

Phantom Pain

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Phantom Pain

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Summary

In the fourth hour of Beta Shift, Commander Riker trailed off mid-sentence and did not pick up where he left off. Eyebrows furrowed, Data turned to study him and found Commander Riker squinting at the viewscreen, one hand raised to shield his eyes. A vein throbbed in Riker's temple, and his face had turned a pale shade of #FAF9DE.

"Sir?" Data prompted.

After a slight delay, Commander Riker said faintly, "I'm fine."

He was still pale, but at least he looked like Will.

Deanna studied him as he slept. She'd found a blanket she'd sent him years ago folded at the foot of his bed — a Betazoid silk, worn from years of use, but lovingly cared for. Now she smoothed it over his chest, careful not to brush against the still-healing surgical scar. Brown disinfectant stains covered Will's face and matted his hair, leftover from the operation to remove Odan — normally the medics would wash it out for him, but Deanna had dipped into his sleeping mind and demanded he be moved before he woke. It would be easier for him; he'd been uneasy around hospitals since Malcor III.

And easier for Beverly, too.

Quietly, Deanna filled a basin with warm water and soap from Will's bathroom. She didn't have much time before the sedatives wore off, so she dipped a soft cloth in the water and squeezed it, dabbing the wet surface over Will's forehead and cheeks. Bit by bit, the disinfectant came loose and washed away. His hair took longer — she had to take small handfuls of it and squeeze them gently between the rag, easing away the crunch of dried alcohol and leaving his hair soft and clean.

There was a scar on his temple, barely visible, leftover from his time on Malcor III. Deanna brushed her thumb over it. Barely an inch long, and so thin you almost couldn't see it — the type of minor wound that Beverly could normally heal in a heartbeat. But he'd been stranded on Malcor for so long, with so many untended wounds, that he'd had to do a lot of natural healing when he returned. Many of his injuries were too far gone for the regenerator.

A close brush with death. And only two weeks later, he'd jumped at the chance to host a Trill, not knowing if he'd survive. He almost hadn't.

Deanna swept the wet cloth over his closed eyelids one last time, her thoughts troubled, and felt his lashes flutter against her palm. The *imzadi* bond awakened in his mind before he did, a gentle touch of golden light against the edges of her mind: his heart, his soul, responding by instinct to the distress he felt inside her.

"...nna?" he asked, his voice raw.

Deanna abandoned the cloth, letting it soak. She smiled down at Will, one hand coming up to cup his cheek. It took him a moment, eyes half-closed, but she felt the warmth of affection in his mind even before he managed to smile back.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

He managed to wince without losing his smile. "Like a shipwreck," he said. He turned his head, wearily studying his surroundings. "Are we in my quarters?"

“Yes,” Deanna said. “Beverly warned me your vision might be blurry for a while.”

He grunted out a laugh, and then immediately flinched, one hand twitching to cover his surgical scar. “I don’t suppose she left any painkillers?”

“She certainly did. In your bloodstream. You aren’t authorized for another dose until eleven-hundred.” Deanna checked her watch, eyebrows raised. “That’s two more hours.”

Will groaned. Blindly, he reached for Deanna’s hand and she met him halfway, giving his fingers a tight squeeze. He was being melodramatic, she could tell — his pain level was high, but dwarfed by his relief to be awake again, his delight to find Deanna at his side. She studied his face, half-strained and half-relaxed.

“What do you remember?” she asked.

Will opened one eye to stare at her. “About Odan?” He gave her a crooked smile. “Why, you got a paper cooking up?”

“I would never use you as a subject, Will,” Deanna said with a faux-haughty sniff. “That would be entirely unprofessional.”

“Why?” He gestured from his temple to hers. “Because of our...?”

“No. Because it would go straight to your head.”

He laughed — again — and regretted it — again. He let go of Deanna’s hand reluctantly and pressed his palm tight over the surgical scar, where the skin was swollen and red. Deanna followed every movement, her smile fading as she remembered his surgery — the days preceding it, watching Will’s body move like a puppet, his health fading while an alien presence controlled his mind — the total suppression of their *imzadi* bond. Like he had died. She swallowed against a tight throat.

“Deanna?” Will murmured, studying her with hooded eyes. He let his head fall to the side so that her fingers brushed against his cheek, a lazy gesture of support.

“Can you sense me?” asked Deanna, almost apologetically.

“Always,” he said.

Her ribcage squeezed tight around her lungs. Deanna blinked, her eyes prickling. “I couldn’t sense you,” she admitted. “As soon as they implanted Odan inside you, it was like you weren’t there...”

Will’s expression melted — the fragile look he always got when she was close to tears, like if he watched her for too long, he’d start crying too. He raised one broad hand with effort and cupped the back of her head, pulling her close to him: his lips against her hair, his slow, calm breathing soothing her. But more than that, the heat of him, the real weight of his hand, and scent of his skin, the gentle brush of his lips against her forehead...

“I was fine,” Will murmured. “Really. It was just like I was sleeping.”

Deanna sucked in a breath, slow, to calm her. “It didn’t feel like you were just sleeping,” she said, careful to keep her voice even.

“But it was,” he said. “Really.” His eyes were closed, his grip on her going soft. “It was like a dream.”

Indomitable as ever, Will was back on-duty for Alpha Shift the very next day. He all but bounced onto the bridge, effervescent with his eagerness to be back — eyes sparkling as he greeted Mr. Worf, lips curling into a smile as he asked Data about his day. He took a seat with a quick, affectionate nod toward Deanna, his mind unfurling against hers: the same effect, she thought, as the warm ripple effect of displaced water when he used to dive into the waterfalls of Betazed and swim right up to her — underwater, teeth nipping against her bare thigh, thrown off-balance and sputtering water when she shoved him away.

Deanna broke eye contact, a quick blush stealing over her cheeks. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Will’s smile tighten. A strange flicker of emotion, half-anticipation and half-anxiety, reached her mind before he abruptly cut himself off.

Now, what was that about? Deanna wondered.

She didn’t have time to suss it out. Captain Picard entered the bridge, greeting Will with a brisk nod, as if he’d never been gone. The rest of the day passed as close to normal as could be: Will was his usual competent self, if a little over-exuberant, and a little too enthusiastic about teasing Worf.

But at the end of his shift, when Beverly came up to deliver her daily report from medical...

Something changed.

The turbolift doors slid open, and Will — halfway through a joke to Mr. Worf — turned his head to see who was coming. His eyes no sooner fell on Beverly than he whipped his head back around. His smile snapped away. Eyes strained, he stared straight ahead at the viewscreen, not even glancing sideways when Beverly crossed the bridge to hand her PADD to Captain Picard.

Deanna squinted at Will. He had his blocks up — impossible to read. But their shift was almost over, and she’d be able to ask him about it soon enough. Five minutes after Beverly left, the team from Beta Shift started trickling in, relieving the bridge crew one by one. Deanna lingered after she handed her chair over, watching Will from the corner of her eye.

He was running through the day's log with Lieutenant Commander Heska, a new hunch to his shoulders and fresh shadows beneath his eyes. It was routine for the off-going watch to walk their relief through a tour of the bridge, but Will went through it slower than usual, one hand trailing over the bridge consoles for support.

By the time he finished, his walls had fallen. Exhaustion leaked out of him, screaming like a shrill wind in Deanna's ears, nipping at her fingertips. She crossed her arms tight over her stomach and raised an eyebrow at Will as he joined her.

"Deck Eight," she said, stepping into the turbolift.

Will leaned against the wall with a sigh.

"What's that about?" Deanna asked, looking him up and down. He scrubbed a hand over his face, eyes closed.

"Fatigue," he said. "Hit me all at once."

"A side effect of your painkillers?" Deanna asked.

"Must be. Came out of nowhere."

Not quite nowhere, Deanna thought, remembering the strain on Will's face when Beverly arrived. She chewed the inside of her cheek. "Do you need to visit sickbay?"

"No," said Will at once, too quickly.

"Will—"

He pushed off the wall, turning to face her, inviting her to read his mood. His eyes were unguarded: tired, overworked, but ... but reassuring somehow, almost against Deanna's will. She softened, her urge to fight him fading away.

"I think I'm fine," he said, and just the fact that he said 'I think' mollified her a little. At least he wasn't speaking in absolutes. "It's just an after-effect. All those damn headaches—"

He cut himself off.

"Headaches?" Deanna prompted, her voice gentle.

Will warred with himself. A flare of distress and stubbornness overrode all other emotions. Before he could say anything, Deanna grabbed him by the wrist, her grip soft and comforting. She rubbed a circle on the base of his thumb until the lines on his forehead melted away.

"Go to your quarters," she ordered softly. "Get some rest. If you need anything from sickbay, I'll get it for you."

He gave her a ridiculously grateful look, like she'd offered to walk over coals for him.

"Just for tonight," Deanna said firmly. "We can't have the first officer developing an aversion to medical care." She squeezed his hand. "Not when he insists on injuring himself once a week."

Will grinned, his shoulders relaxing. "Once a day," he admitted.

"Too true. Those holoprograms with Worf are going to get you killed, you know."

He studied her face, his features soft, and squeezed her hand one last time as the turbolift doors hissed open. Crewmembers were waiting just outside, so they pulled apart by instinct, their expressions locked up as much as they could bear. Will stepped out, and Deanna shuffled around to make room for the new occupants, meeting his eyes only briefly before the doors closed again.

Thank you, he said inside her head.

And he'd been back for a full day now, but it was still such a relief to hear him again that her knees almost gave out.

Deanna slowed six meters away from sickbay, struck by a nauseating miasma of guilt and grief ... and a self-deprecating exasperation that told her it was Beverly dying of shame inside. Shaking her head, Deanna pushed through it, holding her breath the same way she might rush through a noxious cloud of gas.

"Beverly?" she said.

The medics in the lobby froze, as if spooked by the name, and then went on about their business. Not a good sign. Deanna scouted around, following the thread of emotion to Beverly's office, where the door was uncharacteristically shut against visitors.

Deanna leaned against it, rapping her knuckles in a quiet knock.

"Bev," she called, voice soft. "Are you in there?"

What she really meant — and what Beverly would hear — was, *Are you alright?* The door hissed open just as Deanna pulled back, off her tiptoes. She stepped inside quickly, in case Beverly was crying and didn't want the medics to see, but Beverly sat behind her desk, dry-eyed and professional.

And miserable-looking.

“Oh, Bev,” Deanna murmured. She hesitated, clasping her hands over her stomach to squash the urge to run forward and give Beverly a hug. “How are you feeling?”

Beverly slid her elbows forward on the desk, chin resting on both hands. “Not as bad as I look,” she said. “...I hope. I’m just moping.”

“Well, it’s good to get it out of your system,” said Deanna uncertainly. She took a seat in the guests’ chair, where she could study Beverly’s face. “It’s not just about Odan, is it? I can sense that your thoughts are divided...”

Beverly marshaled her reserves and offered Deanna a guarded smile. “No,” she admitted. “It’s not just Odan.”

It was a long moment before she spoke again, but Deanna was patient. She waited her out. Finally, hesitantly, Beverly said,

“I saw Will on the bridge today. He ... he doesn’t remember, does he?”

Deanna bit her lip. “I don’t think so,” she said. “But I’m not sure. Now that I think about it, he never gave me a straight answer when I asked him. He just said he felt like he was asleep.” She gave a careful shrug, trying to appear impartial, professional, but something must have fractured in her expression, because Beverly’s face softened.

“I know it was hard for you, too,” she said quietly, not quite meeting Deanna’s eyes. “I should have checked in with you more.”

“Understandably, you had quite a bit on your mind,” said Deanna. The urgency of Will’s headaches was weighing on her — he wouldn’t have slipped up and told her if they weren’t bad — but across from her, shame was still rolling off Beverly in waves. “Beverly...” Deanna started, her voice gentle.

Beverly forced herself to meet Deanna’s gaze. “I need to tell you something,” she said, and her voice was so strange — quiet and deathly serious — that Deanna sat up straighter, all ears. “When you told me to go to Odan, not to let my chances slip away ... I...”

She couldn’t finish the sentence. But understanding crystallized in Deanna’s mind, and a cool numbness set in. Like a good counselor, she compartmentalized her own emotional reaction, tucking it away for later.

“You slept with Will?” she asked, and her voice came out exactly as she wanted it to: calm, empathetic. But Beverly’s forehead creased anyway.

“Yes,” she admitted in a whisper. “Deanna, I’m sorry...”

Deanna was already shaking her head.

“No, let me apologize.” Beverly squared her shoulders and took a steadying breath. “I tried to apologize to Will, too, but he wouldn’t answer the door this morning. It was wrong of me to do that.”

“It was your last chance with Odan—” Deanna started gently.

“No.” Beverly hesitated. “Yes,” she conceded. “But to sleep with my best friend’s ... well...”

Deanna had to cut this off now. Firmly, she said, “Beverly, you didn’t cross any of my boundaries. Will and I aren’t together; you know that. What you should be concerned about are Will’s boundaries. If it bothers you this much, you need to talk to him — later.” She rushed the next words out before Beverly could continue apologizing. “He’s having migraines. He thinks it’s a side effect of the surgery — do you have anything he can take?”

That snapped Beverly out of it. Stark professionalism took hold, erasing all hints of distress. “Did he describe his symptoms to you?” she asked. “Blurry vision? Nausea, sensitivity to sound, visual phenomena?”

Deanna shook her head. “You know Will. He didn’t even admit to having a migraine. He called it a ‘headache.’ I just ... know.”

Beverly nodded her understanding. “Well, I’d like to take a look at him soon,” she said, scooting back from her desk to access the medicine cabinet. “But I get the sense he’s avoiding me for now. Take this.”

She held out a hypospray, already loaded with a capsule of liquid pain reliever. Deanna weighed it in her palm.

“That’ll keep him pain-free for another twenty-four hours,” Beverly said. “Enough time to sleep, work another shift, and get some rest in. If he’s not comfortable coming here by then...” She trailed off with a shrug, eyes tight.

“I’ll speak to him,” Deanna promised. She stood, regretful that she couldn’t stay longer. “You too, Beverly. I’d like to see you in my office when you find the time. Don’t make me get Jean-Luc involved.”

A ghost of a smile touched Beverly’s lips. “You won’t have to order me,” she said. “I just...”

Her eyes went distant. The shame and guilt had faded. Left behind was nothing but a knot of sadness that would take years to untangle.

“I understand,” Deanna said.

She swore she sensed Odan that night.

It was so strong it woke her up: a gasp, sweat curling her hair and clinging to her forehead, lungs aching like she’d just inhaled a cold

wind. Deanna blinked in the darkness of her room and stretched out, searching for the same sensation that had invaded her mind in her dreams: the hot, alien pulse of Odan's consciousness, the terrible ill-fitting squeeze of his mind in Will Riker's shell.

But it was gone. Just a nightmare. And down the hall, coming closer, was something real, something vibrant and familiar and warm — and tinged with distress. Deanna twitched her blankets off her legs and toed into her slippers just as Will chimed for access at her door.

"Come," said Deanna, her voice a little shaky.

A halo of light blinded her as the doors opened, with Will silhouetted in the middle. Deanna's pounding heart calmed a little at the sight of him: hair mussed, eyes shadowed, dressed in his pajamas. He tossed a hypospray in the air and caught it deftly, half-smiling.

"Can't sleep?" he asked roughly.

"Neither can you, apparently," said Deanna. She paused halfway across the floor to him, sensing the quiet throb of distress underneath his grin. "Nightmares?"

He hesitated. "Headache, mostly." But he stopped tossing the hypospray up and down, his smile fading. "And nightmares, too," he admitted. "A little."

"Is that why you're here?"

He didn't answer right away. His gaze drifted aimlessly around Deanna's room, and he held the hypospray out to her like a sleepwalker. Or, some uneasy part of Deanna's brain supplied, like a discharged officer giving up his phaser. She took it from him and checked the dose, and when Will tilted his head to the side, she dispensed the medicine against his throat. There was nothing she could do for the sharp sting of the prongs, but she rubbed her thumb in a gentle circle under his jaw and hoped it soothed him.

"Can I sleep here?" he asked, his eyes still fixed on some distant point. "Strictly platonic."

He'd never felt the need to specify before. Deanna stayed where she was, close enough to kiss him, and studied his face. "Tell me about these nightmares," she said, taking his hand. She guided him to the bed, where he all but collapsed on the edge of it, exhaustion taking over. All it took from Deanna was the tiniest bit of pressure on his chest and Will fell back, relaxed against her sheets, eyes closed.

"You'd fall asleep right here, wouldn't you," said Deanna, amused, "if you didn't have questions to answer."

Will hummed. "In the morning?" he tried.

"No." Deanna tapped his chest until he reluctantly opened his eyes. "What were you dreaming about?" she asked.

He searched her face and took a risk. "You first," he said.

So he could tell she'd been having nightmares too. That didn't surprise her. Deanna maintained eye contact, letting him see first that she was serious, that she wasn't going to joke around with him. When she could sense his understanding — and a hint of fear? — she said, "I was dreaming of Odan."

Will's face creased. In the darkness, his pale eyes seemed almost liquid. "Me, too," he said softly. "At least, I think I was." He sat up on his elbows, mostly, Deanna suspected, so he could stare down at the floor instead of meeting her gaze. "It was like I lived a dozen lives in one night. When I first woke up, I could still remember all their names — but I didn't write it down fast enough. And I could taste their favorite foods. Smell the air the way they smelled it, from nonhuman noses." He hesitated. Something in his chest flipped so violently that Deanna felt it in her own body, like a physical pain. "I saw them die," Will said. "All his old hosts, one by one."

He reached up, rubbing the bruised spot on his neck where the hypospray went in. The wave of emotion Deanna had sensed from him faded away, ebbing into exhaustion.

"You should go to sickbay," Deanna murmured.

Will rubbed harder at the bruise, and Deanna could sense him reveling in the ache. "It's late," he said. "I'd rather just sleep."

"In the morning, then."

"When Beverly's on duty?" he asked, a little sharply. He met her eyes, each of them testing the other out, sampling each other's emotions. Deanna sat back and deliberately rounded her shoulders to seem less threatening — and a moment later, Will's harsh, quick breathing evened out, and he massaged his chest, only now noticing the rapid heartbeat that Deanna had been sensing all along.

"You'll have to speak with her eventually," said Deanna softly. "The first officer can't avoid the chief medical officer forever, Will."

"No," he grimaced. He lay back slowly, tenderly, like every movement made his gut ache. "You're right. But for now..."

His hand found hers. Their fingers twisted together. His skin was cool and dry, reminding her harshly of his days as Odan's host, when his health was so poor.

"Can we just sleep?" Will asked, pleading with her with his eyes.

Deanna lay down next to him. She skimmed one hand down, beneath the gentle rise of his stomach, beneath the still-sensitive surgical scar. Close enough to soothe, far enough away that it didn't hurt, and after a heartbeat, Will moved his hand over to join hers, their fingertips touching. His eyes slid closed.

“Sleep,” Deanna said.

They’d been running training maneuvers for eight hours straight when Lieutenant Commander Heska called in sick. Alpha Shift filed off-bridge, with two exceptions: Lieutenant Commander Data, who needed no rest, stayed at his station. And Commander Riker, visibly tired, slouched in the captain’s chair and prepared for Hour #9.

“I’ll have to cancel that appointment, Doctor,” he muttered into his combadge. Beverly Crusher’s voice hummed across the bridge, barely audible — and whatever she said, Commander Riker decided not to answer. He raised an eyebrow when Data turned to look at him. “Mister Data?”

Data cocked his head. “If you are required in sickbay, sir—”

“No, Mister Data.”

Beta Shift was manning their stations now, and Commander Riker had hitched his left shoulder up, his face guarded.

“I am more than capable, sir, of running the training maneuvers—” Data started again.

“No, Mister Data,” said Riker firmly. He caught eyes with a curious lieutenant, staying silent until the younger man had passed. To Data, quietly, he said, “I’ve got it. Thank you.”

Data accepted this with a nod. But for the next four hours, he dedicated a small part of his programming to monitoring Commander Riker’s fatigue. By the second hour of Beta Shift, Commander Riker’s voice had subtly slowed, his commands coming out 0.1 seconds slower, on average, than at the start of Alpha. By the third hour, he’d taken to pacing the length of the bridge between orders, and once had to be prompted by the helm when he became, as he said, ‘lost in thought.’

In a real-time maneuver, this level of delay would be unacceptable, Data knew. But this was training, and he had been advised by Geordi to learn when to ‘let things slide’. This, he thought, was one of those occasions. But in the fourth hour of Beta Shift, Commander Riker trailed off mid-sentence and did not pick up where he left off. Eyebrows furrowed, Data turned to study him and found Commander Riker squinting at the viewscreen, one hand raised to shield his eyes. A vein throbbed in Riker’s temple, and his face had turned a pale shade of #FAF9DE.

“Sir?” Data prompted.

After a slight delay, Commander Riker said faintly, “I’m fine.”

Data stood, abandoning his station. He took one step toward Commander Riker and saw the commander’s knees buckle. Security rounded the corner of the console, hurrying forward just as Commander Riker swayed. Data caught him by the biceps; security caught him under the arms, and together they kept him standing until the glassy darkness in Riker’s eyes snapped and cleared.

“Migraine,” he grunted, pitching forward as he caught his balance. Data steadied him, refusing to let go. “I’m fine, Data.”

He shrugged the security officer off, but Data stayed put, his head cocked to the side.

“Sir, I believe this is a side effect of your recent surgery,” he said, and Riker’s face soured. “Might I suggest a break?” Before Riker could argue, he added, “You have been on duty for twelve hours, and are only authorized for eight. Before you continue, I must insist we comm Doctor Crusher for medical approval.”

That got through to him. Riker’s hands flexed into fists. Slowly, he pulled his arms out of Data’s grip and shook his head.

“No,” he murmured. Then, louder, already retreating, he said, “You have the con, Mister Data.”

“Yes, sir—” Data started, but Riker was already gone.

By the time he reached his quarters, Will’s brain was throbbing and his vision had fractured: dark blurs and blinding lines of light, thin as a razor blade, each one lancing straight across his eyeballs. He scrubbed at his eyes with a quiet grunt, coughed out through clenched teeth — and then he checked his palm, irrationally, for blood. Nothing.

He made it to his quarters by muscle memory alone, his internal compass guiding him. The darkness inside was an instant relief. Will froze, his shoulders inching down again when he hadn’t even realized they were hunched — so hunched that they screamed in protest when he eased them down. He paced from bed to desk, his vision slowly coming back now. But the nausea still had an iron grip on his gut, oil crawling up the inner walls of his stomach and turning everything to bile.

Swallowing tightly, Will checked the time. Four hours since Beverly’s call. That was when this headache started, and he’d been fighting the urge to vomit ever since. Eyes closed, he reached for the hypospray he’d left on his desk this morning and guided it blindly to the bruise on his neck.

He squeezed the trigger. Nothing came out.

“Damn it,” Will whispered. He cracked one eye open, wincing at the dim light, to check the dosage. The cylinder was empty. He’d run out. And suddenly the need for it seemed almost pathetic — just a painkiller, just some headache relief, but he felt like an addict, and his heart was pounding in his chest so hard it made his ribcage feel like paper.

He leaned on the desk, his head bowed. His time on the bridge replayed in his mind, gears sticking at all the worst spots. Swaying.

Faltering. Data helping him up. Damn near fainting, right there in front of his crew — in front of a shift who rarely saw him on duty to begin with! He swept the hair back from his forehead with a shaky sigh.

What did it come down to?

Poor performance, whispered a voice in his head, and Will was a twelve-year-old boy, flat on his back on the anbo-jytsu dojo floor, and he was lying half-dead on a Malcorian hospital bed, crying out in pain like a child, and he was trapped in his own mind, watching Odan kiss Beverly with his lips, touch her with his hands, helpless to stop her—

On the other end of the hall, behind her office door, Deanna felt a spike of physical pain that wasn't hers.

She stood without thinking. The PADD balanced on her knee slid to the floor with a clatter. Head tilted, Deanna reached out to Will with her mind and felt it again: a bone-cracking spark of agony across her knuckles, a white-hot sheet of blindness descending over her eyes. She blinked it away and hurried out of her office, following that sense like a blood trail straight to Will's door.

From inside, just for a moment, she could hear it: the wordless, enraged shouts, the impact of flesh against wood, boots against steel. Beneath it all, bleeding through the door, shame and self-loathing so strong it stopped Deanna in her tracks. She forced herself to keep going, to request access at Will's door.

Twice. Three times. Then, when it was quiet inside except the ragged sound of Will's breathing, he said, "Come."

Deanna clamped her mouth closed and stepped inside. She'd prepared herself for the worst, and she was relieved to see it wasn't that bad. He leaned on his desk, breathless and out of sorts, hair flopping over his forehead and blood streaking his forearm. He clutched a broken hand, but he looked at her almost calmly as he caught his breath.

"Will," said Deanna, his name torn out of her.

"I know," he said — soft, chagrined. "I'm sorry. I—" He grimaced. "I think I broke it."

She'd reached him by then, and as gently as she could, she drew his hand into the light. The knuckles were misshapen, split open and slick with blood. When she turned his wrist, she heard the grind of broken bones and saw his wince.

"You'll have to—"

"Don't say it," he whispered.

Deanna pursed her lips. "Alright. I won't." She stepped back, half-turning to give him some privacy until he got his expression under control. Tapping her combadge, Deanna said, "Sickbay. I need a medic to Commander Riker's quarters. Bone regenerator and migraine reliever, please."

She glanced at Will, just briefly, to make sure this was okay. But he gave her nothing. He was silent, waiting for the medic, and he was silent throughout treatment, answering questions with only the tiniest nods. She could sense his mind churning, picking through the embarrassing torrent of emotions and boxing them up one by one, until he was calm again — just a hint of storm clouds underneath the surface. When the medic left, Will stretched his fingers, testing their reach, the level of pain. Using his fresh-healed hand as an excuse not to meet Deanna's eyes.

"Will," she said gently. "Talk to me."

He clenched his hand into a fist, straining the bandages over his split knuckles. He'd opted to heal those naturally, and Deanna couldn't fathom why. A muscle twitched in his cheek as he watched the bandage shift over his hand.

"I got frustrated," he said finally, too calmly. "I thought I would recover faster. From Odan."

Deanna dipped into his mind, searching for honesty. "Maybe you would," she said. "If you kept your appointments in sickbay."

Will made a face.

"What happened on the bridge?" Deanna asked. "I thought you were working a double-shift."

"I'm not authorized to work a double-shift," said Will sourly. "Too ill."

"According to whom?"

"According to Mister Data," said Will. He let his hand fall, suddenly weary. "And according to Doctor Beverly, apparently." He winced, eyes going dark. "Doctor Crusher," he corrected himself.

"And you're too ill because of Odan?" Deanna checked. "Or has this been festering for longer?"

Slowly, Will dragged his gaze up — from her shoes all the way to her eyes, his face pinched. "What do you mean?"

He was genuinely puzzled. She could feel it. But anxious too, a buzzing feeling, a hum like a swarm of bees warning off an intruder from the hive. Deanna moved carefully, leaning against the desk at Will's side. He liked it better, found it easier to talk, when she wasn't facing him directly.

"I think," Deanna said, "that you've been on edge for a few weeks now. Since your mission to Malcor Three."

Will's expression didn't change, and his grip on the desk's edge didn't tense, but something shifted inside him. His breathing became slower, more controlled.

"You spent a lot of time in that hospital," Deanna reminded him. "You almost died then, and we haven't discussed it yet." When Will refused to answer, she said gently, "That's twice you almost died recently. First Malcor, then Odan. I think anyone, Will, would have a hard time coping with that."

"Mm." His lips were tight. Beneath the blank mask he wore, she sensed a hint of anxiety, a flash of memory: an alien girl, with Malcorian facial features and fused fingers, pushing Will back into his hospital bed as he tried to escape. Deanna moved a tentative hand down Will's arm to his wrist, taking his pulse — too fast, too thready — and when his hand twitched against hers, she shifted into a hug. Her hands hooked together at the small of his back, her head tucked against his shoulder, heart to heart. Will caught his breath. Stiffened.

Broke.

"Stop, stop," he hissed, jerking out of her grasp. Deanna had already jolted back, the crumble of emotion in his mind startling her away. She stared at him in shock: lips pulled back in a snarl, eyes hard, voice steady. But inside, everything was shaking.

And that hint of a memory clicked into place. She thought of Beverly, sleeping with Odan, and she glanced down at Will's healed hand — his refusal to go to sickbay — and found herself, just for a moment, unable to breathe.

"You're upset with her," Deanna said, fighting to keep her voice under control. Her emotions were beyond her. They'd blown out, expanding into the wide nameless pale void that overtook her during meditation — or when she simply couldn't afford to examine her own feelings. She closed her eyes, thought of Beverly, and forced herself to speak. "You're upset with Beverly, aren't you?" she asked.

"For what?" said Will roughly.

"Will—"

"I don't want a hug, so I must be upset with Beverly?" he asked, half-laughing. But it was a mean laugh, utterly unlike him. Deanna caught his hand and watched the laugh die, lips trembling instead.

"For using your body," she said seriously. "For sleeping with you."

"No," said Will at once.

"No?" She squeezed his hand. "I can feel it, Will. *Imzadi*. Your walls are down."

His face twisted, but he didn't pull away. He just took a shallow breath and squared his shoulders. "I'm not upset with Beverly," he said, carefully enunciating every word. "Those were her last moments with her lover. Maybe forever, for all she knew." His voice dipped into a whisper. "I wouldn't begrudge her that."

But the pain etched into his face was clear, and it battered at Deanna's mind, begging to be let in. She tried to steady herself — the weight and warmth of Will's hand helped.

"Then this is about the other woman," she said, reluctant to say it aloud. To force him to face it. "The Malcorian."

"The Malcorian?"

Would he really pretend not to know? Deanna stared up at him silently, her eyes wide and wet, and in a heartbeat, he gave up.

"That wasn't..." he whispered.

"What?"

"That has nothing to do with this."

"No?" The glimpses she'd gotten were vague at best. A hospital bed. An open shirt. A flare of nauseating pain in his ribs, a weight on top of him, a sense of shame, inadequacy, so profound it closed her throat, even secondhand. Will took a deep breath, avoiding Deanna's eyes.

"That wasn't forced," he said shakily.

"Will."

"It wasn't."

"You didn't *want* to," Deanna said, sure of it. "I can tell. It's right there, in your mind. It's practically screaming."

"I hesitated," Will said with strained patience, "only because I knew that she would be caught. And her career, her reputation would both suffer for it. She didn't understand what she was getting into." He hit his stride, speaking quickly now, justifications pouring out. "And this was her first time with an alien, Deanna. Look at me. You *know* me. I'm used to a *girl in every port*—" And oh, he chose that language just to hurt her, she was sure of it. "—but she *wasn't*. She didn't know what that entailed."

"Then why are you so angry?" Deanna asked softly. "So anxious? Will, I can hear your heart pounding in your chest."

"There's no one to be angry *with*," Will snapped.

“So you hurt yourself instead?”

Will jerked his hand out of her grasp. He paced the room, a caged lion, refusing to meet Deanna’s eyes. Not until she came to him, hooked her fingers in his sleeve: not quite a touch, but close enough that he could feel her warmth. Then the anger drained out of him. Then he took her hand, his shoulders slumped. Deanna grazed a finger over his bleeding knuckles, careful not to hurt him in the process, and all she felt coming off of him was shame.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered finally.

“For what?” Deanna whispered back.

She heard the quiet catch of breath in his lungs. “For...” He gestured helplessly at the desk he’d beat to pieces with his bare hands. “For being so damn difficult all the time.”

“You aren’t difficult,” Deanna said.

Will laughed. “I know I am.”

“You’re not. *This*, Will, these emotions you’re feeling, they aren’t difficult for me. Compared to the emptiness I felt in my head when you were trapped inside Odan...” Deanna closed her eyes and reveled in his emotion. All of it. The surprise and regret, the self-recrimination, the fear and shame. Even the parts that hurt her seemed to glow, that special pale-blond shade of gold that had rooted in her brain the first time they kissed and refused to leave ever since. “Will, I could stay here for hours, just breathing this in. Vibrant. Alive.” She took his hand and kissed his fingers, his bandaged knuckles, his fingertips, then pressed those same fingers against his pulse point so he could feel his heart hammering beneath the skin.

“What do you feel?” Deanna asked him.

It was three shallow, labored breaths before he answered.

“You won’t be mad?”

She shook her head and knew he could feel her honesty. Still, he hesitated. He bit back a shaky breath.

“Afraid,” he said, voice trembling.

“Of me?”

He nodded. A tear raced down his cheek and disappeared, so fast she could have imagined it.

“Haven’t you always been afraid of me? I can be very intimidating,” Deanna teased, and he let out a shaky laugh and ducked his head. He lifted their joined hands, wiped the tear track away, covered his face without letting go of her. His chest rose and fell, five long minutes before he gained enough composure to speak.

“I don’t feel clean,” he admitted finally. His voice came out painful, raw. He still held their joined hands over his face, hiding his expression. “I don’t...”

...*feel worthy*, whispered his mind to hers. Thoughts and images and emotions combined, conveying his mental state without words. Too injured to save himself from the hospital on Malcor III. Too weak, too injured to perform when the nurse demanded it, when she gave him the choice between vivisection and sex. He couldn’t assert his personality over Odan’s, couldn’t stop Beverly from sleeping with him even though he desperately wanted to.

But he could forgive Beverly for using him. He could forgive the Malcorian girl. Because they needed him for something. They made him feel, if nothing else, if only briefly, worthy.

“Don’t you feel worthy of me?” Deanna asked aloud, her voice breaking. Will laughed and kissed her knuckles, finally letting her see a fraction of his face.

“Worthy of the Daughter of the Fifth House? Holder of the Sacred Chalice of Rixx and heir to the Holy Rings of Betazed? How could I be?”

He was teasing. But Deanna extricated her hand from his and held him in place. “No kissing, Will,” she said solemnly. “No teasing. No sex.”

“I wasn’t trying—”

“Will.”

His breath hitched. She placed her palms on either side of his face and looked him in the eye.

Imzadi, she said, and he let his breath out in a slow sigh. *Do you need to prove yourself to me?*

He almost melted in relief. *No*, he said.

No, she confirmed. She ran her fingers through his hair, wiped the tears from his cheeks. *Let’s go to bed.*

No kissing, he said, almost as a question, everything inside him aching and desperate, all of it hinging on her answer. *No sex.*

No. Just sleep.

He squeezed her hands tight. Just a month ago, she thought, he would have looked wounded at the very idea. But now he looked so innocently grateful that it made her chest ache.

They went to bed, his fingers twisting around hers, his bandaged knuckles so close to her lips that she could almost taste his blood. An open wound, still leaking, still unhealed. And Will's breathing evening out, his eyes closing, exhaustion smoothing over the tide of hurt inside.

They only slept.

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