

Conjoined

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Conjoined

by [jamaharon](#)

Summary

Eight years ago, Thomas and William Riker were both stranded on Nervalva IV. Now, Worf has rescued them, but he can't tell which is Thomas and which is Will.

And neither can they.

The *Defiant's* sickbay was too bright for them, but they refused to wear blindfolds. They preferred to squint and bear the resulting headache instead, and they flinched whenever a medic attempted to cover their eyes.

Worf circled sickbay, out of the doctor's way, but he stayed within sight of ... of the twins. It was impossible to think of them as Commander Riker. And it was impossible to think of them as anything else. They wore his face — his build — his scent — but they clung to each other's hands like children, and when Dr. Saelee tried to scan them, they shrank away. One of the Rikers buried his face in the other's shoulder, his hands clenched in his twin's ragged clothes.

Worf's lip curled. As if he sensed it, the other twin met his eyes: a flash of cold defiance, familiar but never aimed at Worf before, and Riker wrapped one arm around his twin's shoulders as if to make a point.

Us against the world, it seemed to say. And Worf almost felt bad for judging them.

"I need to scan you before I can treat you," Dr. Saelee said, giving up. She held her scanner with the bulb pointed at the ceiling, a gesture of peace. "Can you turn to face me?"

"Just scan me," said the Riker who hadn't hidden his face. *William*, Worf decided.

"I need to scan *both* of you," Dr. Saelee said.

"We're the same person." His voice was rough, cracked. Thomas kept his face hidden. "Whatever you find in me, you'll find in him."

Why did it take so much concentration for him to say that sentence? His eyebrows were furrowed like he'd delivered a tongue-twister. Was it the use of 'me' and 'him', instead of 'us'?

"Sir..." Dr. Saelee started, and sighed. She edged to the side, to make it clear she was talking to William, not Thomas. "Commander, right?"

His eyes narrowed. "Right..."

"Commander, you and the lieutenant have the same DNA, but that doesn't mean you've experienced all the same injuries and illnesses. I need to scan you—"

"We're not injured," William interrupted. He jerked and held his twin closer to him when a medic tried to touch them. "We don't *have* any illnesses," he said.

"You are *riddled* with illnesses. It's like you've been sleeping with cave rats and eating lice for breakfast. Commander—"

Will flinched out of her reach. With his twin still hiding his face in Will's shoulder, both of them lost balance, and Worf rushed forward to catch them as they tipped to the ground. He wasn't fast enough. Will hit the sickbay floor hard on his ass, legs splayed out, but it was a

controlled fall, designed to minimize damage to his twin. Worf slid to the floor at Riker's back and placed a hand between his shoulder blades for support.

"Lieutenant, can you speak?" he asked, trying to see the shy twin's face.

"Don't call him that," Will snapped. Worf ignored him, craning his neck to study Thomas. Nothing of his expression was visible. Just his hair, overgrown and surprisingly clean, soft.

"Lieutenant Riker, look at me," Worf said, lacing his voice with the weight of command.

Will shrugged off Worf's touch and elbowed him when he tried to support Will again. "We're not lieutenants," he said, eyes hard. "We're commanders."

Slowly, Worf pulled back. He looked them up and down, one timid twin clinging to the other. But even the strong twin did not resemble the Commander Riker that Worf once knew. He was too thin, his eyes too bright, too feral. He moved, bared his teeth, snapped his words out like a wild animal.

And he protected Thomas. Commander Riker had never protected Thomas. Worf sat back on his heels, deep in thought.

"What is your name?" he asked finally.

The twins sat up a little straighter.

"Commander William T. Riker of the *U.S.S. Enterprise*," said the first.

Worf nodded. His eyes slid to the coward with the hidden face. "And you?" he asked steadily.

No response.

"Can he speak?" Worf asked.

"We can speak."

"What is your name?" Worf asked, reaching out to touch the other twin.

"Our name is Commander William T. Riker," said the same one who'd spoken before, his voice hard, "of the *U.S.S. Enterprise*. Will, sit up."

He shook his twin. Only with great reluctance did they pull apart. To Worf's surprise, it was the weaker twin who looked at their joined hands and flushed with shame — who untangled his fingers from his brother's, against his brother's will, and edged away. Apart, they took up identical stances, each with his back against the examination table's stand, with their knees pulled up to their chests. They stared at Worf almost identically, but one had red-rimmed eyes.

"There," said the stronger twin. "We're sitting up, Mister Worf." His voice shook. "Now what do you want?"

Worf ignored him for now. He studied the other twin, who met his eyes with a shivering chin and his lips compressed into a bracing line.

"Your name?" Worf asked.

The twin chewed the inside of his cheek. He pulled his fingers into his lap and twisted them, eyes darting away.

"Your name?" Worf asked again. Dr. Saelee inched closer, her scanner subtly aiming first at one twin, then the other. Finally, the weaker twin spoke.

"Commander William T. Riker," he said, "of the *U.S.S. Enterprise*."

And he offered Worf a faltering, embarrassed smile.

"It's good to see you again," he said.

The Trill surgical scar on Will Riker's abdomen was gone; no traces of it remained on Saelee's scanner. Similarly, there was nothing left behind on the neuroscans to indicate either twin had been held captive on Tilonus IV, where a neuroprobe had once convinced Commander Riker he was trapped in a mental asylum. The adolescent spinal injury, suffered during an Alaskan hike when Will was seventeen, still plagued both of them — a little worse now, after eight years without care or medication, than Worf had ever suspected it might be. But there was no trace of Will's service on the *Enterprise*, nothing to mark him, medically, as different from the identical Will Riker at his side.

"Their levels of malnutrition may offer us some clues," Worf suggested, studying the scans.

"Sir," said Saelee impatiently, "they've both been on Nerval Four for eight years now. Their malnutrition levels are the same."

"But Lieutenant Riker was stranded for *sixteen* years in total," Worf reminded her. "Perhaps this is reflected in his nutrition levels."

Saelee pursed her lips. Obliging, she pulled up a full report of the Rikers' bloodwork. They crowded in close, each of them examining the results: identical in every way.

"Is there *any* difference between the two?" Worf demanded.

Saelee huffed out a sigh. "One has a burn scar on his chest. It's recent, only a few years old. So it must have been obtained while they were stranded on Nerval Four."

Useless, then, for determining which was Will and which was Tom. Worf flicked his tongue over the sharp points of his teeth.

"Is it possible," he said, a knot forming in his stomach, "that *Lieutenant* Riker was cloned?"

"How do you mean?" asked Saelee.

"In the initial incident, Lieutenant Riker was duplicated and sent to two different locations. One returned to the *Potemkin* while the other remained on Nerval Four. Perhaps *this* time, the same Lieutenant Riker was cloned again, only both versions remained in the same space."

"In that case, we'd be *missing* Commander Riker," Saelee told him, watching him closely. Worf kept his face blank. "Meaning, he'd be dead."

"Perhaps," Worf said.

"There's no perhaps about it, is there? Our scans of the station showed no other life forms."

Well, plenty of raccoon-spiders and cave slugs, Worf thought, but if some small part of him had hoped there was a Commander Riker down there, exploring the tunnels... that part just died. He squared his shoulders and studied the scans one last time.

"Sir," said Dr. Saelee softly, "I think they're identical simply because eight years is more than enough time to grind a healthy man's bloodwork into dust. Look here: one Riker has broken his arm within the past twelve years. The other has broken his left foot. But there's no indication in Riker's service record that he ever broke either, meaning he likely healed it himself, probably on an away mission or after a stint in the holodeck."

Worf mulled it over. If so, Riker had never mentioned it to him. But it did indicate they had two different men on their hands. With a sigh, Dr. Saelee switched her scanner off.

"There's no reason to think we have two Lieutenant Rikers, or two Commander Rikers, for that matter," she said. "But there *is* at least one good reason to think we've got *a* commander."

Worf grunted. "He recognized me."

"Exactly," said Dr. Saelee. She glanced sideways at Worf. "Did you ever meet Lieutenant Riker, sir?"

"In passing. It is feasible he too would recognize me. There are not many Klingon officers in Starfleet uniforms." But he chewed it over. It would be easy enough to test out. The two Rikers had not been friendly on the *Enterprise*; Commander Riker would not have had time to impart eight years of memories into his brother before the transporter beam malfunctioned. Worf came to a decision and spun on his heel. "Separate them," he barked into the sickbay lobby.

The Rikers looked up at him, eyes widened in matching looks of shock. "Worf—" they said as one.

"Isolate them in separate rooms," Worf ordered. He indicated two private rooms at either end of sickbay, and the medics hopped to it — albeit a little reluctantly. No one on the *Defiant's* medical staff was especially fond of Worf's brusque manner with patients. With gentle hands, the medics eased the twins apart and frog-marched them down opposite ends of the hall. On the left, one Riker twin looked back at the other. On the right, one Riker brother stretched out his hand, like he expected — even with meters of distance between them — to catch his brother's fingers and squeeze tight.

Worf suppressed a shudder. He selected the starboard room on the basis of an internal coin toss — had to start somewhere. He stalked after the medic and pushed inside.

"Dismissed," he said to the nurse. Riker circled the room like a caged animal, his hands clenched into fists. "Which one are you?" Worf asked.

"Worf, it's *me*."

...Inconclusive. Worf stationed himself before the door, chin up. He studied the twin with narrow eyes. Immediately after parting the two Rikers, he'd lost track of who was who — couldn't tell if this was the twin who'd cowered against his brother or the defiant one who'd spoken on his twin's behalf. Worf tapped his communicator.

"Keep the other Commander Riker occupied," he said in a low rumble, maintaining eye contact with the Riker before him. "He is permitted access to a PADD and replicator. This may take some time."

Laced underneath the answering, "Aye, *sir*," was Riker's faint voice saying, "*Can I sleep?*"

"He may sleep," Worf said. He let his finger slide off the communicator and eyed this Riker, who had backed up into the corner. Defensive stance. "Do you expect me to attack you?" Worf asked, fingers flexing.

It would be understandable for Lieutenant Riker to think so; he had never served with a Klingon before. But for Commander Riker, the idea of Worf attacking him outside of a holodeck would be unfathomable. Worf watched as this Riker slid down the wall and curled his knees to his chest.

“No,” Riker said faintly. He rubbed his eyes with the heel of his palm. “What are you going to do, Worf? Test me?”

Worf sidestepped the question. “Tell me which of you hid his face when Doctor Saelee examined you,” he said.

Riker let his hand fall. “That was me.”

Very well. Worf crouched down so he was on eye-level with Riker, more or less. “What is the *Enterprise*’s standard hailing frequency?” he demanded.

Riker blinked. “This is some kind of welcoming party,” he said.

“Answer the question.”

With a short sigh, Riker obliged. “Fourteen eighty-six,” he said.

Worf huffed through his nose. “What is the lifespan of a Mark Twelve recorder buoy?”

“Up to five years, speeds of Warp Two-Point-Five.”

“How many XS-27 deep space probes does a Galaxy-class carry?”

“Six.” Riker knotted his eyebrows. “And they run on microimpulse engines and computer-controlled navigation, which permit speeds of more than point-two-five the speed of light — with an extended telemetry range of three parsecs and an operational life of eighteen months. Worf, it’s not going to work. We had eight years down there to talk to each other. Everything I know, he knows.”

He said it so reasonably that Worf leaned forward, certain that he could just ask. “But which of you is the Commander Riker I knew?” he asked.

“We’re *both* Commander Riker,” Riker said.

“You knew me?” Worf asked, studying Riker’s face.

“Yes!”

“And he also knew me?”

“*Yes!*” said Riker at once.

Worf jumped to his feet. “That is impossible.”

“No, it’s not—”

“*It is.*” Worf’s voice thundered out of him, and with a flinch, Riker pressed himself back against the wall. He fell silent, his face shuttered. “Commander William Riker served on the *Enterprise* for seven years at my side. Lieutenant Thomas Riker did not serve on the *Enterprise* at all.”

Riker’s eyes darted from one end of the room to the next. Worf waited, giving him time to gather his courage. Then, with a short sigh, he activated the replicator.

“Bloodwine,” he said. He glanced at Riker. “Have you tried it?”

Riker looked pained. “Of course I’ve tried it. We drank it together. *As friends.*”

Dark wine trickled into a biodegradable glass. Worf brought it over to where Riker sat on the floor and held it out to him, waiting. With trembling fingers, Riker took the glass and peered inside.

“Drink,” Worf commanded.

Riker closed his eyes and took a sip. For three seconds — the time it took for the bloodwine to rest on his tongue and slide down his throat — his face remained placid, his skin waxy and pale. Only after he swallowed did a touch of redness creep into his cheeks. His lips compressed. The column of his throat spasmed.

He curled in on himself in an almighty coughing fit, shoulders jerking back against the wall with every rough hack of breath. Worf watched him with a clinical eye.

“Strong,” Riker wheezed, his head bowed. He coughed weakly and wiped the water from his eyes, the fingers of one hand curling to hide his flushed face.

“You have never reacted like this before,” Worf noted.

“You’ve never given me bloodwine after eight years surviving on replicated porridge and *cave slugs* before,” Riker said. He swept the back of his hand over his lips and stared at the faint red stain left behind. “It *burns*,” he said.

Worf gave an unimpressed grunt. “Stand,” he ordered.

Riker stared up at him.

“Stand,” Worf repeated, gesturing for Riker to get up. “You will accompany me to the dojo.”

Hesitantly, Riker pushed himself to his feet. “The dojo? Worf, don’t tell me you want to spar.”

Worf just gazed back at him, eyes hard. Riker looked down at himself — at his wasted frame and knobby fingers, each one scarred and covered in sores. At his ribcage, visible beneath his shirt, and the sunken stomach, and the collarbones sticking through his collar.

“I will not harm you,” Worf said, lowering his voice a little.

Riker met his gaze, eyes soft. “I’m not worried about that,” he said quietly.

“Then you will accompany me,” said Worf in a tone that allowed for no argument. He swept out the door, expecting Riker to follow, but he’d made it all the way to the sickbay exit before Riker took even a single step. Slowly, Riker shuffled to the door and stuck his head out, examining the sickbay and its unfamiliar medics. A sharp scent of anxiety stung Worf’s nostrils.

“Commander Riker,” he barked.

Riker frowned.

“I *insist* you accompany me,” Worf said.

Wordlessly, shoulders hunched and head down, Riker made his way across sickbay. His gaze remained fixed to his feet, moving only once — when he passed his brother’s room. Then he sent a longing glance at the other Riker, hidden from him by a closed door.

The tension didn’t fade until they were safe inside the dojo, away from prying eyes. The *Defiant* was too small for a holodeck; its crew made do with a single gym and sparring station, and it was here that Worf kept the practice bat’leth, hardy old blades that he didn’t mind chipping. He removed two from the wall and handed one to Riker, watching the way he hefted it.

Bad balance, but good technique. Riker spun the blade in his hands a little awkwardly, as if the weight of the bat’leth was too much for him. He stepped back, feet sliding naturally into the defensive position Worf had taught him years before. But then he wavered, his left knee quaking beneath his weight.

“I can do this,” he said firmly, before Worf could ask.

Worf appraised him. Pale, wide-eyed, his anxiety on full display. The bat’leth quivered in his grasp. But beneath his clothes, his frame was all wiry muscle, the skin tight, as if he’d been eating less and sparring more over these past eight years than he had on the *Enterprise*. The body of a survivor, a warrior. Slowly, Worf moved forward, telegraphing his moves, and Riker still hesitated a fraction too long before he jerked into action. He barely managed to block the first blow, but with a flurry of offensive strikes, he managed to break into Worf’s danger zone. Worf allowed it, impressed by his strength, and then struck back. This time Riker’s block wavered, his grip slipping. On the third, with a twist between the dual blades, Worf disarmed him.

“Pathetic,” Worf snapped.

Riker’s temper flashed, as Worf expected it to — but then it faded. He picked the bat’leth up without defending himself. “Here,” he said wearily, handing it back to Worf. “I’m done. You can test him now.”

“You are done when I say you are done,” Worf said, refusing to take the blade. “Arms up.”

“No.”

“Arms up!”

The energy washed out of Riker’s frame. He stopped trying to hand the bat’leth to Worf; instead, he just let go of it and sat heavily on the dojo floor, legs crossed underneath him. He rested his chin on his hand. With a growl, Worf collected both bat’leths and fixed them to the wall.

“The Commander Riker I knew would not quit,” he said.

“The Commander Riker you knew just did.”

The second twin, when Worf collected him, was not asleep. He was humming a jazz melody, his bare feet tapping on the sickbay floor. He drank the bloodwine enthusiastically — two deep optimistic swigs that left him sputtering and red-faced, no better-equipped to handle it than his brother had been. He answered Worf’s questions about the *Enterprise* with the same swiftness and confidence as his brother, his voice raspy from the wine. He held the bat’leth with the same practiced ease, and with the same physical weakness. And he was disarmed just as fast.

But he just whistled, a grin tugging at his lips, and picked his blade back up.

“Good one, Worf,” he said. “Let’s go again.”

Worf kept his face studiously blank. His heart soared. He went at Riker again, faster this time, and tossed in a spin-slash that Riker had always been particularly adept at blocking, but had never been able to perform himself. Riker leapt back with a shouted, “Whoa!”, barely getting his blade up in time.

He used a standard block.

Commander Riker *never* used a standard block on a spin-slash. Worse still, his technique faltered as soon as Worf's bat'leth struck his, as if he were so accustomed to fighting someone exactly his size, exactly his strength, that he wasn't equipped for anyone even one inch shorter or twenty kilos heavier, like Worf. Worf hesitated, his blade locked with Riker's, and lowered his bat'leth.

"Why did you use that move?" he asked. "The standard block?"

Riker blinked at him. "Worked, didn't it?"

"You *never* use the standard block," Worf pressed. "And it can scarcely be called *efficient*."

"I use it all the time. Just not for this." Riker shrugged. "But then again, last time we sparred, I weighed ninety-five kilos, not seventy-two."

He was right.

Was he right?

Could he feasibly handle an advanced nar'keth block at his weight? In such poor health? Would the old Commander Riker have gone for it anyway, regardless of the risk, just out of habit? It had not occurred to Worf to check the first twin for this instinct. The first twin had not allowed it; their match had ended before it really began. He circled this Commander Riker and got the impression that he was taller, his shoulders less rounded, his head held high. Although exhausted, although pale, his eyes sparkled and he spun in a circle, trying to match Worf's every move.

"Answer me this," Worf said, slowing to a stop. "Earlier, when you and the other Commander Riker were both in sickbay, one of you clung to the other and hid his face. The other faced me directly."

Riker nodded easily.

"Which are you?" Worf asked.

A slow grin spread over Riker's face. A little sheepish. A little knowing. He rubbed the back of his neck in embarrassment.

"I'm the one who hid his face," he said.

The twins refused to take on separate names as they had done before. It was under Worf's orders that they were tattooed instead, but neither of them would agree to value differentials: A and B indicated that one twin came before the other; 1 and 2 set them apart too much to stand. In the end they were tattooed on their wrists, one with the Arabic number 10, and one with the Roman numeral X. Ancient systems, equal values. Neither complained.

But they stared at each other's tattoos with dark eyes.

"We have questions," said Riker X, leading Riker 10 by the hand.

Worf grunted in acknowledgment. They passed a group of crewmembers — including Lieutenant Gonzales, formerly of the *Enterprise*, who watched the Rikers go by with wide eyes. Self-consciously, the clingy Riker 10 slipped his hand out of Riker X's grasp, but Riker X impatiently grabbed hold again.

"When did you get your own command?" Riker asked.

"It is not my command," Worf said. "I am merely its temporary commander."

The Rikers drew up alongside him, each eyeing the pips on his collar.

"This ship belongs to Deep Space Nine," Worf explained. "Its crew is handpicked for each mission by ... by the station's commandant. For this mission, due to my background on the *Enterprise*, I was the most obvious choice."

"Because you're my friend," said Riker firmly.

Worf declined to answer, his chest tight. "What other questions do you have?" he asked, continuing forward. The Rikers hurried to catch up.

"It's been eight years," they said as one. "Aren't you going to brief us on everything we missed?"

"One at a time," Worf said, shooting each of them a glare.

Riker 10 subsided. Riker X spoke.

"Where's the *Enterprise*? Why didn't she come for us?"

"The *Enterprise* is the Federation's flagship," said Worf patiently. "Her services are better-utilized in acts of diplomacy. Many parties involved in the Dominion War would be insulted to be served by a ship as *lowly* as the *Defiant*."

The Rikers shared a slow grin.

"You sound bitter," said Riker X.

Worf blew a sigh out of his nostrils, like a bull. "You should be as well," he said. "After all, the Federation determined *you* were too lowly a prize for the flagship."

"We're on equal footing, then," Riker said. He slowed his pace — *they* slowed their pace — forcing Worf to slow down, too. "What's the Dominion War?" Riker asked, his voice soft.

Worf hesitated. The question sent a shock of ice down his spine. But he'd known intellectually that it was coming. It was just so strange to hear, when here, in the Federation, it had been all anyone could think about for years. He searched for the best way to answer Riker.

"It is a conflict three years past," he said finally. "Many of Starfleet's finest science vessels were transformed into battleships."

Stress lines appeared at the corners of Riker's eyes.

"Had you been available," Worf said, "I have no doubt you would have been given your own command."

"Of a warship," Riker 10 murmured.

"Yes." Worf paused. "And you would have distinguished yourself in battle, as have I."

Neither Riker responded to that. They glanced at each other, communicating without words.

"Is Captain Picard...?" Riker X started.

"Still in command of the *Enterprise*," Worf confirmed, and both Rikers breathed a sigh of relief.

"Data? Geordi? Beverly?"

"Commander Data is the *Enterprise's* first officer," Worf said, "as he has been since you went missing. Commander La Forge—"

But the Rikers had stopped walking, looking stunned.

"I went missing?" they said.

Worf impatiently gestured for them to catch up. They moved like sleepwalkers.

"I just assumed I was duplicated again," one of them said. Worf couldn't see their wrists to tell who. "This whole time we thought there were two more of us running around."

"You were not duplicated," Worf said. "The *Enterprise* has been aware that you did not make it back since Day One. We were unable to rescue you, despite this knowledge."

One of them whispered to the other, "*I told you.*"

Worf ignored them. After a moment, they flanked him, each studying Worf's face from opposite sides.

"You didn't...?" one said hesitantly.

"What?" Worf said, turning to face that twin.

"Well..." the other twin said.

"*What?*" Worf demanded.

The twins circled around to face him, stopping him in his tracks.

"Where's Deanna?" they asked.

Was that all? Worf rolled his eyes and brushed past them. "I have heard she is happily married on Betazed," he said stiffly, "with a harem of nine loyal husbands, each exceedingly well-endowed and much more handsome than you."

The Rikers protested over each other, voices clashing. "Very funny," said one, and "You're a dick," said the other.

"Why do you wish to know?" asked Worf innocently.

"Worf, she's my friend!"

"A happily married friend," Worf persisted. "With nine husbands."

Now both Rikers looked aggrieved. "She is not."

Worf maintained the lie for five breaths as he approached the Rikers' quarters. Each of them flitted around behind him, radiating tension. Only when he unlocked the berthing area did Worf admit, "No. She is not married. I was practicing deceit."

"I knew it!" one Riker proclaimed unconvincingly. The other just let out a shaky sigh. "You bastard, you developed a sense of humor." Then, in one voice, they asked, "Where is she, really?"

Worf relented. "She is stationed at Deep Space Nine, where she commands a new post-war trauma department."

The Rikers went silent. They followed Worf into the open room, eyes far away. “Is she alright?” one of them asked, voice soft.

Worf furrowed his brow. “She is in no danger,” he said, confused by the question. The Rikers looked at each other.

“Her empathy,” one of them reminded Worf. “If she spends all day treating post-war trauma...”

Ah. Worf wrangled the question, trying to fit it with Deanna, as he last saw her. He shrugged uneasily. “She is coping,” he said.

The Rikers looked dismayed. One of them attempted a pale smile.

“From you, Worf, that’s like saying ‘she’s fantastic,’” he said. Worf did not bother to confirm or correct this notion.

“These are your bunks,” he said, indicating two empties near the head. “Upon our arrival at Deep Space Nine, you will be allotted proper quarters. But that is several days away.”

“Okay,” said Riker X, his eyes strained. Riker 10 sized up the bunks and chewed on his thumbnail, going mute again. “It’ll be nice to see Deep Space Nine again,” said Riker X distractedly. “Did everyone make it out intact?”

Worf hesitated. His ribcage squeezed tight around his lungs. “Mostly everyone,” he said stiffly. The Rikers shot him a look, alarmed, concerned — and Worf stalked toward the door.

“You will report to sickbay at zero-eight for your second check-up,” he said. “And you will proceed to my ready room at ten-hundred. Understood?”

Two mute nods answered him. Worf studied them from the doorway. Faint lines of tension knotted their faces — source unknown. But maybe it traced back to the berth, the prospect of sharing quarters after so much time in isolation — or the humiliation of a commander forced to bunk with ensigns. He didn’t think Riker would mind, but...

“We have a skeleton crew,” he told them. He indicated two bunks near the door. “Ensign Riley and Lieutenant Gonzalez sleep here. Lieutenant Plasney sleeps there.” He pointed to a bunk in the middle. “All other bunks are free.”

Another mute nod, in perfect unison. The stress lines didn’t let up. At a loss, Worf shrugged his goodbyes and left them there.

And when the door closed behind him, one Will Riker turned to the other and said, “Maybe we can sleep on the floor. Mattresses together. That way we don’t have to sleep apart.”

The other blew out a sigh. “Tempting,” he said. He scratched at his wrist tattoo. “No. We’d better not.”

Will’s eyes crinkled. “Afraid?”

“Like you’re not?” Will said, matching his own grin. “You really want to show up at Deep Space Nine with a bad reputation?”

“Worse than it already is, you mean?”

Will hesitated. He amended his statement almost shyly, not meeting his brother’s eyes. “Not bad,” he said. “But...”

Both of them paused. They remembered what Worf had called them, trying to goad them into action: *Pathetic*. Rubbing the back of his neck, Will studied the two bunks. He imagined the gossip spreading, the misconceptions, the lack of understanding. And then he imagined the long trip back to Deep Space Nine without his brother’s touch. Sleeping alone, bed cold, insomnia crawling over his brain.

Deanna would understand; she wouldn’t judge them for it. But Deanna wasn’t here.

“Just a few days,” Will said, relenting. “We can make it till then.”

The other Will, in silence, took his hand and squeezed.

Eight years ago, when the *Enterprise* rescued Thomas Riker from Nervalva IV, he was given a new uniform and a station in ops. Perhaps war had hardened Worf’s heart, or perhaps he was simply stricter than Captain Picard, but when he gave the Rikers their own uniforms, he failed to give them pips.

“No rank?” asked Riker 10, examining the unadorned collar.

Worf crossed his arms. “Your rank will be reinstated upon completion of your skills tests,” he said. The Rikers shared a glance, eyebrows raised. “Review time will be allotted to acquaint you with changes in technology,” Worf said. “You are not on a timeline.”

“Good to know, I guess,” said Riker 10. He shrugged into the red jacket; Riker X followed his lead, and Worf watched uneasily as they turned to each other, arms crisscrossing as Riker X did up Riker 10’s sealing strip for him, and vice versa. “Can we take the tests together?” Riker 10 asked.

“No,” said Worf firmly.

“Not to cheat,” said Riker X. “Just—”

“No,” said Worf again.

Riker 10 opened his mouth to protest, but at that moment, Ensign Riley stepped inside. Riker 10 clammed up at once, his shoulders

hunched and his face pink. Riker X took a step closer to his brother, almost protective, and handled the conversation from there, his posture at ease and his face open, friendly.

“When can we start?” he asked.

“You may review—”

“Surely we don’t need review in every subject,” Riker said. “Are the shuttles any different? Significantly? Could we do a test flight?”

Ensign Riley passed behind Riker 10. She wasn’t close enough to touch, but Riker 10 flinched anyway, his face tightening into a scowl.

“A test flight,” Worf repeated slowly. “With the *Defiant* in warp?”

Riker X’s face fell, as if he’d forgotten. He scratched at his wrist tattoo. “Well ... the simulator, then?”

“This is the *Defiant*,” Worf reminded him. “Not the *Enterprise*.”

“No simulator?” Riker threw his hands up in mock-dismay. Worf suspected it wasn’t quite so feigned as Riker wanted him to think.

“What else can we do, then? Put us in combat training. Give us a shift on the bridge. Hell, let us retake the Academy exam!”

“It is rife with references to the Dominion War,” Worf warned him. “You do not have the factual knowledge needed to attain a passing grade.”

The Rikers searched each other’s faces. One of them gave a tiny shrug.

“We can handle it,” Riker X decided.

Worf scoffed.

“We want to *try*,” Riker X amended. He caught Worf’s arm and squeezed tight. “Please, Worf?”

“You should know that pleading does not work with me,” Worf growled. “Only a coward pleads.”

“Hell, I’ll fight you for it, then,” said Riker, undeterred. Behind him, Riker 10 was keeping a skittish eye on Ensign Riley.

“You are too frail.”

“Two-against-one,” Riker suggested with a grin. “Us against you. To make up for our handicap.”

Riker 10 glanced up at that, with the same mischievous glimmer in his eyes.

“There will be no fight,” said Worf firmly. “I do not wish to break you.” He paused, letting the Rikers’ disappointment swell. Finally he relented. “You may test your skills as much as possible before we reach Deep Space Nine. Ensign Riley will administer the tests.”

Both Rikers deflated. When they pressed close together and studied Ensign Riley, they became indistinguishable again.

“Does Ensign Riley strike you as... unacceptable?” Worf asked.

“No,” said the Rikers as one, too quickly. Worf waited to see if they would admit to it — their body language screamed discomfort, and anyone glancing at them could tell — but both Rikers boxed their anxiety up and straightened their shoulders. They shot him twin smiles. Charming. Flirty. Cognizant of the lack of rank difference between themselves and Riley, for now. “Not at all,” they said.

They were *almost* convincing. Worf could almost buy the facsimile of Riker’s old good-natured lechery on their faces.

But they still flinched, both of them, when Riley handed them her PADD.

Deanna was with a patient when the message came through. She dismissed it automatically, with a casual sweep of her finger that she’d perfected long before the Dominion War. If it was important, she knew, she would be reached via combadge — and few people on Deep Space Nine outranked her, so she didn’t anticipate a combadge communication anytime soon.

Only when her patient left did Deanna check her PADD again. She sipped a dose of headache-relieving tea as she sorted her messages, trying to numb the soul-deep ache that had settled in her ribcage sometime around 2373 and never left. The message, she saw, was from the *Defiant* — from Worf. With a fond smile, Deanna opened it.

Two haggard, identical faces stared back at her.

Her breath caught in her throat. She closed the message; she’d forgotten she set her inbox to open attachments first. With that setting fixed, she viewed the message again, text-only, but behind her eyelids, every time she blinked, that image throbbed: two Will Rikers, thinner than the last time she saw him, with grey streaks in his hair.

The message was perfunctory.

Both Rikers had been extracted, Worf said, with no permanent damage to either one. Both were healing from a mix of malnutrition and untreated illnesses picked up from the station’s corrupted replimatter and cave insects. Their old spinal injury was recovering well under new treatment, and would soon be back to baseline.

But:

Dr. Saelee noted spells of muteness in one or both Rikers — she didn't seem to realize they were two different people, so the psychological symptoms clumped together under a single heading, undifferentiated. She had treated each of them for insomnia, for nausea, lack of appetite; and she couldn't find a physical cause for any of these symptoms. In their file, she listed them as variably outgoing and withdrawn; Deanna's heart ran cold at a description of bed-wetting, handled in secret by the twins only for one of their bunkmates to rat them out. She wished she'd been there — wished they'd given him a private room — or that she could have spoken to him after, determined what exactly caused it, how he felt — wished a thousand things, in short, to take that small sting of humiliation away, to ensure it wasn't recorded in his personnel record where he could never escape it. But there was nothing she could do from here, removed by time and space, so she read on.

They have developed an unhealthy codependency, said Dr. Saelee. Their identity issues are clear; they can be differentiated only by the tattoos on their wrists.

Worf was more direct.

They will need to see you, he said at the end of his message.

And then he underlined:

Professionally.

“Excited?” Nirish asked.

Deanna had been so consumed in her thoughts that she didn't sense him sneaking up on her. She tried not to jump as she turned, taking his hand by instinct. Long, artistic fingers curled around hers in a gentle squeeze, marred only by the blast scar on his trigger finger.

“The *Defiant's* just docked,” she said.

“I see,” said Nirish. “Everyone make it back okay?”

“From what I can tell.” Deanna hesitated. “I can sense him,” she forced herself to say. When Nirish just looked at her, his eyes open and friendly, she added, “Commander Riker.”

Nirish dipped his head almost blankly, like the name meant nothing to him. “Your friend from the *Enterprise*,” he said. “The one who was trapped on that space station.”

He remembered? In the years since she joined Deep Space Nine, Deanna had tried not to mention him. It was easier that way. Now she searched Nirish's face, part of her wondering, even hoping, that he had sensed it in her mind.

“I read his file,” Nirish said apologetically. “You left your PADD open on the table...”

“Oh,” said Deanna, with a flicker of displeasure. She brushed it aside, only because he'd apologized — at least in tone, if not in words.

“I didn't get much from the report,” Nirish said, rubbing a circle on the heel of her palm. “But there are twins, right? Two Rikers. And something of an issue telling them apart?”

“Nirish...” She glanced down the hallway. She could sense them coming closer: Worf's aura, strong and steady, one of her oldest friends. His aura was like a heartbeat, vital and full of vigor, even in his darkest moments. His crew, less familiar to her, filled the halls, many of them young and still grappling with the wounds of war. And behind Worf, guarded by him, were the Rikers.

Will. Deanna closed her eyes.

“There's no time to explain it now,” she murmured, squeezing Nirish's hand.

He studied her face. “Should I go?”

Deanna peeked at him, her lips creased into a frown. She'd never told him much about Will. With some people, the stories poured out of her — a helpless stream of references and memories, “Commander Riker used to do that” and “When Commander Riker was here...” But with Nirish, if she thought of Will at all, her throat closed up. The memories locked into her esophagus, sharp claws catching on her teeth: an armored spider biting at her tongue.

“Hey,” Nirish murmured, stroking her palm with his thumb. He pulled her hand up to his lips and kissed her knuckles, his lips dry. “Listen. He's been gone for eight years, right?”

Deanna managed a nod, blinking rapidly.

“And you two were together before?”

Fiercely, she shook her head. A slight smile tugged at Nirish's lips, as if he didn't believe her.

“Okay,” he said. “But he meant something to you, right? And you meant something to him.” When Deanna didn't deny it, he took a slow breath. “Should I be here, really?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Deanna firmly.

“It won’t upset him?”

She thought of Thomas Riker, the flare of old chemistry, the warmth and weight of his body over hers — the quiet acceptance from Will, a soft desire to see her happy, a surreal lack of jealousy as he watched her kiss his clone. Deanna held her arms down at her side, her fingers laced with Nirish’s.

“It will upset him,” she decided. “But it’s been eight years, and if I know one thing about him, it’s that he would never want me to wait for him. He isn’t like that; it would hurt him more, I think, to know that I spent eight years alone than to know I spent my time with you.” She took a steady breath. “It’s best if he knows right away.”

All Nirish had time to do was nod — because the words were barely out of Deanna’s mouth when Worf rounded the corner and came up short. Behind him, two identical phantoms drew together, their hands entwined like children. Pale blue eyes peered around Worf’s shoulders and met her gaze.

And in her mind, a long dormant warmth, a golden light, awakened.

Imzadi, two voices said.

They didn’t reach for her.

In fact, apart from a brief spark of life in each twin’s eye — a flash of light across each haggard face — there was no sign that they recognized Deanna at all. They stopped walking halfway down the hallway, leaving Worf to pave the way. Only when Worf paused and looked over his shoulder did the Rikers reluctantly start moving again.

One sprang to action first. He took two steps. The other stayed where he was, feet planted, and reached for him. Gently, one Riker took the other’s hand and pulled him forward, and in a slow shuffle, they made their way to Deanna. They studied her hesitantly, not quite in sync — the braver one flicked his eyes at Nirish, examining the ridges along the bridge of his nose and the ceremonial earring, so visible against his short-cropped hair. The other one, more frightened, barely glanced Nirish’s way, barely moved his head. He looked like he might be sick from nerves.

“Hello, Will,” said Deanna softly.

Both men smiled: gentle on one face, terrified on the other, but genuine for both. In one voice, almost shyly, they said, “Hello.” A flicker of flirtatiousness from the one on the left; a flare of apprehension from the one on the right. Deanna hesitated and reached for their joined hands.

“May I see?” she asked.

She had to force their fingers apart, but they let her examine the tattoos on their wrists. X for one and 10 for the other. Worf had deemed X more reckless, 10 more likely to give up. Both of those were traits she associated with Thomas Riker. But Worf had also deemed X humorous and brave; 10, gentle and cautious. And all of those were traits she associated with *William* Riker. Dipping into their minds, Deanna could tell no difference between the two. Just that both minds rose up to meet her, a ripple of warm light against the pleating of her brain.

And it was hard to keep herself from smiling at them, the wide toothy smile of a teenager on a speeder ride — an adrenaline-thrill smile that Nirish had never seen from her, not since she was stationed here at the end of the war. Deanna swallowed the grin and saw it pop up, instantaneously, on the Rikers’ faces instead. As if she’d transmitted it to them somehow, through her mind.

She shot a guilty glance at Nirish. He hadn’t noticed.

“It’s ten-hundred,” she said to the Rikers.

“I know,” they said as one. Then Riker X took over the chore of speaking. “Worf kept the ship in orbit until we were synced with the cycles here.”

“Good. Then you’re not tired?”

A shrug from Riker X. A timid shake of the head from Riker 10.

“How do you feel about joining me in my office?” Deanna asked. She sampled their emotions and got nothing but pleasantness from both of them. This time she couldn’t hide her smile. “Good. One at a time, though. Is that alright?”

The pleasantness disappeared. Riker X’s smile faded first, and he squeezed his brother’s hand hard enough to hurt. With a wince, Riker 10 squeezed back — and then pulled away.

“Good,” Deanna said softly. She caught Nirish studying them, his face carefully blank, but a little too guarded — both twins noticed that expression, and didn’t like it. She put a hand on her partner’s chest, just to signify that he was a friend, and said, “Nirish, would you take Will to see his quarters, and anywhere else he wants to go?”

“Nirish?” Riker X said. He seemed to understand innately that he was the ‘Will’ in question. He stepped forward, releasing his brother’s hand to shake Nirish’s instead. “You must be Deanna’s husband?”

Nirish didn’t correct him. He just grinned. “Will Riker — I’ve heard a lot about you.”

No, he hadn’t. But the Rikers accepted it as fact.

“So which number are you?” Riker X asked.

Nirish’s eyebrows furrowed. “Number?”

A grin spread across Will’s face. “Worf tells me Deanna’s got a nine-husband harem, and all of them are prettier than me. I was just wondering where you fall in the line-up.”

Nirish tossed his head back with a hearty laugh, and Deanna took that as her cue to push him away — a gentle hand on Nirish’s shoulder, and he went. He was halfway down the tunnel with Will when Deanna called, “My office at eleven!”

Yes, dear, said Will in her mind. Deanna froze. The words melted over her brain, liquid gold. And when they were all she could hear, all she could feel and think and breathe, they crystallized, shattered into needle-points. She turned, her face carefully composed, to face the Riker left behind.

He was a different person.

While Riker X joked with Nirish and shook his hand, Riker 10 stayed totally still, one shoulder hitched up to his ears. His hands were at his sides, fingers twisted in the fabric of his uniform trousers, deep stress lines at the corners of his eyes. He studied Deanna without a word, and in his mind, Deanna saw none of Riker X’s warmth or humor. Only hurt.

“Will,” Deanna breathed, surprised.

He shifted his feet. Riker 10, Deanna remembered, was the one who went mute from time to time, especially when separated from his brother — she’d assumed, perhaps arrogantly, that his muteness wouldn’t manifest with her.

“Can you speak?” she asked, keeping her voice low. There were still ensigns from the *Defiant* hanging around, and the Will she remembered wouldn’t want his ‘weakness’ broadcast. Riker 10 lowered his head, his long eyelashes covering the trajectory of his gaze.

We can speak in here, Deanna offered. *If it’s easier.*

His mind rippled, images collapsing into fragments. Thoughts aborted, folding into each other. The mental equivalent of a shrug.

Will you come with me to my office? Deanna asked. She held out her hand, and Will’s eyes flickered, and only then did she realize that he’d been studying her fingers. Searching for traces of wedding jewelry. Heart pounding, Deanna hooked her fingers in his sleeve and tugged him closer.

“Come on,” she said aloud. She led him down the hall, her own pulse pounding in her ears — and his too, laid over hers, a humming harmony. Too slow, too fast, but always in sync with her heart’s arcs and falls. Will’s fingers twitched in hers, his grip gaining some life as they reached the deserted hallway where Deanna’s office waited for them.

Wait, he said, his mental voice folding in on itself. He stopped walking, but he kept his grip on Deanna’s hand and forced her to stop too. Deanna felt his mind stuttering, his thoughts blocked up. She turned to face him.

He pulled her into a hug.

With a gasp, Deanna closed her eyes. He was ... still warm. Still solid. After all this time, whittled down to nothing, she still knew his body like it was her own. He pressed his lips against her hair, the way he always used to, eyes squeezed tight against a rush of emotion he couldn’t name — and his mind kept stuttering, bunching up and tripping over itself, until finally the low hum of his voice eased out into two simple words that she could understand:

Missed you, he said, and Deanna finally found her senses. She wrapped her arms around him — so much thinner! — and rubbed her palms up his back, over his sides, as if by touching him she could force some life into him, get his blood to pump and his thoughts to slide with the well-practiced ease she remembered. She buried her face against his shoulder and sighed.

I know, she said. *I can tell.*

And then, like it was a secret:

I missed you, too.

“You like music?” Riker asked.

Nirish wrinkled his nose. They were in the holosuite, in a program set up to resemble a Terran music shop, and Nirish’s wallet was smarting from the exorbitant price Quark charged him for entry. He leaned against the wall, arms crossed.

“Everyone likes music,” he said.

Riker barely seemed to hear him. He was examining the wall of instruments, his eyes alight. “You can say that again. Although I’ve met a few species, like the Dorwins, who consider music to be torture. Made for a fun dinner party. Do you play?” he asked, fingers skimming over a Cardassian keyboard.

“No,” said Nirish. “I’ve always been envious of musicians. I’ve got a tin ear.”

Riker sneaked a look at him. “And not many opportunities to learn,” he said. He touched his earlobe. “I recognize that design. You grew up on Valo II.”

Nirish blinked. He was careful not to show his surprise, and to let his breath out through a tight smile, carefully controlled. “My earring’s design has nothing to do with the camp I grew up in,” he said.

“No?”

“It signifies the religious sect of my home nation on Bajor,” Nirish said.

“And when you became part of the diaspora, did your sect mostly end up on Valo II?” asked Riker with a grin.

...It was an infectious grin, Nirish thought begrudgingly. “Yes,” he admitted. “It did.”

Riker accepted his victory with a humble nod. He turned, scanning the holosuite for alien instruments.

“What about the klavion?” he asked. “I knew an ensign from Bajor once; her father played the klavion on Valo II. Do we have one here?”

“Do you see one?” asked Nirish dryly.

Riker gave him a sheepish look and crossed to a stack of alien keyboards on the far side of the floor. “I don’t actually know what they look like,” he said. “Back then, we didn’t have any photos of them in the *Enterprise’s* datastores.”

“Well, fair enough,” Nirish said. “It’s funny to think how things have changed over the last eight years. Klavions are expensive and unwieldy; easily takes four men to move one, or a gravlift if you’re lucky. I’m sure *some* folks in camp transported theirs to Valo II, but my family never had one.”

Riker hummed to himself. While Nirish watched, he scratched the back of his neck, his hand disappearing into an overgrown thatch of hair. He looked, Nirish thought uneasily, like a human version of himself, with lighter eyes, catlike where the lashes grew long at the ends. No ridges, shorter hair, but...

Face turned away, Riker said, “Computer, show me your jazz selection.”

The instruments flickered. When the images resolved, Nirish didn’t recognize most of them. He studied an oblong horn of some sort, its handle studded with buttons and levers. With a low whistle, Riker moved to a wall of tiny handheld instruments and plucked one from the rack.

He blew into it. A brassy hum emerged, loud enough to make Nirish wince.

“Not very musical,” he said.

Riker’s eyes widened. “You kidding me?” he said, jerking the harmonica from his lips. “Listen to that vibrato! This is a 21st Century design — short slot reeds with thin plates and a wooden comb. Listen.” He played a brief blues melody and caught Nirish’s gaze when he was done, his entire face lighting up. “Do you hear how warm and rich that is?”

Nirish shrugged, half-smiling. Riker held up one finger, the Terran gesture for ‘wait a minute,’ and played a quick scale up and down the comb. Then, readily warmed up, he settled into his posture, his spine curved back, his hips relaxed, and took a breath that swelled his chest.

He started to play.

It wasn’t bad, Nirish decided. No drums, no keyboard, just the mournful whine of the harmonica — Riker’s eyes closed and his lashes long against pale cheeks, the breathless huff as he bolted from one note to the next — and that was all he needed. The whine rose and fell in a smooth-jazz melody, sad and slow, with Riker’s eyebrows pinched in concentration. Only after a minute, when some color returned to Riker’s cheeks, did the melody pick up and turn into a nimble dance over the reeds — playful highs and lows, and Nirish’s fingers were tapping against his side.

“Toots Thielemans,” said Riker when he finished — or when he decided to quit. Nirish couldn’t tell.

“Oh?” said Nirish.

“Terran musician. Wiz with a harmonica.” Riker’s grin faded a little at the lack of enthusiasm on Nirish’s face. “That was *Bluesette*. It’s a jazz standard. We’ve been working on it for years, but no one plays it like Toots.”

“We?” asked Nirish, one eyebrow raised.

Riker caught his breath. He dropped the harmonica on the display case with a quiet clink of metal plating. “Both of us,” he said quietly. “We didn’t have much else to do.”

Nirish gave a slight nod. His mind circled back to the report he’d snooped into on Deanna’s PADD, the close-lipped description of codependency from Mr. Worf. He folded his hands behind his back and jerked his head toward the door. “Did you want to see your quarters now?” he asked.

Riker shook himself. “Sure.”

They left together, with fifteen minutes still left on the holosuite timer. Down the hall, Nirish let Riker lead. Riker had been to Deep Space Nine before, according to his service record, and to his credit, he only got lost once or twice. But he located the passageway Nirish had indicated without much of a problem, and waited patiently while Nirish unlocked the door for him.

“Go ahead,” Nirish said. He waited in the doorway, his eyes locked on Riker’s face. A slow, hesitant step inside. A quick survey of the room, eyes darting, gaze lingering on the bed.

“Single quarters?” Riker asked, his voice unreadable.

“Of course,” Nirish said. He lifted his lips in a hard smile. “Why? Are you dating someone?”

Riker looked at him in surprise. Like he was seeing Nirish for the first time. His features closed off, his expression guarded now, and the door slid closed behind Nirish’s back. Nirish’s blood quickened at the sudden silence, old battle instincts telling him: *Now. Now is the moment to strike.* But he kept his voice level, his posture relaxed.

“I read your file,” he said conversationally. “Are you William Riker, or are you Thomas?”

“Will,” Riker said, studying him with narrow eyes.

“You served with Deanna, then.”

Riker squared his shoulders. “We both did. We were stationed on Betazed together years ago.”

Nirish nodded. “Right. But you were with her on the *Enterprise* for quite some time.”

Riker shrugged. At his sides, his hands were twitching.

“Well...” Nirish said, circling the room now, “is there anyone you’ve got your eye on?”

“It’s — it’s—”

They’d been together for almost an hour, and this was the first time he’d heard this Riker stammer. Nirish waited him out.

“It’s ... a little early for that,” Riker finished lamely.

“For what?” Nirish said. “For a bit of comfort?”

“For ... yes.”

“If you say so.” Nirish sat on Riker’s bed. It was small, but it would fit two people. Would they share, even though they’d been given separate rooms? He kicked his heels against the floor and tried to imagine it, and a tingle of disgust ran over the ridges on his nose. He was aware of Riker watching him, but didn’t expect him to speak, not after that stammering session. So when Riker took initiative, it came as a surprise.

“How did you meet Deanna?” he asked, too casually. Nirish’s lips lifted in a tiny grin.

“Here, of course. I was stationed here four years ago; she arrived a year after that to head up the post-trauma department. And don’t worry; she doesn’t actually have nine husbands. Or even one.”

“You’re Starfleet?” Riker asked, scanning Nirish’s clothes for pips.

“No, civilian,” he said. “Same as you.”

He said it lightly, his tone friendly. But a heartbeat passed in silence before Riker gave a half-hearted smile and whispered, “Right.” He turned away then, ostensibly to scan the room. Nirish watched the way his muscles bunched beneath his uniform, the tension in his shoulders, and checked the time.

“We ought to be going,” he said. He stood, kicking the storage unit beneath the bed. “Extra sheets in there, just in case.”

Riker’s face spasmed.

“And a laundry unit on the wall, so you don’t have to trek all the way down to the service bay to wash them,” Nirish said, pointing the unit out. He brushed past Riker with a clap on the shoulder and an insincere smile. He was close enough to see the anger flexing over Riker’s features, buried in the twitch of his lips, the lines between his eyebrows. Nirish’s own tension faded at the sight of it, replaced by a warm, smooth sense of triumph not unlike the melody Riker had played him minutes before.

“Let’s go reintroduce you to Deanna,” he said.

The next morning, too early for a therapy sessions, Deanna rubbed the sleep out of her eyes and waited for the Rikers to tell her what was wrong.

“Nightmares,” Will explained, indicating the dark smudges under his twin’s eyes. Deanna tapped her stylus against her PADD. She stifled a yawn.

“You’ve always had nightmares,” she noted.

“These were different. I never remembered my nightmares before. And these were...” He hesitated. “Vivid.”

“Can you tell me what happened in them?”

Will faltered. Through his mind, Deanna caught a conjoined sense of anxiety — confinement — pressure — heat. Both twins furrowed their eyebrows, trying to knit the disparate memory flashes into one whole. If Deanna had to guess, she'd say there was a cave-in, maybe a fire, possibly a real incident on Nervalva IV.

"It changed too fast," Will murmured eventually. "It was ... hard to get a pin on it."

"Several different scenarios," Deanna suggested, "with different emotional themes?"

"I guess." He wiped his palms on his pants.

"And was it *you* having these dreams?" asked Deanna. Her eyes slid over to the silent twin at Will's side, who'd curled up as much as he could, with his boots on Deanna's coffee table and his hands clasped loosely around his knees.

"Both of us had them," Will said.

"Really?" She waited for confirmation from the silent twin. He hadn't spoken in her presence since yesterday, when she traded him off to Nirish. "Will?" she prompted, nudging his mind.

He sent her a wordless wave of confirmation.

"Can you say it aloud?" Deanna asked gently.

He cleared his throat with a grimace. "Sorry," he said, voice rough. "Yes."

Progress, in some form. But the small victory of Will saying 'sorry, yes' rather paled in comparison to the fact that both Rikers thought they shared nightmares. She sensed honesty from each of them: honesty laced with ambivalence, like they both believed they'd shared a dream, but neither of them was really sure. If they were true twins, Deanna might believe it; similar cases had been recorded among humans for centuries. But they weren't twins. Not really.

Deanna checked the time.

"Alright," she said softly. "I'll put you both on my regular schedule from today forward, and I promise it won't be so early in the morning. Would you like to go back to sleep now, or get some breakfast?"

They looked at each other, one Will searching the other's face. Hesitation rolled off them and pushed against Deanna's mind.

"You don't have to go together," Deanna reminded them. "Will, if you want to catch up on sleep while Will eats, that's okay." She dipped into their minds in turn as she said their names, making it clear which one she meant. But they didn't so much as glance at her, too locked onto each other's eyes.

"...No," said one of them eventually. "We'll go together."

"To sleep, or to the galley?" Deanna pressed.

This time, it was the quiet Will who answered. "To the galley," he said, dropping his boots to the floor.

Deanna saw them out just as Worf arrived at her door. He glowered at both Rikers — his version of a friendly hello — and one of the Rikers grinned back at him, even gave him a gentle punch in the arm. The other edged away from Worf and sneaked a hand up his brother's back, clinging to the material of his jacket. Quick and vicious, an instinct rose up in Deanna, an insidious voice urging her to lance into this Riker's mind, to see him for who he really was: the insecurities, the uncertainty of Thomas Riker. But then she tried to imagine the lieutenant she'd known on Betazed — or immediately after Nervalva IV — with his arrogant smile and reckless attitude, and she couldn't picture him clinging to anyone.

She bit her fingernails into her palms and killed the urge to look. To Worf, with a brittle smile, she said, "Come in."

Worf brushed past her with a rumble deep in his chest. "This is certainly an early-morning therapy session," he said, eyeing the couch recently vacated by the Riker's. "It is not yet zero-six."

"Well, they needed it," Deanna said. She clasped her hands over her stomach and circled Worf. "That's two sessions with them — one apiece, apart from each other, and one together. Would you like to hear my notes?"

"That is why I am here," Worf grunted.

Deanna took a seat opposite him. Worf would want to know about Will's emotional state, but not right away, and nothing that might embarrass either of them. She would have to save that for later, buried casually among reports of Will's cognitive functions.

"Answer some questions for me first?" she requested.

Worf gave a single nod.

"You sparred with him on the *Defiant*. Did you just do that one day?"

"We sparred daily," Worf said.

"All three of you? One-on-one?"

Worf shifted in his seat. "I sparred only with the ... more dominant twin."

“Riker X,” Deanna guessed. “Why not with Riker 10? Did he not wish to join you?”

“He did not maintain his fighting spirit,” said Worf, bristling a little. “He did, however, keep up his sparring practice. His opponent was Riker X, not me.”

“I see.” Not comfortable fighting an old friend, then; but still, he recognized the need to keep in shape. That indicated a desire, maybe a distant one, to resume command. Especially since he and Riker X had practiced hand-to-hand combat during their eight years alone. “You gave them some tests already, Worf,” said Deanna. “How did they do?”

Worf shifted in his seat. “They have taken the Academy exam twice. On the first attempt, both failed. Riker 10 received the higher score — marginally. On the second attempt, Riker X passed. Riker 10 received only a twenty percent.”

“Significantly worse than before?” Deanna asked.

Worf just nodded.

“Why the sharp change?”

He hesitated. “The proctor indicated a loss of concentration early in the exam. The computer registered an increased heart rate and respiration level. Before he finished, Riker 10 abandoned the examination cubicle.”

“To visit sickbay?” Deanna asked. Maybe a burst of anxiety, a need for a sedative...?

But Worf pursed his lips. “To find his brother.”

Silence. Deanna’s mind nipped at Worf’s, sampling the dark undercurrent of concern — mixed generously with discomfort, the same way Nirish felt, but a little lighter. Worf, unlike Nirish, had nearly a decade of experience with Riker to counteract his time with the twins. With a sigh, Deanna leaned forward, her elbows on her knees.

“Earlier,” she said, “they described vivid nightmares to me. Was it dark on Nerval Four when you found them?”

“Very,” Worf said. “There were few working lights left, as most of the power had been rerouted to vital functions.”

“I thought as much. And how was the noise level?”

Worf gave it some thought. “It was difficult to communicate when we found them. I believe the shields and generators were producing a background hum.”

“Loud?”

“Near-deafening,” Worf said. “Certainly loud enough to unbalance the finer senses of a warrior.”

Deanna bit back a smile at that. “I think the lack of white noise and the presence of bright lights is affecting them. Most likely, too, the variety in shapes and colors here, and the interaction with other people. It’s overwhelming, especially to minds that have been starved of variety for eight years. I would suggest waiting a week and administering the test again when they have time to adjust.”

Worf grunted. “Riker X wishes to continue his tests. As he has already passed the Academy exam and basic dexterity tests, I see no reason to refuse.”

Deanna hesitated. “And he’s doing well when you spar?”

“As well as can be expected,” said Worf ambivalently, “for a human eight years out of practice.”

Deanna bit her lip. “Alright,” she said. “If he thinks he can handle it, let him. If he starts to flounder...”

Worf bristled before she could even finish the sentence. “I will allow him to fail,” he said firmly, “as I would allow any of my men to fail. To treat him otherwise would dishonor him.”

Deanna shot him an exasperated look. But Will had always been fond of Klingon culture — had understood it better than most, like it appealed to something deep in his soul. So she nodded. “Fine.”

Worf nodded back. His hand, splayed out on his thigh, became a tight fist.

“Is there something else?” Deanna asked, watching his face closely. “Something that troubles you?”

Worf scoffed a little, but he spoke almost instantly, his voice bursting out a little too loud. “Why is the other not ready?” he demanded.

“Riker 10?”

Worf scowled at the designation.

“Well, despite what they say, they *are* different people,” Deanna said. She hesitated, trying to put her thoughts in order. “Outwardly, Riker X appears more confident. Better-adjusted. But inside, he’s a maelstrom of fear. Yesterday, while I saw Riker 10 in therapy, Riker X played a song for Nirish on the harmonica. Nirish reports he was totally relaxed, and a skilled player. But at that same moment, his distress spiked so sharply that I lost track of Riker 10’s words *entirely*. Riker X’s pain blotted out everything else.”

Worf shifted his shoulders, clearly uncomfortable with the line of conversation.

“Meanwhile,” Deanna said, “Riker 10 shows a marked inability to conform to social expectations. He has behaviorally reverted, in some ways, to a much younger age, hence the hand-holding and muteness. But emotionally, he’s more level than Riker X. Most of the time.”

“Most of the time?” Worf repeated.

“As I said, they’re different men. When they saw me with Nirish, Riker 10 was hurt. Jealous. He could think of little else during our session, so he withdrew from me. He asked me questions about myself, but didn’t share much at all about his time on Nervala Four. By comparison, Riker X was largely unbothered. I sensed a brief flare of surprise and sadness, but the brunt of his distress came from separation. The longer he was away from Riker 10, the worse he felt.”

“Then...” Worf hesitated. “...do you know which one...?”

“Which is Will and which is Thomas?” Deanna bit her lip. “Will wouldn’t be jealous.”

Worf tipped his head in tentative agreement.

“But... Will *would* ask me about myself,” Deanna said, her eyes down. “Riker X made a point not to. He had his walls up. His eyes were hard. And that’s another thing — I taught *both* of them to block Betazoid empathy, but only one of them bothered to do so. Maybe that’s because only one of them got eight extra years of practice. Or maybe that’s just because...”

But she couldn’t say it. She smiled brokenly and shook her head, pretending she didn’t see Worf’s inquisitive stare. She knew exactly why Riker X had blocked her — or at least, she had a good idea. She’d sensed Nirish’s mean-spirited triumph, that spark of cruelty he’d shown her once or twice before, when he felt he was being threatened. Cardassians could bring that cruelty out in him; deserters, too, and fleshy politicians who’d sat out the war on resort planets. And ex-boyfriends who came calling for Deanna. But worse than anything from Nirish, she’d sensed Riker X’s flash of humiliation, soul-deep, so sharp that it reached through their mental link and stung Deanna’s cheeks. He was still smarting when he came to her for therapy, and the moment he saw sympathy in her eyes, curiosity, he’d boxed up that humiliation and packed it away — and every other emotion, too.

Deanna swept her hair back with a sigh. Worf was watching her still, steady and patient. But she could sense his concern stretching out in three directions now: not just for the Rikers, but for her.

“How are *you*, Worf?” Deanna asked softly.

His eyes glinted in the low light.

“Have you seen Ezri yet?”

Worf stiffened. In a rough voice, he said, “I have not yet found the time.”

“Make the time,” Deanna suggested. “She’d like to see you. Even if the two of you aren’t...”

But Worf was closing off, his emotions boiling, so Deanna let it go. She sighed, already exhausted, and she had a long day of post-war therapy ahead of her.

“Will you speak to them today?” Deanna asked. “Will, I mean?”

Worf inclined his head.

“Good. They could use a friend.”

He made an ambivalent noise as he stood, towering over her. “I will be an excellent companion,” he said gravely. “Today, we will ‘take it easy.’ I will only test their piloting skills.”

He left Deanna behind, shaking her head.

“Nailed it!” Riker crowed.

He pumped his fist in the air, which turned his tattoo into a blur and greatly disturbed Worf’s efforts to see which Riker he was. When the twins turned to each other for an exuberant high-five, he got a better look. Riker X. He made a note on his PADD just as Riker X settled back down in the pilot’s seat and grasped the steering stick.

“Return to dock,” Worf ordered.

Still grinning, Riker X wiped the nervous sweat off his palms and did as he was told. The hangar bay opened up before them, a wide and forbidding mouth in Deep Space Nine, and the shuttle glided smoothly into place like Riker had been doing this every day for twenty years. When the docking clamps were in lock and the shuttle properly shut down, Worf gestured for the Rikers to switch places.

“You’ll ace it,” Riker X assured his brother as he stood. Riker 10 didn’t smile. He stared down at the sweat stains left on the pilot’s seat, and sheepishly, Riker X plucked his damp uniform away from his skin and fanned himself. “Is it hot in here?” he asked.

Riker 10 just squeezed his arm and slid into the seat. He shifted uncomfortably and studied the controls. Unlike Riker X, he kept his hands to himself; where his brother had insisted on touching everything before lift-off, Riker 10 just stared, and his face was so blank, Worf couldn’t be sure he recognized what he was seeing.

Riker X paced behind the pilot’s seat, oblivious to his brother’s silent study. The more time passed, the paler and shakier Riker X became.

His first shuttle flight was catching up to him. He stopped mid-step, muttered an excuse, and disappeared into the head.

Just as the splash of vomit filled the shuttle, Riker 10 found the start-up button. Placidly, he called the computer screens to life and checked his settings.

“You may begin when ready,” Worf told him, trying to hide his impatience.

Riker reached for the navigation screen and hesitated. He pulled his fingers back without touching it. Unlike Riker X, he didn’t put his hands on the steering stick while he thought it through. He just clasped them in his lap, worrying at his cuticles while his eyes darted from one button to the other.

“If you are unsure…” Worf began.

Riker shook his head with a strangled ‘mm’. He hit the three-button start-up with perfect precision, but he clasped the steering stick like he’d never touched one before. While his brother retched in the bathroom, Riker steered the shuttle out of the hangar bay, slow and nervous, like a teenager on his first solo drive.

Fine. Worf settled into the copilot’s seat, PADD propped on the dashboard to take notes. The other Riker had kept up a steady stream of nervous chatter, peppering Worf with questions as he piloted, but this one stayed silent. He didn’t even ask which route to take. Worf let him amble out of the hangar bay and finally said,

“You will loop around Jeraddo and return to the hangar,” Worf said.

Riker’s eyes tightened. He kept his gaze on the viewscreen and scrabbled blindly over the navport, typing in ‘Jericho’ with just his index finger.

“*Jeraddo*,” Worf repeated in a rumble. “It is the third satellite.”

Riker hesitated, fumbled on the backspace, and closed the navport altogether. Worf gave it a moment, waiting for him to correct himself. When it didn’t happen, he said, “I suggest you call up the navigation map.”

“Mm,” said Riker, his voice strangled. He squinted down at the navport and tried again, eyes strained. In the bathroom, the other Riker finished vomiting and stumbled out, wiping his face with a sheepish grin. He hovered over his brother’s shoulder, the scent of bile clinging to him, and Worf got ready to order him to back off if need be. But Riker X stayed silent and only watched as Riker 10 failed to type in ‘Jeraddo’ yet again.

“There are other options,” Worf reminded him, eyeing the viewscreen. “You do not necessarily need to type the name into the database.”

Riker fumbled with the touchpad, darting a glance down at the dashboard. He selected a basic starmap and his face softened in relief as DS9, Bajor, and its satellites popped into existence. He selected Jeraddo by sight and sat back, a little more relaxed, as the navigation map popped into place.

Better. But it wouldn’t be the only mistake he made. By the time he slid the shuttle back into dock, walls juddering, Worf had filled his PADD with notes — most of them negative. He gestured for the Rikers to precede him out of the shuttle.

Riker X, who had passed his test, walked out on shaky legs, his fingers trembling. Riker 10, who had failed so miserably, took his time with glacial calmness, checking first to make sure his twin hadn’t left an unpleasant mess in the tiny bathroom. When Worf joined them at the bottom of the ramp, Riker X was still pale. Riker 10 had checked out, eyes distant, hands on hips. There was no sweat in his hair, no anxiety in his eyes.

“You failed,” Worf told him, and Riker 10 just nodded. A flash of disappointment, hard and gritty, landed in his eyes, but he didn’t say a word. To Riker X, Worf said, “You passed.”

Riker X smiled, then closed his lips tight and bowed his head, grimacing. He covered his mouth until the urge to vomit faded away.

“You will complete one hundred more basic maneuvers,” Worf told him severely, “until I can be *certain* you will man the helm without dishonoring yourself. Understood?”

Riker X nodded, his eyes still closed tight. Riker 10 wrapped his fingers around his brother’s arm to balance him.

“Once you have proven yourself,” Worf told him, “you may join the *Defiant* as helmsman, with a position in ops. On the *Defiant*, every man must fulfill multiple roles.”

Riker X nodded again, a little more dignified this time. With watery eyes, he said, “Understood.”

Worf turned abruptly to the failure. “Do you wish to take the test again?” he asked.

Riker 10’s expression turned to a wooden mask. He shook his head slowly, firmly. He kept his brother upright, as steady as a tree.

“Very well,” said Worf in a rumble. To Riker X, he said, “Commander, when you are ready to begin again…”

“Now,” said Riker X at once. He wiped the back of his mouth and grinned, frenetic but genuine. “Right now.”

“You are certain?”

“Yes.” Softly, he added, “It’s good to work with you again, Worf.”

Worf hesitated, cognizant of the other Riker's eyes on him. "Likewise," he said. To the twin: "You may accompany us or you may stay."

Riker 10 mouthed his answer without voicing it: *Stay*. He stepped back, avoiding his brother's surprised expression, his outstretched hand. Together, Worf and Riker watched as Riker 10 strode out of the hangar bay entirely, without looking back.

"He's mad," said Riker X, amazed.

Worf glanced sideways at him. Privately, he thought that Riker 10 didn't look mad at all. Anger would be honorable, at least. Riker 10 showed nothing but apathy, and perhaps a nervous hint of relief. He gestured for the commander to join him in the shuttle, back up the ramp to the pilot's seat, and after a moment, with visible reluctance, Riker went.

A minute later, the roar of the engines filled their ears. Riker, still visibly unsettled, grasped the steering stick and stared out the viewscreen, determined to make this next maneuver smoother, faster. No vomiting next time. With the doors closed and the engines on, they had no way of hearing Riker 10, or seeing what he did. They would find out only later, from sickbay, that Riker 10 showed up with broken knuckles and a fractured toe. He wouldn't say how he injured himself.

But right now, locked in the changing room outside hangar bay, the placid, silent twin was beating his fists against the wall.

They had been on Deep Space Nine for thirteen days when the visitors trickled in. Will's door chimed when he was alone, unaccompanied by his twin. He sat on the edge of the bed in civilian clothes, his uniform discarded, bent over his own tightly-crossed arms. He glanced up at the door, his mind outstretched.

The only person he wanted to see was Deanna. But when he reached out, he didn't sense her on the other side. She was too far away for him. That meant someone else — Nirish? His stomach twisted. Worf? Couldn't be. With the shuttle tests out of the way, Worf and Will had gone on a test run on the *Defiant* itself, Will's first shift on active duty since the transporter accident whisked them both away.

The door chimed again. Will pushed to his feet with a sigh. He crossed to the closet and folded himself inside, the door sliding closed to block out the light again, and in the darkness, he reached for the white noise jammer he kept hidden in his spare boots. A deft flick of the thumb and it blared to life, a dull roar filling his ears with blissful silence. Only dimly could he hear the door chime again.

They would go away eventually, he told himself. He tipped his head back, eyes closed, breathing slow. Over the white noise, through the door, a familiar voice called out to him.

"Number One?"

Will jerked upright so fast he banged his head against the closet door. "Sir?" he said, and then jumped at the sound of his own voice — he'd been so shocked to hear Captain Picard that the word leapt out of him, strong and clear.

"If you're in there, then open the damn door," said Picard, exasperated.

Will had to get out of the closet first. He kicked the jammer away from him and straightened his clothes as he emerged, cheeks stinging. "Just — come in," he said halfway to the door, suddenly flustered.

Picard didn't need to be told twice. The doors slid apart, and the too-bright lights of the hallway stung Will's eyes, but he recognized the compact silhouette that stepped inside. When the doors closed, he could see Picard in full: his hair a little thinner around his ears, his forehead more lined. They looked each other up and down gravely, noting the kilos lost, the fresh signs of stress on each man's face.

"Will," said Picard finally, warmly, his voice heavy with emotion. He grasped Will by the hand, one palm skimming up to cup his forearm — a two-handed shake. And if Will didn't know his captain better, he'd pull him in for a hug. As it was, he just grasped his hand in return, as tight as he could, and blinked back the sudden blur in his eyes.

"It's good to see you," he managed.

Picard's expression flickered, like something in Will's voice had struck him. "I wish I'd been there," he said, his face creasing. "The *Enterprise* couldn't be spared."

"I know. I didn't—" Will shook his head. "—didn't expect—"

Picard didn't interrupt him, but Will could feel his tongue growing heavy, so he just quit talking with a shrug. At a loss, Will glanced around his quarters, suddenly foreign to him, and gestured to an empty seat.

"Tea?" he managed to ask.

Picard gave him the tiniest nod and took a seat. With one ankle slung over his knee, Picard watched Will's every move — how he handled the replicator when it jammed, and the fact that he typed his order in instead of saying it aloud. Cognizant of the heavy gaze on his back, Will blocked the replicator with his body and lowered his head.

"I've heard your double is back in service," said Picard eventually.

True, Will thought.

"Worf tells me he makes a fine helmsman, if a bit nervous."

Also true, Will thought. He turned, his fingers cramping around the delicate cup of tea, and handed it to Picard.

“Is it true you don’t speak?” Picard asked.

I just spoke to you, Will thought, indignant. But he couldn’t get his mouth to form the words, so he crossed his arms over his chest instead. He searched his head for something else to say. What had Picard been up to all these years? How was his ship, his crew? But the words scattered before they reached his tongue. He choked out a laugh and nodded. *No*, he thought, *I guess I don’t speak*.

Picard took a sip of tea without ever taking his eyes off Will.

“I’d like to meet *both* of you,” he said. “When does Commander Riker return?”

‘Commander.’ In reality, Will didn’t have a rank, not officially. And surely Picard had other ways of finding out his schedule. He didn’t need to ask Will. When Will just stood there, without saying anything, Picard accessed his PADD and pulled up the *Defiant*’s latest orders.

“Ah,” he said. “Three days. No issue there. Would you like to see Mister La Forge?”

He said it so casually that Will’s heart stuttered. He gripped the dresser so he wouldn’t lose his balance.

“And Commander Data?” Picard suggested, one eyebrow raised.

With a convulsive swallow, Will nodded.

“Beverly is here with us as well,” Picard said. “I’m sure she’d like to take a look at you. Doctor’s pride, you know — she won’t trust that Deep Space Nine is taking care of you until she sees for herself.”

He said it with a gentle smile, a glimmer of humor in his eyes, but Will wasn’t fooled. He stared down at his feet, his chest running cold.

“How is Deanna?” asked Picard, his voice soft. “And Nirish?”

“*Nirish*,” said Will harshly, before he could help himself. He swallowed hard, his throat tight. “Is an ass,” he said, like it was a complete sentence on his own. The words were too compulsive to string together.

“Really,” said Picard dryly. “I rather like him. He has an interest in archaeology, you know.”

Will turned away with a barely-concealed scoff. His cheeks heated; Picard would think him childish. Jealous. He was, just slightly. Mostly he was hurt that Deanna had moved on. More than that, he was *incensed*. He’d heard what Nirish had said to Will; the little taunts and digs, the references to their medical file, to Worf’s report. Bad enough for Worf and Deanna to know. Worse still for someone like Nirish to rub it in his brother’s face, to humiliate him when he was doing so well at hiding his nerves around other people. Will shook his head, the anger bubbling to the surface, and he had to force it back down.

Ask, he ordered himself.

Ask about Geordi. Data. Beverly.

Ask about the *Enterprise*.

Ask about Guinan, about his jazz ensemble, his crew.

Ask about the Dominion War, their losses. Make sure they’re alright.

But his esophagus had tied itself into a knot. Will turned to face the replicator, fiddling with it as if it needed fixed, unable to face his captain. He heard the shift of weight as Picard got to his feet, but he didn’t turn around.

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Picard examine the trombone on Will’s dresser. Picard’s hand hovered over the slide, not quite touching it, his face soft with memories.

“Will you play it for me?” he asked.

Will stared down at his own distorted reflection in the polished surface. His mouth ran dry.

“I don’t remember how.”

“How is he?” Beverly whispered the next day.

They were huddled together, all five of them, waiting for someone to gather the courage to knock. Deanna, who had only just arrived from her latest counseling session, sampled the emotions bleeding out from under Will’s bedroom door.

“He’s nervous,” she said. Her eyes drifted to the side, cataloging each feeling like a visible cloud. “Sad. Ashamed.”

Data cocked his head to the side, eyebrows furrowed.

“He’s lost a lot of weight,” Deanna explained before he could ask. “He looks very different from the Commander Riker we remember, and in his mind, it isn’t a change to be proud of. He is worried that we will judge him somehow, in light of what his duplicate has accomplished.”

Geordi folded one hand over his lips. “Well, I can’t say I blame him,” he said quietly. He glanced at Deanna, his pale eyes sweeping over

her face. “When can we meet the real Commander Riker?”

Deanna stiffened. “Geordi, this *is* the real Commander Riker. As far as we can tell.”

“Right. Totally identical.” He sighed through his nose. “But even if you can’t tell the difference empathically, I think it says something that one of them is flying Worf’s ship on an official cargo haul and the other is...”

As a group, they glanced at the doorway.

“He’s real,” said Picard softly.

Deanna glanced over her shoulder at him. The others were slower, almost reluctant, to turn.

“He is as real,” Picard clarified, “as either of them will ever be. And if we can never determine which is the Will Riker we knew, then I suggest we treat them both as one.” He checked the time on his PADD. “In addition to being real, he is *late*. Beverly?”

She was the closest to the door, so she stepped forward and gave a sharp knock. Inside, Will’s sense of anxiety swelled. He mustered his courage and answered the door, staring down at them. And for a moment, with his hair trimmed and his beard in order, with his civilian clothes clinging to his tall frame, he looked just like the Will Riker that Deanna remembered. Her face softened; she cut through the crowd gracefully, her old friends making way, and when she took his hand, Will’s anxiety ebbed into nothing. He smiled down at her — then at his friends, a little shy, a little rusty.

“Hello,” he said in a croak.

“Hi,” said Geordi, sounding distinctly more choked than he had a second ago.

“Hello, Number One,” said Picard with unconvincing gruffness.

“It is good to see you, Commander,” said Data brightly. “You will be pleased to know I have written two thousand thirty-eight new poems in your absence.”

Will’s smile, instead of faltering, grew a little wider. “No kidding,” he said, squeezing Deanna’s hand. “That’s something to look forward to at dinner, then. I’d like to hear them.”

“Indeed!” said Data while Picard grumbled under his breath. Will turned to Beverly questioningly, his emotions dipping — the anxiety gone now, replaced by gentle curiosity. He opened his mouth to ask how she was, but he didn’t get the chance.

Beverly burst into tears.

A murmur of concern rippled among the crowd as they moved to comfort her, but she turned away from all of them with a choked, “Oh, God, I’m s—” and wiped her eyes. Deanna, struck by the wave of emotion coming from her best friend, felt her face working just as Will glanced down at her. And when Will saw Deanna crying, his eyes teared up too, as they always had when she was in pain, and he looked helplessly at Picard and Geordi while Deanna hid her face against his arm and Beverly accepted a tissue from Data’s chest compartment.

“Do you always carry tissues in your chest?” asked Geordi, bemused.

“No, Geordi, not always,” said Data levelly. “I carry tissues only when I predict a chance of tears upward of sixty percent.”

“You predicted this?” Geordi asked.

Data handed a tissue to Deanna, who snatched it away without revealing her face. “Partially,” Data said.

“Where’d you go wrong?”

With a smile, Data handed a third tissue straight to Will. He shut his chest compartment and faced Geordi.

“I suspected you and the captain would cry as well,” he said.

Above Quark’s bar, in a secluded corner where the lantern lights were dim, Data helped Will push two tables together. Deanna observed with a clinician’s eye how Will twitched when Data’s hand brushed his hip — how he flinched when Picard touched him between the shoulder blades as he squeezed by — and the dread in his eyes when Geordi brought them their drinks.

But Will braced himself, took a sip of champagne, and his face smoothed right out.

“It doesn’t burn,” he said, relieved.

“It’s *champagne*, Number One,” said Picard, one eyebrow raised. “Champagne does not *burn*.”

“Well, Worf gave him bloodwine the *second* Dr. Saelee let him out of her sight,” Deanna said.

“He did *what*?” Beverly asked. “Who authorized that?”

“Worf did,” Deanna said apologetically.

“Where was the doctor?” Beverly threw her hands up. “Is this how Deep Space Nine runs its medical station?”

At her side Will took another cautious sip of champagne and grinned; his mind stretched out to her in quiet gratitude for handling the explanation.

"I halfway-thought he'd never drink alcohol again," Deanna said. "Worf said he nearly combusted."

"Bloodwine in sickbay," Geordi snorted, shaking his head. "Only Worf."

Picard sniffed the champagne and took a sip, his nose wrinkling at the taste. "I take it back," he said. "This qualifies as champagne as much as Mister Quark qualifies as an upright businessman. Geordi, didn't they have a better vintage?"

"You wanna haggle with him, sir, go right ahead." Geordi settled his elbows on the table and raised his eyebrows at Will, who was sneaking glances at Geordi's uncovered eyes. "Oh," Geordi realized. "You've never seen them before. Do you like them?"

Will's anxiety pitched and fell. He leaned a little closer for a better look, only a tiny bit self-conscious. "Oc—" he started, and hesitated. "Ocular implants?"

"Yep." Geordi made an effort not to blink, but when Will got too absorbed, he snapped his eyes toward his nose and made a face. Will drew back with a pale smile. "I got them ... oh, six years ago now. You just barely missed them."

"Do they...?" Will gestured to his own eyes.

"They don't see like yours do, no. Functionally, they're about the same as my VISOR. Just without the need for an external apparatus." Geordi blinked hard and uncrossed his eyes. "What about you, Commander? Any new wacky prostheses we should know about?"

Too much attention all at once. Will pretended not to hear, occupying himself with his drink. He glanced at Data, who stared back placidly.

"Are you prepared to hear a sonnet?" Data asked.

Will's face pinched. His sense of relief spiked. All he managed, by way of answer, was a nod — but that was enough. By the time Jean-Luc returned with what he deemed "a *true* bottle of champagne", Data was halfway through his third recited poem from the year 2376.

"There you are, Will," said Jean-Luc, breezily interrupting Data. He knocked Will's half-empty glass out of the way and poured him another. Beverly's hand shot across the table to stabilize both glasses before they could spill.

"Thanks," Will mouthed.

Slowly, Deanna warned him, and he tipped her a wink that no one else saw. Encouraged — perhaps a little warmed by it — she waited until a break in Data's recital and nudged him. "What do you think of the poetry?" she asked.

Will swallowed against a dry throat. "Much improved," he said. He glanced briefly at Data, eyes darting, but struggled to hold his gaze.

"In what ways have I improved, Commander?" Data asked brightly. "I have prepared a rubric for my past recitals, with points awarded for meter and—"

Will chuckled into his champagne even as Geordi admonished Data in low tones.

For the next hour, Deanna kept a monitor on Will's comfort levels, counting down the clock. Their guests were naturals. Jean-Luc could monologue engagingly on anything from classical music to archaeology and runes. Each topic piqued Will's interest, but was just outside of his expertise, ensuring he hadn't argued over it a millions times before with his duplicate. When Jean-Luc tired, Geordi was ready to swoop in, alternating from enthusiastic descriptions of engineering (much of which went over Will's head, and allowed him the chance to gather wool) to explosively funny stories about his exploits with Barclay and O'Brien, most of which Deanna suspected were made up.

Beverly interjected, when necessary, to fill in facts about the Dominion War that Will didn't know. Data interjected, when unnecessary, to supply exact dates and times of events Will had never heard of. But every interruption lightened Will's mood, so no one stopped him, and certainly no one pointed out that over the course of sixty minutes, Will Riker didn't say a single word. He drank; he listened; he smiled from time to time; and finally—

"Data," he said, so softly they almost didn't hear him. Across the table, Jean-Luc cut himself off. At Deanna's side, Beverly went so far as to hold her breath, and all of them tried not to stare as Will struggled to form the words inside his head. He had to close his eyes to get it out. "How's — how's Spot?" he asked.

Deanna blinked.

"Spot is nursing her third litter," said Data. "I have been studying their vocal emissions to catalog the language of kittens. I believe this is how they say 'feed me.'"

He emitted a perfect recording of a screeching cat. Will's eyes crinkled into a smile. "And ... how many cat scratches have you treated this week?" he asked, turning to Beverly.

His cadence was a little off, Deanna noted, but he didn't stammer — and when Beverly laughed, Will relaxed a little more. Not enough to lead the conversation or tell stories, like he might have done eight years ago in Ten-Forward.

But enough.

At the end of the night, all of them a little bit soused, Will worked up the courage to look Jean-Luc in the eye. His gaze roamed from one

of his old shipmates to the next, like he was memorizing their faces.

“Are you going to stick around so Worf can see you?” he asked.

“Of course,” said Jean-Luc at once, his voice roughened by alcohol.

“And *you* can make another attempt at bloodwine,” Beverly teased, kicking Will beneath the table.

He lowered his head, lips stretched into a smile. Deanna and Geordi opened their mouths at the same time, both ready with a quip, but they didn't get the chance to say it. A shadow fell across the table, tall and thin.

“You're all having fun,” said Nirish, amused.

“Oh—” Deanna fumbled to check the time and cursed under her breath. “Nirish! I meant to message you.”

She directed him to Jean-Luc, the only member of the party he hadn't met yet, and Deanna pretended not to notice the faint hint of disapproval coming from Jean-Luc's tipsy mind. He shook Nirish's hand politely enough, but there was a protective flare beneath the welcome that even Nirish could sense. He turned to Will and wagged his eyebrows.

“Quite the party,” he said with a grin.

Will just stared back, incapable of speaking now. The sudden intrusion of a stranger had rendered him mute.

“Well, you're ... well-loved,” said Nirish awkwardly. He gave up immediately after that, when nobody responded, and offered his arm to Deanna.

“You can join us—” Deanna started, at the same moment that Nirish said,

“We have that appointment in—”

They tripped over themselves. By instinct, Deanna almost backed up his excuse. But at the last second she stayed silent, waiting for him to finish the lie with eyebrows raised.

“We...have that appointment,” said Nirish weakly.

Deanna let the dishonesty rest between them. She glanced at her friends, certain that they felt it too — and by the time she glanced at Will, her moment of stubbornness had turned into a blush of shame. She *should* have backed Nirish up, she realized. He was her partner; if he wanted to speak in private ... but it was too late to change her actions now. Beverly mouthed a goodbye; Jean-Luc clasped her hand; Geordi offered a weak wave.

“Goodnight, Counselor,” said Data loudly, his voice following Deanna and Nirish down the hall.

Silence descended on the table in her absence. Jean-Luc examined his friends' faces, his own expression carefully locked. Beverly reached beneath the table and squeezed Will's hand as long as he would let her, and then she pulled away.

“Do you want to keep going?” she asked softly.

Will shook his head.

They murmured their goodbyes to a silent Riker. Data followed the captain's cue and slid out of his seat, but Geordi remained where he was.

“I'll follow you in a minute,” he said to Data, gesturing for him to go. Then he turned to Riker, sucking on his teeth. “Uh, you want me to walk you home?”

Riker was still staring off down the hall after Deanna, looking dazed. He managed a humorless smile and nodded.

“Some guy, right?” Geordi said. “Nirish — he was a Bajoran freedom fighter before he became a civilian consultant.”

Will nodded.

“Probably nothing too badass, though,” said Geordi awkwardly, and instantly regretted it when Will just gave him a flat look. “Not that you have any reason to feel threatened. I just ... don't think he's that badass.”

Will pretended not to hear. Clearing his throat, Geordi gestured for him to lead the way. They fell into an old familiar pace at each other's sides, the halls here darker than the *Enterprise's*, wider, but...

But still, it felt the same, and when they reached Will's room, Geordi just said a soft, “Goodnight,” and it didn't feel *wrong*, like he expected it to. Like any moment now a transporter beam would rip the commander away. He ambled down the corridor to meet Data, his head buzzing, his heart light, and inside the lonely, quiet room, Will switched off the white noise jammer still playing on his closet floor. He stood there in the silence, turned to face the trombone waiting on his dresser, and hesitantly warmed it up to play.

It was past midnight when Will Riker returned from dock. The *Defiant* had run into a Cardassian runabout on their mission — an unexpected bit of evasive maneuvering and combat flight, and Will had handled it like a pro. He could still feel the bone-shaking clap on the back Worf gave him afterward, and as he bounced down the empty halls to his quarters, his adrenaline faded, left his hands flexing and his veins cool.

He was still grinning, still breathless, when he stepped inside.

“Will?” he said quietly, keeping the lights off.

A lump shifted in the bed. By the time Will sat down to take his boots off, Will was stirring, rubbing at sleep-heavy eyes. “How was it?” he mumbled, his hair sticking up

“Good.” Will couldn’t keep his grin to himself. “Better than good.” He told Will about it in low tones while he unlaced his boots. He didn’t bother to line them up; he just kicked them across the room and slid his pants off as he spoke. Sleepily, Will folded back the blanket for him. “We got a good sparring session in, too,” said Will. “Me and Worf.”

“Good.” Will tugged impatiently on his brother’s uniform jacket. “Come on. I’m getting cold.”

With a grin, Will tossed the jacket to the floor and dove beneath the blankets, relishing in the warmth there. He tucked the blanket around himself and rolled closer to sap his brother’s body heat.

“What about you?” he asked. “Anything fun today?”

Eyes already closed, Will hummed. A smile played around his lips, like he was just remembering something pleasant. “Did Deanna tell you?” he asked.

Tell him...? Will’s smile faded a little. “I haven’t seen her,” he said. “What happened?”

Will smoothed a hand over his brother’s arm, a sleepy offer of comfort. “Nothing bad. They all showed up. The *Enterprise* crew.”

Alarm spiked through Will’s chest.

“Jean-Luc, Beverly, Geordi, Data.” He sighed, his features relaxing.

“You saw them without me?” Will tried not to let it show, how left out that made him feel — it wasn’t fair. He’d been gone half the week, every week, since Worf accepted him as crew. But still, he rolled over onto his stomach and tried — failed — to quell the uneasy tightness there.

“We had drinks at Quark’s,” Will said. “They’re still here. You’ll get to see them all tomorrow.”

Will hesitated. “Okay. Good.” He wanted to ask a million questions — yearned for a play-by-play account — but his brother was already falling asleep again. Like he’d never really woken up. As Will’s breathing evened out, the other Will lay awake, his eyes wide open and fixed to the dark static of the shadows.

He’d get to see everyone. His heart pounded at the thought. Jean-Luc, more than anybody — he’d get to see Jean-Luc again. How many sleepless nights had he passed on Nervalva IV, wondering if Jean-Luc was still alive, if he’d grown reckless without his first officer, if he’d run into the Borg again, or something worse, something new? The only person he’d worried about more had been Deanna. Maybe Worf.

Tentatively, Will allowed himself to imagine it. These were his friends, not unknown quantities. It wouldn’t be like socializing on the *Defiant*, where he was always tongue-tied, sometimes mute. Where everyone thought *he* was the timid twin, when really it was... He rolled over to face the other Will with a sigh.

He fell asleep, as he always did, with his palm over the other Will’s heart, and Will’s pulse thumping against his skin.

He could hear it coming.

In a blind panic he raced through the undergrowth of the forest. He wasn’t supposed to be here. He was supposed to be safe in the barn with the others, where no one could hurt him. Which way? How did he get back? He thought it was north, but he *couldn’t* go north — the animal chasing him, the predator, was coming from the north, and if he turned around now, he’d run straight into it.

Heart pounding, he kept his nose close to the forest floor and pushed through the brambles. Thorns caught on his wool and tangled around his hooves. Through the horizontal slits of his pupils, the forest seemed wild and dark, but with his head down like this he could see in all directions, even behind him, where the pig was charging his way.

He didn’t want to see. He didn’t want to hear. The dirty mud-streaked flesh, the wet nostrils gaping open, snorting puffs of air. The folded ears and sharp malevolent eyes. The curved teeth on the lower jaw, the too-human molars above.

It was the same speed as him. If he tripped, if he faltered—

Will jerked awake and slapped the hands off his shoulders with a cry.

“It’s me, it’s me,” his brother hissed, grabbing him again. “Sit up — *shh!*”

Will swallowed another hoarse shout. Heart thumping, he collapsed back against the bed, more to avoid his brother’s hands than out of exhaustion. Sweat glistened in his hair and dampened his clothes, and he had to rub his hands up and down his arms to assure himself that everything was there. Gently, Will eased a hand over his brother’s chest and watched him as he gulped for air.

“What was it about?” he asked softly.

Will shuddered. The image of grimy teeth and pink skin flashed through his mind. “You don’t remember?” he asked.

A pause. In the darkness, he could just barely make out his brother’s eyes.

“You ... you were a sheep,” the other Will said, half-smiling. “And you were running from a pig. Both of you had gotten loose somehow...”

His heart rate had calmed a little. His lungs still ached, and when he shifted his legs, he became aware for the first time that his underwear was clinging to him, soaked through. That was why Will woke him, he realized, heart sinking. Nice of him to pretend he didn’t notice. He covered his eyes, trying to keep the sudden burn of tears from showing, and waited for the heat in his cheeks to fade away.

“I gotta get up,” Will mumbled.

His brother let him go. Will smoothed a hand over the sheets — dry, mercifully — and searched for clean clothes.

“Why a pig?” his brother asked.

Will hesitated with the dresser drawer open. His gaze fell on the trombone, moved from its previous position, his reflection distorted in the bell. “What?” he asked.

“Why would a sheep be so afraid of a pig?” Will asked. “Isn’t it normally a *wolf* that chases a sheep?”

Was he trying to joke around? Lighten the mood? Will rifled through the underwear drawer in clipped, jerky movements, his stomach tight. As if he sensed Will’s confusion, his brother lowered his voice.

“I’m just curious,” he said.

You should know, Will wanted to snap. *I shouldn’t have to tell you.*

But he took a breath and faced his brother.

“The sheep and the pig live in the same barnyard,” he said. “They both get fed and protected by the farmer.”

Will nodded.

“But at the end of the year, one of them gets sheared,” Will said. “And the other gets slaughtered.”

He disappeared into the bathroom. Alone, the other Will stretched out in bed, staring at the ceiling. He fell asleep again, thinking of Jean-Luc, of Deanna, to the gentle drumbeat of the shower spray on his brother’s skin.

The crew of the *Enterprise* left Deep Space Nine three days later, and it was after seeing them off that Will found his brother packing his things.

“What are you doing?” he asked, freezing in the doorway.

Will glanced up. He kept shoving clothes into a duffel bag automatically, without stopping. “I thought I’d move out,” he said, as if that explained it. “We’ve got two bedrooms. We might as well use them.”

Will felt like he’d been slapped in the face.

“*Why?*” he asked.

Will gave him a pained look. Slowly, Will stepped inside and let the door close behind him. He circled his brother like a predator — sheep and pig — and eyed the clothes left behind. Usually they shared; no reason to differentiate between who wore what. But Will had parceled them out according to some mysterious inner system, and now he was taking half of Will’s clothes away.

“What’s this about?” asked Will, flummoxed. Heat touched his cheeks as he remembered the night he returned from Worf’s ship, the terrible nightmare, the lapse of self-control. “Is it because I...?”

“No,” said Will at once. He touched his brother’s wrist to comfort him. “No. Seriously. I just...”

“You won’t be able to sleep alone,” Will told him. “You’ll have nightmares.”

Will shrugged. He checked the pips on a hanging tunic and left it where it was.

“*Are you sleeping alone?*” Will asked, anxiety spiking through him. “You and Deanna—?”

“Relax,” Will told him. He squeezed his brother’s hand. “You keep the trombone. I’ll get a new one.”

He brushed past Will, shrugging the bag onto his shoulder. He made it two steps before Will grabbed him by the wrist and jerked him back.

“Don’t do this,” he said.

“Talk to Deanna,” Will said, his voice low. “She can help you with the nightmares, you know. You just have to tell her.”

“That’s not what this is about and you damn well know it.”

Will jerked his hand out of his brother’s grasp. “She can sense the nightmares anyway. There’s no point in hiding them from her.”

“Listen to me—”

Will turned to go. His brother grabbed him by the shoulder strap.

“Goddammit,” he snapped, turning to face him. The duffel bag fell to the floor. “You already sleep alone every time you go on the *Defiant*. What does it matter if we sleep alone here too?”

“It’s different,” Will said.

“How?”

“You *know* it is.”

Will picked his duffel up with a scowl. He made it to the door this time before Will caught him. He hooked his fingers in Will’s sleeve and pulled him back, exposing the tattoo on his wrist, that ever-present reminder of what made them different. Gentle, pleading, he said, “Tommy—”

Will shook him off.

He was out the door before Will could say anything else.

Off-duty, the *Defiant*’s crew members met in Quark’s bar more often than not. Worf was gone already, called away on an ambassadorial duty to the Klingon Empire — so Will, while part of the group, drank alone.

They weren’t excluding him. Certainly not deliberately. It was just that they’d chosen a table too close to the entrance, where there was nowhere to sit with your back against a wall. Will had chosen a smaller table, single-person, close enough to hear, to contribute if somebody said his name. But far enough away that, mostly, they forgot about him. He turned his drink in a circle, watching his reflection change with the ripples as he shook his glass.

“Sleeping separate, huh?” said a voice above him.

Will glanced up. His lips curled into a welcoming grin. “Nirish,” he said. “Pull up a chair.”

Nirish’s expression flickered, but he obeyed.

“You try out that klavion yet?” Will asked.

“...No.” Nirish’s chair scraped over the floor. “Not yet,” he said.

“I can teach you the basics,” Will offered.

Nirish narrowed his eyes. “You’ll teach me a Bajoran instrument?” he asked lightly.

“No, but how to read music, how to identify the scales...”

Nirish huffed out a humorless laugh.

“The *Enterprise* had a jazz band,” Will explained. “Playing solo is rewarding in its own right. But there’s nothing like jamming with a band. We get you started and I bet that tin ear will disappear.”

“And then I can play backup for your harmonica solos,” Nirish said.

Will sat back with a slight grin. “Trombone,” he said. “I do play the harmonica, but anyone can play that. My real love is the trombone. That’s the one with the slide.”

Nirish’s chuckle at least sounded more genuine this time. He held up a finger when the bartender glanced his way, and soon enough, he had a drink at his elbow: clear Bajoran moonshine, softened up with ice. The wait gave Will time to think; time to get anxious.

“Deanna never told me how you met,” he said, trying to keep control of the conversation.

Nirish sipped his drink with a hum. “We met here,” he said. “She sees a lot of my soldiers, professionally. And a lot of my enemies. I used to joke that I make the patients and she treats them.”

Will attempted a smile. Nirish, reading his face, let his eyes drop.

“Yeah,” he said softly. “It was funnier in my head.”

Will shrugged one shoulder. “Did she ever treat *you*?” he asked.

“That’s a bit of a conflict, isn’t it?” Nirish said with a pointed glance. “A doctor seeing her patient ... I don’t imagine that would work out well. Besides, I never needed it.”

“And there are plenty of other counselors to go to,” Will said.

Nirish waved this away. He leaned forward, his eyes sharpening. “Will...” he started, and Will winced at the overly-familiar tone. “You’re the one who played a song for me, right? In the holosuite?”

“Right...” said Will cautiously.

“I thought so.” He tapped a rhythm on the tabletop. “Can I ask you a question?”

Will inclined his head. He was hyper-cognizant of his crewmates glancing his way, wondering about the newcomer.

“Was it you who asked to move?” Nirish said. “Or was it him?”

Will blinked. “We...”

“Start a sentence with ‘I,’” Nirish told him. “You might like it.”

Will’s mood flipped. He sat up straighter, eyes flat. “It was *our* decision,” he said firmly. “And it’s none of *your* business.”

He stood up before Nirish could respond. With a purposeful stride, he joined his shipmates at the large table in the center of the room. They made room for him at once, their conversation dying as they pushed their chairs apart. Nirish followed, but he didn’t attempt to join them. He just leaned over and clicked his glass against Will’s.

“I’ll leave you alone,” he said warmly. “And hey, I didn’t mean anything by it.”

Will grunted, his face drawn into a scowl.

“I just wanted to congratulate you, that’s all,” said Nirish. He smiled widely. “No more messy sheets.”

Will’s crewmates turned to study him as Nirish walked away. Face hot, he pretended not to see their stares, but he could only stand it for so long. He kept his head down, his blush growing hotter by the second. When he spoke, he heard himself stammer and had to close his eyes.

“I’m — I’m done drinking,” he said quietly.

Nobody stopped him when he left.

He told one person about the incident. Not Worf. Not Deanna.

He told Will.

And Will (the gentle one; the one who failed his Starfleet tests; the one who didn’t speak) beat Nirish to a pulp.

Will sat with his hands on his thighs and his back against the waiting room wall. His spine ached from sitting there so long, but there had been no updates: not from Deanna, who had shot him a furious look on her way past; not from the other Will, who had broken his hand on Nirish’s jaw; and certainly from Nirish himself. The medics spared a glance for Will every now and then, but no one came over to speak.

Not until Worf found him.

“This is a miserable place,” he announced in a rumble, stalking through the waiting room. He loomed over Will, eyes narrow. “Was it you who beat him?”

“No,” said Will, mouth dry. He held his wrist up so Worf could see his tattoo. “It was the other one.”

The other one. How weird to say that aloud, when he’d spent so much time railing against anyone who acted like they were different people. Worf tilted his head to the side, studying Will closely. Finally, with a shrug, he said,

“You fought honorably. Whichever of you it was.”

“It was — thank you,” said Will, giving up. He knotted his fingers together. “They won’t let me see him...”

“Then there is no point in staying here,” said Worf firmly. “Come.”

He turned on his heel before Will could process that.

“Come where?” he called, refusing to move.

Worf didn’t answer, and he didn’t stop. Will made a split-second decision and rushed after him, abandoning his chair. The medics scowled at him on his way past, and one admonished him for running, but he caught up with Worf in no time.

“Come where?” he asked again as they exited sickbay.

“To the galley. We will feast on bloodwine and gagh,” said Worf.

“Feast?” Will’s head was spinning. “I thought everyone *liked* Nirish.”

“It is not about Nirish,” said Worf. “It is about your skill as a warrior.”

Will put a hand on Worf’s forearm. “Worf, have you heard anything? Is he *okay*?”

Worf slowed his pace. His chest swelled with pride. “I have received a medical report,” he said with clear satisfaction. “It appears you broke his nose. He has lost one tooth.”

Will’s face creased in dismay. But Worf’s eyes were glinting, and after a moment, against his own better judgment, Will cracked a smile.

“Revel in your triumph,” Worf advised him. “It is honorable for a warrior to celebrate his victories.”

“If you say so.”

“I say so,” said Worf firmly. “And after we feast, we will spar.”

Will faltered a little at that. “*After* we feast? Don’t you want to switch those around?”

“It will hone your skills to fight on a full stomach,” Worf told him. He turned down the hallway toward the galley, pausing only once to look over his shoulder at Will. “Next time,” he said, “you will break his collarbone too.”

It was Worf who submitted Will Riker’s name for the semi-annual command test.

It was Captain Picard who approved the request, pending psychological approval.

It was Will who passed, and it was Worf again who kept an eye on him aboard the *Defiant*, with his full rank reinstated, and his position still locked in at the helm. If Will minded not being a first officer — or a captain — he didn’t show it. But the longer they were away from Deep Space Nine, the more agitated he got. Every mission, rinse and repeat, he started off as the genial, outgoing Riker that Worf knew; and every mission, by the end, he was at his shipmates’ throats.

Today he was antsy. Worf watched from the command chair, his face perfectly neutral, as the tactical officer needled Will.

“But that can’t be *all* that happened on Ursu Minor,” Lieutenant Peeler insisted.

“Lieutenant, *lots* of stuff happened on Ursu Minor,” said Riker, exasperated. “You want me to give you the full report?”

A flash of irritation passed over Peeler’s face. “I’m just curious. You know, they teach that mission at the Academy now. It wouldn’t kill you to talk about it.”

“You gotta be kidding me.” Riker twisted in his seat, eyebrows raised. “They teach that at the *Academy*? Why?”

“Because there are *logs* for it, first of all,” Peeler said. “Not every mission of consequence comes with detailed logs. And because it was some damned good tactics, alright? So when you made the decision to go through the goss-slime, did you check the chemical composition first, or—”

“Of *course* I checked the chemical composition,” said Riker. “You think I’d lead my men underwater without checking?”

“Well, I only ask because our professor made such a huge deal about it. Like what if that goo was actually a Changeling?”

“Why the hell would it be—”

Voices chimed in to inform Riker of the finer points of the Dominion War. His shoulders grew tight, face set, eyes on the helm. For five minutes, Worf’s officers spoke over each other, arguing the details, while he and Riker remained silent.

When the voices faded, Peeler spoke up again.

“I heard you got a dressing-down after that mission,” he said. “Is that true?”

“Yes,” said Riker, voice clipped.

“That was on the *Pegasus*? With Captain Pressman?” Peeler’s eyes sparkled. “Was he really as bad as everyone says?”

“He...” Riker busied himself with the controls, his face stormy. “Let it go, Lieutenant.”

“Well, my professor said you should have been promoted for that maneuver, not put in the brig.”

“I *wasn’t* put in the brig,” said Riker patiently. “I was busted down to half-pay for a month. That’s all. And it’s not like we really need money anyway, so it wasn’t much of a punishment.”

“Still. Disciplinary action for a display of valor—”

“Peeler,” said Riker, long-suffering.

“—and the ingenuity to travel *through* the slime, instead of around—”

Riker slammed his palm against the helm console, cutting Peeler off. Then, face twisted, he smacked it again and again, louder each time,

until the whole bridge was staring. He shook the sting out of his hand and grasped the helm controls with a muttered curse, his face working. Any moment now, Worf suspected, he would burst into tears, but he sniffed and kept his eyes on the viewport, and pretended he didn't see everyone looking his way.

Worf glanced over at tactical. Peeler had gone a shade of puce. The clock over the turbolift doors showed a time of 2146, almost time for a changing of the guard. Tapping his communicator, Worf said,

"Lieutenant Bixley. Ensign Erlow. Report to bridge."

At the helm, Riker had hitched his shoulders up to his ears, sensing a reprimand. Worf stood and brushed his uniform down.

"Commander Riker, dismissed," he said. "Lieutenant Ord, you have the conn."

"Aye, sir." Ord slid over into Riker's seat as soon as Riker vacated it. With a raised eyebrow, Worf gestured for Riker to follow him — not to the ready room, but to the turbolift. The bridge stayed silent even after they left, as Worf had known they would, but inside the lift, with the doors closed, Riker pushed out a sigh and wiped his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Worf," he said. "I didn't—"

"Please," said Worf dryly, "call me 'commander.'"

Riker winced. Head down, he said, "I'll apologize the next time I see him, sir. I just..."

"Do not apologize," said Worf, his voice stiff.

"Worf..."

"A warrior does not apologize."

Riker relaxed his shoulders with visible effort. "Then what did you call me in here for?" he asked, exasperated. "Either put me in my place or let me go lick my wounds in private."

"I cannot," said Worf, "because you are not wounded. Yet."

The turbolift spit them out right next to the dojo. Worf strode out, eager to get started, but Riker remained behind. After a beat, he followed, hands twitching.

"What are we doing?" he asked.

Worf unlocked the dojo door. "We are sparring," he said simply. "You met my wife only twice, so perhaps this phrase has little meaning to you. You would not have heard it when gambling against her. But as Jadzia would say..."

He tossed an anbo-jytsu stick Will's way and bared his teeth.

"...You need to let off steam."

They were two days out from Deep Space Nine when the shipboard AI alerted Worf to a problem. It did so via PADD report, a quiet method of data transmission that allowed Worf to receive non-emergency info without troubling his crew. It troubled *him* plenty, though, because it was deep into the night cycle when his PADD lit up and started flashing.

He studied the screen through slitted eyes. Ever since the Dominion War, the berth was set to record possible symptoms of post-battle trauma. This system had helped detect early signs of trouble among the crew more than once, with an AI filtering out the difference between nightmares and less-alarming nighttime activities that the crew might get up to in bed. Over the course of several missions, Will Riker had unknowingly tripped the alarm more than once, but never enough to necessitate a counseling report.

This was different. Worf struggled to make sense of the readings. The computer data was clear; he just didn't want to understand. In the middle of the night, while Riker's crewmates slept, the commander had endured yet another nightmare — only this time, when he woke, he quietly stripped his bed and left the berth entirely.

Worf tapped his combadge.

"Commander Riker," he said sleepily, "report location."

It was a long moment before Riker answered. Not for the first time, Worf wished the *Defiant* had the *Enterprise's* locator services.

"I'm in the laundry," Riker said finally. "Why? Do you need me?"

That confirmed Worf's suspicions from the PADD report. He hesitated, reviewing the data there.

"No," he said finally. "As you were."

Riker made an exasperated sound, and the comm cut off. In bed, Worf called up a blank message template and typed in Deanna's name. His fingers hovered over the screen. The blank message box blinked at him, waiting to be filled in.

He had reported this before. With Riker, though he hadn't known then which twin it was. It was standard, among the Federation, to report these incidents. Symptoms like these indicated a need for counseling among adults, sometimes among children, too. But Riker had only

just passed his command test, and if this bed-wetting incident got out, it would topple his newly-restored rank faster than anything outside a court-martial. Worf closed his eyes and pictured this information on Riker's permanent record.

He deleted the message template.

He went to sleep.

In one section of sickbay, a medic was closing the gap in Nirish's bleeding gums. In this section of sickbay, Dr. Saelee set Will's fractured knuckles for the second time this month, her expression grim. It was only when he flexed his fingers, testing his range of movement, that Will sensed Deanna waiting outside.

But who was she here to visit? Nirish, of course. His stomach tightened. It wouldn't be pleasant to see her with him, but it would be far *less* pleasant for her to come in here, for him to see the disappointment in her eyes. And worse to explain himself, because he'd *have* to — because he wouldn't back down from his basic belief that Nirish was an *asshole*, and Will (the other Will) didn't deserve to be made fun of in front of his crew.

Aw, hell. Will scrubbed a newly-healed hand through his hair, self-righteous anger spiraling into remorse. Even when there was just one Will Riker, he wouldn't have beat up anyone who taunted him. It didn't matter if it was in front of his crew. The other Will knew that. It was why he hadn't reacted. But defending yourself was different from defending a brother. And he was getting a headache trying to figure out which one he'd done.

He rested his head in his hands, eyes closed against the bright sickbay lights.

"Will?" said a voice nearby.

Deanna. Will winced.

"Are you still injured?" Deanna asked, resting a hand on his shoulder.

"He's good to go," said Dr. Saelee, her voice tinged with disapproval. "I'd like to keep Nirish for dental surgery."

"Okay." Deanna squeezed lightly, and Will fought the urge to shrug her off. His body translated his struggle into something worse: he actually leaned into her touch. Amused, as if she sensed the internal warfare, Deanna said, "Walk with me."

Will slid off the examination table. They had to exit through the main lobby, where Nirish's door was blessedly closed. At least he wouldn't see them leaving together. With his head ducked, Will weathered the stares from sickbay staff. In the hall it was easier. He could relax a little, breathe a little better. The only issue was Deanna at his side, her emotions deceptively calm.

"Straight to therapy?" Will guessed.

But Deanna led him the opposite way — not toward her office, but to Quark's.

"The holosuite," she said. "I want to take a walk with you. Anywhere you choose."

Will let his suspicion leak into her mind.

"It's not a trick, Will," Deanna assured him, half-smiling.

But he'd beat up her partner. Surely that merited a trick or two.

"I disagree," Deanna said, even though Will hadn't exactly put this thought into words. She took his hand, and this time, when she spoke, he did sense a hint of reproof. "Besides, Nirish isn't exactly my *partner* right now. He delivered the news shortly after you broke his nose."

Triumph mixed with guilt mixed with anxiety, each emotion screaming over the other. Will shifted his shoulders uncomfortably. In Deanna's mind, he could sense something similar: sadness, certainly, and anger (directed at him), and hotter anger (directed at Nirish), and something like protectiveness, a fierce desire to fight for something or somebody who'd been kicked while they were down.

...Oh. Will knew her well enough to guess what that meant. After they were separated, after Nirish was taken to sickbay to repair his broken nose and Will was restrained by security, Deanna must have talked to him. And Nirish, seething, embarrassed, must have doubled down on the same taunts he aimed at Will. The other Will.

Deanna wouldn't stand for that. And Nirish wouldn't want to be with somebody who saw a glimmer of humanity in a man who spent eight years eating cave slugs and forgetting how to speak. Will almost smiled.

"Don't be too smug about it," Deanna warned him.

"Wouldn't dream of it," he managed. They reached the holosuite, deserted, and Will went straight to the program list to select a good spot. "Anywhere I want?" he asked.

Deanna just nodded. She watched over his shoulder as he pored through the list. There were dozens of locations on Betazed, no doubt programmed by Deanna herself, or by Lwaxana on one of her visits. Most of the programs were for Bajor, and Will had never been. But near the bottom, a fat selection of Terran hikes presented itself, and Will navigated straight to Alaska.

"Did you program this?" he asked, hesitating over a program marked 'Valdez.'

Deanna peered at it. “No. It was here when I arrived.”

“Then who...?” Will opened the metadata. It had been accessed numerous times during the eight years he was gone. First by Worf, he noted, his chest squeezing tight. Then by a list of names, most of which he didn’t recognize, some of which he did. Deanna, over and over again. O’Brien, Keiko, even Geordi once or twice.

“They missed you,” Deanna murmured.

Will struggled to keep his expression under control. He started the program with a tap of the fingers.

“If Worf really missed me, he would have programmed a bat’leth tournament,” he said, trying to maintain his humor. “My bet is he just wanted to test his winter endurance.”

Deanna rolled her eyes. They stepped into the program, straight into an Alaskan lodge where the walls were lined with parkas and snowshoes. Will chuckled to himself. He selected the appropriate gear for each of them while Deanna wandered over to a crackling fire and inspected the hot chocolate station.

“This will be nice when we come back,” she said, eyes sparkling.

“Or take one for the road,” Will said. He handed her a parka and prepared a travel cup. He’d wanted to do this, he remembered dimly, years ago. He’d half-way-planned it: a trip to Alaska with Deanna; a private lodge, or a night in his dad’s old log cabin; winter hikes and summer visits to the lake, their breath visible as the sun dimmed but never really died. He shrugged into his coat and helped Deanna tighten the velcro on her gloves.

“Good?” he asked.

“Good,” Deanna murmured.

They made their way out into the snow. Sunlight glittered off the banks, pristine, without a single footprint to break the white canvas before them. Deanna held the travel cup close to her face and let the steam play over her lips as they walked, without discussing it, straight toward the fir trees in the distance. They rose up like ink-strokes over the drifts of snow, a sharp scent of sap and pine awakening the senses, blue shadows stretching out over the ground and chilling Will and Deanna when they crossed through.

“Do you love him?” Will forced himself to ask.

Deanna sipped her hot chocolate, eyelashes low. He sensed her hesitation, her displeasure — both with the question and with Nirish. But not with Will.

“He can be cruel,” Deanna said.

Will digested this. His knuckles still stung; the gloves he’d selected rubbed harshly against the smooth, sensitive skin where Dr. Saelee’s regenerator had healed him.

“He’s Bajoran,” Will said finally. “He played an active role in the war.”

“I know, Will.”

“I just mean...” With a steadying breath, Will turned to her. Deanna looped her arm through his and leaned against him, half-hiding her face. “He’s seen things, that’s all,” Will said. “And you treat trauma...”

“Yes.”

“...so you know that traumatized people can be cruel.” He thought of the packed bag, the abandoned room he’d shared with his brother. The fingers clinging to his sleeve.

“Yes,” Deanna whispered. “I know.”

He’d said it like a confession. Now he searched her face, his eyes strained and pleading. His mind brushed up against hers like a gentle touch.

Can I kiss you? he asked.

Deanna closed her eyes, jaw tight. She didn’t want to say it, he knew. She shouldn’t *have* to say it. He shouldn’t ask her. But...

She nodded, and soft, warm lips met hers. The kiss was chaste, open-mouthed but shy, just a slow, almost platonic brush of Will’s lips against hers. His palm cupped her cheek, broad and achingly familiar, lined with calluses he’d never had before, when he was her Will Riker. His thumb brushed the corner of her lips as he pulled away and he stared down at her, at her flushed cheeks and long eyelashes, at the snowflakes catching in her hair.

He kissed her again. This time, he didn’t have to ask.

There was more room in Deanna’s quarters with Nirish’s things gone. He’d removed them five days ago, shortly after his dental surgery, and refused to speak to her since. It was a good thing he didn’t try, Deanna decided. She’d been the one to find them fighting, alerted by the spike of anger and adrenaline. So she’d seen Nirish with his hands up in an ineffective block, and she’d seen Will’s fist crashing into his face once, twice, again and again — and she’d heard what Nirish said as he spit out his own tooth, blood streaking down his face.

She couldn't forget those words. Even if they hadn't been aimed at *Will*, they would have been too cruel. Deanna shook her head, putting it out of mind, and studied the empty spot on her dresser where Nirish used to keep his PADD.

It was a good place for a vase, she decided. She'd just called up a catalog on her replicator when the door chimed. Deanna dipped into the mind outside, testing their mood — confused, a little concerned, but nothing alarming. It was no one she'd met before; the mind was similar to Will's, but didn't rise up to meet hers when she touched it. A relative, she decided, or a very close friend.

"Come," she called.

The door slid open. Deanna selected a neo-Betazoid style vase and hit the 'replicate' tab before she turned around.

She froze.

"...Will?" she said softly.

He stared back at her, as dazed-looking as she felt. Why hadn't she realized it was him? Off-balance, Deanna gestured for him to take a seat.

"I just got back," he said, wavering.

"Back—" Oh! Deanna covered her confusion as quick as she could. This was Riker X, she suspected, and when she glanced down at his hand — forefinger rubbing anxiously against his thumb — she could just barely see his tattoo poking out from under his sleeve. "Well, welcome back," she said awkwardly. She brushed against his mind again, but he still didn't respond. "Did you wish to talk?" Deanna asked.

He nodded. He didn't sit. He glanced around her room, from the empty space on her dresser to the coat hanger, where Nirish's jacket was conspicuously missing.

"Yes...?" said Deanna.

He tore his eyes back to her with a blink. His gaze fell on her lips. Deanna's heart flipped when he raised a hand and touched his own — tenderly, as if he'd split the knuckles somewhere, as if they were bruised.

"I thought..." he murmured.

Deanna's heart skipped a beat.

"I thought something might have happened," he finished lamely, not meeting her eyes. "I — have you seen him?"

"Nirish?" Deanna asked.

"Will." He licked his lips. "Me."

Deanna relaxed her shoulders. "Not today," she said carefully. "But I'm sure he's around somewhere, if you'd like to speak to him."

He nodded. Deanna thought he might sit, but he didn't. Instead, he turned on his heel with a half-hearted wave goodbye and headed for the door. He was halfway through it when Deanna gathered her courage and said,

Imzadi?

But she didn't think he heard her, and on the far side of Deep Space Nine, the other Will responded,

Yes, I'm here.

The door to Will's quarters slid open without a chime or access request. He got to his feet as the mirror image of him strode through, forehead creased.

"You made a move on Deanna," Will accused.

Will blinked. His face, against his will, settled into the same authoritative scowl his twin wore, the one he'd turn on work-shy ensigns when he was still on the *Enterprise*. "Welcome back," he said sourly.

"You waited until I was gone and you made a move on her!"

"I made a move on her? What the hell do *you* think you did?"

"No, don't evade the damn subject." The door hissed shut behind him and Will stepped forward, his voice going up a notch. "You waited until I was gone, until I was on *duty*, and you swooped right in!"

"You weren't showing any interest," Will snapped. "And like I said, *you* swooped in first — you don't get to play high and mighty about this."

"That was different and you damn well know it. That was *back then*, before we... And besides—"

"And besides—" Will started.

“—Deanna can make her own damn choices!” they said simultaneously.

Will bit his tongue, heat rushing to his face. Across from him, the other Will spun on his heel with a scowl. He searched Will’s dresser, jerking open the drawers.

“What are you doing?” Will asked.

Will didn’t answer. He moved to the console where Will worked and rifled through its compartments. Will knew what he was looking for before his brother found it, and when the other Will tossed a pack of cards down on the table, he wasn’t surprised.

“What is this?” Will asked, fighting to keep his voice level.

“Deal,” said Will, fuming.

“Deal *what*? What point are you trying to make?”

“Deal the damn cards,” Will snapped, spots of color lighting up his cheeks. “Let’s see who’s lucky.”

“For God’s sake—”

Will grabbed the deck of cards and brushed past his brother entirely.

“Where are you going?” Will snapped.

“I’m leaving! I don’t have to put up with this.”

Will caught him by the arm, his grip tight enough to bruise, and that was it for Will’s temper. He snapped back and punched his brother in the chest, just above the heart, his knuckles screaming at the glancing contact with Will’s collarbone. With a bitten-off curse, Will rolled with the blow and lunged for his brother’s hands, pinning them together, only to lose his grip. One Will’s boot struck the other’s knee; one Will’s head crashed into the other’s; both of them saw stars, and when the first Will fell, the other fell, too, their legs tangling as they hit the floor. Dazed, one of them let go, and the other lunged forward, pinning his brother to the ground. He straddled Will’s hips and slammed his head against the floor.

“Fuck—” Will said, the fight going out of him. He held up his hands for peace. “Will—”

With a snarl, his brother hauled him up and slammed his head against the floor again. Will cried out in pain.

“*Will—*” he said.

Will twisted his fingers in his brother’s clothes and jerked him to his knees. Blunt fingernails clawed at his face as he shoved Will inside the closet and held the doors closed. The only thing he could reach was the damn trombone, and it was child’s play to break the slide and slam it through the door handles as a lock. The other Will banged against the inside of the door with a shout of protest — and when he kicked it, Will kicked back, their boots making contact with a slab of wood between them.

“You always were the lucky one,” they said simultaneously, and the fight went out of them. Will wiped the blood from the cuts on his cheek. In the closet, Will sank to the floor, his knees knocking together, and ran a finger over the raised skin on his tattoo. He reached compulsively for the hidden white noise jammer and turned it on.

“Will,” he said, voice shaking.

Will left him there. In the dark.

Alone.

It was Worf who found him eventually, when neither Riker showed up for a scheduled shuttle run. The bedroom hadn’t been slept in for two days, and the closet door was bowed and broken. But Will was still inside. He was curled up in the corner, his face streaked with dried tears, his uniform stained with blood. A pool of it had congealed underneath him, and it made a tacky ripping sound when Worf pulled him to his feet.

“Can you walk?” he asked, kicking the white noise jammer aside.

Will leaned against him, boneless, and buried his face against Worf’s chest. Slowly, Worf ran his fingers down Will’s arm to his wrist, the source of the blood. Where an identifying tattoo had once been, the skin had been torn away. Flesh and blood were clotted underneath Will’s fingernails. The wound, when Worf touched it, oozed another drop of near-black blood.

With a quiet curse, Worf ripped a length of fabric from Will’s sleeve. He knotted it around the wound as a makeshift bandage.

“How long have you been in there?” he asked, eyeing the broken trombone, the rudimentary lock.

Will didn’t answer. He kept his face hidden against Worf’s chest, his breathing thin.

“Commander?” Worf asked, touching his shoulder.

No answer.

With a sinking stomach, Worf lifted Will in his arms, bridal-style, and carried him straight to sickbay.

Sickbay was quiet. The lights were low, letting the patients rest their eyes as night cycle dripped toward day. In one private room, the entertainment console had been set to emit a gentle hum of white noise, just loud enough to leak through to the room next door. The occupant either didn't notice or pretended not to hear the visitor who chimed for access.

So the visitor came inside without permission.

"Will," said a quiet voice.

Will kept his eyes fixed to the console's speaker, to the little holes emitting that persistent hum. His double circled the bed and studied his face: the distant eyes, the pale skin and hollow cheeks.

"Two days," one of them whispered. Then the visitor added,

"You could have got out. You didn't have to stay there."

Will didn't answer.

"*Why* did you stay there?"

For the same reason it tortured him so badly to be locked inside in the first place. Because it was dark. Because it was lonely. Will closed his eyes and saw Nerval IV, those eight long years alone, with no one else to talk to. Lying in bed, Will closed his eyes and saw the same.

No point. Better to think of the holosuite, set to Valdez, Alaska, with Deanna at his side. Better to think of Worf's ship, bare feet sliding on the dojo floor, the scent of adrenaline in the air. Or Worf's chest, solid and warm against his head, Worf's unfaltering arms keeping him up on the walk to sickbay. Will touched his twin's arm gently, twined their fingers together, turned his brother's wound to face the light.

It had been healed. The tattoo was still gone, unrecoverable. Will studied that blank expanse of skin, intact and tender, and turned to search the sickbay walls. He picked through the tools that lined the medical cupboard nearby: hyposprays and regenerators, yes, but also cleansers of every type. Lasers to remove hair before surgery. Sanitizers. And... yes, here it was.

He rolled his sleeve up, exposing the tattoo there. The little blotches of ink that marked him as different from his brother. With a short breath, Will activated the device and aimed the laser at his skin.

It sank into his flesh and wiped the ink away, and when he was done, when there was nothing left to distinguish one Riker from the other, he lay down next to his brother on the hospital bed and slept beside him one last time.

Worf sat in the visitor's chair, legs akimbo. One Riker, healthy and in uniform, leaned against the counter with his arms crossed. The other one, still dressed in hospital pajamas, didn't bother to get out of bed.

"The *Defiant* has received orders to Earth," Worf said. "There, it will be outfitted with the technology required for scientific exploration."

Both Rikers raised an eyebrow.

"All ships were refitted for combat when the Dominion War broke out," Worf explained. "Few have been returned to baseline in the years since. Now it is the *Defiant's* turn."

"And once it's been refitted...?" Riker asked.

Worf looked him in the eye. "From there, it will disembark on a five-year mission." He took a deep breath and glanced between the two. "I want you to join my crew on a permanent basis."

The Rikers were silent. The one in the hospital bed clutched his bandaged wrist. The other was so still he'd even stopped breathing, eyes going distant.

"Are we ready for that?" asked Riker.

"No," said Worf. "I do not believe you are." He took a slow breath. "But Counselor Troi believes it is necessary, and I agree. I trust you not to let my crew down."

Silence. Then:

"Which one of us?" asked the one in pajamas, his voice little more than a murmur.

Worf's throat tightened.

"*You*," he said firmly.

He reached out and turned Will's hand over, so he couldn't even see the wound where the identifying tattoo once stood.

"I want you," Worf said.

When it came time, the twins said goodbye with a handshake. Nothing more.

Deanna and Will stood back, away from the docking clamps, and watched as Will and Worf disappeared down the walkway. Guilt and shame and fierce, triumphant hope soared in Will's chest. He didn't dare to think that things were turning out alright.

He reached beneath his shirt and scratched the burn scar on his chest.

He edged his sleeve up to his elbow and ground his thumbnail into the sore spot where his tattoo used to be.

On the bridge, he took the helm, his pips shining in the soft light, and waited for his captain's orders.

On Deep Space Nine, he threaded his fingers through Deanna Troi's and attempted a smile.

"Warp Two, Mister Riker," Worf said, and he turned to face the stars. "Engage."

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