

## Finding Common Ground

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## Finding Common Ground

by [Beatrice Otter](#)

### Summary

After “Conundrum,” Riker and Ro learn to be friends—and sometimes more.

### Notes

**Betaed by:** Karios

**Written for:** eratoschild for the [Star Trek Rair Pair Prompt Meme](#)

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“You know, Ro didn’t need you encouraging her,” Will griped at Deanna two weeks after their memories were restored. “I had enough trouble trying to keep her in line *before* ... all that.” Before they’d spent a week having *very* creative sex whenever they weren’t on-duty.

“Are you asking professional advice on a matter of personnel management, or griping at a friend?” Deanna asked.

They were in her office, but both were off-shift. Will had stopped by to complain after a particularly trying day.

“You know I can’t be your therapist,” Deanna continued. “And probably shouldn’t be hers, either, under the circumstances.”

Will shuddered at the idea of trying to have therapy with a former lover. “Griping at a friend,” he said. “My personnel management skills are excellent.” It wasn’t a boast; a large part of being a first officer was keeping the crew organized and running smoothly so the captain didn’t have to worry about it. And there was a *reason* he was first officer on the flagship of the fleet.

“With crew from ordinary Federation worlds, yes,” Deanna said.

“Hey, I’ve researched Bajoran culture, and it hasn’t helped at all. *She* doesn’t follow Bajoran customs.”

Deanna sighed. “It’s not a matter of custom, it’s a matter of trauma. She spent the majority of her life—and *all* her formative years—in a place where the authorities were actively malevolent and wished her harm. She barely has a concept of the idea that it’s *possible* for an authority figure to be both competent and good. You can’t expect her to respect you simply because Starfleet says she should. And you know very well that even with people who had stable, secure childhoods, focusing on punishing bad decisions is generally ineffective.”

“Yeah, but she makes it so difficult to do anything *else*,” Will said. He thought about Deanna’s words. “Tasha’s childhood was about as bad,” he said. “And I never had a problem with her.”

Deanna shrugged. “Tasha was younger when she escaped. And got therapy once she’d reached the Federation. Ro was an adult by the time she got out, and doesn’t trust counsellors. Or anyone else who might try to give her advice about how she should think.”

“If she can’t deal with authority, she can’t be in Starfleet,” Will said. “There’s a reason we have rank systems. In a crisis, we have to work together quickly.”

“The most immediate issue isn’t how she feels about authority *in general*, though,” Deanna said. “It’s how she feels about you as her superior officer. She already respects Captain Picard. Learning to trust authority *in general* can only begin by learning to trust *specific* authorities. As much as she is able to.”

Will sighed and tried to think about how to accomplish that. Every time they had a disagreement, things got worse. She dug in her heels just to avoid giving in. “This would be so much easier if we hadn’t slept together. I *hate* trying to discipline a former lover.” It was awkward, and the extra documentation to show everything was fair was hell.

“She doesn’t respond well to discipline no matter what, and probably never will,” Deanna said. “And she’s used to a command structure based on personal relationships, not on externally-enforced rank structure.”

“Are you saying I should sleep with her again?” Will asked, incredulous.

“No,” Deanna said. “But even if there’s never anything romantic or sexual between you again, you now have a connection that isn’t based solely on your respective roles on board the ship. It’s a place to build from, at least.”

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Will had considered Deanna’s advice, and a few days later he had an opening. Ro was sitting in Ten Forward alone, with some sort of hot drink, staring out at the stars.

“Mind if I join you?” he asked.

“Not at all, *Commander*,” Ro said, voice heavy with irony. About the same tone, actually, that she’d had when she’d called him Will a few days earlier when he’d had to reprimand her for ignoring procedure and, in the process, messing up two whole departments she hadn’t realized were *also* using the data she was collecting.

“You can call me Will off duty,” he said, taking a seat.

“Why the difference? Neither of us are different people on-duty than we are off. Our history doesn’t change.”

“I know you got the same lessons at the Academy as I did,” Will said, “about being professional and not letting personal matters get in the way of performing your duties.” One of the servers came up, and he ordered a decaf raktajino.

“Yeah, and it never made much sense then, either,” Ro said.

Will ignored her tone of voice and answered it as he would a junior officer who was genuinely confused. “In this case, partly it’s a matter of keeping focused on the job, and not distracted by other things. And it’s partly a matter of not rubbing in your coworkers’s faces that you and I know each other a hell of a lot better than I know any of them. But neither of us have any work to be thinking about right now, and—” he gestured around “—nobody’s paying any attention to us. So I really don’t care whether you call me Commander or Will or even ‘you insufferable jerk.’”

“So I guess you’re not here to try and rekindle the flame,” Ro said.

Was she capable of saying *anything* without heavy irony? Will shrugged. “Not particularly. No offense, but I get enough drama in my professional life that I’m not looking for any in my personal life.”

“I thought you *liked* drama,” Ro said, sarcasm replaced with innuendo.

“In bed, sure,” Will said. “Not out of it.”

She shrugged. “Fair enough. In that case, why *are* you here?”

“When we didn’t have our memories we worked together just fine,” Will said. “I’d like to see if we can do that without needing amnesia.”

“When we didn’t have our memories, you listened to me.”

“When we didn’t have our memories, you didn’t assume I was an incompetent idiot out to get you as a personal vendetta,” Will pointed out.

“You mean you’re not?” Ro asked, with a bitter smile.

He couldn’t help noticing that she’d smiled more—and never bitterly—when they didn’t remember, and for the first time it struck him to wonder what it would be like to be *happier* when you had amnesia than you normally were. “I try not to be,” Will said. “And I flatter myself I mostly succeed.”

“Only mostly?” she asked, raising her eyebrows.

Will took a sip of his coffee. “If you’ve ever met anybody who never misses anything and is never out of their depth—even when thrown into the kind of completely unpredictable situations we get into on an exploratory mission—please let me know. I’d like to meet them.”

“Fair enough,” Ro said. “And the personal vendetta?”

“You’re very frustrating to try and manage, but I try not to take it personally,” Will said. “And whatever it may feel like on *your* end, I don’t dislike you. I wish you’d come to me and talk things over *before* doing them, because then if it’s a good idea we could integrate it into the work everyone else is doing, and if it’s not a good idea I can explain why. Instead of being presented with everything in chaos and having to clean up the mess afterward. I promise you, if you have an idea that will genuinely improve how we do things, I will be happy to hear it and implement it. And if you don’t understand why we do things the way we do, I will be happy to explain. But on a ship this big, it’s never just about one person. Everyone and everything has to work *together*, or we’re not going to survive. I know you’re smart, you’re competent, and you’re hardworking, or you wouldn’t be here. But the same is true of everyone on this ship.” He hoped he hadn’t come on too strong, made her defensive.

Ro stared into her cup. "I know."

They sat there in silence for a bit. "So, have you redecorated your quarters?" Will asked.

"Really, *Will*?" Ro said.

"Hey, you were the one who kept complaining about your quarters," Will said.

She shrugged. "Not much I can do, without permission to repaint and reupholster everything," she said. "Starfleet bland is better than Cardassian grey gloominess, but not by much."

"Repainting is out," Will said, "but you could probably hang drapery on the walls to give it some color. Throw some bright blankets and pillows on the furniture."

Ro thought about that for a few minutes. "Might work," she said.

After that, Will made a point of stopping and chatting when he saw her off-duty. It wasn't a magic fix, but it *did* reduce the friction in their working relationship, Deanna had been right about that. He wouldn't call them friends, exactly, but they had more than a working relationship.

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As the *Enterprise* warped away from J'naii space, Will stared out his cabin windows, imagining ways that things could have gone differently so that Soren might have been saved. None of them very practical; as a Starfleet vessel, they *had* to try diplomacy first. But if she'd only asked for asylum earlier, if he'd asked more questions earlier and had known from the start *exactly* what sort of danger she would be in if she went home ...

His door chimed. "Come," he said, without turning around.

"You usually head to Ten Forward, the first night after a mission is over."

"I'm not in the mood for socializing right now," Will said, turning to face her. Ro Laren was persistent, stubborn, and immune to any hint she didn't want to take.

"I don't blame you," Ro said. "At least with the Cardassians, if they don't like you they just torture you and lock you up. Your mind is still your own. What the J'naii did ..." she shuddered.

"Yeah," Will said, hoping she would drop the subject.

"But it's done now, and there's no point brooding about it," Ro went on.

"I told you—"

"I have two offers: fun, athletic, no-strings-attached sex, or shooting things in the holodeck."

Will considered. He loved sex, and he and Ro had been good at it together, but he was really *not* in the mood for it right now. Shooting things, on the other hand, sounded better than sitting alone in his quarters thinking about all the things he could've done differently. "All right," he said, "let's go shoot things."

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They spent an enjoyable few hours shooting things on the holodeck, and by the time they were done Will was tired enough that he'd probably sleep well that night. He already had a therapy session scheduled for the next day, and he knew that no matter how terrible he felt right now, he'd be able to set aside his grief and guilt and go on with his life.

"Thanks, Ro," he said as they did some light cooling-down exercises. "This helped."

"Why do you call me Ro, off-duty?" she asked. "I call you by your personal name."

He shrugged. "You never gave me permission to call you Laren. Not even when our memories were taken."

She looked at him strangely. "Because I didn't know that Bajoran names worked differently than Starfleet-standard, and thought Ro *was* my personal name."

He spread his hands. "I always find it annoying when superior officers think they can use my first name without asking just because they outrank me."

"Well, you can call me Laren if you like, I don't care," she said. Although he knew her well enough to know that if she really *didn't* care, she wouldn't have brought it up.

"Laren it is," he said, and went back to stretching.

As they left the holodeck, Laren paused. "Sorry about your girlfriend," she said, awkwardly.

"Soren wasn't my girlfriend," Will said firmly. She might have been, had things progressed, but they hadn't had the chance to explore. And he was very well aware that he'd been an experiment for Soren, that chances were she'd find that once she had options, he wasn't quite what she wanted, and that would have been fine. She should have *had* options all along. And now Soren wasn't a 'she' any longer, and had only the options J'naii society allowed. "And while I was attracted to Soren, I would have tried to help them regardless of whether or not I was interested, because it was the right thing to do."

“Yeah,” Laren said. “Well, hope you sleep well. Good night.”

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The whole mess with the Romulans had ended surprisingly well, for a mission that began with a warp core breach and two (presumed) dead officers and ended with a Romulan attempt to sabotage the ship, but Will was glad it was over, because it had been one hell of a roller-coaster ride. He was in his quarters getting ready for bed when his door chime went off. “Come,” he said.

“Laren,” he said in surprise as she stepped inside. “How are you feeling?” She was still in her uniform, looking just as she had when he left Ten Forward as the wake-that-wasn't wound to its close.

“Alive,” she said. “And confused. And tired of thinking. I don't want to think any more.”

Will considered this, and remembered when she'd shown up to his quarters after Soren. “You in the mood for sex or shooting things?” It was probably the least romantic proposition he'd ever given, but he thought she would prefer being straight-forward.

“I've *been* shooting things,” she said. “Including you. That was how we flooded Ten Forward with chronitons. I want to feel alive. And there's nothing better for *that* than sex. If you're up for it.”

Will smirked at her. He was curious about the shooting—where had she gotten a phaser? She hadn't had one on the Romulan ship—but that could wait until the debrief in the morning. “Oh, I'm *always* up for it,” he said.

“That's what I thought,” she said with an answering smirk, walking up next to him and reaching her hands under his shirt.

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After they were done, Will dozed for a bit and woke to the sound of Laren moving around his living room. His robe was missing, so he put on some boxers and walked out there.

Laren was sitting on his couch, wearing his robe, eating a bowl of soup and watching the stars go by.

“Didn't you get enough to eat at the party?” he asked.

Laren snorted. “Geordi ate for about an *hour* straight. He'll regret it in the morning, if he doesn't already. Me, I'm not stupid enough to gorge all at once after going hungry for a while.”

Will nodded. Two days wasn't enough for your stomach to shrink—or, at least, not Human stomachs, he didn't know about Bajoran anatomy—but then, Laren undoubtedly had practical experience with starvation and recovery. He sat down next to her. “Wanna talk about it?”

She shot him a dirty look and opened her mouth, then visibly reconsidered. “What were you going to say about me? At the memorial service.”

“You know about that?” Will asked, surprised.

She smirked. “I was there when you and Captain Picard were discussing it. Both times.”

*That* was a little unsettling. To have had someone there he wasn't aware of. “I didn't write out the text, or I'd show it to you,” he said. “But I was going to talk about what a fine officer you were, and what potential you had, and how even though you were difficult to get along with and didn't fit the Starfleet structure very well, you always came through when we needed you to.”

She nodded. “So, all professional stuff, then. Nothing personal. Nothing about that time we slept together.”

“*No*,” Will said, before realizing she was teasing him.

Laren went back to eating.

He watched her for a little bit. “I know Geordi liked the party, but what did you think of it?” he asked. “I mean, there weren't any Bajoran elements.”

“The most important part of Bajoran rituals around death is the Death Chant,” Laren said, not looking up. “It lasts for two hours. There's other stuff, depending on where you're from and what caste you're part of and whatnot, but the Death Chant is the core of it. When I was ten, the Cardassians killed fifty people in our labor camp as payback for a Resistance strike—I don't even know what they did, but it made the Cardassians mad. They didn't allow any rites for any of the people they executed. A month later, there was an accident in the plant. Well, only sort of an accident. It was predictable, because they never cared about our safety, but it wasn't sabotage or anything. A lot of people died. I got cracked ribs and a bad concussion. Instead of doing the Death Chant once together for everyone who died, they sang it for everyone individually. They sang, in shifts, day and night, throughout the entire camp. It took them four days. I was in too much pain to sleep, but too woozy to really understand what was going on. I don't ever want to hear it again.”

“Good to know,” Will said. “But I hope I don't ever need to know what sort of funeral you want.”

Laren shrugged. “Death happens, on a starship. Not as much as in a Cardassian labor camp, but you just never know.”

“Yeah,” Will said. He wasn't hungry, but it felt rude to sit there and watch her eat, so he got a bowl of fruit from the replicator.

“You don't have to keep me company,” she said.

“Is that a hint to get me to leave you alone?” Will asked.

“No.”

“Okay then,” Will said. He sat down next to her again and speared a piece of watermelon with his fork. “So, besides hearing us talk about the memorial service, did you overhear anything else interesting?”

“Mostly we were following Data around trying to figure out what had happened to us,” Laren said. “I did watch Doctor Crusher fill out our death certificates, though—*that* was a head trip.”

“I’ll bet,” Will said. He waited to see if she wanted to talk about it more, and when she didn’t, he turned his attention to his snack.

When they had both finished, he recycled their bowls in the replicator and they went back to bed.

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“I notice you haven’t been complaining about Ensign Ro, lately,” Deanna said a week later, voice full of pure (and fabricated) innocence.

Will purposefully did not meet her glance, eyes fixed on the personnel reports they were working on. He hadn’t had to recuse himself; he hadn’t been signing off on Laren’s evaluations or assignments since they’d slept together the first time, under influence of amnesia. “We’re getting along much better these days.”

“Is *that* what they’re calling it now,” Deanna said teasingly. With her empathy, of course she’d noticed that they were sleeping together.

“Is this you raising a concern as ship’s counselor, or you looking for juicy details as my friend?” Will asked.

“The latter, definitely,” Deanna said.

“It’s nothing serious,” Will said with a shrug.

“I know that,” Deanna replied. “You are getting along better, though, and that’s good for both of you. I’m glad. Though I am curious about how you two fit together.”

Will raised an eyebrow at her wording. “You want *that* sort of gossip, you can get it from her.” He was *not* going to discuss his current lover with the woman he’d almost married, once upon a time. He turned his attention fully back to the evaluations, boring though they were.

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Sleeping with Laren turned into a habit. When they’d have a difficult mission, sometimes they’d come together for the night. They weren’t romantic partners, exactly, but if it were only sex they wouldn’t talk afterwards, at least not about anything important.

Will hadn’t been lonely; he had a number of good friends aboard ship. But he appreciated Laren as an addition to that number, and sex with a friend was always better than sex with strangers. He hoped she was getting as much out of it as he was.

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The Ferengi capturing the *Enterprise* was not even close to the most dire threat they’d ever faced, but it was one of the few where Riker had been in command, and having the captain and the others as children (especially Laren) had been as weird as anything they’d encountered. Seeing his lover as a child was ... disturbing.

Once Laren was back to her usual age, but before her next duty shift, Will stopped by her quarters. “I’m glad you’re back to normal,” he said, when she let him in. It was odd; when they saw each other off-duty, as they occasionally did, sex was the first priority. They might talk afterwards, but rarely before.

“So am I,” Laren said, waving him to a seat. “Don’t get me wrong, even with the Ferengi attack it was better than my first go-round with childhood, but that’s not saying much.”

“I’ll bet,” Will said. “Is that why you took a couple of days before returning to normal?”

Laren shrugged. “Doctor Crusher thought it might be good for me. Neural pathways in children are more plastic than those in adults, and time spent in a safe and supportive environment is key for a lot of healthy brain development. I still don’t see that a couple days of playing and hanging out with Guinan are going to make much difference, but I didn’t *mind* it.” Her voice was a bit defensive, as if she felt she needed to justify her choices to him.

“Time spent with Guinan is almost always a good thing,” Will said.

“She’s nice,” Laren said. “It doesn’t change the fact that when I was *actually* a child, I was alone in the camps, or the next best thing to it. But it was nice.”

“What about your parents?” Will asked. “You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to, it’s just ... you’ve mentioned them before, I assumed they raised you.”

“My father died of disease—I don’t know which one, they were all endemic in the camps. Poor hygiene, poor nutrition, too many people in too small a space, no real medical treatment. It happened.” Her voice was matter-of-fact. “My mother disappeared one day, never came home. That happened a lot, too. Most of the adults tried to look out for the kids like me who didn’t have anyone, but we still fell through the cracks a lot.”

“And you never found out what happened to her?” Will asked. He couldn’t imagine what that must have been like.

“No,” Laren said. “I used to dream that she’d escaped and joined the Resistance, and would come collect me when I was old enough and we’d fight the Cardassians together. Pure fantasy, of course, but it was better than imagining all the *other* things that might have happened to her. That probably did happen to her.”

"I'm sorry," Will said, feeling helpless. Laren's dispassionate recital of childhood losses disturbed him, a little.

Laren frowned at him. "Why? Nothing you could have done about it then or now. What about you? Did you have that perfect Federation childhood Doctor Crusher wanted to create for me?"

"Not exactly," Will confessed. "Nothing like yours, of course, but my mother died when I was two and my father wasn't around much. He left for good when I was fifteen, and I was able to qualify as an emancipated minor. I had social workers and therapists for support, but I took care of myself. But I was safe and had everything I needed."

"He just *left you*? Before you were an adult?" She was more horrified by that than she had been over her own childhood in a disease-ridden Cardassian refugee camp. "I thought everything was perfect in the Federation."

"My father was lucky he didn't face criminal charges for neglect and abandonment," Will said. "It's extremely unusual, but even Earth isn't perfect. Even though we sometimes like to think it is. Better than a lot of places, but not perfect."

"I don't think perfection exists," Laren said.

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Will was busy when the Captain told Laren she'd been selected for Advanced Tactical Training, so he sought her out in Ten Forward after their shifts were over.

"Congratulations," he said, dropping down into a chair across from her.

"Thank you," Laren said. "Did you have anything to do with my getting the spot?"

Will shook his head. "You know better than that. I can't do any sort of evaluation of your performance, or have any input into promotions, punishment, or special assignments. But the Captain and I discussed it before he submitted your name for consideration."

"I hope you told him only good things," she said with a smile.

"I tried to be fair," Will said. "And besides, Captain Picard doesn't need me to tell him how much potential you have. He's known all along."

"That means a lot to me." She looked down into her mug. "I'm taking it, of course—I hope you won't miss me *too* badly."

"I'll miss you, but the year will fly by, and then you'll be back," Will said.

"That's assuming I don't wash out. Half the class does, you know."

Will leaned forward. "Ro Laren, the only way you're going to wash out is if you decide you want to."

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They didn't keep in touch, much, while Laren was at ATT; it was one of the most grueling training courses Starfleet had, so Will wasn't surprised. For graduation, he sent her a mixed case of springwine and kis, imported from Bajor.

"You know, I've never actually *had* kis," Laren said, as they left the bridge after dealing with the Maquis attack that had interrupted her welcome-back party. "Kantar, sure, the Cardassians had it by the gallon. And springwine is easy to make and kiva grows everywhere, so we had that. Kis, however ..." she shrugged.

"So it's a good thing I wasn't sure what to get and just got a sampler selection," Will said.

"I guess I'll know what I like," Laren said. "If you're curious, we can try them together."

"Sounds like fun," Will said, "although probably not something to experiment with while we're so close to the demilitarized zone."

"Yeah, no kidding," Laren said. "'Demilitarized zone.' What a laugh. This area is the most militarized place in the whole region."

"It's a sound idea in theory, but it hasn't really worked out," Will said. "Or, at least, it hasn't yet. Who knows, maybe it will, someday."

"Now, *that* would take a miracle," Laren said.

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Admiral Nechayev showed up the next day, and though Will wasn't part of her conference with Captain Picard, he was brought in soon after to discuss the logistics of detaching Lieutenant Ro for an undercover mission.

Will stared at both of his superiors when they outlined the plan to him, wishing that he could discuss this with Captain Picard alone. Picard knew Laren, trusted her. She was a person to him, not just a personnel file and a set of aptitudes. He didn't want to prejudice Nechayev against Laren. But he couldn't keep quiet. "With all due respect sirs, I do not believe that Lieutenant Ro is the right person for this mission."

"Is this sentimentality, Commander," Nechayev asked coolly, "or do you doubt her loyalty? Or her skills?"

"Neither," Will said. "Lieutenant Ro has the skills, the courage, and the sheer bloody-mindedness needed for this mission. She is an exemplary officer and I am proud to serve with her. But sending her off to aid in the destruction of the Maquis—to help the Cardassians in any material way—would be a mistake."

"So it's her loyalty you doubt, then," Nechayev said.

Will shook his head, frustrated. "No. She would take this mission with every intention of doing it well. And there's a good chance she'd

accomplish everything we asked her to. But this mission is exactly calculated to strike at her weak spots, and even if she performed flawlessly, the personal cost would be very high. There are other officers we can send where that would not be the case.”

“Is there any reason this mission would be harder for Lieutenant Ro than for any other Bajoran officer?” Captain Picard asked.

“I’ve never worked closely with other Bajoran officers, so I don’t know how they would handle this,” Will said. “But I do know that after her mother disappeared when she was a child, Ro used to fantasize that her mother was in the Resistance and that she’d rescue her from the camps and together they’d join the Resistance and fight the Cardassians.”

“I see,” Nechayev said. “That is certainly worth considering.” He could see the wheels turning in her head.

“The Maquis are hardly the Resistance,” Picard protested.

“No,” Will said, “but they’re closer than anything on Bajor itself, these days. They’re fighting the same enemy, and they’ve got better weapons, better support, and a higher chance of winning.”

“But you don’t doubt her loyalty,” Nechayev said.

“She wouldn’t go in to it planning to betray us,” Will said. “If she *wanted* to join the Maquis, she’d already have done so. Hell, she’d have stayed on Bajor and joined the Resistance in the first place, instead of coming to Starfleet at all, if fighting Cardassians was her goal. But going undercover with a group fighting the Cardassians in order to betray them for the Cardassians’ benefit would put stress in all the wrong places. Everyone’s got a breaking point.”

“And it is both cruel and foolish to put someone knowingly in a position to break, if there are other options available,” Nechayev said. “You are right that Lieutenant Ro is not the only possible candidate for this mission.”

With that, they turned to a discussion of who could be sent in Laren’s stead, and Will breathed a surreptitious sigh of relief.

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The mission went off without a hitch, and Will breathed a sigh of relief when Captain Picard gave the order to set course for their next mission. When Alpha shift was over, he and Laren shared a turbolift off the bridge.

“Glad *that’s* over,” Laren said. “Helping the Cardassians makes me nauseous.”

“No kidding,” Will said. He’d never tell her that *she* was almost the one sent undercover; he wouldn’t want her to think he didn’t trust her. Besides, it was classified. “Is that offer of sampling the kir still open?”

“Of course,” Laren said. “How about tonight?”

“Sounds like a plan,” Will said.

End Notes

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