Rating: **Teen And Up Audiences**  
Archive Warning: **No Archive Warnings Apply**  
Category: **F/M, M/M**  
Fandom: **Star Trek: The Next Generation**  
Relationship: **Jean-Luc Picard/William Riker, Jean-Luc Picard/Original Female Character(s)**  
Character: **Jean-Luc Picard, William Riker, Helen Frijs (OC), Sascha Riker-Picard (OC), Rose Riker-Picard (OC)**  
Additional Tags: **Marriage, Infidelity, Extramarital Affairs**  
Series: **Part 6 of The Post-A Million Sherds Universe**  
Stats:  
Published: 2014-12-14 Completed: 2014-12-24 Chapters: 3/3 Words: 4602

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**The Bright Unbroken Planet**

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**Summary**

Picard leaves Will and their two young children.

**Notes**

In Cochrane Day, the story of Will Riker and Jean-Luc Picard set thirty-five years after A Million Sherds, Will and Jean-Luc discuss what happened twenty-five years in their past -- what Will calls The Incident.

This is The Incident.

The title is from the poem "Jet," by Tony Hoagland.
At what point, Picard wondered, had he known where this would end up? It wasn’t as if he hadn’t played the game before. It wasn’t as if he hadn’t been at a thousand diplomatic functions, eaten at a thousand diplomatic meals, been seated at the table with hundreds of interesting young people, and yet. Sitting at this particular table, at this particular function, at the end of a trying but ultimately successful trade negotiation, he’d known, just by looking at her, that she’d placed herself at his table. By the way she smiled at him, by the way her eyes glittered, by the way her hand moved as she talked, by the way her fingers tapered around her champagne flute.

She wasn’t perfect in her beauty, far from it, but there were interesting planes to her face, almost geometric in design, and the way the lighting touched her, creating shadows beneath her cheekbones…he wanted to run his fingers across them. Usually the people who sat with him were important, and cultural in some way, designed to keep him interested and mildly amused, after having dealt with the self-obsessed and the narcissists in the talks of the day; there was always a handsome young person, whose job it was to be mildly flirtatious; all part of the game. It was common knowledge, after all, that he was married to the captain of the _Titan_; he wore a ring on his finger; he was quite willing, when asked, to talk about his children. So she must have known too that he wasn’t available, and yet here she was, with her conversation that he suddenly found so appealing, and the interesting shadows of her face, and the cool green of her eyes, intelligent, surely, and interested, definitely, but without – without the need that always seemed to be in Will’s.

When she invited him out into the gardens he didn’t even need to think. She linked her arm with his, but casually, just a friendly gesture, from one diplomat to another. She didn’t have a title, but she was definitely working. The two moons were hazy overhead in the warmth and humidity of the evening, and she talked a little about the tides, and the inland sea, and where she’d grown up, along its estuaries. It was as if he’d been transported to another time, and another era, perhaps in those long-forgotten Romantic novels of his youth, when he’d discovered the rocks of Cornwall and the shifting sands of Kent. Her perfume was light and yet it filled his nostrils and he breathed it in as if he’d never smelled anything before. Oh, it was so practised, this seduction, but he’d been playing the game long before she’d even been born, and it was so pleasant, so charming, just to ride along with her, let her take the lead to where he’d known, all along, when she’d sat down, this was going.

He’d forgotten what a woman felt like. The curves of her shoulders and the softness of the nape of her neck; the wisps of hair that fell along her cheeks, which he brushed away; the sheer softness of her skin, along her belly and her thighs. When he’d taken her in his arms it had all come back to him, the physical memory of being with a woman, the give and take, the softness, the yielding. It was intoxicating; it was overwhelming, as memory returned; Beverly, and Jenice, Nella and even Phillipa seemed to all become this one woman, in his arms, beneath him, beside him. Afterwards, she slept beside him, breathing lightly against his skin, a tiny, almost fragile thing, something he could hold and protect; something rare and gentle, like a tiny bird; like a flower.

In the morning there’d been no apologies and no embarrassment; he’d made love to her again, and it was as if he were young and strong with his whole life ahead of him. They had tea
and a light breakfast on the balcony, and she asked him what his plans were; and suddenly he
didn’t have any. No plans, he said, I have days of leave owed to me, and her delighted laugh
enthralled and enchanted him. Eventually, he thought, he’d have to send a communication, but it
wasn’t as if these diplomatic talks didn’t sometimes overstay their welcome. A few days wouldn’t
be unexpected; he’d send the communication if it looked as if it would turn into a week.

And the planet was so beautiful. Two glorious moons in a hazy fuchsia sky; lush
vegetation and luxurious gardens; fresh air and the spicy scent of flowers everywhere. She’d been
married, she told him, but her husband had been lost in a skirmish somewhere; he hadn’t really
paid attention to the details. She had one child, a son at university in the capital; he didn’t
volunteer any information at all, to her, about his four-year-old son and six-month-old daughter on
the Titan. It suddenly was embarrassing, that someone his age should have young children, when
here was this marvel, this wonder, who was so young, and yet her parenting days were over.

She was so different from Will. After accepting her offer to stay with her in her small
cottage near the sea, he was able to reflect, as she was walking in her garden, or walking with him
along the beach, just how different she was. Making love to Will, after all these years, had
become routine; when, of course, they actually had the opportunity to make love, between Will’s
constant life on call as captain and his trips as ambassador, and the general busyness of having one
younger and one infant in the captain’s quarters. And large as the captain’s quarters were, it
was, he realised, claustrophobic to have two adult men and two small children in what was
essentially a flat not designed for family living.

What was amazing to him was that at first, he didn’t even think of Will. After three days
he’d sent the communication, saying that the talks had stalled and he would be away at least
another week, and then he’d left it, and returned to what had become an interlude both strange and
magical. She was clear-eyed and intelligent; she was an active participant in their lovemaking; she
was an engaging conversationalist who knew when to be silent; she was perfectly at ease with
him. And so he hadn’t thought of Will. He hadn’t, he realised, even thought of Sascha, or the
baby Rose.

But now, as he watched her sleep, he wondered at what point he’d realised that this had
become more than just a dalliance. When had his forgetting Will become deliberate? When had
his communication become prevarication? When had he begun, he thought, to justify what he
was doing by comparing her to Will? It was hard for him to understand why it was so exciting to
be with a woman – to be with this woman. He’d always been attracted to both sexes; from his
first love, Michel, when he was only seventeen and trying to gain admission to the Academy; and
Jack, his first officer, on the Stargazer; to Walker; to Will. He hadn’t been exclusive in any way,
except perhaps in the type of man he fell for, and in the type of woman. Making love to Will – the
hard muscles of his back, the hollow of his neck, the silky hair along his spine that led downwards
to the curved muscles of his arse; the strength of his hands, the line of his jaw, the cleft in his chin
– when had that given way to the mundane? He tried to picture Will, curled into him the way he
always slept, his arm across Picard’s chest, his hair in his eyes; he tried to summon some
excitement, or a sense of loss, but there was nothing there. And then he felt her stretch beside
him, and take him in with her appraising jade eyes, and he felt a frisson of both excitement and –

And fear. And then it was gone, and he reached for her, and he was lost once again in the
softness and the sweetness and the wonder of this new and remarkable love.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Picard and Helen end their affair.

Chapter Notes

From "Jet," by Tony Hoagland:

"...no one really hears. We gaze into the night
as if remembering the bright unbroken planet
we once came from,
to which we will never be permitted to return.
We are amazed at how hurt we are.
We would give anything for what we have."

2.

It was too new for there to be any sort of a routine, and yet they’d happened upon having a light breakfast on her patio after waking. The weather was mild and warm, the humidity high but not stifling. When he’d asked her about rain, she’d laughed and told him it was the dry season, which made him tell her that he was glad he’d missed the rainy season. For some reason, this made her laugh harder, and then they were both laughing; and Picard felt as if he’d never been this happy before. He was watching how the light reflecting on the sea was the same colour as the light reflecting in her eyes – he thought perhaps it was the same colour green as a deep tide pool – when her secretary brought her the morning dispatches – a strangely old-fashioned diplomatic term, Picard thought, surprised that there was a padd with dispatches for him as well.

“A new mission?” Helen asked, sipping her tea. She was drinking some citrus-infused concoction and he could smell it from where he was sitting.

“No,” he answered, perusing through the messages he’d hoped he could ignore. “Reports, you know….”

“Do you feel them, then?” she asked.

“What?” He glanced up at her, not quite sure what she meant, and then he noticed the corner of her mouth trying not to turn up and the glitter in her eyes. “Do I feel what?” he asked,
and he donned his neutral expression for her.

“The tendrils, Jean-Luc,” she replied, and he could see it was a struggle for her to keep from smiling.

He was mystified. “Tendrils?” he repeated.

“Reaching out for you, bringing you home,” she replied, and he actually looked down, to see if they were there, greenish-grey and thick, winding around his feet, and then they were laughing again, and he took her in his arms, and the dispatches were forgotten.

He was surprised that there was nothing from Will. It was almost a week, after all, and Will usually communicated with him several times during any time he was gone for a long time; this was now heading into his third week of being away. Will had received his message, the one he’d sent when he explained negotiations were stalled, and he’d be staying another week; the ensuing silence, then, was deafening. It took time and organisation to catch up to the Titan; sometimes he had to shuttle to a starbase and then wait several days there; other times, he could take a shuttle directly to the Titan, but there was always logistics involved. Will handled it himself, sometimes, or his XO did; Picard had heard from neither.

Helen, still teasing him about the tendrils, had explained that she had some of her own; work-related; he could come with her, she’d said, to the city, or he could remain at her cottage and she would see him for supper – what, she asked, would he prefer?

He’d opted for staying behind, sensing that perhaps there were things of a more private nature she needed to do. After the intensity of the past week, perhaps it might be a good thing to have a little space, and he was curiously disquieted for the first time since beginning the negotiations.

He watched Helen leave, and then he returned to her kitchen and the replicator for a mug of tea, more out of habit than anything else. During the negotiations, his time had been structured; either he was in the talks or he was preparing, in some way for them; attending meetings, writing and reading reports, and then falling, exhausted, into a dreamless sleep. Since joining Helen here, in her cottage, there’d been no structure to his time at all. They’d done whatever they felt like doing, whenever they felt like doing it; walking on the beach, swimming in the tepid sea; eating, talking, making love. As before, in the negotiations, his days had been filled; this was, he reflected, the first time he was really alone with nothing at all to do in he couldn’t remember how long. Years, perhaps, he thought, and he took his mug of tea out onto the patio and sat down out of habit. Even though there was a slight breeze blowing in off the sea, he thought he still could catch her scent in the air, and he breathed it in. Intoxication, he thought; he was intoxicated. He hadn’t felt this way since – since forever.

He thought perhaps he could take a swim, after he’d finished his tea. The padd her secretary had brought him was still on the table, and he decided he’d better bring it in before he walked down to the shore. The humidity seemed higher, somehow, today, and it wouldn’t do to leave the padd out. He set his mug down and picked the padd up. There was a communication from the Titan, and he couldn’t stop himself – first he felt like a naughty little boy, waiting for his maman to scold him, and then he felt anger. It surprised him. He was not a man who felt anger often; he’d always thought of himself as calm; measured; rational. But there was no denying it; anger was what he felt. He debated ignoring the message, and then he wondered, who are you? And where did the real Picard go? Picard would never ignore a message from his ship; would
never ignore a message from his lover of over ten years, the father of his children; a Picard, came his father’s voice suddenly, would never have an affair.

He set the padd down. He’d had plenty of affairs, dozens of them. He could feel the anger, sitting there, deep down, in his core. Were they tied at the hip, then? He couldn’t take a much-needed week off, once in a while? Was it necessary that he, Picard, ask permission now to do something he felt like doing? Who the hell did Will Riker think he was, anyway?

He stood up. He could feel a rivulet of perspiration trickling down the back of his neck, and along his brow, and he wiped his forehead. He wished he’d worn a hat, feeling the beginning of the tingling of a burn on his crown. He was sure the humidity was higher, dry season or no; and the breeze had slipped away. It was hot. He was uncomfortable. He picked up the padd and walked inside, leaving his mug on the table.

The dayroom was cooler, a ceiling fan whirring, although certainly the inside temperature in the cottage was warmer than in his quarters on the ship. He could, he supposed, tell the computer to turn the temperature down a degree or two, but he couldn’t understand why the temperature was bothering him now, when it hadn’t bothered him all week. Nothing had changed. The weather was the same; diffuse sunlight over a lavender sky which deepened to fuchsia as the evening rolled in; the seabirds calling, the waves tumbling onto the sand. Yet he was hot, and sweaty, a feeling he detested, and there was no one to distract him from the anger which was still swirling around in his gut.

Just what the hell was he angry with, anyway?

Or who?

He booted the padd up, and opened the communication, expecting it to be Will, or perhaps Will’s XO, with questions about his travel plans and recommendations thereof. Instead, it was from Deanna, who’d gone with them to the Titan as ship’s counsellor. He read it quickly, recognising almost immediately that she was using what Will called her “Ten Forward voice” (even though it was Seven Forward, on the Titan) – chatty, breezy, gossipy, the psychologist hidden. He smiled, reading the opening, because it was not from Deanna at all, but a note from Sascha, who, in his serious voice – which somehow managed to carry through in his first attempts at writing – explained that he had won a prize of some sort at school. The first of many, Picard thought, and then he was reading Deanna’s letter, full of ship’s gossip about the bridge crew and the bizarre group of new Federation candidates that they’d met, and there it was, in the middle of the froth – Will was working himself to death, apparently, not sleeping and doing double shifts; Rose was teething, which wasn’t helping matters; Sascha had written a story – the prizewinning one, apparently, about a little bird who couldn’t find its way home. Jean-Luc, she wrote, he will not ask you to come home. He is too proud. You must make the decision yourself, and you owe it to all of us – not just Will and your children – to let us know.

He is too proud to ask me to come home, Picard thought. Instead, he will work himself into exhaustion and then beyond exhaustion. Would he stop eating? Picard wondered. Apparently he was no longer sleeping. In his mind he could picture Will waking, terrified from the old dream which always appeared when he was stressed, and it wouldn’t be himself who would be there to comfort him; no, it would be their serious little son, who would somehow take on the responsibility to make Dad okay, in the way that children did; take on the emotional responsibility of their parents. Hadn’t he felt responsible for his mother’s unhappiness, blaming it on his inability to please their father; on his failure to get along with Robert? Hadn’t Will believed completely that it was his fault his mother had died, and thus his father’s monstrosity was simply what he deserved?

The anger was still there, and it was because, Picard realised, he was angry with himself.
When Helen returned, he was already packed. Neither one of them said anything; she’d known, when she’d left for the city, that it was already over. He’d just needed to realise it himself. He took her in his arms one last time and kissed her gently on her forehead.

“Will he take you back?” she asked, standing beside him on the patio, waiting for the air car to come and pick him up.

Picard shrugged. “I don’t know,” he answered, honestly.

“Does he love you?”

“Yes.” Picard watched a sea bird circling over the waves.

“Then he will take you back,” she said.

Picard picked up his case as the air car pulled up. “Helen,” he said.

“No regrets, Jean-Luc,” she replied. “Now go home.”

He nodded and sat down beside the pilot. The Titan had been his home. He was no longer sure that it still was. He had become his son’s little bird.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Picard comes home.

3.

He knew, as soon as he left the shuttle bay, that the crewman would contact Will to say he was aboard. He walked down the corridors of the Titan, his home now of almost five years, and they looked somehow less familiar, as if he had been gone a year, or two, instead of only three weeks. He wondered if this was because he had already begun the process of distancing himself, in preparation for what he had told himself to expect. He was surprised, then, to find Will not in their quarters, waiting his arrival. The nanny was there, a crewman named D’jali, and he placed his case down on the floor and took Sascha in his arms.

“Bonjour, mon petit oiseau,” he said into Sascha’s dark blond hair, causing Sascha to giggle. “Tell me why you are not at school.”

Apparently they’d had a very special field trip, and as Sascha told him all about the wonders of stellar cartography, he took Rosie from D’jali’s arms and held her, and he’d realised that somehow he must have gone quite mad. He had no explanations to give; no justifications; no excuses. He had left his family and now he had more than likely lost them. He didn’t ask D’jali where Will was; he knew. He talked with Sascha and cuddled Rose, and then he took his case into their bedroom and set it on the closet floor.

“Will you play with me, Papi?” Sascha asked, and even though the child’s eyes were dark, he could see an echo of Will’s anxiety in them.

“Of course,” he said, kneeling down so he was eye level with Sascha. He stroked his son’s face and kissed his forehead. “Let me go see Daddy, first.”

“He’s at work.”

“He is the captain,” Picard said. “The captain is always at work.”

Sascha sighed. “I know.”

“Perhaps I can convince him to come home,” he offered. “We can eat supper together, and then we’ll play with you. Would you like that?”

“And Rose? You’ll play with Rose too?”

“Of course,” he answered. “We would never leave out Rose.”
“Okay. You’re dismissed,” Sascha said imperiously, and Picard wondered whose voice it was, his or Will’s.

“Yes, sir,” Picard said, straightening, the sound of Sascha’s laughter following him out the doors.

Will was on the observation deck. It’s where he went, always. Picard was just a little surprised that the doors were not privacy-locked, but then, Will knew he would find him here, and perhaps that’s why they weren’t. The lights were low, and he could see Will standing dark against the retreating of the stars as they warped by. They were on their way to Starbase 135; he only knew that because of the logistics involved in flying a shuttle to meet them. What the mission was he didn’t know; sometimes Will could tell him and sometimes not. He stepped inside and then he hesitated. He’d never been a man who couldn’t find the right words to say. It’s why he’d spent years in the diplomatic corps; it was his trademark as a captain; it’s why he was appointed a Federation ambassador. And yet – what exactly was he to say? He could only, he thought, say the obvious.

“Permission to come aboard, Captain?” he asked.

Will did not turn around. “What will you do if I say no?”

“Beg your indulgence until I can disembark at Starbase 135,” Picard said.

“You always have an answer for everything, don’t you?” Picard could hear the exhaustion in his voice. “Permission granted.”

“Thank you,” Picard said. He found himself walking, quite helplessly and against his own will, until he was standing as close to the observation deck windows as Will was, and so they stood there, silently, watching the stars. He could feel how rigidly Will was holding himself, and he thought perhaps he should just touch him, lightly, on the arm, but there was a distance of three weeks and a lifetime between them, and it was a gap he did not know how to close.

“I’ve said hello to the children,” he said, when he could no longer bear the silence. “I’d thought you would be there. I’d wanted to see you first…."

Will said nothing.

Picard had not prayed, even when he was with the Borg, even when he was with the Cardassians, but he had the urge to pray to his grandmère’s benevolent God now. “I told Sascha we would have supper together,” he added. “I’m sorry.”

Will said, “For telling our son we were having supper together?”

“It was a presumption,” Picard said.

“Oh?”

“Will.” He felt the silence begin to close in again, and he said, “You are exhausted. I told Sascha we would have supper and play a little, with him. And then if you want me to move into guest quarters, I will.”

“And how,” Will asked, turning to look at him, “are you planning to explain that to our
son?"

“I don’t know."

“You are a selfish bastard,” Will said, turning back to the window.

“Yes,” Picard agreed. He tried to remember how he’d felt on the planet, with Helen, but it was gone, to be replaced only by an aching helplessness. He had made a mess of his personal life before, many times, but this was beyond his comprehension. He hadn’t understood at all why he’d done what he’d done, and now he didn’t understand what he could do. Will’s pain was a physical presence in the room, and he was – he was afraid.

“What is it you want, Jean-Luc?” Will asked.

Oh, Will, Picard thought. You are still the bravest man I’ve ever known.

“I want to come home,” he said. And then he added, “Please.”

He could hear Will breathing, and he took Will’s hand.

He said, “I won’t ask you to forgive me, Will. But I would like you to take me back, if you can find it in your heart to do so.”

“You asked me to trust you,” Will said.

“I know.”

“And I did, trust you.”

“I know.”

“How am I ever to trust you or anyone else again?”

Will’s hand was still in his. He said, quietly, “We must start over, and I will have to earn your trust. It won’t be easy, Will, not for either of us.”

“I should hate you,” Will said. “I want to hate you.”

“You couldn’t even hate your father, Will,” Picard said. Still Will’s hand was in his.

“No,” Will agreed. “I’m not crying,” he said. “I won’t cry.”

“No,” Picard murmured, and he took Will’s hand and kissed it. “Sascha is waiting for us, I think,” he said.

“You can never do this again, Jean-Luc.” Will’s voice was firm.

“I can’t lose you, Guy,” Picard answered. “I won’t lose you.”

Will said, “There’s no need for you to move to guest quarters. I don’t think – I don’t think it could work, if you did.”

“No.” Picard waited.

“I haven’t been eating,” Will said.

“Is that why you came home? Because she comm’d you?”

“No, Will. I didn’t know how to come home. When she wrote me, she showed me how.”

“You were afraid of me?” Will sounded incredulous.

“I was afraid you would tell me to go to hell,” Picard answered.

“Which is what you would have told me,” Will said, “if this shoe were on the other foot.”

He took that blow. “Yes,” he said. “But you are the better man.”

“Not because I want to be.”

“Will you let me hold you?” Picard asked. “Guy?”

“Yes,” Will said.

“I can come home?” Picard wanted to be certain.

“Yes.”

“Je t’aime, Guy,” Picard said, and felt himself enfolded in Will’s arms.

Will rested his head on Picard’s shoulder. “I love you, too, you stupid old man,” he replied.

“I am indeed,” Picard agreed, “a stupid old man. Shall we have supper, now?” He felt as if he should hold his breath, because he knew he didn’t deserve Will’s answer.

“I’m not cooking.”

“Of course not.” He smiled into Will’s tunic. “I told Sascha we’d play with him, after. And Rose. He wanted to make sure we’d include Rose.”

“Rose has been too cranky to play,” Will said. “Sascha doesn’t understand the concept of teething.”

“I think,” Picard said, “he understands far more than we might want him to.”

Will said, “Then you need to tell him that you have come home.” Will paused, and then said, “Just as you always do.”

They walked to the doors, and Picard answered, “And just as I always will.” He took Will’s hand and together they walked home.

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