

Nothing Heavier

Posted originally on the [Ad Astra :: Star Trek Fanfiction Archive](http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/610) at <http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/610>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	Multi
Fandom:	Star Trek: Picard
Relationship:	Jean-Luc Picard/William Riker/Deanna Troi
Character:	Jean-Luc Picard , William Riker , Deanna Troi
Additional Tags:	Hurt/Comfort , Fluff , Pining , Friends to Lovers , Telepathy , Canonical Character Death , Grief , Humor , Flirting
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2023-02-08 Words: 6,078 Chapters: 6/6

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Summary

"...for there is nothing heavier than compassion. Not even one's own pain weighs so heavy as the pain one feels with someone, for someone, a pain intensified by the imagination and prolonged by a hundred echoes."

— Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

Six vignettes, starting with "Best of Both Worlds" and ending with *Star Trek: Picard*, where the captain of the Enterprise gets a little too close to his first officer and his counselor.

Chapter 1

The Borg implants were gone, but they still stung. Troi could tell — not *just* through empathy, but from the way Picard kept hunching his shoulders on the bridge, the twinge of facial muscles as he fought the urge to rub his shoulder against his cheek and grind the pain away. Emotionally, he was more stable now. It had been forty-five days since the attack, and ship-wide, nightmares and general anxiety levels had been reduced to a low simmer. Riker was one of two hold-outs. Picard was the other.

Troi glanced around Picard and met Will's eyes. She felt his mind open up to hers, pushing a wave of concern through their mental link.

? he said.

Jean-Luc, Troi replied. *I'm worried about him.*

A line appeared between Riker's eyebrows. He turned back to the viewscreen, but he kept his mind open so she could read him: agreement, mild worry, a conviction that Picard would be alright. A sense-memory of the tightness in his gut, the glint of light reflecting off metal, the hum of electricity coming from Picard's implants...

It's not about the Borg, Troi said. *It's something new.*

? again.

He's been getting better. But last week, I sensed a new flare of emotion. Unrelated.

And of course, she couldn't tell him anything more detailed than that without violating Picard's privacy. Riker looked at her from the corner of his eye and dipped his eyelids, his way of offering a knowing smile when he couldn't be more open with his emotions — such as during a poker game, or when they were in the middle of a meeting.

"Something amusing, Number One?" Picard groused.

The smile wasn't as subtle as Riker thought.

They'd been called to Picard's ready room for a debrief. It wasn't a particularly serious one; in fact, they'd gotten off topic twenty minutes ago when Geordi mentioned poetry, and now Riker was aimlessly swinging in his chair while Troi rolled a stick of local chocolate cream between her palms to heat it up. Data's lecture on limericks had Picard's temper spiking bit by bit, until it became a staccato headache in Troi's temples, where her empathic powers always seemed to land. She crinkled the wrapper on her chocolate cream bar and let the lush, dark scent of chocolate and sharp citric fondant fill the air.

Riker stopped swinging and looked her way with interest. Troi offered him the first bite. Across the table, Picard's temper softened somewhat, as if this sight had mollified him somehow, but he turned the bar down when Troi held it out to him.

"No thank you, Counselor," he said wearily. "Mr. Data, enough."

Data snapped his mouth shut in the middle of a recital.

"I believe we've gotten well-enough off-topic now," Picard said. "Commander Riker, meet with the quartermaster to design a wardrobe for your away team."

Riker pulled a long-suffering face as he said, "Aye, sir." Troi watched him go with a grin. The quartermaster was known for producing only the itchiest costumes for away missions; he claimed the material he used was the lightest-weight, most durable in the galaxy, and it didn't make any noise when it chafed between your thighs. It just so happened that most humans were lightly allergic to it, too.

"Bet he's wishing he took the Melbourne now," Geordi said.

Troi flinched as Picard's temper soured again. "Why do you say that, Lieutenant?" he asked, his voice perfectly even.

"The Melbourne's got a whole department of designers," Geordi explained. "I bet they never have to deal with the quartermaster's rash-inducing—"

"Dismissed," Picard interrupted, waving his hand dismissively. "This meeting has gone on long enough."

A brief jolt of hurt emanated from Geordi, but it was nothing to worry about — he was an officer, and an adult, and he knew better than to take offense over a sudden interruption. Troi stayed in her seat as the bridge crew filtered out. She turned to Picard, eyebrows raised.

"Yes, Counselor?" Picard asked.

"You seem rather abrupt today," said Troi mildly.

Picard glanced away with a scowl.

"It was that mention of the Melbourne that did it," Troi said, scanning Picard's face. "Would you like to talk about it?"

"There is nothing to discuss," said Picard. He woke his PADD with a tap of the finger and threw himself into the latest reports from below.

"I sense a great deal of anger—" Troi started.

“No one informed me that my first officer was offered his own command,” Picard snapped. “I learned of it one week ago, when Admiral Jellicoe inquired after Will’s decision.”

Troi already knew the answer, but studying Picard’s roil of emotions, she decided to play dumb. “And what did Will decide?” she asked.

“He’s staying,” Picard grumbled. “Again.”

“You disapprove?”

Picard’s dark eyes flicked up to meet her gaze. “Of course I disapprove,” he said flatly. “He handled the Borg admirably. I’d say he’s more than ready to take his own command.”

Anger, in Troi’s experience, was a secondary emotion — a reaction, nothing more. She prodded at the tight ball of Picard’s emotions, imagining each stray feeling a piece of thread, each one color-coordinated. The ball pulsed with an angry, boiler-room red. But when she plucked the strings loose, when she scraped at the red with her fingernail, it flaked away like dry paint. Underneath, the real color of the thread was...

“You think he’s coddling you,” Troi realized.

Picard’s eyebrows shot up. He drew into himself, facing her with the same dangerous, quiet gaze he’d turned on so many incompetent officers and disingenuous diplomats. Troi took a risk and reached across the table, covering Picard’s hand with her own.

“Jean-Luc,” she said softly, “Will’s decision was influenced by our encounter with the Borg. I’m certain of that. But he didn’t stay on the Enterprise to keep an eye on you.”

“No?” said Picard roughly. “Then enlighten me.”

With a sigh, Troi searched her mind for evidence. What would convince him? He couldn’t read Will’s emotions the way she could. How easy it would be, if she could just show him — the concern when Picard was in sickbay; the fear that he might lose him; the loneliness that had eased one centimeter at a time when he joined the Enterprise, when he found his home. But all of that was off-limits for a human. Troi stood, making up her mind.

“Follow me, Captain,” she requested. “I have something to show you.”

Riker was trying on the scratchiest tunic ever made when the door to his quarters whooshed open. Troi and Picard strode through like they owned the joint, and Riker hurried to cover his chest. Sparkly sequins clung to his chest hair and started a lurid purple rash on his skin.

“Uh, hi?” he said, sending Troi a quick ???? through their mental link.

“There,” said Troi, ignoring him entirely. She marched right up to Riker’s bookshelf and crossed her arms, one eyebrow raised. Not at Riker, but at Picard, who looked like he’d swallowed something sour. “You know what this is, I suppose.”

“I do,” said Picard shortly.

Riker tugged his tunic all the way on. They were studying his childhood model of the U.S.S. Stargazer, one of the only keepsakes he’d brought with him when he was stationed here. Picard’s old ship, he remembered with a flush. It had been his favorite as a kid. He’d memorized the crew’s names and stats the same way other kids memorized gravball teams; he used to fall asleep with his eyes fixed to that model on the shelf across from his bed, imagining himself as Ensign Riker on the starship Stargazer, under Picard’s command. And he’d always been extremely careful not to let Picard know that this model even existed, let alone how deep the childhood hero worship used to run.

I could throw you in the brig for this, he thought, and he tried hard to project it to Troi, but he was pretty sure all she received was a wave of embarrassment. Next to her, Picard was studying the old chipped model of the Stargazer with a feigned expression of indifference. He cast Riker a considering glance, and no doubt noticed the blush.

“Commander Riker,” said Picard in the whip-crack voice of a schoolteacher. “You turned down command of the U.S.S. Melbourne. May I ask why?”

Oh, this was shaping up to be just like one of Riker’s worst dreams. Embarrassing clothes, childhood secrets on full display, Picard quizzing him in his bedroom... He glanced to Troi for help, but of course, none was coming. With his best professional voice — and posture — Riker said,

“Sir, I’m honored by the offer. But the Enterprise...”

...is your home, Troi whispered in his mind, urging him to say it.

“...is where I belong,” Riker said, stumbling a little and cursing her for it. “For now.”

“I see.” Picard turned back to the Stargazer, his eyes distant ... and his face a little softer than before. “I apologize for the interruption, Commander,” he said finally. “You have preparations to make. Counselor.”

Troi accepted her dismissal with a nod — and a tiny smile that grew into a full-blown grin when Picard left them alone.

“He’s feeling better already,” she informed Will.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

This chapter takes place right after Robert Greenberger's "A Time to Hate", where Kyle Riker is killed.

When Will beamed aboard, he looked like he'd been whittled to the bone by the hand of a cruel god. His bloodstained snow jacket hung off his frame, charred by the same fire that must have singed his hair and left those raw, red burns on his cheeks. A black eye and a broken nose rendered him almost unrecognizable, coupled with the weight loss. But the body he clutched, cold and dead and still intact, marked him as Will Riker. Nobody else would be crying over Kyle Riker's corpse.

"Get him to sickbay," said Picard grimly.

He stayed with the body. He didn't need Dr. Crusher's report to know what was wrong with Will — not really. He'd been planetside for weeks now, chasing Kyle Riker across the snowy landscape, and if his extreme weight loss was anything to go by, he'd been doing it without food. The black eye and the broken nose likely came from Kyle himself; Counselor Troi had reported a sharp burst of pain and a loss of consciousness from Will shortly after the two Rikers were reunited.

Picard knelt next to the body. Kyle had few wounds. His cheeks were clean-shaven and full; he hadn't gone hungry while he fled from Starfleet. But the bullet wound that killed him ... it had entered his body from behind, like he'd been shot in the back. And the blood splatter over Will's chest suggested he'd been facing his father when it happened.

Was it possible Kyle Riker had saved his son's life, so soon after beating him into unconsciousness? Could he have shielded Will's body with his own? Picard stood with a shake of the head.

"Transport him to the morgue," he ordered the medical team. "I'd like a full autopsy conducted, as soon as Dr. Crusher is free."

"Aye, sir," the lead medic said. Picard wandered out of the transport room, his mind spinning. Deanna would be at Will's side, and he was glad of that — he'd never seen Will in tears. The ragged, out-of-practice sobs Will made hadn't sounded right; more like labored breaths than real crying; perhaps he was too exhausted for anything else. Either way the sound stuck in Picard's ears, haunting him as he made his way to sickbay.

He never wanted to hear Will Riker cry again.

"He's not that bad," Beverly assured Deanna, her eyes fixed to her medscanner. "Hearing damage in both ears—"

"From the explosion," Riker said dully.

"—two broken ribs—"

"From the hovercraft crash," Riker said with a nod.

"—obviously a broken nose, a black eye—"

"From Dad."

"—a bullet wound to the arm—"

"Primitive weapons," Riker grouched, rubbing his shoulder.

"—exhaustion and a touch of malnutrition—"

Now Riker looked offended. "Just a touch?" he asked, putting a hand over his stomach.

"Well, you *did* have a bit of weight to lose when you started out," Beverly lectured. "I distinctly remember warning you to lay off all the Klingon food."

"Now I'm really wounded." Riker flopped back on the examination table. Despite the lightness of his voice, there were deep bags under his eyes — or at least, under the one that hadn't swollen and turned purple — and shadows on his newly-gaunt cheeks. He caught Deanna studying him, her face soft with sympathy, and he quickly looked away.

"Plus a touch of frostbite," said Beverly cheerfully as she finished her scan. "Nothing a cellular regenerator can't fix."

Deanna squeezed Will's hand. He squeezed back, then winced and popped his index finger back into joint. He kept up a good mask, Deanna thought — he'd stopped sobbing as soon as she pulled him to his feet in the transport room, and by the time they made it to sickbay, he'd dried his tears and locked up all emotions behind a wall of exhausted good humor. But it was gnawing at him even now, at the corners of his mind. And the longer they stayed here, under the bright lights and scrutiny of the medical team, the worst it got. His mind drifted — back to the ice and snow — back to the manic bloodshed of a planet tearing itself apart — back to his father's corpse on the transport room floor.

"Did you bring me back a gift?" Deanna asked, trying to distract him. The hum of the cellular regenerator filled the air, and it took a moment

for Will's eyes to flicker and land on her. His face lit up, a pale mimicry of his usual smile, but a delight nonetheless.

"As a matter of fact, I did!"

"You're kidding."

"I did," he insisted. "Before I got separated from my guide, there was this—" He bit his tongue, a quick blush lighting up his cheeks. "—well, I'll tell you later."

Deanna sampled his emotions. The grief and guilt had spun downward, making room for nervousness — a flutter in his empty stomach, like a bird's wings. She tried to bite back a smile.

"Something romantic?" she guessed.

The blush deepened.

"Get a room, you two," said Beverly. "It's indecent to flirt in front of the staff."

"We're behaving," Will protested. He tipped his head back so Beverly could access his nose and swollen eye. A flash of red light left Will's skin raw and abraded, but healing fast. "Deanna—"

"Not here, Will," she said, because she could sense what he was about to say, and she planned to ask him first.

"When I was down there — I — there was this dinner I shared with my guide and his family. His wife, his kids. I never had a family dinner like that. I thought—"

She had to put the kabosh on this proposal before he ruined her plans. Deanna hissed and held a hand to her temple, feigning pain.

"What is it?" Will asked, his eyes widening with concern.

"It's—" Deanna reached out empathically, searching for an excuse, and nearly cried out in victory when she sensed Picard in the hall. "It's the Captain! He's coming this way!"

Will gave her a confused look, but he didn't have time to ask why exactly this caused her pain. The doors to sickbay hissed open and Picard strode inside, exuding so much prickly anxiety that even the non-empaths flinched away.

"Number One," he said, his voice clipped. "How are you feeling?"

Will straightened up a little, reminding Deanna of an eager-to-please schoolboy. "Good, sir," he said, even though Deanna could sense the sharp ache across his entire body. "Just about fit for duty."

Picard raised an eyebrow. "I don't think so, Number One. Consider yourself grounded for the next five days."

"For your health," Deanna cut in before Will could feel hurt. "Not because you did anything wrong."

A flicker of uncertainty crossed Picard's face as he realized — thanks to Deanna — exactly how cross he sounded. He softened a little, rubbing his thumb against his forefinger in a nervous gesture. "Precisely, Will," he said, a little less brusque. "Doctor—"

"Just about finished," Beverly said in a lilting voice. She ran the regenerator over Will's feet, where his boots had practically fallen apart. One was held together by industrial-strength repair tape, meant for the hulls of planetside transports. Deanna could only imagine the type of blisters incurred during a cross-planet hike in boots like that — and Will's pinched face relaxed a little as Beverly ran her regenerator from heel to toe. "Can you walk?" Beverly asked, straightening up.

"I could walk before," Will muttered. But he tested it out, easing off the examination table to take a few steps. The clouds cleared from his face. "Feels great."

"Well, you'll be a little sore for a few days," Beverly said. "But you won't have to spend the night. You're free to go."

She nodded — not at Will, but at Picard — who gestured for Deanna and Will to follow him. Outside sickbay, Deanna looped her arm through Will's, letting him lean on her during the slow, silent walk back to their quarters. Picard accompanied them the whole way, his awkwardness swirling like a visible mist before Deanna's eyes. He still hadn't figured out what he wanted to say by the time they reached Will's door.

"You go ahead," Deanna said to Will, nudging him forward. He entered wordlessly. Alone with Picard, Deanna could sense Will's emotions plummeting fast — no one to distract him, nothing to keep his mind off what had happened down below. A soul-deep longing for company rose inside him, stretching out to Deanna's mind — and to Picard's.

"He'd like it if you stayed," said Deanna softly.

Picard froze, his face expressionless. He glanced at the closed door to Will's quarters. "I—" he started.

"He'd like it if *both* of us stayed," Deanna said, lifting her chin. "And I think we can do that, don't you?"

Picard's throat flashed as he swallowed. He closed his nervous hands into fists, so that incessant gesture — thumb against forefinger — couldn't give him away. Shoulders squared, he met Deanna's eyes and nodded.

Sometimes he slips up, Deanna thought, knowing Picard couldn't hear her, praying he would understand anyway. *Sometimes he calls you Dad.*

Picard didn't hear. He entered Will's quarters like a man going to war. Deanna followed, and no questions were asked, no answers given.

They all went to bed together.

Chapter 3

“You look as exhausted as I do, Will,” said Picard warmly, extending his hand for a shake.

Will gave him a tired grin. He clasped Picard’s hand and then — totally disregarding the fact that he was in uniform — pulled his former commanding officer in for a hug. Picard went stiff, startled by the sudden touch. But he would just have to get used to it, now that they weren’t serving on the same ship.

“I *am* exhausted,” Will said.

“A newborn baby will do that to you,” said Deanna dryly, with Thad in her arms.

Not to mention a wife in the Phase, Will thought. She gave him an unamused look, but he felt the heat of her thoughts and knew she wasn’t really mad. Just turned on. *Always* turned on, he thought wearily. He turned back to Jean-Luc, oblivious as ever to the sexual undercurrent of the conversation.

“It’s a pleasure to have you aboard the Titan, Jean-Luc,” Will said. “Can I show you around?”

Jean-Luc hesitated. He looked smaller and older than the last time Will saw him; his career had taken a hard turn toward negotiations and diplomacy, and Will had always firmly believed that conversational warfare was far more exhausting than any of Worf’s Klingon workout programs. He was unsurprised when Jean-Luc reluctantly said,

“Perhaps just a short one. And a cup of tea...”

“Certainly.” Will’s eyes glittered. He hooked his arm through Deanna’s, angling for a chance to hold Thad — she always hogged the baby — and Deanna read his mind. She placed Thad squarely in Will’s arms and hurried to Jean-Luc’s side.

“We’ll show you our quarters first,” she said, practically vibrating with energy.

Imzadi, Will scolded.

“Your quarters?” said Jean-Luc, a line appearing between his eyebrows.

“We’ve just redecorated,” said Deanna smoothly. “You must see it.”

To Will, she justified herself: *He’s exhausted! He doesn’t need a tour of the ship.*

He doesn’t need a predatory Betazoid luring him into a trap, either, Will thought. He’d gotten better at projecting his thoughts to her over the years, but Deanna had one simple countermeasure: she could just pretend not to hear him, and that’s what she did now. Will shook his head with a grin. She latched onto the unsuspecting Jean-Luc and led him down the hallway, keeping up a steady stream of conversation.

Just you and me now, Will said to Thad.

??? the baby replied. Will dangled his fingers over Thad’s still-cloudy eyes. !!! Thad said, and Will couldn’t help but laugh. He followed Deanna and Jean-Luc at a distance, taking his time to entertain Thad and bask in the simple comfort of a baby nuzzling against his chest. By the time he reached his quarters, Jean-Luc had settled into one of the low Betazoid couches, a warm cup of Earl Grey steaming his face.

“It was miserable,” he was saying. “These so-called diplomats couldn’t talk their way out of a Romulan fingertrap.”

Deanna rested her cheek on her hand with a vague smile. *He looks good*, she said to Will.

“Which so-called diplomats are these?” asked Will. “Anybody we know?”

Jean-Luc’s features tugged into a scowl. “Does the name Jellicoe ring any bells?” he asked sarcastically.

Will swallowed a laugh. He made his way to the computer in a slow sideways shuffle that Thad liked, because the swing of Will’s hips and shoulders always led to a gentle rocking motion. While Jean-Luc ranted, his voice folding in on itself from tiredness, Will programmed the computer for some light jazz, a melody that always put Thad to sleep.

He’s quite sexy when he’s mad, Deanna said appreciatively.

Speak for yourself. Will remembered the many lectures he’d received from Captain Picard with a shudder. He eased into an armchair at Jean-Luc’s side and leaned back, letting Thad rest on his chest. Deanna shot him a quick, affectionate look — no doubt she could feel the warm rush of happiness emanating from deep in his soul. Will beamed back at her and put his feet up.

Ask him, he encouraged.

Don’t torture me. You know he won’t say yes.

“Meet any nice girls lately, Jean-Luc?” Will asked loudly, interrupting Picard’s train of thought. Jean-Luc sputtered a little over the change of subject.

“I — er — no, not as such.” He lowered his chin, suddenly pensive. “There was a woman at the Episcu Conference. The Borg task force. But...”

The Borg. Those words settled into the air like an oily skin over water. Will turned his attention back to Thad, keeping his face blank, but he was sure Deanna could feel the sting of guilt coming off him.

“Of course,” said Deanna softly, and now she felt guilty too, like they were feeding into each other. “Jean-Luc, if you want to talk—”

“No,” he said dismissively. He heaved a sigh. “It’s not that bad. We were simply too busy to...” He shrugged and turned back to his tea. “In any case, I suspect a relationship is not in my cards.”

Deanna’s nonstop state of arousal gave a sad little flare before it wilted. She turned to Will with almost a pout. When she saw him happily cradling a sleepy Thad and nodding his head to the music, it turned into wrath.

I’ll see you in the bedroom later, she promised. All this pent-up energy has to go somewhere!

Will’s smile washed away. He sat up and caught Jean-Luc’s sleeve just as he stood to go.

“Jean-Luc, tell us more about—” Think, Will, think! “—archaeology,” he said.

“Oh, Will, it really is late—”

“Deanna’s thinking of getting a second degree,” Will lied.

Jean-Luc’s eyebrows shot up. He settled back into his chair, alight with new enthusiasm. “Really!” he said softly. “Well, where to begin? The first thing you need to know, Deanna—”

Safe. Will leaned back, eyes closed, lulled by the music and Thad’s gentle breathing. Picard could go on for hours about archaeology, and while he did, Will was safe. Not that he didn’t enjoy the Phase, but...well, by God, he was pushing fifty.

And they were up to five times a day.

Chapter 4

“You seem winded,” Jean-Luc said cheerfully.

In a massive vat of grapes, beneath a hot, pale sun, Will shot him a mental wave of long-suffering exasperation. At his side, Deanna slid in the grape pulp and clutched his arm for balance, and he could sense her amusement.

He can't hear your thoughts, she reminded Will.

“I *am* winded!” Will shouted, recovering from his telepathic gaffe without an ounce of abashment. “Leave it to you, Jean-Luc, to rope your guests into manual labor!”

“Well, you have much larger feet than me,” said Picard from the sidelines. A floppy sunhat shaded his bald head from the light, and he took a casual sip of wine before saluting Will with the glass. “Although your technique leaves much to be desired,” he said.

“I find it hard to believe there's any *technique* to stomping grapes,” Will said. He leaned against the wooden vat and grimaced; crushed grapes oozed between his toes and stained his skin red-purple. It looked like the least-sanitary process in the galaxy to him, and he was a Klingon food gourmand. “I tell you what, I'm definitely sticking to synthehol from now on,” he said. “Nothing like an up-close view of the process to turn you off wine.”

“Oh, please,” Deanna said. She swung her leg over the side of the vat and stepped down, wiping her stained feet in the grass. “*I* enjoyed it, Jean-Luc. Thank you for this edifying glimpse into your native culture.”

Suck-up, Will said. He gratefully accepted two helping hands out of the vat and nearly fell on his ass when his fruit-stained feet slipped on the wet grass. Jean-Luc swallowed a laugh. “I heard that,” Will complained, but his eyes were sparkling. He snatched the glass of wine out of Jean-Luc's hand and drained it in one gulp. “Please tell me you have a foot-bath somewhere around here.”

“Of course. It's called ‘the hose tap’. Follow me.”

Jean-Luc led them around the side of the vineyard — a gorgeous place, really, with a fragrant scent on the air that cleared out Will's lungs and left him feeling chilled but content, the same way a spring breeze left him feeling young and new. He and Deanna hooked arms, and after a moment, playfully, he offered his other arm to Jean-Luc, and felt a frisson of delight when Jean-Luc hesitated only a moment before taking it.

The dry golden sun — the cool wind filtering through his shirt and kissing his chest, the back of his neck — the tang of fruit on the air, the rustle of vines and buzz of bees searching for a hit of sucrose — the pit bull puppy loping after them, stopping to sniff at the base of the vat—

Jean-Luc turned, forcing Will and Deanna to stop. He glared at the little dog as it pawed in the dirt.

“Number One!” he called.

Will twitched. The puppy lifted its head, tail wagging, as if it recognized that name.

“Come, Number One!” Jean-Luc said.

The puppy scrambled to get its feet under it and chased after them. Will raised an eyebrow and studied Jean-Luc's face — which was studiously blank. Deanna's amusement rolled off her in oppressive waves.

“Number One?” Will asked. “You named your puppy after me?”

Jean-Luc gave him an innocent look. “It's a generic term, Number— Will.”

Deanna's grip tightened on Will's arm. “That's funny,” she said with innocent pleasantness to Jean-Luc. “You call your puppy ‘Number One’, and sometimes, I call Will my puppy.” She and Will offered Jean-Luc twin devilish smiles. “When we're in—”

Jean-Luc blushed a worrying shade of red. “Come along, pup!” he shouted to the dog, drowning out the rest of Deanna's sentence. He rushed on ahead of them, head down and ears burning, and Will and Deanna didn't bother to hide their laughter. With his sandals flopping in the dirt, and his sunhat covering his head, he looked younger, more casual, almost...

...*Cute*, Will said absently.

Very, Deanna agreed.

Then Will felt it. A pit of warmth in his stomach, a fire stoking higher. He glanced at Deanna, surprised, and saw the same feeling in her eyes, felt it swirling between them — deep, and shared. A rush of affection, of attraction, the same fierce protectiveness and love he'd always felt when he was with her. But this was different. The target wasn't Will, wasn't Deanna.

Her interest in Jean-Luc was piquing.

His was, too.

Chapter 5

By the time Picard learned about Thad's death, it was too late to attend the funeral.

Betazoid funeral rites required the surviving family to tend the body on their own, and Jean-Luc suspected that's what Will would want anyway. Still, in the months it took him to arrive on Nepenthe, it troubled him. He dozed off on the transport, and the discomfort of long travel mixed with his sleeping concerns to form a terrible dream: a wasted body, not Thad's, but one of the dead children Will had seen to on a Federation candidate planet years ago. What was the name of it? Gilla — Gilla — he'd almost forgotten that place, barely remembered the name.

There had been a chemical attack there, Jean-Luc remembered when he woke. He dug the grit out of his eyes and tried to call up the details. A revolution; an oppressive governmental backlash; canisters of gas and corrosive mist filling the air. He hadn't gone planet-side; he'd seen the images later. Will's tortured face, the brisk professionalism with which he handled the dying and the dead. And he'd been there in sickbay when Beverly treated Will — and the rest of the away team — for the milder effects of the toxin on their skin. White blisters, seared red flesh...

Thad wouldn't have looked like that. Jean-Luc knew that. A death by illness was not the same as a death by accident, by violence. The body Will and Deanna lowered into a grave would not be malnourished, broken open, malformed. Not a wasted corpse. Not a flesh-and-muscle shell ripped into pieces by shrapnel or phaser blasts. Just Thad, his dark eyes closed, his hair falling soft across his forehead. Just Thad, still caught in that awkward lanky phase between boy and man. Thad, his father's spitting image, his mother's sensitive soul: peaceful and sleeping, forever.

It was easier to imagine the nameless, deformed children of Gilla instead.

They said the soil of Nepenthe had healing properties, and Deanna had to believe that was true, because how else could she explain why her Imzadi spent every hour alone in the woods instead of here with her?

Don't bother to scold her: she knew that wasn't fair. First of all, because Will had always been more comfortable outdoors. Not that he disliked a party — she could feel the delight radiating off him in Ten-Forward back in the day — but it was nothing compared to the joy she sensed when he was guiding the kids on their first hunting trip. He'd taught Thad and Kestra how to swim in the muddy-bottomed lake nearby, minnows nipping at their feet. He'd loved living out of a temporary capsule-shelter while he built the log cabin, with Kestra and Thad stripping down to their shorts like wild-men to mimic him, always getting in his way.

She could still see it: the sunlight blazing off Will's bare back, the sweat glistening on his skin as he worked the saw. The gentle curve of his lips as Thad danced a circle around him, trying to distract him — as Kestra clambered over the log pile, as she pretended to lose her balance so Will would catch her mid-fall. She could hear Thad's laughter.

How long would she be able to hear his laughter?

But that was all just 'first of all'. There was one other reason why it wasn't fair to blame Will. Deanna was hiding, too. She took her meals alone, claiming she didn't have an appetite. Really she liked the gnaw of hunger in her stomach; she liked cutting herself off even better: if Kestra and Will had a Klingon entree, if they ate together in the garden, then Deanna had a salad and she ate it at the kitchen table, windows shut, all alone. If Will and Kestra spent the morning patching their old rowboat, then Deanna spent it at the house with a book in hand. If both of them had lost somebody — if both of them were grieving — if their sadness battered at her empathy like intruders at the door, then—

When Will came back from his long walks at night, Deanna pulled the covers over her head and pretended to be sleeping. When he kissed her, she kept her eyes closed. She liked to look at him only in the kitchen in the mornings, when sunlight splintered through the eastern window and cast his face in shadow. She didn't have to see Thad's long eyelashes, Thad's devilish grin, Thad's one-eyed squint.

I need to see somebody other than you, she said. Her mental voice wove through the trees, across the fresh spring earth and flowers, until it reached Will's mind. She sensed the sting of new calluses on his fingers as he tied a rope swing for Kestra, the dull ache in his heart, the desperate need for somebody to guide him, to listen, to offer advice. For a father.

I know, Will said. He looked at Kestra, unsmiling, digging a twig into the loose earth. Her playmate was gone; her parents were grieving; boredom had turned her eyes dull. But at the sound of a landing transport, she shot to her feet, eyebrows raised. And when Jean-Luc made his way to the Riker-Troi cabin, exuding nothing but weariness from his journey and delight to see his old friends, Kestra ran to greet him. Her face lit up in a smile. She took Jean-Luc's arm and steered him straight to the makeshift archery range, where she could show off her skills. For the first time in months, Deanna sensed nothing but joy in her daughter's heart.

I think Kestra needs somebody, too, Will said.

Chapter 6

I really don't want him to go, Will said.

Soji and Kestra stood some distance away, watching with embarrassment as the three 'old people' embraced. Will started it, of course — he couldn't help it. He enveloped Jean-Luc in a tight bear-hug, hyper-aware of the smallness, the fragility of Jean-Luc's body, how tired he seemed. In fact, Deanna agreed. The weariness was rolling off Jean-Luc in waves.

She joined the hug. Jean-Luc's broad hand landed on her waist, a gentle touch. She heard the soft noise of Will's lips on Jean-Luc's cheek, then a little bolder, a kiss on the lips — quick and chaste — and Deanna leaned in for one too.

I'm surprised he let me, she said.

I'm not, Will said. He tightened the hug to stop Jean-Luc from walking away. *Listen to him. He's sick and tired of all this fighting. He's been desperate for someone to take care of him ever since the Borg.*

Agreed. Deanna paused in the middle of rubbing Jean-Luc's back. *What do you mean, 'listen to him'?*

Will paused, unsure. He pulled back a little to study Jean-Luc's face. Jean-Luc raised his eyebrows.

You should manipulate him into staying, Imzadi, Will said. *You're great at manipulation.*

Thanks, said Deanna sarcastically. *Why don't you try asking him yourself?*

"Ask me what?" Jean-Luc said.

Will opened his mouth to explain, but the words died on his tongue. He turned to Deanna. She stared back at him, just as speechless. Jean-Luc glanced between them, concerned.

Will? Deanna? said his voice in both their heads. *Is something...*

Realization caught up to him. His face blanched.

...wrong? His thoughts echoed through their heads. A massive grin split Will's face. Deanna took Jean-Luc's hand with a disbelieving chuckle.

"Nothing at all," she assured him.

And she added, so only he and Will could hear:

Imzadi.

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