

Altered States

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Altered States

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Summary

It's never wise to reject a Q.

He was gone for two hours.

Beverly hurried to the bridge; Deanna stayed in Ten-Forward, holding down the fort while Riker's date assisted in a ship-wide search. But he wasn't in his quarters; he wasn't in the holodeck; he wasn't anywhere. And with every passing second, Deanna's nerves tightened just a little more.

She chewed her thumbnail and dismissed Guinan's offers of food. Her eyes fixed on the empty table where Riker had been meeting his date. She should have seen this coming. She'd sensed Amanda's attraction to Riker from the moment they met. She'd even teased him about it – until she felt his discomfort and let it drop. Worse, in the moments between Riker's rejection of Amanda and the flash of light that blipped them both out of existence, Deanna had felt the swell of embarrassment in Amanda's young mind – world-shattering grief that only the young could feel when they were turned down – responsive anger, entitlement, the power of a Q rising to erase every whispering voice that normally told Amanda to think things through.

But what could Deanna have done against a teenage girl with the powers of a Q? That, she didn't know. She folded her hands in front of her lips and checked her chrono.

On the two-hour mark, the air in Ten-Forward sizzled and Will Riker was there – where no one had been, just a second before. Deanna stood, her heart pounding, and reached for him automatically before she noticed his mussed hair, his undone collar. He took her hands by reflex and squeezed tight.

“Deanna,” he said, his voice hoarse.

“What happened to you?”

He cracked out a laugh – a raspy sound that made Deanna almost think his throat was caving in. He slipped his hands out of hers and did up his uniform collar with a crooked smile. Around Ten-Forward, interested officers and crewmen turned away, too accustomed to the Enterprise's strange goings-on to stare when a first officer reappeared out of thin air.

“Is there a search going on?” Riker asked, avoiding Deanna's questions.

“Oh!” She tapped her combadge. “Troi to the bridge. I've found him, Captain.”

Riker leaned in so the badge would pick up his voice. “Alive and well, sir.”

“Very well, Number One,” came Picard's displeased voice. “Report to my ready room at your earliest convenience.”

“Aye, sir.”

The transmission ended. Deanna and Will eyed each other, and gently, she used her fingers to comb his hair back into place. “She forced you?” she asked.

Will huffed out a laugh. He caught her by the wrist and kissed her pulse point. “I don't need to be forced into pleasure,” he said. “I just wish

she had better timing. Where's my date?"

"She was heading the search party," Deanna said. Will had turned away to glance at the empty table when he asked her that question – why? To hide his face? She sensed a quivering inside him, one that meant his mental walls were up. Dishonesty. "Will," she said.

He met her eyes. His face was a cheerful mask.

"She's awfully young," Deanna said, and she thought, *Two hours ago, that bothered you. It bothered you a lot.*

But now? Riker's expression didn't change. He was always great at that poker face. But the quivering inside him quaked, fell through the bottom of his stomach, stilled unnaturally, and one by one, his positive emotions bled away. They hadn't been very strong to begin with; now they were nonexistent. Like he was feeling nothing at all.

He squeezed Deanna's hand. The sparkle in his eyes was flat.

"I've got to meet the captain," he said.

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