon. Honor had been served well here on Lazon II. They would rejoice on board their ship tonight, for their victory and for their comrades who had died in service to the Empire and were now on their way to Sto-Vo-Kor.
After the last shot had been fired, Balth ordered Morgath, his second in command, to investigate the firing from the tunnel. "Take care you give them a chance to explain themselves, whoever they are. They were fighting on our side. Don't kill them unless you must."

A few minutes later, from his position by the bodies of Gul Tevran and his two lieutenants, Balth fingered his bat'leth. It had been denied the taste of blood on the battlefield on this day. He was not one to hack at corpses just to blood his blade; his bat'leth could only sing its battle song from honorable deeds. Morgath approached, leading two figures who were introduced to Balth as their unknown allies. The Klingon commander reacted with surprise. "You, a Bajoran religious woman, and a prisoner? You were the ones in that tunnel?"

"After we got rid of the ones who were there before us," answered the male. "William Thomas Riker, late of the Maquis," he went on, "and this is . . . Vedek Parys, who was visiting me in my cell when the fighting broke out." Balth noted that the male looked at the female in an odd way as he said her name. What was this? Was there something between them?

"You were a prisoner? What about the guards? Are there any left down there?"

"No. We were left alone. The power went out, shutting down the shields. So, we figured the Cardassians didn't want to hold me anymore, and we left." The human male Riker smiled.

From Balth's left, to the rear, he heard a male voice call out. "Parys! See! I told you we would win a glorious victory!"

Balth was nonplused to hear the female groan in apparent frustration when a young Bajoran male, the upstart who had been trying to fight alongside his Klingon troops and had been more a hindrance than a help, burst upon them. She did not appear to care for this man, although they were of the same planet. It could not be a coincidence they were together on this world.

"You mean when the Klingons won a glorious victory to save our hides, Tir. Where are Shaldir and Jilya? Are they all right?"

"Shaldir was wounded, but he will live. Jilya is with him. The Klingons have transported them up to the tajitlq," Tir croaked. "We need to go back to our ship."

The Klingon commander saw the young Bajoran man's crazed eyes. Balth distrusted him. This Tir had been wild to wield a weapon, but once he'd gotten hold of one he'd had no concept of how to
fire at the enemy. Balth was even more disgusted with the Bajoran male when he added, triumphantly, "Our secret weapon worked, Ro! It knocked out all their power!"

"Hah! Your weapon! All the power was knocked out on the surface, yes. But what about all of the weapons underground? All the facilities? The Cardassians would have fixed it all in minutes. If we had not attacked and destroyed the power core when we did, little Bajoran, the Cardassians would have killed you all. They already had you trapped inside the mines!"

Vedek Parys groaned again. Facing the tall human, she murmured, "I knew it. See, we should have been dead, Riker."

The human male put his arms around her. "Maybe your Prophets don't want us dead yet. And I don't mind getting lucky for once; it's about time! It's a good thing you showed up, Balth. But why are you here?"

"The Klingon High Council has declared war on Cardassia. Attacks are taking place all over, as we speak. My force was ordered to establish a base here. Three Birds of Prey are in orbit above us. We were surprised to find a Klingon freighter already in orbit when we decloaked. You must leave, now. This outpost is claimed by the Klingon Empire."

"I'm delighted to leave! Just show me where to catch the next shuttle," Riker laughed, hugging Ro tightly to his chest. She smiled, sharing his pleasure.

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Tir Graxom was not pleased. This was his moment of victory, and he was the one who should have his arms around the vedek. Tir stepped over the quiet form of a Cardassian lying between Tir and Riker. "Leave your hands off her, human."

"Tir . . . " cautioned Ro.

Riker left his arms where they were, but his blue eyes flashed with a cold fire at the younger man's challenge. "I don't hear the lady complaining. What right do you have to complain?"

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On the ground behind Tir, a blood-smeared figure began to stir. Dokan, lying unconscious from an energy blast that had stunned but not killed him, began to come awake. Most of the blood covering Dokan flowed out of his friend Gantak's body as it was torn apart by a Klingon blade, well after Dokan had fallen to the ground. Had the victors realized Dokan was unconscious, not dead, they would never have stood so casually, right next to him.

A disoriented Dokan at first was confused to find he was lying on rocky ground, staring up at the sky. Turning his head slightly, Dokan saw the prisoner. The one in solitary. Here, above ground. Riker.

I know my duty, thought Dokan, his hand tightening on the disruptor he had in his hand. This prisoner is the cause of our defeat!

That Thomas Riker was far from the only cause for the Cardassian defeat mattered not at all to Dokan. He would be the one to pay for all the deaths. Dokan would see to it. Raising his arm suddenly, he pulled the trigger of his disruptor.

It was strange. Riker seemed to grow another body just as Dokan fired. This shorter Riker, clad in golden clothes, shouted something incoherently in Bajoran. "She is mine!" Dokan thought vaguely, No, whoever she is, she will be mine -- to kill -- but only after Riker is dead. The weapon jumped in his hand as it discharged into the golden figure before him.

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Tir Graxom reached out and thrust the human's arm away from his Ro, unaware that his action had pushed her to the ground. She was his prize, his to bring back into the Maquis fold. But why was his back and side suddenly on fire, as if all the blood were boiling in his veins? Suddenly Tir Graxom wanted only to sink down onto his knees and pray to the Prophets for a return to strength. Somehow, his knees had disappeared, or perhaps they'd only gone numb. He couldn't say.

As a light suffused the scene in front of him with a bright clarity, Tir saw Riker go down on his knees in front of him. Only then did he see that Ro was down, too. She threw her arms around Riker, when before his arms encircled her. Tir tried to speak, but his voice seemed to be gone again. Only sight and sound were left. He heard Ro call a name. The name was not his. "Riker! Thomas Riker! Don't you dare die on me, Riker!"

Tir heard a roaring in his ears, a wild sound, a climax. Something bounced by him, just barely within
sight. Some kind of oddly shaped ball thumped dully as it passed, spraying something all over him as it rolled away.

Come hold me, Ro, Tir Graxom tried to say, but his mouth would no longer obey him. Sounds faded. There was no longer any light, any sound. No heart beat in Tir Graxom's chest to pump his blood, boiling hot from a disruptor blast fired at close range. His eyelids seemed to be so light, like feathers, yet it was so very dark, as Tir's soul began its long journey back to the light, back to the Prophets.

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The Klingon commander was incensed when he saw that what he had taken to be a Cardassian corpse was an unexpectedly alive enemy firing his disruptor. Balth was not going to let a dying Cardassian murder an ally unpunished. Not at his outpost.

With a casual flick of the bat'leth, Balth decapitated the audacious Cardassian. He was pleased his blade would not be denied the opportunity to taste the sweet blood of an enemy on the field of battle. It was a good day to die after all -- especially if you were a Cardassian.

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On the Klingon Bird of Prey

The average Klingon Bird of Prey generally wastes little room on fripperies like a fully equipped sickbay. In most, a decent diagnostic bed is cause for celebration. Klingons are expected to survive their wounds as much on the strength of their characters as good medical care. If they don't, their crew mates will gladly yell another warrior on his way to Sto-Vo-Kor.

Fortunately, the bortaS, despite its vengeful name, had a well-equipped field medic kit and a second navigator who knew how to use it. Kalith spent as much of her off-duty time studying medical texts as she did practicing hand-to-hand combat. She did not have much of a social life, but Kalith did not mind. The daughter of Vorn was respected by the honorable warriors of her ship for believing that keeping other honorable warriors alive to fight another day was a worthwhile goal. Many were still fighting for the Empire because of her skill in healing, yet her greatest skill may have been her ability to treat injuries without making the wounded feel coddled. She was a very intelligent female.

Having a chance to practice her arts on a non-Klingon warrior was a challenge. She'd seldom had the opportunity. This human provided her with one. He had endured months of torture at the hands of the Cardassians and had bravely fought off his jailers. He deserved a measure of respect from her, even if he had been a prisoner. Everyone knew that humans didn't seem to mind being held prisoner if they could win escape eventually, as he had. A strange culture, but what could one expect from those not fortunate enough to be born Klingon?

The Bajoran female cleric seemed to have a fair amount of medical knowledge as well, particularly concerning the medicines available to Kalith that would have the desired healing properties in a human. This Vedek Parys was unable to read Klingon well, however. Kalith had to translate the medical scanner's readings for her, as well as identify the medicines, but the Bajoran quickly selected appropriate preparations to treat the male. He was soon sleeping easily in quarters vacated by two of the crew on their captain's orders. When Kalith offered to share her own billet with the Bajoran, this Parys told her no, she would sleep on the floor in the room of her patient. The Bajoran needed to be near him, and she'd slept on many floors in her time. A bed was not necessary.

Kalith approved.

Ro was perched on a chair that was probably just as uncomfortable for Klingons as it was for Bajorans, but it served the purpose of allowing her to watch Riker. He was still unconscious, but his breathing had eased. Ro would have allowed him to wake up if there had been any painkillers in the Klingon medical kit; but of course, that wasn't something culturally acceptable on a Bird of Prey.
Sedatives were permitted, and Ro had used one on Riker. He was resting fairly well, but now she had a decision to make.

Riker, in a word, reeked. He needed a bath desperately. The Cardassians' withholding of sufficient water in which to bathe properly was one of their pettier ways of torturing him, but now anyone in a room with the man was being tortured. While talking to him in the prison, she'd been able to put the smell out of her mind by thinking it would be over soon. She'd be leaving him to his fate, so she could stand it. Besides, his own musky scent, augmented by honest sweat from the exercises he'd used to occupy his mind and keep himself in shape, really hadn't been all that unpleasant -- actually, rather the opposite. But that had been many hours ago, and after the battle and his injury, his smell was sharper and far more distasteful. She didn't want to disrupt his sleep, but she simply didn't know how long she could stand being in the same room with him.

After going over the pros and cons of bathing him at least a half-dozen times, Ro had had enough. She hoped his injuries weren't so severe he would be harmed, but he really needed a good scrubbing.

The cramped quarters she shared with Riker had minimal sanitary facilities. Filling the basin with warm water, Ro searched for some soap and toweling. They were stored, logically enough, in a niche next to the basin. Ro had learned from her fellow officer on the Enterprise, Lieutenant Worf, that Klingons had rather delicate skin. (It was one of those facts that convinced Ro the Prophets had a sense of humor.) This soap should be mild enough not to cause a problem for Riker's burn if any splashed onto his wounded skin. As the quarters were fairly warm, catering to Klingon preferences, he wasn't likely to take a chill while being bathed, either.

Preparations made, Ro slipped off her Vedek's robe, her under tunic, and the wide legged pants, leaving her clad only in underpants and a tank top. Riker's clothing was in extremely poor shape. As she stripped them from him, she decided that they all should be thrown out. Ro smiled, recalling the last man she had stripped before bathing. When she'd cared for Tom on Delistor II, Ro had had to throw out most of his clothing because they stank of alcohol and vomit. Ro closed her eyes and bid the mercies of the Prophets be shown to the soul of the late, much lamented Mr. Paris. Now, however, Ro Laren had another Tom to care for.

Ro started with his face and arms, which had not been damaged by the disruptor. After carefully bathing his underarms and right side, where there was little tissue damage, and even more carefully attending to the left side, where the burns were extensive, Ro decided to change directions, washing his feet and legs next. Eventually, she reached Riker's generative organs. After washing his hips, again being careful of his left hip where he had sustained a fair amount of burned tissue, Ro put the cloth to his Orbs of the Descendants and Profound Shaft of Pleasure. Riker may have been given a sedative to keep him asleep, but the touch of her hand was welcomed by Mr. Riker's private parts in a very predictable way. Guiltily looking up to his face, Ro saw that while he had not awakened, his eyelids were moving rapidly, as if in a dream. Was it the dream that had prompted his physical reaction, or did her touch prompt the dream?
"You certainly are a Riker that way," she murmured softly to herself as she stood, arms at her hips, chuckling quietly as his Tower of Joy showed no inclination to wilt.

The sudden swish of an opening door behind her gave her a start. Ro turned to look into the eyes of Kalith, come to look in upon her charges. The Klingon's teeth were bared in what Ro assumed was delight.

"I see this Riker is much like the other one is reputed to be. Impressive."

Ro laughed out loud at that. "Oh, yes, he certainly is. Rather well-endowed, I'd say," she added, speculatively tilting an eyebrow upwards in good humor.

"Indeed. And it's a good sign he will survive, I think. It would be for a Klingon male. Is it the same for humans?"

"To tell you the truth, Kalith, I have no idea. I'm prepared to take it as a sign from the Prophets that he'll live, though. Can you help me wash his back? He's a big man, and I need one of us to wash while the other holds him up."

"Of course."

"I'll climb into the bunk to prop him up -- here's the soap, and there's warm water in the basin." Ro clambered in behind Riker. Tilting him on his right side, Ro was able to expose almost his entire back and buttocks for Kalith's ministrations. After Kalith was finished, she handed Ro the soap and cloth so that the Bajoran could carefully clean the rest of his back and right hip.

As Ro crawled out from the bunk, she drew the blanket over Riker's naked body. Not dressing him now would make it easier to care for him the next time. "The air in here smells better already." Noting that Kalith seemed to be appraising the vedek, Ro added, "What is it, Kalith?"

"The way you are dressed . . . "

"Oh, I don't have any change of clothing, so I didn't want to get my robes wet," Ro replied. She had no desire to wear Klingon dress.
"Ah, I see." The Klingon continued to stare at Ro, who took this as her cue to redress. When she'd put her robe back on, minus the ruined veil, which she'd discarded, Ro sat on the edge of the hard Klingon bunk. She gently placed the back of her hand on Riker's forehead and cheek. "He doesn't seem to be feverish, at least."

"Vedek Parys, may I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"This Riker, you like him. I can see by how you look at him. Would you be able to take advantage of his . . . as you called it, his endowments?"

"I've only known him for a day or so! It's a little soon to say if we could be more to one another," Ro responded, a little flustered, as her vision at the Orb of Prophecy flashed through her mind.

"I did not ask that. I was asking if your faith allows a vedek to take a mate."

"Oh. Well, I'm not from a celibate order, if that's what you mean."

"Good. It would be a shame to let such a 'well-proportioned' man get away, Vedek. It would seem you could take advantage of what he has to offer even now."

Ro felt her face flush at the comment. Looking back at Riker, she could see that the blanket was still propped up noticeably in one spot. At first, she did not trust herself to say anything, but finally, Ro managed to say, "Not now. I'd want him to remember it."

After a few seconds, Kalith flashed her toothy grin and laughed. "As would I, Bajoran." Ro found herself joining the Klingon medic in her laughter.

Kalith clapped Ro on the back, saying "I must return to my responsibilities. As you must return to yours?"

Nodding agreement, Ro fumbled in the medical kit to find more of the sedative, as Riker was becoming increasingly restive and had begun to moan. Kalith left, leaving Ro to appreciate the
Klingon medic’s sense of humor. She also observed that while Klingons had a tradition of mating for life, fidelity did not seem to diminish their enthusiasm for the opposite sex.

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After administering another dose of the sedative to Riker, who quickly settled into a quiet sleep, Ro prayed for a long while. Guilt assailed her. She had held weapons in her hand and had used them against others. Ro did not know if she had wounded or killed anyone, but to Ro, that made no difference. She had vowed to bring spiritual comfort and guidance to those who sought to follow the way of the Prophets. Attacking people with weapons could not, in any way, be considered an acceptable method of providing spiritual comfort and guidance to those on the receiving end of her attack.

As brutal as the Cardassian Occupation of Bajor had been, and as badly as she herself had been treated in the past, Ro was certain that her actions had not been what the Prophets had in mind for her when she went to that prison. Or were they? Was rescuing Riker and being part of what turned out to be an action freeing all of the living prisoners from the hell of Lazon II their plan? Did the Prophets intend for her to take up the Maquis cause again? Or was she to continue walking the path she had followed since arriving at the House of the Prophets, a life of prayer and service to those who needed it?

Ro had acted upon instinct, to preserve the life of a man who had been left to rot in an underground torture chamber. Ro could not find it in her heart to flay herself for those actions, but she perceived that this experience had been a test, one she was not sure she had passed. How was Ro Laren to live her life from this day onward?

The longer she meditated, the more her conviction grew. She had a choice to make, and the time to make it was now. While she had willingly taken the vows of a vedek, Ro Laren had drifted into the contemplative life. She had not really chosen it in response to a Call from the Prophets. Always, in the back of her mind, she had reserved the right to return to the Maquis. Their cause was honorable, although she no longer felt the same way about many of their methods. Using the vedeks as a blind, whatever the outcome, had been wrong.

Ro Laren might be forgiven for this one lapse back to the training she had received in Starfleet, and for betraying the peaceful message of the Prophets by taking up arms, but another lapse would be inexcusable. If Vedek Parys Folaren, born Ro Laren, was to remain in the House of the Prophets as a vedek, she could never take up arms again. No mission of mercy could make up for the way she would feel if this happened again. She had to choose to follow her vows to the end of her days or abandon them now. Perhaps the Prophets had led her here, to this moment, because this was her Call. She would hear and accept it, or go back to the ways of a warrior.
In later days, Ro Laren thought it strange that her vocation as a vedek was not confirmed within the peaceful confines of the monastery where Vedek Bareil had provided her with sanctuary. She found it within the hull of a Klingon vessel named bortaS, which in Federation Standard would be called the Revenge. The irony did not escape her.

After her prolonged tussle with her conscience, Ro was exhausted. The past few days had been trying to the extreme, even before she became involved in two battles for survival, the first on the planet, and the second by exercising her training as a field medic. Ro needed to rest. Despite her professed willingness to lay on the floor, she preferred not to sleep on it if there were any alternatives. Fortunately, two were available. Ro debated whether to remain in the uncomfortable chair or lie beside Riker in the bunk.

While she might doze off if she reclined next to Riker, she also would know if and when he awoke. If she fell asleep in the chair -- an iffy proposition -- she might hurt herself if she fell out of it. Ro chose to curl herself along the edge of the bunk. From this vantage point, she was close enough to touch his face if she desired, but it was enough just to study his face.

The orb experience made Ro feel quite proprietary towards Riker and his various body parts, almost as if he had already gotten her with child. Ro leaned against his undamaged side, thinking that if Kalith's ability to give a prognosis was as accurate as her medical knowledge, Riker had a good chance of survival. That vision had a chance of becoming reality, if she wanted it to. And she realized that she did. She remembered again the feel of the child in her arms, his warm, squirming body, his sucking mouth. Ro also, unfortunately, recalled her very sore bottom, a sensation she endeavored to put out of her mind.

What she could not put out of her mind, even now, were the emotions Ro remembered feeling during that orb experience. In her shock at the identity of the man she thought she had seen, Ro had largely ignored what she had felt about the actual contents of that vision. The experience was still vivid in her mind, however, and now she did remember. Ro had felt a strong, genuine sense of being truly loved by the father of the child nursing at her breast. No words of love had passed during the orb experience itself, yet somehow, she knew that Thomas Riker had said them to her in that possible future, and often.

While Ro had adored Tom Paris -- and she'd been quite sure he'd felt the same way about her -- they'd never told each other in so many words that they loved one another. Tom Paris was surely dead now, lost with the rest of Voyager's crew, but even if by some chance he was still alive, Ro no longer felt quite the same way about him. She still cared deeply about him, of course, but the caring had been transformed back into a friendship of the purest kind: the affection of two people who, in a time of torment, had offered each other a lifeline, each helping the other to survive a hell in which both had been living for so many years.
Tom Paris had given her another gift besides that lifeline. Ro knew that if she wished to share physical love with this Thomas lying next to her, she would be able to, and gladly. She was grateful to Paris for that. She hoped he had been able to find some measure of happiness and peace within himself, too, before his death.

Although Ro had always thought that "love at first sight" was impossible, now she wasn't so sure. The survival of Thomas Riker had become so important to her, could it be that she had fallen in love with him as soon as she met him? Just from those few hours of conversation in the dungeon of Lazon II? Or did it even count as "first sight?" She'd already had feelings for Will Riker. When Ro and Will lost their memories, they tumbled into bed, experiencing one passionate, yet tender, night together. They were totally embarrassed -- and very surprised -- when they learned the truth about their relationship once their normal memories returned. Was their mutual antagonism really because they'd hated each other so much, or because they had sensed an attraction they'd fought not to acknowledge, realizing just how mismatched a couple they were in personality?

This Riker, though, was not the same man as that Will Riker. Same in body, although Tom Riker was lighter by quite a few kilos, thanks to the Cardassians' attentions -- but how different in outlook they were from one another! Thomas Riker had lived through a degree of solitude few people have ever survived. Any personal isolation experienced by Commander Will Riker of the Enterprise was self-imposed, due solely to his inability to commit to a permanent relationship.

_The two Will Rikers would be a classic case study in the effects of nature versus nurture_, Ro thought. _Some researcher could make quite a reputation for himself by doing a paper on them._

And the one that had suffered alone for so many years was the one that touched Ro's heart. She sensed no barriers between them, no expectation of the perfection she had detected in every command from Will Riker. The twin Rikers had led very different lives, and the man lying sedated before her almost seemed like a gift of the Prophets, created just for her.

_I'm tired, and I need to rest. All this philosophizing just proves it. Time to sleep._

As she adjusted the blanket over him, Ro suddenly felt the urge to hold onto his ear to feel his _pagh_. That was a skill she had never really developed. She wasn't sure exactly how to interpret what she might feel, but she gently cupped her hand around his ear anyway.

Ro sensed Riker's life force as it surged beneath her hand. Moving her fingers from his ear to touch his neck gently, Ro checked his pulse. It was strong and even, a good sign. A very good sign.
Ro dimmed the illumination. She could still see Riker, but there was no harsh light to bother him if he woke up.

Before she fell into slumber, Ro thought of one more thing that made her smile. She had told Vedek Bareil when she'd first come to the House of the Prophets that she wanted answers to her questions. Bareil had told her she might have to ask many more questions before arriving at the answers she sought. He was certainly right about the questions. They never seemed to stop, but very few answers had ever come her way.

Perhaps Thomas Riker could answer a few of them for her.

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Several hours later, Kalith reentered the quarters assigned to Ro and Riker. She noted the Bajoran vedek sleeping soundly at Riker's side on the hard Klingon bunk. The brief grin that came over Kalith's face was quickly smoothed away. "Vedek Parys. Awaken. We have found you transport back to Bajor."

The crew of a Bajoran freighter, delighted that the decloaking Bird of Prey had no evil intentions toward their vessel, was only too happy to take on the dozen or so liberated prisoners from the Bird of Prey. The agreement would permit the bortaS a swift return to battle. Kalith helped Ro pull a Klingon martial arts outfit over Riker to cover his nudity.

"I wish we could have allowed Riker to wake up so he could thank you himself, Kalith. From what I know of him, he would have wanted that. Thank you, for everything. May the Prophets bless you. Kahless, too, if he does that sort of thing."

"It was simply my duty. I am sorry I will not get a chance to speak with him. He seems a brave man."

"He is, Kalith. I wish you Qapla' in everything you do. You have been most kind."

"And to you, Parys. I do not know your story, but you are a warrior, too, I think."

"I have been. Now, I hope to be a healer."
"You will heal this man, Vedek . . . and I hope you will get a chance one day to enjoy his 'endowments,' also."

The women were laughing together as the tingling transporter beam captured the Bajoran and the human, bringing them on the last leg of their journey home to Bajor.

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When he opened his eyes, he had no idea where he was. The ceiling above him was high and vaulted, constructed of some kind of bricks, not the stone of the caverns he last remembered. He even had trouble remembering who he was at first. Awareness seeped back to him, a little at a time. William Thomas Riker. Klingons. A jail break. A beautiful woman. Was it all a dream? His aching side suggested it was not, as did his sore back. When he tried to stretch, the pain increased.

"Careful. Your side is still in pretty nasty shape. Your liver got cooked a little, too, but Vedek Krisya assures me you'll be fine. You'll have to rest a few more days here, in our infirmary."

He turned his head to view the possessor of the mellow contralto voice. She was seated on a stool next to his bed. His eyes came into focus upon her face. He knew her. The Vedek. The one who was really Ro Laren, once a Maquis, who now followed the Prophets in a Bajoran monastery.

"Cooked my liver, huh? Any other damage?"

"Some muscle tissue damage, but most of it was to your skin. You'll heal. The disruptor didn't catch you fully, thank the Prophets."

"I don't remember that. I remember crawling out of the tunnels in the dark, and I remember firing on the Cardassians. There were Klingons. I can't seem to remember what else happened afterwards. I got hit by a disruptor?"

"Yes."

"I'm surprised I'm here to talk about it."

"Another man stepped in front of you and took the brunt of the blast. He was killed instead. He was a lay brother from my religious order."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Ro."
He saw her eyes flicker over to the right, checking on the figures of two female vedeks standing near a bed occupied by a man. "Riker, here I'm known as Vedek Parys."

"Sorry."

"It's all right," she whispered. "I couldn't warn you before. You were unconscious; but you need to remember it now. You've been under sedation for three days. Klingons don't believe in pain killers, so I thought you'd heal better if you stayed asleep."

"Where are we now? Doesn't seem to be a Klingon kind of place."

Her face was graced by a radiant smile. "You're right, it isn't. You're in the infirmary of what's known by those of us who live here as the House of the Prophets, although that isn't it's formal name. I won't bother you with the details about how we got here right now. Just rest for the next couple of days; concentrate on getting well. You'll be safe here until you decide what you want to do with your freedom."

"Freedom. That sounds good. Even better than good."

"I'll bet it does." She stood up, smiling at him as she smoothed her robes. "I've got to go now. It's time for midday prayers."

"Will you come back to visit me afterwards?"

"If you want me to."

"I'd like that." As he lifted his arm to grab her hand, Riker winced in pain.

Ro leaned down to take his hand in hers, stroking his cheek with her other hand as she whispered, "Rest now, Riker. I'll be back before you know it."

"Call me Thomas. I've come to prefer it." Besides, he knew from something a Maquis named
Chakotay once told him that the name Tom meant someone else to Ro Laren.

Her smile broadened. "Then I'll be back before you know it, Thomas."

"I'm counting on it."

She was as good as her word. Vedek Parys spent every free moment during the following days with her former patient, having relinquished his care to the young but competent infirmarian, Vedek Krisya. They spoke of many things. At his insistence, she told him all about what she'd learned about the Klingon attack on Cardassia. She also described the rules of her house, the daily schedule of those who dwelled in it, and the types of work done there. He did not let her know what he might be planning to do with the information. She asked him once if he liked carpentry, but after this cryptic question was answered in the negative, Ro said only, "That's good," without commenting further.

As he rested, first in bed, and then in a chair next to it, Riker had a lot to think about. He had no idea if the Starfleet brass would want to punish him for stealing the Defiant. The Cardassians had been doing it for them, but now that he was free of the Cardassian prison, he had no intention of serving time in one belonging to the Federation. He also found he had no desire to return to the Maquis. Once again, the William Thomas Riker who had spent eight years alone on a deserted science station did not have a clue as to what to do with the rest of his life.

"Hello, Vedek Krisya. How are your patients, today?" asked Ro as she swept into the Infirmary after the silent midday meal.

"Fine, Vedek Parys. Shaldir has returned home to Jilya's tender care."

"She finally over her hysterics over his injury?" Jilya's reaction to the broken arm and leg her husband sustained during the fighting at Lazon II had been out of all proportion to the seriousness of the injuries. Ro privately wondered what Jilya would have done if Shaldir had been wounded as seriously as Riker had been.

"Finally seems to be," answered Krisya, laughing lightly, her earring dancing in the sunlight shining
through the window at the end of the infirmary.

Ro looked around. Someone was missing. "Where's Riker?"

"Vedek Sharom came in this morning after breakfast to speak with him. I've released him from the Infirmary. I imagine he'll be leaving us now."

"Already? He's gone, and I didn't get a chance to say good-bye to him?" Ro's agitation was painfully clear.

"I don't know if he's actually gone yet. He didn't have any possessions. I'm sure Sharom will make sure he has the basics. Why don't you go to the Domiciliary? That's probably where he went."

A hasty trip to Vedek Lixan's domain corroborated much of what Krisya had told Ro. She had distributed clothing and personal articles to the human called Riker Thomas. Vedek Lixan did not know where he'd gone after leaving her storeroom, only that Vedek Sharom was with him when he left.

Dejectedly, Ro walked into the Garden of the House of the Prophets. The lush greenery usually soothed her when she was upset. Today, her mind was in so much turmoil that a walk in the park-like gardens could not calm her. Ro began to get more than merely agitated; she began to get angry. How dare he leave without saying, at the very least, "So long, thanks for everything, and thanks for getting me out of prison"?

"Parys, there you are." She turned around at the sound of Terzy's voice. "Your human friend was looking for you. I thought you'd gone to the outer gardens, so I sent him there. He looks like he's well healed."

"Yes, I believe he is. Which of the outer gardens?"

"I thought you were going to work in the orchards today. That's what we agreed yesterday. I sent him there."

"Oh, I forgot. Thank you, Terzy."
"Don't mention it," the elderly gardener said to her rapidly retreating form.

Practically running to the south gardens, Ro managed to slow her less than tranquil pace when she reached the gate. Stopping herself to catch her breath, she peered through the open gate to the herb garden and the orchards beyond.

He was sitting on a bench in the herb garden. The herbs had been planted in an area protected from harsh winter winds by the inner wall of the monastery. His back was to her, but she would know him anywhere. His head was tilted up, looking at the sky.

Ro's excitement at seeing him was tempered by the direction of his gaze. Back to the stars, Ro thought. I guess that orb vision won't be coming true after all. Ro had promised herself that she would say her good-byes to him when the time came, however, and that she would do. Steeling herself for what she expected to be an ordeal, she moved out from under the shadow of the gate and into the sunshine.

"Riker. Good afternoon."

At the sound of her voice, Riker stood up and turned to face her. "Parys. I'm glad to see you. I missed you this morning."

"I had someone who came early this morning for a counseling session, and then another woman dropped in unexpectedly. I never even had a chance to break my fast until the midday meal."

"Thanks for coming to see me now."

"You don't think I would let you leave without saying good-bye to you, do you?"

"Trying to get rid of me?" He raised a quizzical eyebrow.

"No, of course not. But Vedek Krisya said . . . aren't you leaving?"

"Not right now. There doesn't seem to be much call for my Starfleet services at the moment, but I hear there's an opening for a cook in your kitchen. I thought I'd stay a while. If that's all right with
"Of course it's all right. I just didn't... well, I didn't expect you to want to stay. It's pretty quiet here."

He faced away from her, his voice becoming almost too soft for her to hear, as if he were talking more to himself than to her. "Quiet may be what I need. I've got decisions to make. This seems as good a place as any for that." Turning back to her, he added, "It may be quiet, but at least I won't be alone. There are people around to talk to and work that needs to be done. I've always liked to cook. I figured I might as well see where being here leads me. It's nice and warm here. Good for growing herbs."

His sudden change of subject disconcerted her. "Uh, yes, it is. Warm. And good for growing herbs."

"Do you do much of your gardening work out here?"

"I do whenever Terzy assigns me out here. I'm working out here today."

"Yes, I know. I wanted to ask you about the herbs you're growing in this garden. Some I recognize, some I don't. And I don't know Bajoran, so I can't look them up. I expected to find you out here to help me."

"There's a program in the temple's library that translates from Bajoran to Federation Standard and vice versa, but I can help you, if you wish."

"I'd like you to." He turned his face towards her. His white teeth, buried behind his freshly-trimmed beard, appeared in a huge grin. Ro couldn't help responding with a broad smile of her own. Bending down and plucking a small leaflet from a plant with delicate, lacy green foliage, he inquired, "What is this?"

"That's chaderi. I believe it tastes a bit like your dill weed."

Riker rubbed the small leaf between his strong fingers and lifted it to his nose to sniff the aroma. "You're right. It does remind me of dill. Good for pickles." He extended his hand to Ro's nose, giving her a chance to share in the chaderi essence that lingered on his fingertips.
For a good part of the afternoon, they strolled from plant to plant, crushing leaves to release their aroma and tasting others, as Ro answered as many of his questions about the herbs as she could. Between several of his questions, the pretty vedek offered wordless, emotion-filled prayers to the Prophets to grant her a future she'd once seen, with the help of the Orb of Prophecy and Change.

In his position as a cook in the House of the Prophets, Riker was expected to arise very early in the morning, long before any of the vedeks or lay brothers and sisters in other positions had to leave their beds. The first few days were difficult, since he was still recovering his strength from his injuries; but Vedek Kyl, who headed the kitchen staff, willingly made allowances for him.

By the end of the first week, Riker was often the first in the kitchen in the morning, pulling out the bowls and ingredients for baking the day's loaves of bread. There was something satisfying about burying his hands in the dough, pounding it onto the boards, and kneading it into smooth elasticity. Best of all, however, was that while Supplicant Riker might be the first in the kitchen, he was not the last. There were six other cooks, and having company was a wonderful change.

Usually, the chimes for the Dawn-Greeting Service had already sounded before the cooks could leave their morning labors. Because they were usually last to arrive for services, a special row was reserved for the five lay brothers who worked in the kitchen, just as the two vedeks in charge had places reserved for them in the sanctuary. Riker liked sitting in that first row because it gave him an unobstructed view of what he considered to be the most beautiful sight in the monastery: Ro Laren.

Her seat in the sanctuary area at the front of the temple was at the end of a U-shaped row of cushions. While Riker liked to look at her during all four of the daily prayer services held at the monastery, the morning service was his favorite. On sunny days the sun's rays fell upon her from the windows behind Riker, highlighting her slender figure and face. Sunlight beams bouncing from her earring reflected splinters of light on her cheek and neck. Although Vedek Parys did not wear a veil most of the day, at the prayer services her face was framed by the triple-peaked headdress of the order. Her sharply angled brows with the floating "eagle" above the bridge of her nose, when cast into sharp relief by the morning sunlight, almost took his breath away. He imagined he could see her eyes sparkle with the light of her intelligence. He longed to kiss her delicately shaped lips and wrinkled nose. Among other things.

Even if he were not so enchanted by his view of Ro, Thomas Riker would have liked the services. The chants of the vedeks, to him, were a cross between Gregorian chants and Asian folk music. Some of the scales had an unusual quality to them. Riker found himself soothed by the melodies and rhythms of the voices as they sang. The pipes and chimes which accompanied the chants were pleasant, but he sometimes thought about offering a trombone solo -- if he could get his hands on a
trombone, that is.

While Riker didn't understand many of the words, it wasn't because they were chanted in Bajoran. Vedek Sharom had dug up an antique Starfleet universal translator for him to use. It had to be at least ninety years old, and he didn't want to know how she had obtained it after being filled in by Ro about Sharom's probable Maquis sympathies. Still, it was a relief to be able to speak with everyone, not just the few, like Vedek Sharom and Vedek Krisya, who spoke passable Federation Standard. Although Ro spoke Standard like a native, no one in the kitchens knew more than a smidgeon of Riker's tongue.

At services, however, Riker habitually turned the translator off to let the Bajoran words wash over him. No translation could ever do the poetry justice. The sounds of the Bajoran verses were beautiful and evocative. Sometimes Riker thought he could hear Ro's mellow contralto tones during the chanting, making them sound even more lovely to his ears.

As soon as the morning services ended, Riker and the other cooks hustled back down the stairs to the kitchens to finish breakfast and begin their preparations for later meals. The hour between the ending of the service and the ringing of the chimes that called the dwellers of the house to the first meal always passed quickly. At serving time for all repasts, the cooks took turns so that, at least a few times a week, a cook could sit in fellowship with others of the order. Whenever Riker was free, he took the place that Ro saved for him next to her.

After breakfast, there were dishes to be collected and washed and meals for later in the day to be prepared. The midday meal was the largest of the day and was eaten in silence, to match the solemnity of the Midday Service. Many of the order ate only breakfast and the midday meal, which Riker always thought of as dinner, and preferred to fast for the rest of the day. Once cleanup from the midday meal was over, the "snacks" that would make up the remainder of the day's meals were prepared and left in covered dishes in the Refectory. The dwellers of the monastery who were hungry after the midday meal either ate their food cold or heated it themselves in small ovens located in the Refectory and in the kitchens for just that purpose. For the "snack" meals, every vedek or lay person was responsible for cleaning up his or her own messes. The cooks' workdays, by that time, were formally ended.

Riker sometimes took a short nap before the Sundown Service, if Ro was not free in the afternoon to spend time with him, since he was up so early in the morning. That service was also pleasant, short and music-filled. He also looked forward to Sundown Service because he knew that once it was over, he would be spending the next several hours before Days End Devotion with Vedek Parys, who tutored him in Bajoran customs and language. Sometimes they wandered the gardens, at other times, they sat in the library reading from old bound volumes or modern PADDs. Whatever they did prior to the solemn litany and final chant of the day, it was fine with Riker. He was with Ro.

Although Riker knew he had no vocation to become a vedek, that did not seem to bother anyone at
About one third of the one hundred or so residents who lived there permanently were of the laity, brothers and sisters who did much of the actual work around the grounds, while the vedeks did the chanting, philosophizing, studying, and guiding of the faithful. There usually were a significant number of temporary residents at the monastery, too. Bajorans and those of a smattering of other races came, some for a few days, others for years, to study the faith, learn about themselves, or discover the paths which the Prophets wished them to follow. Political intrigue, military strife, and power struggles swirled around Bajor and the quadrant in which it was located. The monastery walls enclosed an oasis of calm.

Riker dressed willingly in the simple clothing worn by supplicants to the order. A dangling Bajoran earring on his right ear identified him as one who sought the wisdom of the Prophets. He had no problem being marked as a seeker of knowledge. Riker had plenty of questions and few answers, most of them centered around the nature of his own being and his place in the galaxy. As he saw it, his life had been created unnaturally; the status of his soul -- or even if he had one -- was a question he could not answer for himself.

Ro still liked to work in the garden, but more and more of her time was now being taken up by her counseling duties. Riker found it odd that both of the women that had been truly important in his life had been counselors. The Prophets must have decreed his partner would be a woman of wise counsel.

The only barrier to his true happiness, apart from the ever-present danger that someone would come to the House of the Prophets and demand his arrest, was his own inability to fully accept Ro as she was. Even though Riker knew that vedeks, like other Bajorans, "honored the Prophets" by having sexual relations, and that they raised the resultant "blessings of the Prophets" together in families, he couldn't quite accept it. To his mind, people who live in monasteries are monks, and monks are celibate, or should be.

So, although in his heart Thomas Riker adored Ro Laren, he had been unable to show it in any way other than by being her good friend. Her best friend, as a matter of fact. He had no way of knowing just how significant that fact might be to Ro.

They could easily have gone on this way for a long time. One day, however, Thomas Riker decided to learn how to make *hasperat* for his best friend.

The counseling session had been a draining one. Lys Treval's childhood had been distressingly like Ro's. To dispassionately discuss such damaging experiences was exhausting for Ro, but dispassionate was the best that Lys could do. She had never had an opportunity to have her memory wiped of all her past experiences, nor had she ever met a man as tender and considerate as Tom.
Paris, to help her get over her fears. The young woman was emotionally distanced from everyone, even herself, much of the time.

Lys had found a young man who loved her and wished to marry her, but she was afraid to honor the Prophets. She had decided to break off her engagement. Her fiancé had been devastated, as had Lys. Ro was afraid it would take several more years of talking about her feelings for Lys to be willing to try having a physical relationship. Her fiancé would not wait for her that long, but Lys had not been willing to tell him why she was troubled. She had forbidden Ro to share her knowledge of the true story with him. Very discouraging. Ro didn't know how much more of Lys she could take.

It didn't help Ro's mood that she'd missed meeting Riker in the herb garden that afternoon, where they'd planned on having a language lesson. She hurried down to the kitchen, but when she saw by the clock that the Sundown Service was less than an hour away, she knew she had missed Riker and sighed in disappointment.

"It's about time you got here," she heard a deep voice say as Riker approached her from the back kitchen, a cloth-covered dish in one hand and two empty mugs in the other.

"I can't believe you're still here! I thought you'd gone to take a nap when I sent word I wouldn't be able to go to the herb garden with you."

"Actually, that's why I'm still here. When I heard about that marathon counseling session, I figured you deserved a treat. And there's one thing I'd been wanting to learn to make. So today I learned. Want some?" His eyes had that wicked gleam in them that she loved so much. Riker flashed a better evil smile than anyone else she'd ever known, Ro decided. Must be the beard.

"What is it?" She sniffed deeply.

"Guess." He set the mugs down on a counter.

She sniffed a delightful aroma. "Not hasperat!"

"Let me see. Ah hah!" Whipping the cloth off the plate, Riker displayed a pile of his creations. "What a surprise! hasperat. And good, I think; you be the judge. The pastry crusts held together when I cooked 'em in the spiced brine. You'll have to tell me if you like the way I've seasoned the filling, though. Careful, they're still pretty hot. Want some jumja tea?" He set the plate down on the small table in the corner of the kitchen where the cooks often sat, a mug of tea or raktajino in hand,
chatting during the down time that sometimes crops up between the steps of complicated recipes.

At her nod, he turned to an urn with *jumja* tea in it and filled the two mugs to the brim. Meanwhile, Ro took the top *hasperat* parcel and cautiously bit into it. It was warm, but not as burning hot to her tongue as some that she'd eaten. And the flavor . . .

"Thomas Riker, this is about the best *hasperat* I've ever had. The spices in the filling -- whatever did you use?"

"It's my secret." An upturned eyebrow made his smile seem even more wicked as he set the mugs on the table between them.

"Please, tell me."

"All right. But don't breathe it to a soul," he whispered, even though no one was in the kitchen but the two of them. "There's an Earth spice called cumin. I thought a little bit, mixed with the usual Bajoran ones, would punch up the flavor. What do you think?"

"Umm. Delishioush," she slurred, her ability to articulate hampered by a mouthful of partially chewed *hasperat*.

"Glad to be of service. I thought they were pretty good myself when I taste-tested one before, but I'm not a connoisseur, like you." He picked up one of the small pastries and bit into it.

For the next few minutes, their conversation consisted almost entirely of "Umms," "That's really goods," and nonverbal facial expressions. Finally, sighing with satisfaction, Ro remarked, "I'm stuffed about as tightly as these *hasperat* are. I've always loved them. I know we're supposed to be moderate in all things, but I think *hasperat* should be the exception that proves the rule."

"Vedek Kyl told me about your weakness for them. I've gotta admit, they are good little devils, aren't they?"

"Especially when they're nice and spicy like these are. Thank you, Thomas, for making them for me."
His face bore such an expression of contentment at her compliment that she wanted to hug him, right there in the kitchen. Hugging in the workplace was considered a breach of propriety, however, so she held herself back. Instead, she commented, "When did you get so interested in cooking, Riker? Somehow it doesn't fit the image I had of the dashing Starfleet officer you used to be."

"If you think that, you'd be wrong, Madame Counselor/Vedek. I learned to cook as a child. My mother died when I was just a baby; I don't even remember her. It was just my father and me. Since there was only one of me, back then, I used to cook for the two of us all the time. It was the best way to make sure I would get fed myself. I always liked doing, it, though. It was never a chore to cook. Grilling over a campfire is fun, too. Food gets a great taste that way. Maybe I'll grill something for you as a night snack sometime. Do you think you'd like that?"

"Sure. As long as I only have to eat and you cook. I've never liked cooking, not that I ever had to do much of it. I had to do it occasionally in the relocation camps I lived in before I qualified for the Academy. But then, it was an assigned chore. That's probably why I hated it so much."

"Maybe. You know, when I was alone on the science station on Nervala, one of the things I replicated for myself was a small stove. Instead of calling up completed dishes from the computer files, a lot of times I'd replicate the ingredients and cook them up myself. Gave me something to do, you know? Want some more tea?"

She'd had enough tea. As he walked over to the urn to refill his own mug, her mind was struck by the image of a lonely man, cooking in an empty, half-wrecked station, filling up the hours of his solitary life with a task that had been more hobby than chore to him from boyhood. It gave the term "comfort food" an entirely new meaning. Ro's musing must have cast a melancholy expression across her face, for when he turned back to her, he asked her what was wrong.

"Nothing's wrong. I was just thinking about how much of your life you've had to spend alone."

"You were alone a lot, too, weren't you? Orphaned as a child?"

"Yeah."

"I've been on my own since I was fifteen. My father'd had enough of raising me by that time. Said I'd do fine on my own." The bitterness sharpened his voice.

"I was fifteen when I was freed from the relocation camp here on Bajor by the Resistance." And
finally freed from being raped, she added silently.

"Big year for both of us? The 'Freedom' Year?" He asked.

She nodded.

Riker raised his mug, "So, let's toast to fifteen. The year of liberation." His voice was dripping with irony.

"To fifteen, the year of liberation," she agreed, accepting the toast, knowing that Thomas Riker had no idea how much it meant to her.
Leaning out her window, Ro sighed. The hasperat snack and the pleasant evening of study that followed had whetted her appetite for an activity with Riker that was far more intimate. She’d promised herself she wouldn’t pressure him, in case all he felt for her was gratitude at his release from the Lazon prison, but she was getting frustrated. Ro wanted more, but while she suspected that Riker was as attracted to her as she was to him, neither of them seemed willing or able to make the next move.

Ro stepped away from her window. She started to prepare for bed by untying her sash and then she stopped. She was being ridiculous. When Tom Paris had been playing the pig on Malagra, she’d called him on his behavior. She’d taken a risk, and everything had changed for the better. It was time to stop being a coward and go to Riker. The worst that could happen was that he’d say she was mistaken, he didn't want her. It wouldn’t be the first time that had happened to someone. If it did, she'd just use the experience in her counseling. OK. You can do this, Ro Laren.

She started for her door, but stopped. This is a night for climbing out windows, she thought sardonically. Stepping back to the window, Ro opened the shutters all the way and hopped onto the sill. Swinging her legs around, she landed with a soft thud outside. Taking her shutters firmly in hand, Ro shut them and resolutely stepped out onto the path, briskly trotting towards the Brother House.

When she arrived in front of the building, Ro looked at Riker's window. It was dark, the shutters tightly closed. He was either asleep or not there. Did she have the guts to climb into his window and land on top of him in his bed? Offer herself to him when he was unconscious? A half-smile appeared on her lips. By the Prophets! That would be as shameless as if she had taken him when he was sedated on the Bird of Prey! That isn't the way to honor the Prophets!

Ro walked back up the path toward the Sister House, stopping when she came even with a jaranda bush. The jaranda bush would conceal her from the eyes of others. Stepping behind it, she stood for several minutes, hoping to see some sign that Riker had come awake. Finally, she gave up, thinking, Just another night of frustration, I guess.

Sighing, Ro vacated her vantage point, intending to return to her room. As she stepped onto the path, however, she was immediately shocked by a collision with a figure who was quietly walking back to the Brother House, his head down, deep in thought. Ro stumbled into the man's chest. Thomas Riker's chest. "Oh, I'm sorry. I should have been looking where I was going," she said breathlessly.
"I'm sorry, too, I should have been watching out myself. But it's all right, Vedek Parys. No harm done. And, I assure you, I never mind when a beautiful woman walks into my arms, even if she isn't sure how she got there."

Ro looked askance at him. A vintage Riker line if she ever heard one. She'd heard plenty of them while on the Enterprise. "What brings you out so late at night, Riker?" she asked, falling into step beside him as he strolled down the main path towards his room. Even this late at night, the way was illuminated by small globes every five meters or so.

"Might ask the same thing of you, Ro."

"Yes, you might, she thought, since I was hanging around the Brother House so shamelessly. "I had trouble sleeping." It was the truth, of course, but she was not about to let him know the reason for her sleeplessness was that her mind was too filled with thoughts of the body of Thomas Riker for her to relax. "And you?"

"I had trouble sleeping, too. There's a little too much activity going on next door."

"Ah, Tabor has the room next to yours, doesn't he?" At his nod, Ro smiled. "He and Krisya will be announcing their joining any day now. Then you'll be able to get some rest, Riker. They'll move to the Family House then."

"Not a moment too soon. They're making so much noise 'honoring the Prophets' that I needed to take a walk," he laughed. Silently, he added, to cool myself down, but that isn't likely to happen now that you're here, Ro.

"Does it bother you that much to be around two people making love? I wouldn't think you'd have any compunctions about that. At least, from my experience with Rikers." Her voice was stiff, disapproving.

He was on dangerous ground now, but he felt compelled to answer her. "Not at all. It's just . . . well, things are different here, somehow."

"You mean, because Krisya and Tabor are both vedeks?"

"I guess so." Her chilly attitude made him want to explain himself. "Don't get me wrong. I know that
"Did you ever think that may be why there are so few monasteries left on Earth?"

Laughing again, he admitted that she had a point.

"You know," Ro commented, "I find it amazing that anyone would feel that God would appreciate such a sacrifice. It's one thing to be moderate in all things, as our faith teaches us. We're supposed to concentrate on all aspects of our life, the physical as well as the spiritual, to achieve balance in our existence. Hedonistic people lose sight of what's truly important in life, and not just the teachings of the Prophets. Getting lost in any vice -- whether it be gluttony, greed, overweening pride, or exploitative sexual practices -- that's wrong because it takes from others. Ignores the feelings of self-worth of another. It even may endanger the physical lives of other people. With greed and gluttony, hoarding might mean that there isn't enough of necessary commodities to go around for all that need them to stay alive. That is sin, Thomas, not two people sharing the act of love to express their true feelings for one another."

"I get your point, but let me play devil's advocate for a moment. Sex is a powerful force for good or for evil. When I care for a woman, frankly, I have trouble not thinking about her. My mind is always full of visions of her body. On duty, I could suppress it enough to function, but at other times . . . well, Ro, let me just say that meditation would be pretty hard for me to do without my mind wandering to . . . to . . . baser things." As soon as the words slipped from his mouth, he knew he had made a tremendous blunder, but it was too late to call them back now.

"Ah. 'Baser things.' Like fucking, for instance."

He choked audibly before an absurdly tiny, "Well, yes," escaped from his lips.

They walked several steps further. With every pounding step, Ro telegraphed that she was getting closer and closer to a major outburst of temper. When she finally stopped and whirled around to face him, Riker could see, by the meager light of the glowing globes by the path, that she was consciously reining in her anger. When she spoke, it was in a deceptively calm, controlled voice, "Maybe the reason your people think of sex as 'base' is because of the words you use to describe it. According to Federation Standard -- and I'm talking about the everyday words, now, not the official, medical ones -- and correct me if I'm wrong -- the male sticks his cock into the female's cunt so that they can fuck until they're blind, and he comes to a climax. If the woman is lucky, the man will pay enough attention to her clit so that she can come to a climax, too. What are all of those 'kuh' sounds in there for, anyway? Just saying them now I spit all over you! Is it possible for your people to have made it sound any uglier?"
"Put that way, no; I guess it would be hard to make it sound uglier. But those are just good old Anglo-Saxon words that have hung on all these centuries because people feel comfortable saying them. Plain speaking, that's all. Are you trying to tell me you've never used any of them yourself, when you were in Starfleet?"

"Of course not. You know I did -- and sometimes I still use them, or those like them, such as prick, for one. Another good 'kuh' sound in that one. But I use them as obscenities. That's what they're perfect for -- cursing."

"Maybe they do make good curses, but what's so important about how they sound? Is it so much better to say that a man places his 'Tower of Joy' into a woman's 'Wellspring of the Prophets' so that they can 'Honor the Prophets'? I can list you dozens of euphemisms from all kinds of Earth cultures that say the same thing."

"You're missing my point, Riker," she sighed. "The Bajoran terms aren't really 'euphemisms.' They indicate an entirely different mindset about what it means for a man to join with a woman, for two people to mate. Did you know that the concepts of both prostitution and rape were unknown on Bajor until the age of spaceflight, when we learned of them from the other races we encountered? The old writings are full of references about how shocked my people were. How could someone 'sell' or 'rob' a bodily function? Can a person 'sell' defecation? 'Steal' eating? 'Rob' breath?"

"You can sell food or a place to defecate. And a pretty face can rob me of my breath, I assure you." He flashed his most devastating smile, desperate to change the subject, even if it meant she would attack him for trying to flirt with her when she was upset with him.

"Those aren't the same thing, and you know it. None of those have anything to do with exploiting a person's body. To pervert the most profound body function of all, the generative act -- my people could barely believe it."

Ro paused in her diatribe, which, despite its intensity, had been delivered at the volume of a whisper. Nevertheless, Riker could not have felt worse if she had been screaming at him. Catching a second wind, she went on, "Riker, did you know that until the Occupation, prostitution was unheard of outside of the spaceport areas? Rape was an extremely rare crime anywhere on Bajor -- until the Cardassians came and established it as an institution. They almost turned rape into an art form. Rape the landscape of its resources, the men of their self-respect, and the women of their joy in joining in the act of creation. Can you understand? Even if a couple is old or sterile, when they perform the act of love together they commemorate the very act which created their own lives, and those of everyone they know. Sex is life itself, Thomas. It's the one way that ordinary people like ourselves can be one with the Prophets. Because, sometimes when we 'honor the Prophets,' we are blessed by their greatest gift. We create a new life, a new soul, to share our lives with and to raise to honor all
As she peered into his face, Riker was at first too stunned by her fervent outpouring to know how to respond. He stood there, unable to think of anything to say. Then he considered all she had said to him with such emotion, finally comprehending what she had been trying to convey. The simple joy Krisya and Tabor found in each other was no different from what others felt, even though they had dedicated their lives to their gods. Perhaps it was even more precious to them than to others, since the vedeks gave so much of themselves in their life work, expecting little in the way of material gain in return. Riker couldn't help feeling ashamed that he'd been whining about his disturbed sleep to Ro. *God knows, I've probably kept more than a few people awake when I was at the Academy, and with Deanna when we were together. What I really am is jealous!*

No wonder he wandered the paths of the Gardens at night rather than retire to his bed. His narrow, cold, empty bed. With the joy of the young lovers all so apparent next door, he could not ignore that he desperately wanted what Krisya and Tabor had. Someone else who cared whether he lived or died, someone to love him.

Casting around in his mind for something to say, he finally managed to pull out, "I'm pretty dense, I guess. When you told me that first day we met in the prison that vedeks had sexual lives and 'commemorated the creation,' I didn't understand that you meant it so literally. It never occurred to me before that you could consider making love to be a sacred act, but now I see. How obvious it is. It's the way new lives are created."

Despite the darkness, Riker could see her face light up with that rare, genuine smile he loved. She never smiled enough, in his opinion; but with the weight of her work, perhaps that was no surprise. Then another thought crossed his mind, and a bitter smile curved his lips. "The usual way new lives are created, that is. There aren't a lot of people created in transporter accidents, thank the Prophets."

Shock crossed her features as he laughed too heartily, bitterly pushing away the stabbing pain that flared up within him. A sympathetic expression came upon her lovely face. He found himself clutching onto her, looking deeply into her eyes, as if trying to find something there to ease his mind.

"Don't think that, Thomas. You were created in the usual way, from the loving of your parents. Identical twins are always the result of one being splitting into two. You just did your splitting a little later than most. Transporter technicians aren't likely to replace the Blessing from the Prophets anytime soon."

"It's okay, Ro. It's just something I've thought about a lot, the last couple of years. Dr. Crusher -- I'm sure you knew her better than I did -- she said there wasn't any real difference between us. We were both the 'true' William Thomas Riker. But that was a lie. Biologically, maybe it's true, there's no difference genetically, but he was the one who's accomplished so much. All kinds of
commendations. First Starfleet officer to serve on a Klingon vessel. The man who beat back the Borg. That's his career. It could have been mine, but it isn't. I'm not him and never will be, no matter how hard I try. That's what was so hard to accept. On the _Gandhi_, they expected me to _be_ him. The raw materials were there, but not the experience that shapes a man into what he ends up becoming. In those eight years, I'd fallen behind in the technology, and in leadership skills, too, from being alone so long. No matter what anyone says, I'm the imitation. I'm not -- whole."

"Maybe when it comes to your career, that's so, but I think he lost something, too, when you became two people. The Will Riker I know isn't exactly whole, either. He sacrificed his love for Deanna Troi to his career, yet when he's been offered his own command -- and he's had several offers, I understand -- he's always turned the big brass down. He's stayed on the _Enterprise_. Even Picard thought he was ready to go out on his own. I'm sure Picard is grateful to have a first officer he knows could be a captain if he wishes, but it seems that Will is missing something, too."

"Will could have a command whenever he wants. He could have Deanna back, too, I'm sure. She still hears him, I know. It's difficult to explain that _Imzadi_ bond, but I knew, when I got back, that we didn't have it anymore. I tried, but she couldn't really hear me. Only him."

His arms had gradually slipped down to her waist by this time, and she gathered him in close to her, hugging him as she heard his voice catch. "They've lived in such close proximity for so many years, Thomas. She's attuned to him; it's easy for her to hear him; yet he chooses not to hear her. On a ship full of people, no matter how many women he brings to his bed, he's still alone. He's pushed her away, so that the last time I heard, she was with Worf, not Will Riker. And he doesn't have the 'loneliness of command' of a ship for an excuse. At least when you were alone, you didn't have any choice in the matter. You've learned about the 'loneliness of command' the hard way. To excess, one could even say!"

Riker chuckled into her hair, squeezing her gently as he answered her embrace. Riker wanted to ask something of her, but he was suddenly afraid. To be rejected now would be crushing, and after the way he'd mucked up the night's conversation, he wasn't up to taking the risk. As it happened, he didn't need to.

Leaning back so that she could meet his eyes, Ro captured his gaze despite the darkness and added, "And perhaps the Prophets have another _Imzadi_ in mind for you, Thomas Riker. One who needs you even more than Deanna needs Will, even if this _Imzadi_ can't touch minds with you the way Deanna could."

His eyes never wavered from hers as he began to smile. "Another counselor, do you think?" A quick, brief smile crossed her lips, and her nod was echoed by his a second later. Bringing his hands to her face, his thumbs caressing her lips and the bridge of her nose as lightly as a whisper, he replied, "Maybe she can touch my soul, instead."
Their lips met gently in a kiss that began the same way as the one they had shared in the prison, the
day they met. This kiss deepened, however, until their pulses raced and the blood pounded in their
temples. Their arms wrapped around each other so tightly that they threatened to press out the tiny
fraction of air lingering in their lungs. Perhaps that was why both of them gasped when their mouths
parted; why they stood so close, holding each other erect, both unable to speak.

Riker found words first. "So, where do we go from here?"

A smirk appeared on her face, and her voice was pitched suggestively low. "Your place, or mine?"

He laughed at that response but kept her body as close to his as possible in what was, even at this late
hour, a public place. "Mine. It's time I paid back Tabor and Krisya a sleepless night or two."

Ro laughed with him, patting his bearded cheek. "Let's go wake them up, then, Thomas Riker."

After embracing and kissing again, Riker took up Ro's hand and took a step toward the Brother
House before halting and saying, "Caring."

"What?" she asked, confused.

"You know, that list of 'kuh' words before -- you left the most important one out. Caring for each
other."

"I guess I did." Amusement could be heard in the tone of her reply.

"Sure did. Almost the most powerful one of all. Second only to love. No 'kuh' sound in that 'love'
one, though."

Her voice was soft, low-pitched. "No, but it's good to hear."

His voice deepened in pitch also, rich, sultry. "Let me say them both to you. I love you, and I care
for you, Ro Laren. Or Vedek Parys. Whatever you're calling yourself tonight." Their hands were
clasped, her long, slender fingers tightly held in the grasp of his great paw of a hand.

"And I love you, William Thomas Riker. No matter what you choose to call yourself, you know who I mean."

Their bodies merged into one silhouette. Their heads were close, their lips brushed, but they did not stop to kiss passionately. Instead, they walked together down the path to the Brother House, Thomas Riker holding her hand and leading the way for Ro. In his small cell of a room they would have plenty of time to kiss.

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As they approached the Brother House, Ro could see that most of the windows were now dark. Riker moved as if he were going to go to his window to hop the sill, but she shook her head. Instead, they went in the front way, past Vedek Jarish, where he sat dozing by the entrance, and walked openly to his tiny quarters. Riker opened the door for her and had an overpowering urge to carry her over the threshold, but he resisted the temptation. It seemed presumptuous, even though he knew, by sharing their bodies in this house, he was making a commitment to Ro that was far greater than it would have been if he had brought her to his quarters on a starship. This wasn't a starship, and he wasn't in Starfleet anymore. They were dwellers in the House of the Prophets. Vedeks might have sex lives, but they weren't known for casual love affairs.

The room was totally dark, but Riker stepped confidently to the low dresser at the right side of the room. After only a bare minimum of fumbling, he found the matches and located the tall, fat candle that had been assigned to him for prayer. The room had standard illumination, but for this night, he wanted to light a candle. He had never used it before, but tonight, the prayers of two people were being answered. What better way to commemorate that than by lighting a prayer candle?

After the tall column was lit, however, he was unsure of what to do next. Ro did not hesitate. Taking the candle down from its perch on the dresser top, Ro placed it on the floor in front of her and knelt down before it, pulling on Riker's hand to indicate that he should kneel beside her. For a few seconds, the silence was almost complete; only the slight sound of their breathing could be heard. Then Ro, her hands steepled before her, recited something in Bajoran. Since he did not have his universal translator activated, she followed up with a short lyric in Federation Standard so that Riker could understand:

My footsteps were led by a Call from the Prophets to follow those left by another.

My hand touches one who has been brought to my side to catch me, whenever I falter.

The sun shines above us casting light all around us. Yet only one shadow is seen.

Mouths touching, we taste and we breathe in each other. Our separate hearts beat as one.
Songs bind our souls in this life we have chosen. As one, we are together forever.

When she finished reciting the verse, Ro's eyes met Riker's. "That verse is from the Kalyani District, where my mother was born. I never knew it until I came here to study. The translation into Federation Standard isn't very good, I'm afraid, but at least you can get the gist of it."

"It's beautiful."

A crooked smile quirked across her lips. "Could I have said anything that wouldn't have been beautiful to you, now that I'm here at 'your place'?

"Tonight? No, probably not." The hint of humor in his eyes made her feel even more warmly towards him, anticipating the joy that she knew they would share.

She spoke first: "Just so you know, whatever you want to do, we'll do."

"Let's stand then. All this kneeling is getting awfully hard on the knees."

They smiled hesitantly at each other as they stood up. Riker enveloped her in his arms. His hands touched her face as their lips met. His tongue explored her mouth, gently at first, then more relentlessly. Her tongue responded to his until they broke off the kiss, gasping for more air. Riker's mouth descended along her jaw and throat as he devoted himself to kissing her again. Softly, his fingers traced the eagle of cartilage flying above the bridge of her nose, then the wrinkled bridge itself, as his lips continued to adore her face. When his lips captured hers again, it was with such passion that Ro literally felt weak in the knees and held onto him tightly to keep herself from collapsing again onto the floor.

He took a half step back from her, still holding onto her arms, but Ro felt vaguely disappointed. She wanted him to stroke her body with his hands, but Riker said quietly, "Ro, you have the advantage of me. You've seen me naked. My alter ego and me both, as a matter of fact, but I've never seen your body. Show me?"
Slowly nodding her head, Ro indicated that he should sit on his bed. Removing the sash she wore around her waist to keep her tunic close to her body, she handed it to him. After pulling the long tunic over her head, Ro held onto his shoulder to steady herself and slipped the loose, pajama-like pants she wore down her hips. She stepped out of them carefully, lifting her feet out of her soft shoes at the same time, pushing all of her garments into a heap on the floor with her foot.

His breath caught. His eyes shone brightly, as he remarked, "This brings a whole new meaning to 'disrobing,' doesn't it?"

"Very funny, Thomas." Her eyes smiled at his joke as she lifted her under tunic, with its pleated collar, over her head. When her head emerged, Ro could see him staring at her, a look in his eyes that she had never seen before from him, though she'd seen it often enough from other men. Look at him, now. That hunger -- can anyone really believe that this isn't a body function, as much as eating or drinking are? But oh, what a wonderful body function this can be!

Taking hold of the hem of her tank top undershirt, Ro started to pull it above her head also, but at that moment, Riker's desire for her could no longer be denied. At the glimpse of her erect nipples under the thin material of her shirt he jumped up from his seat on his bed. Stepping in front of her, he slipped his hands beneath it to cup her breasts briefly. Groaning, Riker slid his palms up her body and removed the garment.

Once he'd pulled her shirt over her head, her breasts were revealed to him. Tossing the shirt on the growing pile of vehek's robes next to his bed, Riker pulled her close and kissed her again as his hands slipped down to remove her remaining garment. She would be glad to be rid of her panties; they were getting damp from her body's response to Riker's eyes drinking in the sight of her, and to the touch of his hands.

Once all of her garments were gone, Riker had free access to her entire being. His hands roved over her body. The palms of his hands stroked and caressed her; his fingers explored her most secret places. She had missed this. It had been a long time since she had been touched in this way, not since a certain blond-haired human pilot and "best friend" had shown her she could respond to loving touches without fear. Now she could refuse to pay attention to the terrible memories what she had endured from Cardassian "caretakers." As she moaned in time to the movements of Riker's hands, slowly moving, yet so thoroughly stirring up her senses, she was thankful for every one of Tom Paris' lessons in letting go.

Up until now, her eyes had remained closed so that she could lose herself in the feelings his hands evoked, but at this point she opened them and smiled at the blue eyes looking at her.

"You are so beautiful," he breathed to her, meaning every syllable.
"No, I'm not. I'm too skinny and too tall."

He stepped back a half step, without removing his hands from her Passage of Enlightenment. "You aren't too tall for me," he remarked, and it was true, Ro realized. She had to tilt her head back to look up into his eyes. "And you aren't too skinny, either. You're slender. Just the right size."

"My breasts are awfully small."

His face assumed a wicked grin. "Haven't you ever heard the saying that more than a mouthful is wasted?" Riker bent his mouth and took one of her nipples in his mouth, using his tongue to swirl around it before sucking it enthusiastically. "There's even some waste there. Let me try to take in all of the other one." She had to laugh, but soon she was panting as his mouth worked its magic on her other breast.

Ro held his head and stroked his back as he was bent before her, mouth on one breast, one hand teasing her while the other cupped the fullness of her other breast. Finally, she gasped, "Thomas, isn't it time you let me see you naked again? I want to touch your skin, and there is way too little showing."

He stood up then, and with her help he was quickly divested of his shirt, pants and shoes. As she tugged his briefs down to expose his erection, Ro thought how beautiful he was, not just the visible body, but the soul inside, too. A lonely life had transformed the man who had begun life as Will Riker into a gentle man, strong, yet compassionate. And she longed to feel that erection pressing inside of her, to satisfy her body's longing even as their presence together in this room was satisfying her soul.

Make love to William T. Riker? While she was in possession of all her faculties? Right! Once she would have thought that impossible, but no more.

Above that long, rigid member, a band of dark hair arose up, past his navel, widening as it reached his chest. Lush hair that she had to run her fingers through, glorying in the sensation of it. "You certainly are a hairy man," she said, and I have a definite weakness for hairy-chested men, she added silently, as she played with the hair around his small nipples.

"Oh, I'm part Kodiak bear, didn't you know?" he laughed.
She looked up at him in surprise, then remembered what a bear was. "Oh, a lycitha, only with round ears instead of pointed ones, right? Eats all summer so that it can sleep all winter?"

"That's the one. Kodiaks are Alaskan, like me. And last time I checked, I didn't have a Vulcan's ears," he smiled sheepishly, rubbing one of his very definitely rounded ears.

At that moment, seeing the glint of self-deprecating humor in his eyes, Ro realized the depths of her love for this man. He simply was The One. Everyone else she had known in her life had been preludes to Thomas Riker. She wanted to give him everything she had to offer of herself -- her soul, her body.

His bobbing erection, poking her in the midsection, reminded her that there were a couple of personal hurdles she still needed to surmount, despite all of Tom Paris's careful and loving teaching -- hurdles she was determined to conquer tonight.

Ro reached up and dragged his lips to hers, kissing him deeply. She then proceeded unhurriedly to kiss her way down his body. When her lips reached the luscious dark hair of his broad chest, she buried her face in it. Murmuring, "I love Kodiak bear pelts, Thomas," she rubbed her cheeks against him. Her hands brushed lightly against his nipples, and he groaned. His Profound Shaft of Pleasure bounced enticingly, and Ro began to stroke it as she continued kissing his body. His navel. His hips, the tops of his thighs. She breathed in the faint, musky, male scent of him that no amount of washing could ever completely eliminate -- and why should she want it to? That scent was her Thomas Riker's, and no other's. It reminded her that she was kneeling in front of the man she loved, pleasuring him, not a scaly Cardassian who was forcing her to do his bidding.

This was the first time she had ever knelt down in front of a male and done this act willingly. She had learned to love Paris in this way, but not when kneeling in front of him, not like this. Now, with Riker, she found that she could. Glancing up and smiling again, she licked and stroked him until she heard him groan, "God, Ro, I'm going to come if you keep doing that. Oh, my God, that feels so good . . ."

She didn't stop. "Oh, my God, Ro. My God." His hands loosed their grasp of her hair and moved to her shoulders, urging her to stand up. Stroking her back as she leaned into his arms, he moaned, "Ro, I only hope I can satisfy you, too."

"I'm sure you will, Thomas, but considering what we're doing, don't you think you should use my given name, Laren? I promise not to bite anything off if you do."

He threw his head back and laughed, "Anything you say. My beautiful Laren." That phrase put a
thrill up her back. She had never thought of herself as particularly beautiful, but Paris had called her that, and now Thomas Riker had. If, in their eyes, she was beautiful, then maybe she really was. Although poor Paris was gone from this life, Riker was here, and he was the one that counted.

Ro closed her eyes, putting her arms around his neck, kissing him again. As her lips left his, she suddenly felt a strong pair of arms scoop her up by her buttocks and shoulders, lifting her feet from the floor. Lowering her onto the narrow cot against the wall, Riker settled her down upon his bed, pulling the covers out from under her and down to its foot.

Kneeling in front of her as if in prayer, Riker began to kiss and stroke her again, as he had when she was standing before him. She was on an altar, with Riker her worshipper. And worship her he did. Ro felt a throbbing in her Celestial Home of Delight as he again showed her that her breasts weren't too small. His hands wandered all over her. There was no body part too insignificant to lick or caress. She cried out as he brought her waves of pleasure.

For a few moments, he stopped his attentions. When she opened her eyes, she saw that he had switched positions. He was now at the foot of the bed, stretching his long body out for his mouth to reach to the top of her thighs again. He kissed and pulsed her into excitement. Ro found herself shouting and screaming in delight. Finally, she moaned, "Thomas, I can't take much more of this."

He lifted his head from where he had buried it, with her hands now grasping his head. "Sure you can. And make all the noise you want. Wake 'em up next door. It's payback time."

She had to laugh, but seconds later, she was again groaning and shouting as he brought her to ecstasy again.

Then, a shadow of panic invaded her. In the dim light of the single candle, a dark shape loomed over her, thrusting into her consciousness, a nightmare out of the past. Clutching convulsively onto the arms of the figure, she was relieved to hear Riker's voice whisper, "Laren, are you all right?"

She gulped, angry at herself for her momentary lapse. Who else would be bent over her in bed but her lover? "It's nothing. I'm fine. Thomas, kiss me again."

"Where?"

"Anywhere you can reach," was her reply.
His lips made contact with her breasts, kissing and licking before a pattern of kisses ascended her shoulder and neck, traversing her face from one jaw to the other. After he kissed her mouth, her nose and both eyelids, Riker was poised above her, breathing raggedly, saying, "Guide me inside you, Laren. Please."

Ro’s hands had been caressing his back, feeling the scoring from the energy whip scars. *Some scars show more than others*, she thought sadly. When he asked her to be his guide, Ro slipped both her hands across his shoulders and over his chest, finding his "pelt," as her fingers drifted through the trail of hair. She never really ran her fingers out of his hair before encountering his hard, throbbing Tower of Joy. He was ready for her, as she was for him. She refused to let her own scars prevent him from entering her Passage of Enlightenment. Slowly, carefully, he slipped inside. "My God, Laren, you feel so good. Oh, God in Heaven! Laren!"

A look of ecstasy was on his face as he sank into her. Ro knew that he must be thinking how long it had been for him. It had been so long for her, too. He was being very gentle with her, but as they learned how to move together, their pace became stronger, more passionate. The thought crossed her mind that he was offering himself to her, not taking anything, only accepting what it was that she could give him. She praised the Prophets in her mind that she could give him whatever he wanted. Clearly, he was prepared to give all of himself.

Feeling herself tighten on him, Ro gasped out "Sweet Prophets," but he did not slow his tempo. With each thrust that filled her body and her soul with him, a small whimper escaped her. As she felt herself gathering for one more gush from deep inside her, Ro felt him stroke so deeply that she almost could feel him touch the bottom of her heart. "My God, Laren!" erupted from him as his last powerful, explosive stroke caused her own body to convulse along with his. Her mind slipped away, and she knew nothing but sensation and joy. She heard herself shout out again, "Sweet Prophets," suddenly recalling what another Tom had said when she called that out to him. It was the sign that he had satisfied her completely. This Thomas, in the meanwhile, had collapsed upon her in happy exhaustion, murmuring "Laren" over and over.

She willingly supported his not inconsiderable weight. Thomas Riker was definitely a bigger man than Tom Paris, although much thinner than Will Riker. Eventually he managed to raise his head enough to focus his blue eyes on Ro's brown ones. She commented quietly, "Just as I thought, Riker. You have no problem at all invoking the name of the deity when you are in the midst of honoring the Prophets!"

He smiled lazily. "True enough. You're not going to hold it against me if I don't call out for the Prophets, too, will you?"

"I'll give you time to adjust."
"Big of you. And big of me, to still be crushing you. Let me get up. There. That's better." He eased over onto his left side, allowing her to curl up onto his chest. For several minutes they said very little. As they rubbed each other's bodies, both enjoyed the feeling of holding another, and of being held. It had been a very long time, for both of them.

They lay with their limbs entwined for a long while. One thing, however, tore repeatedly at Riker's peace of mind. That hesitation, that jump she made when he bent his body over her, he knew that was a sign she had lost track of where she was, and with whom. If she wants to tell you, she will, he thought, but then he realized that that wasn't necessarily true. Ro Laren was a strong woman who might try to keep it within herself. He had to know the truth.

Riker gently touched her chin and moved her head so that he could look into Ro's eyes. "You know, I almost thought I'd lost you there, for a moment. Like you were in a panic, for some reason." Ro tried not to let her face change, but she was unable to completely maintain her mask. Clearing his throat, he said tentatively, "I know that, uh, rape counselors often have lived through it themselves. I got the impression you almost wanted to stop me for a moment. Laren, it's happened to you, hasn't it? You've been raped."

"Yes."

"Will you tell me about it?"

He had asked her a question, and she would not lie to him. "Are you sure you want to hear this, Thomas? It's pretty unpleasant."

"Yes, Laren. I want to know all about you." She closed her eyes and was motionless for several very long seconds. Finally, he said sadly, "It's OK. I understand, if it's that painful . . ."

Sighing, she said, "Yes, it's very painful, not just for me to tell it, but for the one listening to me tell it, too. I know. I've only told two people before in my life, and even Deanna was a little shaken when she heard it. But if I'm really going to put this behind me, maybe now is the best time to tell you. At least, if I have one of my nightmares, you'll know why." She threw her arm over Riker's body, tucked her forehead under his chin, and lay her cheek onto his chest. She took a deep breath and quietly began to tell her story.
"Well, you know my father was killed in front of me by the Cardassians when I was seven?" He did. "About a year later my mother disappeared from the camp we were in. The Cardassian commandant there liked to sexually abuse children. I finally figured out that if I didn't scream or cry, he'd leave me alone, but it took me a few years to realize that. I had a break for a year or so, but when I was twelve, I began to develop physically. A lot of the guards liked to take advantage of the orphaned teenagers, because there wasn't anyone to complain, so . . . "

As she poured out the entire, sordid story, Riker became more and more appalled by what he heard, and even more at himself for having asked her to reveal such painful things to him, just as they'd come together in joy. My God! How could anyone do such terrible things to an innocent child? He'd been confident he'd guessed right that she'd been raped. He wouldn't have been surprised to hear she had been gang raped. That she might have suffered for years, helpless to defend herself, had never entered into his head. When Ro admitted that the rapes had gone on until she was rescued by the Resistance at the age of fifteen, he groaned and hugged her tightly, saying, "My God! I'm sorry, Laren. If I'd only known, I would have been more careful with you!"

That elicited a laugh. "Thomas, you couldn't have been any more careful. It's all right. I had some help learning to live with what happened to me."

"Tom Paris?"

"Yes, he helped me a lot."

"I know about the two of you when you were in the Maquis. Everyone was still talking about it."

"Were they, now?" Her voice and face turned grim, then softened. "I guess they would at that. He started helping me long before that, though, when we were at the Academy."

"You were lovers back then, too?"

She shook her head. "No, he was my friend. My only and best friend. After what had happened, I didn't trust other people, period. At the Academy, though, he was kind to me. Not 'Let-Me-Get-This-Girl-in-Bed' kind, just very friendly. He got his family to open their home to me for holidays, backed me up whenever I needed it. We became like brother and sister. Eventually, he wormed the whole truth out of me. His solution was that if I couldn't have relationships with men, I could have them with women. But that wasn't really the answer. I still remembered when I was touched, no matter who I was with. So I decided I was going to live a life without romance."
"Never 'honoring the Prophets?' Doesn't sound like a very Bajoran attitude," he said, drawing upon his new-found knowledge.

"No, but I didn't know what else to do. It was just too painful to even think about being with anyone. But at least Tom was always there, willing to help me, to be my friend, through good times and bad times. One of our worst days was graduation, if you can believe it. We thought that we'd be better off as a team. We both put in for the Lexington. He was assigned to Exeter; I went to the Wellington; and we both ended up with ruined careers." She sighed. "But I got a second chance."

"On Enterprise."

"Yes."

"Where my 'Alter Ego' came onto you."

"You really want to hear this?"

He hesitated, then reminded her, and perhaps himself, "You know about Deanna and me, don't you?"

She shrugged and turned herself back onto her side so that she could see his face, to gauge his reactions. "If you really want to know, I'll tell you."

"Yeah, I guess I really do need to know."

Ro grazed his lips with her forefinger, stalling a bit, but then nodded her head and went on, "Everyone else, he came onto, but Will Riker never came onto me. We hated each other. He was the priggish, perfect first officer, always waiting for me to screw up. Picard believed in me, but Commander William T. Riker never did."

"I thought you said . . . "

" . . . that we were lovers? We were, for one night. There was an incident where everyone on the Enterprise had their memories wiped by an alien race that wanted us to kill off their enemies for
them. They tampered with the computers, too, so we knew almost nothing about our personal histories. But even then, Will didn't approach me. I came onto Will Riker. When our memories returned, we were both mortified, and Deanna was so pissed at the two of us. I can hardly blame her."

"Poor Deanna."

"Yeah, I felt really badly for her, once I realized what I'd done. That might have been the chance for Will and Deanna to get back together, if I hadn't gotten in the way. A couple of months later, I went to Deanna and apologized for what happened. She was really good about it, and I ended up spilling everything about my past to her. Like I said, it even shook Deanna to hear it, but she was the perfect counselor. That didn't mean she wasn't still furious with Will Riker . . . "

"I'll bet she was." Riker thought back to his meeting Deanna again on the Enterprise, when he'd been rescued from his exile. After all that history with his "other" self, perhaps he shouldn't be surprised she'd been so reluctant to become involved with him again.

Ro had been silent for a long time, deep in thought. He was about to tell her she didn't have to say any more if she didn't want to, when she finally added, "You know, that night really started me off on the road to being here. If I hadn't had that night with Will, without the bad memories to ruin it for me, I don't think I could be with you now. Will wasn't the 'Commander' that night. He didn't show that driving need to be captain of the Enterprise, the way he usually did. I think he was more like the 'original' Riker. More like you, I guess. It's almost like I fell in love with you before I ever met you."

Riker nuzzled her neck, and Ro began to stroke his forearms. "And then later, in the Maquis, I met up with Paris again, and then we did become lovers."

"If he was good to you at the Academy, I guess you felt you owed him something. The way everyone talked about him in the Maquis, I had trouble understanding what you saw in him."

Ro muttered something that sounded like "Sessa" under her breath. "Yeah, I did owe him, but that's not really why things changed between us. I was able to find out what he was doing to himself when no one else even tried to understand him. Tom was cashiered from Starfleet after he admitted he'd lied about a fatal accident. A couple of years later, we ran into one another on one of those backwater planets where the Maquis hang out. I convinced Chakotay to take him into our cell, and then Tom tried to pick up every woman at our base. He succeeded often enough that everyone thought he was a pig; he was certainly acting like one. But he was really using promiscuity as a pain killer, to hide from his feelings of guilt. I called him on it. And I ended up seducing him."
"After all that had happened to you, you seduced him?"

"Yeah, I did. Tom was my friend, and after that experience with your 'Alter Ego,' I wondered what it would be like to be with someone I actually liked! Tom was good to me; he helped me get over many of my fears. And he was faithful to me until he was captured. He sacrificed himself to Starfleet so that I could get away. I'll bet no one told you that, did they? Yeah, I didn't think they could see what he did -- or wanted to see it. Tom knew exactly what he was doing. He said, since he didn't know anything important, it was better for him to be caught. Deep down, I think he thought he should go to prison because of the deaths he'd caused, and this was the way he got there.

"And now he's dead, along with everyone else on Voyager and Val Jean. And that's pretty much it. Except that now there's you. I don't need to go into detail about my personal history with you, do I?" she asked, one eyebrow arched sarcastically. "In case you missed it, I seem to have seduced you, too."

Riker chuckled, but with a bitter edge. "Thanks for telling me about Tom, and Will, too. I needed to know." He added resignedly, "Even though it's hard being his 'doppelganger.' "

"What does doppelganger mean, anyway?"

"Kind of a spirit double, not a real person. A shadow person."

"Hmmm. You feel pretty solid for a shadow person." She had begun to finger a certain part of him that was, in fact, getting firmer by the second from the attentions she was paying to him. Turning serious, she added, "You aren't a shadow person, Thomas Riker. You're the man I love."

His voice sounded husky as he acknowledged, "I love you, too, Laren." Turning slightly to his side, he pulled her left leg over his hip. As he played with her, she uttered little noises of appreciation. They began to kiss, first gently, then more passionately, until Riker pulled her on top of him, positioning her to mount him. "So, enlighten me, Vedek Parys. What are the Bajoran terms for what we're about to do?"

"I'm going to join with you in honoring the Prophets. Your Profound Shaft of Pleasure is going to enter my Passage to Enlightenment, and we are going to become one flesh to commemorate the creation. And if we are very fortunate, the Prophets will give us their blessing, and we will be given the gift of a child." Her smile was serene.
"I have to admit that all that sounds a lot classier than a cock fucking in a cunt. Wordier, though."

"Thomas!" Her giggle turned into laughter as she put her head down upon his chest, listening at first to the vibration of his chuckling, then to the beating of his heart beneath her ear. Its steady thumping soothed her, yet, as eager as she was to feel him inside her again, she hesitated. Something in her words to him about the "blessing of the Prophets" led her to an epiphany. There was one more thing she needed to do to free herself from her past, as much as she ever would.

Riker broke into her reverie. "Well, are we going to 'honor the Prophets' again, Laren?"

"Yes, but not this way." She propped her chin upon his chest to look into his face and into his eyes. "There's one last demon I have to put to rest." Slipping out of bed, she walked over to the corner of the floor where the prayer candle still burned. She blew it out, plunging the already dim room into almost complete darkness.

"Laren, what are you doing? What demon are you talking about?"

"Get up, Thomas. I need to be on my back, in the dark."

He did not move immediately, silently considering her request. When he finally spoke, it was in a quiet tone that told her he already knew the answer to his question. "You've never made love in the dark, unless some Cardassian forced himself on you?"

"Never," she answered, while she carefully made her way back to the bed. "Never in darkness -- just like I never kneeled down and took a man's Tower of Joy into my mouth before tonight, unless I was forced. I need to get this over with, just do it, and never look back ever again."

"Laren, are you sure?" he asked as she pushed him off the bed to take his place.

"Yeah, I'm sure. Don't worry. I'll know it's you -- by your taste, by your smell. And there's never been a Cardassian with a lycitha pelt like you've got on your chest, either." Lying down on her back, Ro touched Riker gently, urging him to arch over her again. "Come into me, Thomas Riker." She stroked her right hand down from his shoulder, brushing the back of her hand against the hair of his chest and finding what she was looking for, the part she needed to feel inside her.

She had thought that Riker had been as considerate as a man could be when they first joined, but she
realized she'd been wrong when, even more carefully than he had before, Riker sank into her.

Her hand rested on his chest and her mouth tasted his lips. At first they moved slowly and easily, but when she wanted a faster pace she allowed her hands to drift down, cupping his buttocks. Their bodies melted together, moving faster and faster, until the only thought left in their minds was their joint desire and need for each other. Both cried out in joy when he finally collapsed over her, both of them fulfilled.

As they panted with each other afterward, in the darkness, Riker whispered sleepily in her ear, "Laren, there's something I've been wanting to ask. Can the joining of a human and a Bajoran be 'Blessed by the Prophets' without having any special help?"

"The child needs to be treated in the uterus or it will be sterile, but yes, we can have a baby, Thomas. The old fashioned way. Without transporters."

"I'm glad," he murmured softly. Finding her mouth, he kissed her in benediction.

She had been in the middle of a marvelous dream when the sharp, wailing cry startled her awake. A deep, masculine sigh expelled itself into her ear. "Stay put. I'll get him this time."

As he unfolded his long body from their bed, Riker reached over to the lamp and turned it up to quarter illumination. A slight grunt of frustration, disguised as much as possible, escaped him. This was the third time since sundown that their "Blessing from the Prophets" had decided to express his individual existence. He was very loud.

Ro tried to sit up without aggravating her sore bottom anymore that it already was. Not an easy task; she was very sore. And not only her bottom, she suddenly realized. Her breasts, which had not been small for six months, now felt like they'd been stretched over a barrel. The front of her gown was soaked. "Oh, yuck! Thomas! My milk just came in, and I'm all wet."

"Between three and five days, Krisya said. Right on schedule. Catch." He tossed her a clean cloth from the pile they had been keeping near the dresser "for protective purposes" when they changed their son's diapers. He'd already sprayed his father once during a diaper change.
Pulling her gown off her shoulders, Ro used the cloth to sop up the milk leaking from her breasts. "I guess his crying must have triggered it."

"When you accept the Blessings from the Prophets, you've got to take the good with the bad, right, Champ?" Riker had already lifted his enthusiastically crying son out of his cradle and was changing the infant's diaper with a remarkable degree of skill, given how recently he'd begun to practice the task.

"Sore bottom, sore nipples, sore breasts. So far the uncomfortable seems to be most of the bad." Ro managed to prop herself up on her left elbow as she tried to get herself into a comfortable position to nurse her son.

"I thought all those traditional Bajoran chants and chimes were supposed to keep you from being so sore after the birth."

"Nothing helps when the baby's four and a half kilos instead of a nice, sensible three and a half kilos, like babies are supposed to be."

"Hey, what do you expect? He's part Kodiak Bear, right, Tommy?" Riker's question for his son was rhetorical, since he did not expect an answer. The tall man's blue-eyed grin extended from ear to ear in his obvious pride in his offspring.

Her son's large size at birth suggested to Ro that he would be the size of his father one day, or even taller, perhaps. She wasn't exactly a small person herself. Ro looked over at her husband, who had already finished the diaper changing and was wrapping their baby boy in a soft blanket. Despite her general discomfort, the sight of Riker's tall naked body, hairy torso, and long legs had the power to ignite a familiar desire. I certainly seem to have a weakness for tall, hairy-chested humans with blue eyes, big grins, and a preference for sleeping in the nude, she thought fondly. Her eyes fell to hip level. And with Towers of Joy in proportion to their height. This particular part of her husband was bobbing around, becoming longer and more erect as he turned to face her. A feral smile spread across her features.

"Stop staring at me like that. You'll only make it worse. You can't do anything about it now!" he complained good-naturedly as he approached their bed.

"Maybe not at this moment, but later on I can help you, if you want. There's more than one way to 'honor the Prophets,' my dear. As you know. You'll just have to owe it to me. How's my poor hungry little man?" she asked of the smaller male in the room as Riker, muttering with good humor about "paybacks," handed the child to her.
The warm, squirming body was a solid weight in her arms as she placed him into position on the bed next to her and offered him her breast. Ro felt the sudden tightening of his mouth around her left nipple and groaned softly as the tiny mouth gripped onto it tightly. Pulling energetically, little Tommy quickly established a rhythmic pattern of sucking, one tiny hand patting the exposed areola of her nipple lightly. It was miraculous that his little Bajoran nose, wrinkled on the bridge, was able to take in air as he nursed, since it seemed to be buried half the time in her milk-swollen breast.

"Look at him latch onto that tit!" Riker remarked proudly as he settled himself back into bed, his body stretching along his wife's back. Ro leaned her head back against his chest as a feeling of wonder and accomplishment overwhelmed her.

Her hand gently stroked the velvety soft head of her son. His warm body nestling close to her radiated heat to the front of her, as his father's warmth soothed her back. Sandwiched as she was between the two men in her life, her bottom was feeling a little better. The arm of her husband, covered with the dark hair she loved to stroke, appeared to view as Riker curved it protectively around her body to caress his son's tiny back. Ro would have liked to pay some attention to that arm and to the rest of the person it was attached to, but at that moment both of her arms were fairly well occupied with holding her baby. She settled for a quick touch to his hand by one of hers and the voicing of a rather self-satisfied observation.

"You never thought he wouldn't love to suck on my tits, did you? He is your son."

"I guess that's true. My namesake Tommy, the sucker of tits." He bent down to kiss Ro near her right ear and rubbed his bearded chin across her shoulder.

Ro shivered, less from a cool draught of air chilling her bared shoulder than from remembrance. "This is it. This is the time," she said, in awe.

"What time?"

"What I saw in the orb. I should have realized . . . "

"Saw in the orb?"

"Before I met you. Vedek Bareil let me look into the Orb of Prophecy and Change. I saw this, and I heard you say, 'My namesake Tommy. The sucker of tits.' When I heard it, I thought . . . well never
"Did you think the man was Tom Paris?"

"Not when I saw Will Riker's face! But I didn't even know you existed then."

His rich, masculine laugh rumbled along her back. "No wonder you got so pale when you met me the first time. Did you expect me to want to start making this little guy right away?"

"Not exactly. I can't say the idea that we might become intimate didn't occur to me as soon as I heard your name, but we weren't in a comfortable enough situation to do anything about it at the time, if you recall. I was shocked by the whole situation, though. Up until then, I had accepted that my vision would never come true. It seemed impossible. From then on, I knew it could."

"Laren, why didn't you ever tell me about this before?"

"You're not really supposed to talk about orb experiences until after the events you see happen, if they ever do. But this is it, I know, so I can tell you now."

She turned and looked into the eyes of her husband, Thomas Riker. Her best friend and her lover. The look in his eyes reflected that his feelings for his wife were much the same as hers for him.

"I'm glad to know it now." He kissed Ro again and added, "I guess I'll have to do that orb thing one of these days. Can we do one together?"

"I'll never do it again. This is wonderful, but I don't want to push my luck. Maybe the next time I'd see something terrible. I'd rather just let things come, one day at a time."

Riker wrapped his arms around his family. "I can understand that." Like his wife, he knew how many bad things could happen in life. Maybe it was better not to know.

For a few minutes they huddled close as Thomas Riker the Younger methodically stripped his mother's left breast of milk, the only sounds an occasional endearment from Ro to her "baby Kodiak." Riker seemed to be able to talk to their son more easily than she could. For her, feeling him
in her arms was already so overwhelming, she often could not think of anything to say that didn't sound foolish -- but she was trying.

Finally, Riker asked casually, "So, how is my little namesake doing. He is my namesake, right? He's not named after that other Tom?"

"What, are you suddenly getting jealous after all this time? Of course he's named after you. Do you doubt it?"

"Nah. I just like to tease you."

Her voice softened as she added, "I'm not sorry that you two share the name Thomas. Tommy is named after his father, but I'm glad I've had a chance to honor the memory of a very good man, too. I wish you could've met him. I think you might have liked Paris."

"I may get a chance to meet him, yet, if Kira's right. When she came to see Tommy, she told me they could never find any trace at all of a warp core explosion, for either Voyager or Val Jean. That's really unheard of, even in the Badlands. Kira thinks that they didn't blow up at all."

"Does she think they fell into the Mirror Universe?"

"I asked her that, and it's a possibility. So maybe Tom Paris is alive after all. Maybe all of them are alive: Chakotay, Torres, Seska. That guy Suder. Janeway and the crew of Voyager."

"Seska. Ugh," she groaned as she switched her son to the right breast, the young man registering a protest about being forced to give up sucking on a nipple for several entire seconds. Once she had repositioned Tommy and allowed him to suck on the other nipple (somewhat less energetically than he had before his stomach had started to get full of milk), Ro admitted, "That Mirror place sounds dreadful. Seska and Suder would fit right in. But I guess I'd rather they were all there than dead."

"So maybe someday they'll all come back home. It would be strange, don't you think? Wonder what Paris would say, you here with a Tommy?"

"Probably some kind of wise crack. But he'd be happy for me, and for you, too. Really." She settled back into her husband's embrace again. Bemusedly she added, "Actually, I hope it is true. I'd like to think that Tom's alive out there somewhere."
"If he came back, you'd have a chance to choose between Thomases. Which do you think you'd pick?" he asked in a light, teasing tone. Thomas Riker was, by this time, very sure of his place in Ro Laren's heart.

"You, of course, my Kodiak lycitha, although for having the audacity to ask me that, I should say him, just to make you squirm." She looked down at her son again. The sucking had slowed down to an occasional squeeze of the lips. Separating those lips from her nipple and lifting him up over her torso, she was almost immediately rewarded by a large belch, prompting a chuckle from both parents. Young Thomas Riker had become very drowsy and promised to drop off to sleep again at any second.

Rubbing her son's back in a circular motion to make sure that all the gas had come up, Ro added quietly, "I do know that if Tom is alive, I hope he's managed to find someone who makes him as happy as you've made me."

"What a good answer, Vedek Parys! Very much a vedek answer, I might add."

"So, if it's a 'vedek answer,' then you also know that it's the truth."

"Yes, I know it's the truth." Riker's face beamed as he softly added, "Do you know how much I love you, Ro Laren?"

"As much as I love you?"

"Maybe more," he whispered, leaning closer to her face.

"Not possible, Thomas Riker." She breathed back to him. As she settled their sleeping infant son against her bosom, she felt her husband's thick beard brush her cheek as he offered her a gentle kiss.

Ro Laren lay back in her bed, surrounded by the arms of Thomas Riker, the unexpected husband that she loved more than she ever thought it was possible to love anyone. In her arms she held another Thomas Riker, formed not in a transporter accident, but by the time-honored, "old fashioned way" of growing in his mother's womb after a night of lovemaking by his parents. The young man had emerged from her body squalling in protest, very much in the human fashion rather than the Bajoran. He now seemed to be getting the hang of what this living in the world was all about. A new soul, a blessing from the Prophets, she was learning to love more and more with every second of his
precious existence.

Thomas Riker the Elder reached up to the controls to lower the illumination of the room to its lowest level before cuddling with his family again. Ro Laren sighed contentedly as she leaned against his muscular frame, stretched out behind her and supporting her back.

There will always be questions in life, Ro thought, but at least now I know a few of the answers.

=\= End =\=

End Notes

GENERAL DISCLAIMER: Paramount and CBS own the characters of Ro Laren, Thomas Riker, Tom Paris, Vedek Bareil, Chakotay, Torres, the O'Briens, and others who have appeared on Star Trek: The Next Generation, Star Trek:Deep Space Nine, and Star Trek: Voyager, lock, stock and barrel. Those characters who never appeared on the show and the back stories not otherwise the property of Paramount and CBS, as well as the events in this story itself, are claimed by J.A. Toner (jamelia), December, 1997 (Revised August 2013). This story is just for fun, and maybe for thought. As was the case with "The Mercenary," my interpretation of Ro's early life and sexual history owes much to the writing of L.E. Bowen.

In Peter Tremayne's "Sister Fidelma" mystery series, the protagonist is an Irish female cleric from a Celtic monastery, set in the seventh century, A.D. Unlike monasteries elsewhere, or at a later time, celibacy was not a requirement in all of them. Men and women lived and worshipped together in conhospitae, or double houses. Some married and raised children in these houses. When the Roman Church became ascendant, these houses were banned. Since no one ever seemed to bat an eye over the sexual relationship of Vedek Bareil and Major Kira Nerys, I decided to use the general concept of the Irish double house of the Early Christian Era as the model for Bajor's religious houses (or at least, the sect to which Bareil belonged). Most of how this might play out, including the interpretation of why sexual relationships were acceptable in this setting, is strictly from my imagination. I thank Mr. Tremayne for providing a framework for my musings.

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