

A Bridge of Brass

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A Bridge of Brass

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Summary

The Enterprise retrieves the science logs from Nervalva IV, but it leaves two men behind.

“Let go!” Thomas shouted.

“Climb!”

“One of us has to get out of here!”

“Climb, *climb!*”

Sweat slicked Will’s grip, muscles knotting as he struggled to keep Thomas in place. Familiar hands clutched at his shoulders – then at his uniform, rucking it up in a desperate attempt to gain traction. Thomas’ boots scrabbled uselessly at the too-smooth surface of the fallen bridge, swaying underneath him. But even as Will shouted his throat raw, he could sense Thomas giving in, and soon his vision was blotted out by Thomas’ shadow – the weight and heat of him crawling over Will’s body – the firm relief of his hands pulling Will up.

Safe.

Will stumbled to the main computer station, hyper-aware of their time limit. He was on his knees before the broken servo-link before he registered Thomas at his side, his face sweat-streaked but softer than Will was used to. It was Thomas who eased the backpack off Will’s shoulders gently, like he knew exactly how badly Will had wrenched his arm trying to save his ass – and it was Thomas who rooted through the repair kit and found what they needed.

When the computer lit up, both of them breathed a sigh of relief.

“I can feel an earthquake coming,” Thomas said, easing to his feet. Will nodded and tapped his combadge.

“Riker to transport chief,” he said. “Two to beam up.”

They waited, both of them feeling like they’d run a marathon. Will’s uniform clung to him, damp with sweat and a little itchy, and he thought of how quickly Thomas gave up when he thought there was an ion radiation leak – the tone of voice, almost eagerness, when he told Will to let him fall.

He glanced sideways at Thomas just as the beam materialized, a warm glitter of coruscating light that tingled over Will’s skin and nipped at the short hairs on the back of his neck. When they got back, he’d insist on a Federation counselor for Thomas – someone other than Deanna. Eight years alone on a space station, fighting for his life, and they’d expected him to go right back to normal. Will more than anyone, because if Thomas cracked, it meant *he* would crack, and he couldn’t stand to see it.

Will closed his eyes. The beam locked into place. The station shuddered beneath his feet as another earthquake seized the support beams and rattled them against the walls.

When he opened his eyes, the beam was gone, and he and Thomas were still there.

“They’re coming,” Will insisted, his stomach tight. “They wouldn’t leave us behind.”

The latest earthquake had trapped their backpack beneath a collapsed computer console, and Thomas was lying on his stomach, patiently wiggling the straps free. His only response to Will was a grunt.

"I mean it," Will said, circling to the station's reinforced windows. He peered out at the distortion field, at the stars. But he couldn't see the *Enterprise* anywhere. "I've worked with these people for six years, Lieutenant. No distortion field is going to stop them when there's a man left behind."

"Two men," Thomas corrected, tugging on the backpack.

Will wheeled on him, eyebrows raised. Even though he was lying down, even though his back was turned, Thomas' resignation was clear. It was there in the hunch of his shoulders and the dull tone of his voice. But scolding him wouldn't help. Will restrained himself and crossed the room instead, crouching near Thomas' head.

"How can I help?" he asked, assessing the fallen console. He knew what he'd *like* to do, but he wanted Thomas to say it.

"Lift it up there," Thomas said, "at the back corner." He gestured to a juncture where the console had nearly cracked apart. "But be careful."

Exactly what Will would have done. He shuffled over to the back corner and raised the console with both hands, just an inch or two. It was enough. Thomas jerked the backpack free and rolled away, and half a second later Will lost his grip and let the console crash back to the floor. He shook out his stinging fingers and tapped his combadge.

"Riker to *Enterprise*," he tried for the sixth time.

Thomas, still lying on the floor, rested the backpack over his chest to unzip it. "That's not going to work," he said, peering inside. "I called the *Potemkin* so many times I lost my voice. They never answered."

"Riker to *Enterprise*," Will said again, putting an extra layer of command steel into his voice. Thomas rooted around inside the backpack and made a soft exclamation when he found a pocket replicator – standard issue for any away mission. He clutched it to his chest, eyes squeezed shut in an expression of quiet gratitude that Will hoped was at least partially meant to make him laugh.

"The last replicator broke months ago," said Thomas. "I didn't have anything to fix it. I was just catching rats."

"Rats?" Will asked, eyeing Thomas uncertainly.

"Well, not Terran rats – more like raccoon-spiders. But I had to call them something," Thomas said, getting to his feet. He clutched his ribs with a grimace – must have bruised them, Will thought, when he slammed against the falling bridge. "They're not too bad once you get used to them," Thomas said. "It's just that having real meat shocks your system. Gives you indigestion."

"You're lucky that's *all* it gave you." Will tapped his combadge, his throat tight. "Riker to *Enterprise*."

Thomas watched him, face expressionless. In this low lighting, it was hard to see the bags under his eyes, the subtle hollows in his cheeks that marked him as a different man from Will. Quietly, he said, "Do you think we made it back?"

"Riker—" Will swallowed his own words, and a wave of watery bile. He blinked at Thomas and a surge of vertigo came over him, like he was looking at a mirror, but his reflection was all wrong. "What do you mean?" he asked.

Thomas' expression didn't change. He lifted one shoulder in a tiny shrug. "*I* stayed here," he reminded Will. "*You* made it back. Maybe this time, both of us did."

Riker just stared at him, a cold wind rising in his chest, a shriek of ocean storms like the kind that used to batter his house in Valdez when he was a kid, when Dad was away, when he lay alone at night with just his mother's ghost beside him.

"I don't think the *Enterprise* is coming for us," Thomas said.

Will sat with his back against the wall, his stomach growling. In this small, dark room, it was easy to pretend you weren't on Nervalia IV, or so Thomas said. It had been his bedroom during his eight years alone, his sanctuary, personalized while the rest of the station remained as the scientists had left it and as nature ordained. But Will sat there, his knees pulled up to his chest with a titanium wall digging into his spine, and he couldn't see the bedroom as anything other than what it was.

A thin roll-out mattress on a bunk built into the wall. A tally of days, of months, of years, etched on the walls ... and engravings, masterfully done, of scenes Will remembered from his own life and recurring dreams he'd struggled to describe aloud even to Deanna. A bucket of chalky earth sat near Will's knee, scraped from the exposed cave walls where the station had fallen into disrepair, and with this chalk, Thomas had scrawled musical compositions on the walls and floor. Will craned his neck to read one on the ceiling, over Thomas' bed. A little faded now, with streaks cutting through it where cockroaches (or raccoon-spiders?) had crawled right through the notes. But he recognized the melody.

He'd made it up five years ago. He'd been humming it, off and on, ever since. Will scrubbed a hand through his hair with a shaky sigh, and he was glad beyond words when the door hissed open and swallowed that sigh up.

"Here," Thomas said, tossing a beaten mattress to the floor. "This one's not so bad."

One corner looked like it had been chewed open by rats. Will stuck his finger in the hole and pulled the mattress closer to inspect it.

"It wasn't rats, believe it or not," Thomas said, reading his mind. "I tore that one open early on, my first stay here. Needed some gauze for

a cut on my hip, and I thought the stuffing would work. But it's too crumbly."

Will huffed out a humorless laugh.

"There's no bugs in it," Thomas informed him. "I checked."

"Thanks." Will glanced around for somewhere to put it. "You see any serviceable rooms while you were out?"

Thomas frowned. "Most of them are pretty neglected. You understand, I didn't foresee myself having any guests."

He could have kept a room up, though, couldn't he? What if an earthquake caved his quarters in and he needed a new place to sleep? Hell, even if that never happened, taking care of the rooms would give him something to do. Will hefted the mattress over his shoulder with a sigh.

"I'll find a place," he said, resigned. He paused, and against his will, he watched his arm rise and his finger point at one of the scenes Thomas had etched on the bedroom wall. It was a bridge strewn with paper lanterns and vines, with an alien gondola cutting through the water underneath. Tall, musteline creatures manned the boat, their blunt heads so masterfully carved that Will almost believed he could feel the soft fur against his fingers if he touched them.

"I remember this," he said. "It's based on that aquarium I went to when I was a kid, remember? In Anchorage, with the otters? I used to dream about it all the time."

Thomas raised his eyebrows. "When?"

"When I was on the *Hood*. I haven't had that dream in ages."

Lines stood out at the corners of Thomas' eyes. He brushed his fingers over the engraving and let his gaze track upward, over all the dozens of scenes he'd carved into the wall. "I have," he said softly. "Out here, it's all you do, is dream. And they never go away, like yours did. They just pull you deeper."

Will's stomach pinched; his sense of hunger had gone too long unsatiated, and now it curdled, turned into a heavy pit inside him. He shifted the mattress on his shoulder, still aching from when he pulled Thomas out of the hole. Eight more years on Nervalva IV. How could Thomas stand it?

How could Will?

He was halfway out the door when Thomas murmured, "You could stay with me."

He pretended not to hear.

Thomas had been through this before, every minute of it: it started with denial, just like the old out-dated model of grief and its five stages, the one he and Deanna laughed about when she informed him. For the first two months here, maybe three, Will would be industrious. Convinced the *Enterprise* was coming back, spirit unbroken, he'd focus on escape.

"Gotta be a way out of this distortion field," he muttered to himself, thinking Thomas couldn't hear. "Are there any shuttles in the hangar?"

"No," Thomas said.

"Even old ones?" Will pressed. "In a state of disrepair?"

"You can't take a shuttle through that field anyway," Thomas told him.

"We can try!"

Next up, from Thomas' experience, would be the compulsive checking of the combadge. At night, when Thomas couldn't sleep, he paced the halls of Nervalva IV and came too close to Will's bedroom. Through the door he could hear it: the tap-pause, tap-pause of Will testing his combadge; the scrape of metal and squeak of a pin digging in its circuits, making sure everything was properly aligned.

"Riker to Enterprise," Will said, keeping his voice low. Thomas waited, remembering what he himself had said eight years ago when he was trapped. "Riker to anybody," Will whispered. "Anybody."

Thomas walked away.

Next, and with renewed gusto, would come repairs. There was always something on Nervalva IV that needed fixing. Sleep became a luxury; paleness stole the blood from Will's cheeks; shadows tugged at his bottom eyelids and dipped into his ribs, digging trenches as the weight fell off.

Thomas could chart Will Riker's mental course with near-perfect precision. His calculations were only slightly off because the Commander Riker who was stranded on Nervalva IV today was more mature, happier, steadier, than the Lieutenant Riker who was stranded here eight years ago. It took Lieutenant Riker sixteen days to break down.

It took Commander Riker three months.

Thomas found him sitting at the console, listless, with the station's logs scrolling on an old-fashioned PADD. Will's eyes were narrow, a

good facade of concentration, but if you looked into his eyes, really looked into them, they were glazed. He'd been repairing the station manually for weeks, working without rest, and now he was so still Thomas couldn't tell if he was breathing.

This is where the tears start, Thomas thought, and he backed away to give Will space.

And no matter what he heard, he didn't come out to check.

It had only been two weeks since the unpredictable fits of tears began. In Thomas' experience, they came on out of nowhere, those fits. First there was a whistling in your ears, a tightness zipping up your jaw to knot your teeth together, a thread of iron looping around every rib and squeezing your ribcage shut.

Then came the tears, *violent* tears. Sobs through clenched teeth. Hands ripping at hair. Your spine curled and your knees jammed so hard against your chest that they left a bruise. And then the fits were over as fast as they'd begun, and Thomas was always glad there was no one here to see. He would sit in his room, legs curled up, just like Will on that first day, and he would imagine Deanna there with him, the Imzadi bond a golden flow of warmth in his mind, and he would tell himself over and over again,

I'm glad I'm alone.

He knew Will was crying. He had to be. Because *Thomas* had. But Thomas was careful not to see it, if so; any hint of fragility in Will's face, of strain in his eyes, and Thomas found an excuse to leave the room.

But two weeks after the tears started, Thomas' bedroom door opened and someone pulled out the rack beneath his bunk. Without speaking, Will turned the single into a double and flopped his mattress into the extra space. He slotted himself into the empty spot at Thomas' side, a burst of weight and body heat, of someone else, someone *there*.

With a quiet sigh, Will tossed his blanket over Thomas' body and edged in closer. His chest pressed against Thomas' back, their legs entwined, their breathing synced. Years ago, after every fit of tears, Thomas had lain here dreaming that someone – Deanna – would curl up behind him, would lace their fingers around his middle, just beneath his ribs. As a kid, when Dad was away on missions, he'd lie beneath the blankets with his pillow wedged behind his back, to simulate his mother, how she used to hold him when he was very small. One arm wedged beneath him, one slung over his stomach, palms flat against his body to hold him tight.

Will, as if he could read Thomas' mind, did exactly that. He rested his face against Thomas' shoulder, his breath hot and shallow, his eyes closed. It would be easy to fall asleep like this. To ignore it. But Thomas let the tension flex through his muscles and held his breath.

He jerked his arm back and elbowed Will in the ribs.

"What?" Will grunted, one hand flying up to massage the sore spot. Thomas missed the warmth of that hand against his stomach immediately. But aloud, he said,

"I don't like to be touched."

Which wasn't what he meant to say. Will stared at him, face drawn and pale.

"Yes, you do," said Will finally. He settled down on one elbow, careful not to touch Thomas. "We're the same person. Of course you do."

"Not anymore," said Thomas. He peeled Will's blanket off his own and flicked it over. "You can sleep here if you're having nightmares. Just don't touch me."

He rolled back over. He pulled the blankets over his head to hide his face. It was cold on Nerval IV, and his breath warmed his hands, chipped away at the numbness that settled into his fingers late at night. There was a creak of the plastoid bed frame as Will lay back down, a shift of the foam mattress beneath his body.

"I'm not having nightmares," said Will softly. "I'm just..."

Although Thomas couldn't see him, he knew somehow, from the deep and easy pattern of breathing, that Will was lying on his back, staring at the ceiling. At the white pattern of musical notes scrawled up there, like stars. Slow and soft, Will started to hum a tune they both knew well.

He was still humming it, voice low and raw, when Thomas fell asleep.

Thomas bowed his head, a light shiver wracking his shoulders. His shirt was twisted in his lap, a heap of oil-stained yellow fabric, leaving his torso bare and his shoulders exposed to the cold air of Nerval IV. Gently, Will combed his fingers through Thomas' hair, parting it to the side before he lined the clippers up.

"Be quick about it," Thomas said.

"Do you want it to go fast or do you want it to look good?"

Thomas half-smiled as the clippers whirred into life. A weak laser beam cut a straight line across the back of his neck, eliminating all excess hair. "Who is there to look good for?" Thomas asked. "You?"

"Damn right, me. You think I want to look at your ugly mug all day? And with a bad haircut to boot?"

Thomas tried not to laugh for fear the laser would bisect his ear. He kept still as Will adjusted the settings and brushed the clippers over

Thomas' skull with a hum of warmth from the laser beam, trimming the overgrown ends of his hair before moving down to his sideburns. His fingers danced over the line of Thomas' jaw.

"You know," said Thomas, angling his head away from Will's touch, "there were some books left behind by the research team when they evacuated."

Will's hand froze on Thomas' cheek. "Oh?"

"Nonfiction, novels. Most of them not to my taste, but after a while, you'll read anything."

Slowly, Will tilted Thomas' head to the left so he could trim the other side of his beard. "I know what you mean. I've already pored through all the science logs."

Thomas listened to the whine of the laser trimmer in his ear. When Will thumbed it off, he spoke. "I could read them to you," he said casually. "Or you could read them to me."

Will brushed the hair off Thomas' shoulders and nudged him off the stool. "Well, it's something to do," he said. "How about I do the reading first?"

First. As if he already knew that they'd read the entire library aloud more than once while they waited for the *Enterprise* to return. Thomas' palm brushed Will's as he took the laser trimmer from him.

"Okay," he said, testing the settings while Will rucked his shirt off and took a seat. Thomas' own shirt lay abandoned on the floor; where he'd been cold a moment before, now he was warmed by Will's body heat, rolling off his bare skin in waves. He lined the laser up with Will's hairline. "You want your sideburns pointed or squared?"

"Same as yours," Will said.

They'd taken apart their shared bunk just for the evening, making it long instead of wide. This way, they could sit facing each other, with their stockinged feet entangled and both of their backs against opposite walls. It was like curling up on Mom's window seat back home, Thomas thought, only he'd never had anyone to share the window seat with. Will sat across from him with one knee bent, his PADD propped on it, voice going hoarse as he read.

"But Salmeoneus hated his brother Sisyphus," Will said. *"And Sisyphus hated his twin in turn. When he learned from an oracle that his son would grow to kill his brother, Sisyphus was glad. His wife was not. She learned of the prophecy and slew the babe where he slept..."*

Thomas mouthed along to the words, tapping out a rhythm on his own knees.

"Salmeoneus, being an overbearing man and impious, soon became hated by his subjects," Will read. *"For he ordered them to worship him as they worshiped Zeus. He built a bridge of brass, upon which he rode his chariot, dragging behind him the dried skins of animals and throwing torches into the air as though throwing lightning..."* Will trailed off, squinting his eyes. "Why the bridge of brass?"

"Picture it," Thomas said. He skimmed his hand through the air like a speeding chariot. "Horses' hooves drumming on a brass bridge? Sounds like thunder, doesn't it?"

"Or like a cave-in," Will said, giving a significant look to their ceiling, where a new musical composition had been scrawled in chalk. "Or an ionic storm."

Thomas just grinned. He bumped his foot against Will's ankle. "Keep reading."

"My throat hurts. You do the rest."

Thomas caught the PADD and dimmed the screen lights a little. He found Will's spot and cleared his throat.

"For his crime of hubris, Salmeoneus was hurled into Tartarus for eternal punishment. In due time he would be accompanied by his brother, punished by Hades for twice escaping death."

"The notorious boulder," Will said, leaning back against the wall. His eyes fell closed, lashes dark against pale skin. "You were mouthing the words when I was reading."

Thomas glanced up from the PADD almost guiltily. Will cracked one eye open, sparkling with humor.

"You've got them all memorized?" he guessed.

"Yeah," Thomas admitted. "Even the bad ones."

The single eye slid closed again. Will's chest expanded in a slow, shallow breath. Eight years stretched out before them, and Thomas could see them clearly, filled with the same old books read and reread, the same scenes etched on the bedroom walls. Sixteen years on Nerval IV while the galaxy spun on without him.

Without *them*.

"Tell you what," Will said, without opening his eyes. "Maybe tomorrow, instead of reading those books, I can tell you about some of my missions. All of them. From the *Potemkin* to the *Enterprise*." He shifted his legs a little, letting his foot brush against Thomas' calf.

"Does that sound okay?"

Throat tight, Thomas could only nod. And he knew that was useless, because Will's eyes were closed.

But somehow, Will seemed to sense it anyway.

Time alone was a necessity, for as long as either of them could stand it. Thomas was on his third day of desperately-needed, terribly-unwanted solitude when one of the power conduits broke in the outer labs. He found his repair kit in Will's still-unpersonalized room, the chisel point a little dulled.

It would do.

In the hallway, the power leak had caused an upsurge of temperature that left Thomas sweating within seconds. He unscrewed the battered hatch and eased himself into the narrow passage just beyond, where wires and cobwebs laced together and caught in his beard. He batted them away with his hand and then skimmed his palm up the wall, searching for the jagged bite of a broken conduit. One of the damned fuzzy spiders crawled across his hand and he slammed his palm against the wall in a manic, animalistic urge to crush it.

Something sharp scraped against his wrist even as the spider raced up Thomas' arm and disappeared into the darkness. He twisted his wrist against the sharp point, felt the broken metal grind against his skin.

There it was.

Blindly, Thomas raised his pocket welder. His thumb grazed the sharp side of a broken tube, and with all the strength in his left arm, Thomas wedged the two ends together and held them in place. He switched the welder on – and the soft blue glow nearly blinded him, and made him miss the spark of a faulty wire overhead.

On the other side of the station, reading through the science logs, Will heard a howl of pain.

“Thomas?” He jumped to his feet, waiting for another cry – and there it was. Now he could tell where the shout was coming from. Will took off at a run, ducking through the fallen pipes on the north side of the station where a minor cave-in had nearly cut them off from the northernmost hall. He skidded to his knees at the sight of Thomas half-inside the wall, a plume of dark smoke spilling out the hatch. “Tom!”

Will grabbed Thomas by the hips and hauled him out. There was another shout as Thomas' elbow collided with the wall and bent the wrong way, but Will was more concerned with the charred remnants of Thomas' shirt – blackened by fire – and the shiny burns across his bare stomach. He got a hand underneath Thomas' head before it hit the ground, relieved to see that aside from a few singed hairs, his face was unharmed.

“Shit,” Thomas coughed. The smell of smoke wheezed out of his lungs.

“Still burning?” Will asked, eyeing the hatch.

“No, I – the kit I had–”

A coughing fit stole the rest of his words, but Will knew what he meant. The repair kit he'd taken from the *Enterprise* had a miniature fire retardant packed inside for cases like this. He eased Thomas down to the floor and got to work, plucking the remnants of his burnt shirt out of his wounds. A sizzle of still-hot flesh, a rip of fabric coming loose from melted skin–

“Come on,” Will said. He slid his hands under Tom's arms and hauled him to his feet. “Can you walk?”

Thomas was already sliding back to the floor, his knees turning to water. Just by instinct, Will bent down with him and got one arm behind Thomas' legs, sweeping him off his feet. He staggered a little under the weight, but he got his brother out of there, away from the plumes of lung-burning smoke, to the little shower off the side of Thomas' room. Will knocked the door open with his shoulder and squeezed them both inside, one elbow popped against the button to turn the shower on.

Recycled water sprayed down on them. It plastered Thomas' hair to his forehead and washed the soot from his face in streaks. He stirred in Will's arms, not quite waking – not until the water landed on his burnt chest and he jerked his head back with a hiss.

“Easy,” Will said. He leaned hard against the wall and slid down with Thomas in his arms. His uniform was already soaked through by the time his knees hit the floor. He eased Thomas into a sitting position, one hand between his bare shoulder blades for support. “Can you sit up?” he asked.

With an effort, Thomas swayed forward and kept himself upright. He grunted out a yes.

“I'm going to get the regenerator,” Will said.

Thomas placed his palms on the wet shower floor. His head was bowed, water dripping from his hair, when Will left. And he was even less responsive when Will came back. He didn't look up, didn't say a word as Will pulled him against his chest and ran the cellular regenerator over Thomas' torso. The shiny aspect of his burnt flesh faded a little, and the blisters shriveled and smoothed over, but there was still a flash-burn pattern where his chest hair had ignited and been scorched away.

By the time Will got him patched up, he suspected Tom had fallen into some kind of meditative half-sleep. He was limp in Will's arms, his breathing slow and steady. Will brushed the wet hair off Tom's forehead and checked his face: eyes closed, muscles relaxed. With a sigh, Will turned the shower off and hefted Tom in his arms.

It was a hassle to dry him, to get him to bed. But when he was done Will peeled off his wet uniform and ambled out into the quiet space station of Nerval IV, where the rumble of a mild earthquake shook the ground beneath his feet.

If he hadn't been here, would Tom still be stuck in that hatch? If he hadn't been here, would Thomas have died?

Will couldn't let himself think of it. He paced the passageways, stopping at every abandoned bedroom to peek inside. The scientists had left much of their belongings behind when they evacuated. There were extra blankets here, most of them riddled with "rat" droppings and dead bugs, but Will paused to shake the carapaces out of one and folded it over his arm. In another bedroom, tucked away in an airtight drawer, he found clothing left behind by a man as big as Will and Thomas – maybe bigger. Sweaters, shirts, spare trousers. He pulled a sweater over his head and scooped up all the rest for Tom.

Halfway out of the bedroom he stopped. The wool fibers scratched against his bare chest, itchy and uncomfortable. But more than that, wherever the fibers touched him, it actually *hurt*. Will skimmed a hand up beneath the sweater, over his own chest, and almost winced at the roughness of his calluses over sensitive skin.

He wasn't injured. But when he touched his chest, it felt like a still-healing burn.

He was getting better at this.

Will braced his feet against the wall, a slab of metal wedged between his knees. He held the chisel in one hand, a broken old PADD in the other (makeshift hammer). But when he tried to carve a straight line, the chisel skittered out of his control. The shriek of a sharp point on metal made his teeth sing.

"You'll get it," Thomas assured him. "You're faster at it than I am."

"I doubt that. Same genes."

"Yeah." Thomas crouched down to peer at the engraving over Will's shoulder. His breath warmed Will's ear. "But you've got someone to teach you. Here. Hold your left hand like this."

He adjusted Will's angle and slid his thumb down a little further on the chisel's handle.

"Try again," Thomas said.

Will obeyed. This time, though still not straight, the line he produced was more controlled. Deeper, more confident, with a curve that almost seemed deliberate. Thomas nodded to himself and backed away.

While Will worked, caught up in his vision, Thomas lay in bed. His feet dangled off the edge, swaying to a rhythm only he could hear. His eyes fixed on the music scrawled across his ceiling. He closed his eyes and willed his brain to come up with a new melody, something he hadn't heard before, either from himself or from Will. Gradually, it came to him: like warm light unfolding across the pleating of his brain, a vibration strumming in his vocal cords, a soft, sad hum.

He hadn't made his mind up yet, which way the notes would go, when Will started humming too.

Perfect harmony.

"Remember when we were kids," Will asked him one day, "and we used to make harmonicas out of popsicle sticks?"

Thomas snorted. "Drove Dad crazy." He had both hands deep in a broken console, so to wipe the sweat from his forehead, he had to lean forward and nuzzle his face against his forearm. "Help me out here."

Will duck-walked over and wedged his hands into the console, holding the two wires together so Thomas could tie them off.

"I was thinking," Will said, leaning against Thomas for balance, "I could probably make myself a harmonica comb. A good one. And *you* could make a frame, engrave it with something fancy, something baroque..."

Thomas furrowed his eyebrows. "Yeah. It wouldn't be too hard. Like one of those old Puck harmonicas, with the vine motif?" He jerked his hands out of the console as a spark numbed his fingertips. "You're good."

Will eased back, but he didn't pull away. He just slipped off his heels and onto his ass, sprawled lazily at Thomas' side. "It never occurred to you to make one?" he asked.

Thomas stared down at him, his arms dangling useless at his sides. "No," he said honestly, a little amazed now that he thought of it.

"You took up engraving," said Will, swallowing a laugh, "but you never thought to make an instrument?"

"I..." Thomas shook his head. He held his hand out, clasped Will's, and pulled him to his feet. "I *guarantee* you wouldn't have thought of it either," he said.

Will barked out a laugh. "You got me there. Well, it took us nine years to come up with the idea. Let's get to it."

Nine years. And seven more to go. By the end of the week, Will had his comb carved out, the diatonic chords progressing from one to ten with a brassy hum. It took ten times the effort to wrangle notes out of some holes, and others blew out flat or sharp, but it was better than Little Walter to Thomas' ears. It was only a matter of minutes to secure the frame over it, and when the whole contraption was cooled down from the mini-welder, Will held it up to Thomas' lips and let him take the first blow.

How did it go again? That song they used to play, to drive Dad mad?

As if reading Thomas' mind, Will grinned and started to sing.

"Four strong winds that blow lonely, seven seas that run high – all these things that won't change, come what may – buy my good times are all gone, and I'm bound for moving on–"

"I'll look for you if I'm ever back this way," Thomas sang along.

He placed his lips to the harmonica, one foot tapping, waiting for just the right moment after the second verse. Will's voice rolled over him, soft and clear, flawed in all the same places Tom's would be, and when he fell silent, the harmonica cut in to take his place. Sad and sweet and short, the same melody Mom had loved, the same one that made Dad so mad he'd tossed their harmonica into Curtis Creek.

Thomas closed his eyes and played.

"So I teamed up with Galen, Jean-Luc's old instructor," Will said, "and together we got him this artifact from Orion–"

"Kurlan," Thomas corrected.

They were lying in bed, the blankets pulled down to their waists. Will blinked up at the musical composition overhead.

"Kurlan?" he said finally, folding his arms beneath his head. "Are you sure?"

"Positive," said Thomas.

Will was certain it had been Orion. But he thought it through begrudgingly, only because Thomas had called him on it. He could picture it in his head, ancient sun-bleached pottery, the dramatic curve of the bowl tapering off into something more graceful. It had a name, he remembered now; Jean-Luc had recognized it on sight, and that name.... It *couldn't* be Orion.

"What was it called again?" he asked.

"Naikos."

"Right. And with a name like 'naikos,' it couldn't be Orion. They don't have a 'sk' sound."

"Nope," Tom grinned. Will rolled over with a sigh, facing his brother in the low light.

"You tell a story, then," he said. "You know all of mine."

"You have more than me," Tom protested. But he thought it over, and in time, he rolled to face Will, too. "Okay. Did I ever tell you about the cave slug?"

"A million times," said Will, but he settled in to listen.

"There were three earthquakes that day before noon. You know that bridge? Where I almost died?"

Where you almost gave up, Will thought. He didn't mean to project his thoughts, but he knew Thomas could read them from the sudden strain of sadness in his eyes. Blithely, pretending not to see, Thomas pushed on.

"It came unhinged, and I had to climb down the cave walls with a rope to try and hook it back together."

"Back then it wasn't as deep," Will murmured.

"Exactly. If you fell, no big deal. You might break your leg, but you wouldn't die."

"Assuming you could climb back out," Will said, his eyes sliding closed. Tom poked him in the ribs.

"Hey. Are you telling the story or am I?"

"Sorry. Go ahead."

"Well, I noticed this slime trail on the cave walls. Sort of iridescent, wet ... salty..."

Will, the first time he heard this, had been shocked. *You tasted it?* he'd asked, incredulous. But now he'd heard the story so many times that he could close his eyes and *live* it. He felt the pinch of the rope harness against his inner thighs. He remembered his concentration wavering as he noticed the slime trail, his eyes flicking from one end to the next, the tug of curiosity as he swept his fingers through it – tried to argue with himself – guiltily licked the slime from his thumb. Too sodium-rich to be any good for seasoning his replicator meals, and kind of stupid to taste it without testing it first, like he tested the raccoon-spiders, and now he could practically hear Deanna scolding him: *You'll never kiss me with that mouth again, Will!*

"Then I felt it," Tom said, voice hushed. "Something wet and cold crawling up my leg. Inside my trousers. And it was big, too. It felt like a damn tentacle wiggling its way up there – like that guy on Ipsand, remember him?"

Will remembered him. He was pretty sure *he'd* been the one to meet the guy on Ipsand. When he was stationed on the *Hood*. But he was too tired to know for sure.

"I ended up shimmying out of my pants while I was still hanging on the rope harness," Tom continued. "And there it was, this big nasty cave slug, with its suckers latched onto my hip. The damn thing was as big as my leg, and so bright blue—"

"Green," Will corrected, scratching the burn scar on his chest.

Tom paused. "No," he said. "It was blue. I remember, because it left a blue slime trail all over my leg, like a tattoo. And I couldn't get rid of it for weeks."

"It was green," said Will firmly. "Because you used the pigment to paint that first etching of the Janaran Falls. It was beautiful. But over time it corroded the metal and the whole thing was ruined."

Tom lay there in silence. Slowly, he pulled the blankets up to his shoulders, and as a courtesy, he did the same thing for Will – because if one of them was cold, then the other had to be too. Quietly, almost inaudibly, he said, "How do you remember that?"

Will kept his eyes closed. He could feel the slime beneath his fingernails. He could see the red spot he rubbed on his thigh when he tried to clean it off. He could feel the lump in his throat when he realized the etching was ruined.

"I just do," he said.

It was a stupid fight. Cabin fever. Minor hatreds building up.

In a year or so, when the *Enterprise* came back for them, Will would like to claim that this fight happened over something important. He'd like to say they had a disagreement over how to fix the replicator – or whether or not they ought to explore the cold, dark cave system below. But the truth was that he'd come to think of the grey sweater he liberated from the scientist's bedroom as *his* sweater, and when he saw Tom wearing it again, for the third time that month...

He snapped.

Knuckles crunched against jaws. Fingers twisted and tore out clumps of hair. Knees rammed into ribs. And here Will was, huddled in an abandoned bedroom on the far side of the station, beyond three different barriers where the station had collapsed, with his knees to his chest and his chipped molar crying out in pain. He pressed his palm to his jaw and squeezed his eyes shut, swallowing the wave of copper from his bitten lip.

Stupid. Stupid as all hell, and he was twelve years old again, running away to sulk after a lost anbo-jytsu match, his eyes burning and his leg pulled out of socket, and the snow building up around him as he fought the urge to come crawling back to Dad. Will buried his face against his knees. If not for the chipped tooth, for the pain ripping through his skull, he would have laughed.

Seven years ago, when he first met Tom, he'd thought he was the most immature man Will ever met. Now he knew how it felt. Like a great blue heron trapped inside his chest, wings the size of a full-grown man cramped and twisted to fit between Will's ribs – beak pecking at his lungs, talons curling 'round his gut, beady eyes just waiting for the moment to burst free. That's how it felt to live here, never leaving, never seeing the sun or any other person. Just yourself.

It was a wonder Tom didn't go crazy, he decided, and he repressed a shiver just as the door hissed open and Thomas stepped inside.

"Will?" he said softly.

Will kept his head down. His eyes burned and his jaw throbbed, but he still heard the quiet scrape of Tom's shoes against the floor – the clink of a bowl being set down, the soft splash of water against its walls.

"I knew you were here because my tooth was aching," Tom said. He pressed a cool rag to Will's jaw, where the flesh was swollen and green. "Every time I got closer to you, it *pulsed*. Like a sick and twisted game of hot-or-cold."

Will winced as the rag pressed against his chipped tooth. He kept his eyes closed as Tom guided his hand up and pressed Will's palm to the rag, holding it in place. With a gentle touch, Tom skimmed down Will's body, inspecting every little wound he'd left behind. His movements were impersonal, not like a medic was impersonal, but like a man washing his own body never lingers to examine it in full. Gradually, Will relaxed into the touch, the great blue heron going limp so he could take a breath. Another. Deep and slow. Until the touch felt good.

Only when all the blood was wiped away did Tom sit beside him and rest his head on Will's shoulder. His knuckles were bruised and scraped, the skin cracked open where he'd struck Will in the face.

"Do you think they would have been happier," Tom asked, "if Zeus let them see each other, down in Tartarus?"

"Who?" asked Will, his mouth full of cotton.

"Sisyphus and Salmoneus."

Will grunted. Despite himself, he was comforted by the cool rag against his jaw and the weight of Thomas' head on his shoulder. "I don't think it would have helped," he said, trying to ignore the singing nerves in his chipped tooth.

"No?"

"They're being punished for all of eternity," Will reminded him. "I don't think it would matter one bit to have company. You'd be pushing your rock up the cliff and you'd glance over and see your brother getting his liver pecked out by an eagle. How does *that* help?"

“Mmm,” Tom hummed. He edged a little closer, his eyes closed, and with a sigh, Will rested his head on top of Thomas’, letting his brother’s hair tickle his cheek. He lifted Tom’s injured hands, felt the bones scrape against each other, and brushed the bleeding knuckles against his lips.

“But at least he wouldn’t be alone,” Tom said.

Their replicator was broken again.

Will sat alone in his bedroom, with the light turned up as high as it would go. The secondary generator was broken too, and Tom was seeing to it. So it was Will’s responsibility to fix the replicator, and he didn’t mind. By now he was used to it.

The first time he had to do this – back when he still wore yellow, back when he thought of himself as Lieutenant Riker first and foremost – he’d gone numb halfway through. He’d cannibalized the parts he’d needed and laid them out on a piece of cloth beneath a beaming light just like this one, and he’d done half of the work with gusto, only for all his motivation to leak away.

What am I doing? he thought, and he let his hands fall. *It’s only been two months and already, my replicator is broken. I’m never going to last eight years out here.*

That was a rotten week, Will thought.

He hadn’t finished the replicator. He’d walked away, still numb, and wandered the station until his legs were sore and the skin on his toes had blistered and turned black. He slid down, too exhausted to make his way back home, and leaned against the wall and waited for starvation to take him. Or sleep, or death, whatever.

Will shook his head.

He remembered the crushing pain of rescue, only to learn there was another Will Riker out there – a Will who never went through eight years of solitary confinement. A Will who still had his career, his family, Deanna, everything. A repaired relationship with their father, a position on the Federation’s flagship.

Why would anyone want the Will Riker who stayed on Nervalva IV when they had a better, healthier Will Riker right there?

Will slotted a replacement motor into the replicator and tested it out. It whirred to life, but the replimatter it spat out was formless, tasteless sludge. Calmly, he took the motor out and examined the circuitry again.

He remembered the bridge falling out beneath his feet. He remembered Will catching him, urging him to climb up when all he wanted was to die. He remembered holding Thomas, refusing to let go, begging him to make an effort, to just stop giving up so early, to live.

It wouldn’t be like that this time, Will decided, slapping the motor into place again. Even if the transporter had created two more versions of him, even if those versions were waiting on the *Enterprise*, captains or admirals, married with Betazoid children, it wouldn’t be like last time. Because this time he had Will.

He turned the replicator on and watched as a red, round apple materialized into place.

“Fixed?” Will called from the other room.

“Fixed,” Will said.

When the *Defiant* beamed into Nervalva IV, Will was sleeping.

The away team found them curled together, whittled down to muscle and bone. A medical scan showed they were still healthy, still living. Just thin, with low blood pressure, and a few new scars that Worf was certain they hadn’t had before.

They woke slowly, with a sharp, simultaneous inhalation of breath, and the one on the right lifted his hand to rub his eyes just as the one on the left lifted his. They turned as one, and rested back on their elbows, and squinted up at Worf as if they didn’t recognize him. They didn’t wear their Starfleet uniforms; there were no pips, no colors to tell them apart. He glanced from face to face and couldn’t tell which one was Thomas and which was Commander Riker. He knelt beside the bed and waited for them to wake up fully, for them to recognize their rescuer, for their reactions to give Commander Riker away.

Then a slow smile spread across both faces.

“Mister Worf,” they said warmly.

And simultaneously, with a single voice and a too-familiar grin:

“It took you long enough.”