

The Love that Asks No Questions

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The Love that Asks No Questions

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Summary

A revelation in the Praetor's household. Agon thinks he is schooling someone. A conman gets conned. Two spies have a drink and a cigar in an old London company. The revelation shows more to the Praetor-Second's Preceptor.

Prologue:

chRihan
Ki Baratan(Capital City)
Hall of State
The Praetorate Offices
The Once and Future Time
2296, Old Earth Calendar

The Praetor's Preceptor, the principle aide and servitor, a human known as Covenant, looks out over the lights of the city. He waits on the Praetor, the last one remaining that keeps sole power from the hands of t'Rrallion.

His mind is focused on his current precarious position, as well as the job at hand. One that if he completes, he still may be kept in the deep shit that he is currently in, back in the Federation.

With a possible charge of desertion and a cell in a Federation penal colony. All because of a certain manipulative old bastard known as the Prince, with a codename that reflects his role model.

Niccolò. As in Machiavelli. He sends his thoughts away from that personage as another presence intrudes into his mind. He manages to keep from smiling as the warm presence touches the center of his mind.

He concentrates on that presence, knowing that it helps keep him focused, as well as making sure he generally speaks in Romulan, from both her knowledge and his own.

"Hello, t'hy'la," T'varilyn says in his mind's eye and ear. He gazes at her dark eyes, underneath the high-arched eyebrows. Her long golden hair, tied back as he remembered it. Unlike their other bond's perception, she isn't nude in his mind—at least not in instances where she is just talking to him.

"My love," he says to her, in his own mind.

"You're in a bind," T'vari says. "As you would and our other love would say, you're in 'deep shit'. Don't worry. I've got your back." He shoves other thoughts away, specifically of that 'other love.'

One who he can't reach, in spite of a different kind of bond. One who is probably too proud, just like he is, to reach out in the Link.

As they both try to find ways to blame themselves for what had happened to the woman now lodged in both of their minds.

Somehow.

Incongruously, he concentrates on the fact that T'Varilyn makes use of many human and Deltan patterns of speech and colloquialisms. Including contractions, more than most Vulcans he had known.

He starts as the door opens, then relaxes as his boss-at-least-in-name, the Praetor-Second Megara t'Khnialmnae, steps in. She is dressed not in

her formal clothing for work, but in a flowing gown. He bows his head, then looks up into her dark blue eyes. Her ravenwing black hair is up off of her long neck. Even though she is a century or so, she looks as if she might be in her forties or so to a human. Her forehead is smooth, lacking the brow ridges of the Romulans of the northern hemisphere of this world.

Covenant looks at the figure behind her. A younger officer—much younger—with the insignia of a subcenturion on her uniform. She is probably only around twenty standard years old and petite. He can just see some family relationship between the Praetor and her young aide.

“Ahh, Covenant. Change of plans. We’ll be going to the Praetor-Prime’s residence for entertainment tonight.” She looks at the young aide, who Covenant had never met. “As soon as someone changes from her uniform. And the Praetor’s lackey arrives.”

The man with another name knows the young woman well, from his study of her SI dossier.

A’ela t’Khnialmnae, known as t’Stolna to the Empire at large. Megara’s granddaughter, thought to be dead under her own name. Niece of a woman supposedly disowned by Megara. Named for the woman most hated in the Empire now and the reason for the mother’s sister’s disowning.

It isn’t long before A’ela is clad in a long white gown. One that leaves her shoulders bare and her chest only covered by strategically placed embroidered flowers.

The door chime sounds. He goes to the door, and opens it, expecting the Prime’s driver. He stops short as he is assaulted by the telltale pheromones of a member of their bond’s species. A tall Deltan woman, with that ageless quality stands in her own gown, one that hides nothing. He manages to keep his eyes on her dark amber versions, eyes that gaze at him with amusement, rather than what is bared in her gown. He recognizes a couple of things about the woman, who might be in her forties or fifties.

The shape of her eyes, which he is sure that are a part of her laughter at him, for one. For the other, something about the ‘taste’ of her pheromones and the connected Link—the deeply psychic and empathic aspect of her gifts.

As he sits in the back of the large hovercar that the Prime had dispatched, crammed between her—she’d introduced herself as Danara—and the young Romulan officer, he wonders why she is so familiar to him.

T’Varilyn, or at least his mind-T’Varilyn is strangely silent.

I.

Leelix III
near Grisha’s Folly
The Sunset Grille

Agon pours out a drink for an unknown Starfleet officer, a lieutenant j.g. He hadn’t seen an Edoan—or an Edosian as the proper term was, after an original mistranslation—in a long time, ever since Commander Arex had retired back to his homeworld.

“Haven’t seen you around here before,” Agon says in what he hopes is a friendly tone.

“That’s because I haven’t been here,” the officer says in his flat voice.

Agon grits his teeth, but moves on. “I’m Agon. I own this place.” He dips his head in a bow, rather than offering to shake one of the three three-fingered hands.

“Lieutenant Daronex,” he says. “Newly assigned to the 17th. On the group leader, the *Comstock*.”

Agon nods. “I know many of their officers well. I once served with your Captain (L), Chandra. Good officer.”

“I’m sure,” Daronex says without inflection.

Agon feels his eyebrow raise at that. “You’re not sure?”

“No. I don’t actually care,” he replies. “I’m just here to get some experience at a command level.”

Agon nods, then says, “Good luck with that.” As he moves away, he looks at the young officer who is nursing a beer. Her copper eyebrows are raised into her freckled forehead. She bears a full lieutenant’s insignia on her delta, on the flight jacket hanging from the hook in front of her, under the bar. She turns her gaze to Daronex. He can tell that Siobhan is calculating how she can throw her new subordinate’s narrow, three-legged ass out of an airlock. Especially if it is true that Daronex will be superseding Decker Sinclair as her XO.

It might be especially uncomfortable as Shiv is just here to pick up her replacements. She finishes her drink and lifts her jacket from the hook, pulling it over her customary tanktop. Her expression tells Agon it may be a long trip to the *Comstock* in a very small shuttle for the new XO.

Not my circus, not my monkeys, he thinks. He feels his commpadd buzz. He nods at the other bartender, who has moved to take Daronex’s order. The Edosian’s eyes are flashing anger, probably at how Agon had moved away without taking a drink order.

He moves through the back storage room. Theelia looks up from her inventory. She sees his expression, then nods. She puts the commpadd into the back pocket of her work pants. She pulls up her own jacket and pulls it on, leaving it open. She pats her belt, making sure that her own Type I phaser is handy. He knows that she carries a few knives concealed on her person as well.

They walk out the back door in silence, then turn into an alley. After several more turns, they come out into a dead end, but one where they have the advantage of the exit, except for the ladder of an emergency escape.

A tall figure stands there, in a dark body suit with hood and mask. The dark eyes gaze at him. One of the upswept eyebrows raises when the dark eyes fall on Theelia. Theelia stands there looking coolly at the figure.

Although her eyes do sweep appreciatively up the woman's figure. He can't tell if it is in the best traditions of the Omri't, as her people call themselves, or if she is checking for hidden weapons.

Or a little of both.

"So this is what you mean by coming alone?" the woman asks, her accent neutral and even.

"We're married. We do things together," Theelia says. "Including some things most married couples don't do." Agon feels his body react to her familiar pheromones, the Threads, as well as the parts of their mind that they share—the Link—that stems from and powers the Threads in an endless circle, as Theelia's tone and her look grow suggestive.

The woman shrugs. "Perhaps later, dear. Now we need to talk business. Or the fact that I can shut down your business with a snap of my fingers."

She looks around the alley. She apparently is satisfied with what she sees, as she reaches up and pulls the mask and hood off. Agon takes in her fully uncovered face, as a mass of dark waves, including some bronze in them falls over her shoulders. Her ears are elegantly curved in a point. Her forehead is smooth, rather than with the brow ridges that he has seen on some Romulans. Someone once told him that these differences had evolved between the hemispheres of Romulus. He can't even remember which hemisphere has the ridges and which doesn't.

The engineering portion of his degree and track at the Academy didn't cover if it was even possible for two groups of the same species to evolve that differently.

His own gaze does denote that her eyes show a great deal of intelligence, along with something he hadn't expected in a criminal mastermind with the moniker of Darkwing.

A recognizable bit of humor as she surveys both of them.

There is continued silence as all three of them stare at one another.

"So what do you want?" Theelia finally asks.

Darkwing smiles slightly. "I understand that you also have part ownership of a Free Commando vessel. The *Starlight*."

Agon and Theelia refrain from looking at one another, but Agon narrows his eyes at their 'partner.' "That's not widely known. We'd like to keep it that way."

Darkwing doesn't change her expression. "I can respect those wishes, as long as you do what I ask."

"What's the ask?" Theelia inquires.

"Just let me know what they're up to. And occasionally let me use them to transport certain goods across the Outmarches."

Agon notes the use of the Romulan term for the Neutral Zone and the border area.

"I promise you, I will make it well worth your time and your effort," she says. "Your discretion as well."

"And if we don't?"

Darkwing chuckles. "Come, come, Agon. We're all adults here. Let's not dwell on 'what ifs. Let's just say that one of the entities that I work for will make a lot of things easier for you. Given your, shall we say, *tenuous* relationship with the Federation and the institution of Starfleet."

"We get along fine with Starfleet," Theelia says.

"Oh, yes," Darkwing purrs. "I know you seem to be doing a great deal of *relating* with certain members of Starfleet. Got your own little circle of trah é ta-ehbraen d'dere going with the 17th."

Agon starts at the Deltos words. Words for a certain singular bond among Deltans—the lowest, if you believe the hierarchies of the Deltan soul. *Sisters and brothers of the body*. He shoves that thought aside, knowing that certain of those bonds are deeper than the words suggest and rise higher with some of those members, for Theelia. "In spite of what you say about our relationship with Starfleet's higher-ups, we are still loyal to the Federation. We won't do harm to them." He grins. "Except maybe to its customs and excise laws and regulations."

Darkwing nods. "We seem to understand each other. Some of the entities I work with work for the Federation."

Agon can feel Theelia's mind calculating the layers of hidden meaning in the Romulan's words, even without the bond of a spouse. "Then we might have a deal. Provided you show some good faith to us."

It is the Romulan's turn to do some calculating. "Twenty percent of the profits or fees that we ship over."

Theelia shakes her head. "Forty." Agon wonders how far Thee will go. She's more of a gambler than he is.

Darkwing laughs. "You're a rogue, my dear," she says. "Twenty percent, plus ten percent of your debt to me forgiven."

Agon sees Thee hesitate, as if unsure. He stifles his grin. All part of the act.

“Twenty-five percent, and fifteen forgiven.”

Darkwing holds out her hands. “My aged mother would starve. Twenty five and ten percent debt relief.”

Theelia grins. “Throw in a drink at our bar and we’ll take that.” Agon sees her eyes grow hooded. “Perhaps some *conversation* as well.”

She looks at her chrono. “I’ve got a few hours. I have to make a call first,” she says.

“Half-hour?” Theelia asks. “That’ll give me some time for me to find my toys.”

As they turn away, Agon gives an admiring glance back at Darkwing. Somehow she had kept her expression even at Theelia’s suggestive words. Words designed to throw someone off.

Mostly.

Darkwing watches them leave. She looks around again, as well as giving her PADD a surreptitious glance.

A human male fills the screen, his green eyes on hers, an even expression on his face

“We’re on track,” she says. “I have a feeling that the numbered people will be contacting me, since I hinted I was already working for them.”

He nods and says in a slight accent—one that she had heard so many years ago in a certain starship surgeon’s voice. “Yep. Maybe then I can get them out from under the actual debt that Agon’s dimwittedness got them into. Hopefully without destroying the part of their marriage that isn’t open to others. Or getting them killed in the process.”

She shakes her head. “Marriage. I can’t believe a ceremony performed by a certain drunken starship first officer was enough to get them—how did you put it—‘the big chicken dinner’, from Starfleet.”

His face darkens at her words. Guilt comes over his regular—pleasing, at least to a human—features. “Apparently it was enough for someone looking for a reason,” is all that he says.

Darkwing stands there, staring at the blank screen, her eyes troubled.

II.

Covert Location

Across the Neutral Zone

Free Vessel Starlight

The man known to certain organizations as Assisi, to other individuals with various other agendas as Oscar Freetown and his mother by another name and others who could give a shit and don’t, as Francis, sits on watch on the bridge.

His eyes play over a screen, from a pickup in one of the cargo holds, where two women, one human and one Romulan, spar with serious intensity. He smiles as he sees the numbers increasing next to certain noms de guerre.

The one signifying the Romulan are increasing faster, but the human’s numbers are up there, particular with the greenish-black eye that the Romulan is sporting and the green blood oozing from her nose.

The door behind him snaps open. “What the fuck, Francis?” says the opener of said hatch. His chair springs forward as he tries to deactivate the screen. He overcompensates and winds up on the deck on his ass.

Staring up at an angry woman of Portuguese ancestry whose nose is bleeding and full lips are split. Her arms, crossed over the chest in her workout top are marked by bruising. Her knuckles, just visible where her fists are balled up under her arms, are split and bruised, bearing both red and green blood.

Francis doesn’t remark on the festiveness of her knuckles, especially as she pulls one out from under her arm and waves it under his nose, causing him to cross his eyes. “You’ve been recording us, you creep? Have I got to tear my quarters apart to find the hidden pickups?”

“What? Hell no,” he replies indignantly. “I’m an entrepreneur, not a voyeur,” he says. He holds his hands up, looking to the other woman who has stepped out on the bridge. She looks at both of them with amusement. Unlike the images on the screen, she only bears the fading black eye, along with about a half-dozen or more fresh bruises on her bare midriff.

Ava Fonseca slowly turns towards her, narrowing her eyes. “Did you know about this?”

“To a certain extent,” she says. “I figured it was harmless fun. Two somewhat scantily clad women fighting it out is tame compared to some worlds on the Frontier. I thought he had told you, though.” She looks hard at Francis, who recoils.

“Harmless fun?” Ava snarls.

“Unless you don’t think me kicking your ass is fun.”

A smile quirks Ava’s lips. “I think that you and me have a different view of whose ass was being kicked, sister.” She looks back at Francis. She walks up to him, her head moving up to an angle at his greater height. She pokes him in the chest.

He is much too sure of himself to actually rub where she has poked him, where he is sure a bruise will form. She apparently likes it so much, she keeps poking him, punctuating each word. “You’re still not out of the woods, yet, hon,” she says. “We’re supposed to be comm-silent.

You broadcasting our position to every mouth-breather in the Outmarches isn't exactly exercising good operational security."

He looks more aggrieved at this suggestion than the accusations of creeper-ness. "I would never put us in jeopardy. These are previous recorded, and uploaded to the gaming computer at a reputable casino on Wrigley's Pleasure Planet. I only receive the standings."

She stares at him for a moment. "How much are you up?"

"Eighty thousand. You're a hit as the plucky newcomer."

Her mouth quirks up again. "Fifty percent, Francis."

"What?" he asks, dumbfounded.

"I want fifty percent. This is not a negotiation."

"I thought you Starfleet types don't need money," he grumbles.

She grins. "Baby likes her toys and baubles."

He exhales. "It's not like I showed you naked or anything," he tries.

"That's why you're still in one piece. I've actually fought on Wrigley's Pleasure Planet. And anything else wouldn't be too exciting. I'm alone on a freighter in the ass-end of nowhere."

"Yeah, but you sure are loud, though." He looks at D'Shaya t'Rrallion, who looks elsewhere.

He is heartened by the deep blush on Ava's tan features. Without a word, she turns and leaves the bridge without a glance.

"You know, she could kick your ass, Francis," D'Shaya says. "And she isn't that loud."

"I know," he admits. "Shot in the dark. Gotta take her down a peg or two. Even a blind squirrel finds a nut once in awhile."

"You remember that when she's hanging yours up above the console?"

Their attention is drawn by a beep and a light on the comm console. He nods. "Mommy's calling."

"Yours or mine?" D'Shaya asks.

His eyes scan the readout. "Mine."

She grins and nods. "Guess I'll make myself scarce. Maybe I'll keep our guest occupied, so we can keep all our lives separate."

He refrains from saying what he was thinking at that sally.

D'Shaya would pull those parts of him that she had mentioned up through his nose, rather than employing a clean cut with a blade.

III.

*Room 2020
Universal Export
London, England
Earth, (Sol III/Terra)
2296*

The asset's bearded features stare at her from her screen. C nods at his report, such as it is. She stares at him for a moment, hoping that she has a baleful enough gaze for him to recognize for what she is about to say next.

"How about you not filming your fellow agents fighting and sending them out for gambling purposes, especially without one of their knowledge. Not only is it a dick move to your agents, it goes against all known forms of tradecraft, in every book we ascribe to. You're calling attention to yourself. Go back to the the Encyclopedia Galactica's dictionary and look up the word 'covert,' to refamiliarize yourself with the definition and the concept."

His angry features fade. She exhales and shakes her head.

"You know, you didn't have to lay into him like that. I have it on good authority that he's made some seriously good contacts in certain fringes of the criminal and secret world on Wrigley's with those vids. Plus, that particular Starfleet officer has her own, shall we say, 'flexible' moral center, when it comes to defending who and what she loves."

"One of yours?"

"Not exactly. But someone who has had some of our training, as well as Starfleet security's. She just wishes she could be putting it to different uses."

C raises her eyebrows. "Let me guess. A frustrated science officer?"

"Social. A trained, certified archaeologist."

C smiles. Jameson McCall shares her smile.

He looks down. “Do you think we’ve made everything so convoluted? Is it too much?”

She lifts her snifter of brandy, inhaling the smell of the Napoleon brandy and taking her sip, before lifting the cigar to her lips. Both of them sit on a balcony in the cooling weather of London, a compartmentalization field protecting their conversation and a filtration field protecting everyone else’s senses from their smoking.

“I don’t know. The people that are the reason, on our side and theirs, make it complicated, not us. And technically you and I are the only ones who know everything. Maybe two other people, or three.” She takes a deep breath, then looks into his blue eyes. “Ask that officer of yours about one of those reasons. She’ll tell you. And I bet she’ll have no problem mentioning their names.” She grits her teeth. “Or their number.”

He nods, taking his own drag, then exhaling the smoke into his brandy snifter, then inhaling again.

“What is it that she loves?” she asks.

His eyes are perplexed. “What?”

“Your officer. Commander Fonseca. You said she protects what she loves. Or at least inferred it.”

He smiles. “It’s simple. She loves what loves her back. Or is supposed to.” He is thoughtful for a moment. “A love for her that supposedly asks no questions.”

“The Federation,” C replies. “We’ve kind of failed at that throughout history. It may not be always deserving of that love.”

“Didn’t say she doesn’t question,” he says patiently. “All of us should. Ava Fonseca, if she was asked, wouldn’t say ‘my country right or wrong.’ She’d continue what the original saying was, completely—that many of even the time that it was first said forgot or neglected.”

C smiles. “My country right or wrong. If she be right, keep her so. If she be wrong, make her right. Or something like that.”

“What nation doesn’t fall short, or even fail? It’s how the people and the nation react that determines if it fell short or actually failed. As long as we can keep questioning, I think we’ll be okay.” His eyes flash with anger. “As long as we can maybe quash the elements who think that the ends justify the means for everything we do. That everything is a threat.”

C makes a mock-retching sound. “Oh my fucking Great Bird. You’ve become a philosopher in your old age, Prince, and a bleeding optimist.”

“Asshole,” he says sourly. He brightens a bit. “My codename was Niccolò.”

They fall silent for several moments. She finally reaches out and touches his hand. “Can you stay the night?” she asks, almost shyly.

As shy as a woman who had just past the half-century mark and was leader of a vast intelligence gathering operation.

Well, semi-vast, she thinks.

Her spook’s heart starts to beat a bit faster as he reaches up and touches the swatch of white at the front of her otherwise dark hair.

Epilogue:

Croft starts as he hears the tapping sound. He looks around, confused at where he as the waking dream recedes into its own compartment in the back of his brain. He clutches the arms of the chair in the small, spartan quarters in Megara’s official residence, high above the capitol city’s streets. He wills the pain and grief away as T’Varilyn’s and Chandra’s places in those memories fade, in the remembered moment of light.

He looks up to the figure standing over him. He rises, his hand going to the knife at his back, then relaxes.

At least for the current moment.

The Deltan woman that he had encountered yesterday at the Praetor’s dinner—her own Preceptor, just like he is for Megara—gazes at him calmly. Her hands are empty.

He has no doubt she has other, less visible weapons at her disposal.

“What the hell?” he asks. He searches for the name she had given. “Danara.”

She smiles, the expression moving for the first time to her hazel eyes—appearing blue at this particular moment. He feels his eyes widen as her Threads activate. Something familiar once again strikes him through the Threads.

She is no longer dressed in the revealing gown that he’d first encountered her in at his Praetor’s. She is dressed in a form-fitting, though functional black jumpsuit. She, like him, still wears the gold-and-silver collar of her office and her station around her neck.

He is pretty sure, that unlike his, she can’t get hers removed at will.

“Oh, come now, dear,” she says quietly. “My name isn’t Danara, anymore than yours is Covenant.” She doesn’t hesitate, as if she knows that this is a safe zone, given to him by Megara.

She lifts her long-fingered hands. She pulls the middle two fingers on her right hand to her palm, then drops it down towards the ground, the index and the small finger pointed downward, with the thumb extended outward.

He curses as he recognizes the symbol.

The recognition of a member of ostensibly a division of Federation Security. The civilian intelligence organization of the Federation. Known simply as the Institute.

He exhales, then draws the first two fingers of his left hand under his opposite eye.

Her smile actually morphs into something both warmer and more devious, if that is possible.

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