

Changing Colors

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Changing Colors

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Summary

Soren's spent her whole life secretly exploring a gender she's not supposed to have.

Riker has, too.

Notes

This fic covers a few different time periods: Riker and Troi's first reunion after Encounter at Farpoint; Riker and Soren's relationship years later; the day that Kyle Riker abandoned his son, the day Riker and Troi first met, etc. The year is listed at the top of each scene to help out.

2364

She could feel his anxiety and determination, and it had nothing to do with the recently-completed mission at Farpoint. Will's eyes kept burning a hole in the back of Deanna's skull, mentally telegraphing his intention to corner her the moment they were alone. *What for?* Deanna wondered — he'd been surprised to see her aboard the Enterprise, but it wasn't like him to be *cross* about it.

She listened with half an ear to Picard's debrief. The rest of her attention zeroed in on Will: the buzz of worry deep in his chest, the nervous twitching of his fingers and the way he shifted from foot to foot. This anxiety hadn't been present when they were planet-side, when he had the mission to distract them. Deanna nodded her head, vaguely aware that Picard had dismissed them both, and turned on her heel.

Will caught up with her in the hall.

"May I speak to you?" he asked politely, without a hint of nerves in his voice.

"Of course," said Deanna, keeping her face blank. She led him to the nearest empty room and stepped inside. When the doors hissed shut behind Will, his anxiety ratcheted up ten levels, practically *visible*, like a starburst of golden light emanating from his skin. "What is it, Will?" asked Deanna, her voice soft. "You're worried about something. I can tell."

His jaw tightened. He glanced over his shoulder as if he half-expected someone to come after them.

"I just wanted..." He stepped closer spasmodically. His voice lowered almost to a whisper. "You know things about me, Deanna," he said with a careful lack of emotion, studying her face.

"I suppose I do."

The hint of humor didn't draw him out.

"Things nobody else knows," he said, and now Deanna understood what he meant. Exasperation and affection rushed through her, and she had to stop herself from taking his hand.

“Will—” she started in a sigh.

“I know you won’t tell anyone,” he said roughly, avoiding her eyes. “I just need to hear you say it.”

She brushed her fingertips against his. Their first meeting played through her head again: the tears, the tight knot of panic in his chest, the fragrance of wedding flowers choking her lungs. Will forced himself to meet her eyes, and she was struck by how put-together he looked, how closed off. The perfect picture of a Starfleet officer, just like always. Only she could feel the swirl of distress lurking just beneath the skin.

Her eyes softened. She allowed herself to take his hand.

“I won’t tell,” Deanna whispered.

2368

If you’d told Riker just a month ago that he’d be on a mission to chart a pocket of null space, and that he wouldn’t find the null space all that interesting, he’d have laughed in your face. What could be more interesting than an all-new discovery, with the Enterprise at the front lines, with Riker himself manning the exploratory shuttle?

But a month ago, he hadn’t met Soren yet. And now, when he glanced up from the dashboard, he didn’t catch himself peeking at the null space pocket all that much. Mostly his eyes trailed sideways, to the genderless person in the copilot’s seat.

What are they really? Worf had asked him when the J’Naii first came aboard.

What do you mean? Will asked.

They say they have no gender. Yet they must be hiding something beneath these... Worf’s lip curled, his Klingon sensibilities offended by the baggy jumpsuits the J’naii wore. ... *Uniforms*, he finished with a hint of disdain.

Will tried to stifle a smile. *They’re not like us, I don’t think*, he said. Soren — he didn’t know Soren’s name back then — passed closeby, and Worf’s eyes tracked them to the door.

I believe that one is female, he said in a low growl. He pinpointed another J’naii, this one with a slightly stronger jaw and a husky voice. *And that one is male.*

Will shook the memory away. It reminded him too much of a time he’d rather forget. He sneaked another glance at Soren. Assuming the J’naii had a traditional dichotomy between the sexes — assuming those sexes more or less mirrored what humans were used to — he still couldn’t tell what Soren might be, and it gave his skin a tight, uncomfortable tingle to speculate.

Better to focus on the mission.

“I’m illuminating the Delta IV grid-map,” Soren murmured. “We’ll start there and expand.”

Their voice always seemed higher, more fluting, when they were alone with Riker. And at the same time, less stilted, a little quicker, the natural speed of someone having fun.

Riker swallowed hard. “Standby forward phaser array,” he said as gruffly as possible, tapping over the dashboard screen. A pulse of light disappeared into the pocket of null space, emitting a hum Riker could feel in his teeth. He and Soren leaned close to study the sensors.

“Pulse vanished at Delta IV point-two by point-three,” Soren said.

They leaned away again, and instantly Riker missed the hint of body heat coming from Soren’s arm. What had they said earlier, during lunch? The J’naii slept together to avoid the cold. As friends.

“Firing second burst,” he said, his mouth dry.

This one targeted, and disappeared, at point-four by point-five.

“This is working,” Riker said, cheering up a little. “Initiating computer task hand-off.”

He hit the auto-controls and settled in, watching on the screen as the computer mapped out every burst of energy. The boundaries of the null space pocket were being written in the form of glowing yellow lines; soon they’d know exactly where it began and ended, and where to find the missing J’naii shuttle. He sneaked a glance at Soren, but their face was a rubber mask, no hint of excitement to be found.

Riker turned his attention back to the map. A comfortable silence set in. Then:

“Commander,” said Soren formally, “tell me about your sexual organs.”

Riker’s head snapped up, but he kept his eyes on the windshield, trying to get his expression under control. A wicked blush crept up from his collar.

“Uh...”

“Is that an uncomfortable subject for humans?” Soren asked, eyes down.

Uncomfortable? Riker’s heart was in his throat. But that, he reminded himself, was his problem, not anything to do with Soren. He

squared his shoulders.

“No,” he forced himself to say. “But it doesn’t tend to be a topic of casual conversation.”

“I’m interested in your mating practices. What is involved with...” The hesitation made his pulse drum at his ears. “...two sexes,” Soren finished.

The blush had spread to his ears now. “Correcting course,” said Riker perhaps a bit too loudly. “Zero-two-one-mark-zero.”

“Mating,” Soren said, as if he’d forgotten. Riker gave her a wide-eyed, quelling look. *Her*. Damn it. He met Soren’s eyes, not breathing.

“Right,” he said, looking away. *Tell them*, said a voice in his head. Soren had asked about sexual organs; about his sexual organs. Clearly they had an interest in gender beyond what was typical for the J’naii. An open-mindedness, a tolerance that he’d noticed in Soren’s dealings with aliens. If there was ever a good time to say it, or a good person to say it to...

But what came out of Riker’s mouth was a total evasion.

“Well, it’s pretty simple. The men inseminate the women and the women carry the baby.”

Not what Soren asked, and Riker knew it.

And suddenly he couldn’t meet their eyes.

“We should see if we can balance this engine,” Riker said.

He knelt, pushing down on the back of Soren’s seat as he did so. He did it without thinking — it was the kind of intimate gesture, either friendly or romantic, that was common among the Enterprise’s crew. The same way he and Deanna could kiss on the lips and still be friends, or the friendly touches Beverly gave her patients — but Riker usually treated guests a little more formally.

He didn’t have time to regret his action. The seat back went down, and Soren adapted like nothing had happened, sliding to the floor on the other side of the copilot’s chair.

“Can you access the starboard thrust?” Riker asked.

Soren folded himself under the dashboard, red light softening the planes of their face. They reached for Riker’s extra screwdriver as they settled in, and their fingers brushed Riker’s just for a moment — a flash of warm skin against his own, and then Soren was gone.

“There,” they said softly as they examined the engine’s control panel, their voice just like a human woman’s. Riker’s heart leapt into his throat.

“I’ll optimize the plasma flow while you work on that,” he said. Soren was deliberately pitching their voice higher, he was sure of it now. He remembered doing the opposite around thirteen or fourteen, when all the other guys in school showed up one day, voices cracking.

“Commander...” Soren’s eyes flicked to Riker’s face and away again. “I’d like to tell you something.” They lowered their screwdriver. “Something that’s not easy to say.”

Riker kept his eyes on the read-out screen, his throat tight. “What is it?” he murmured.

Soren sat up straighter. The warm light of the screen played off their face, lending a touch of color to their pale lips.

“I find you attractive,” they said softly, and Riker finally met their eyes. “I am taking a terrible risk in telling you that. It means revealing something to you — something that, if it were known on my planet, would be very dangerous to me.”

And suddenly Riker was a child again, sneaking access to his dad’s padd. He could remember the ache of his calves as he stood on tiptoe, stretching to reach an adult-sized reading stand. And the strain of the screen lights against his eyes, the way he refused to blink as he read the results. All he found was a list of dead people. Murdered people, some of them centuries distant, others too new, too fresh.

Soren extricated himself from beneath the dashboard. Their hand slid across the copilot’s seat, almost brushing Riker’s knuckles, but not quite.

“Occasionally, among my people...” Soren hesitated. “There are those who are born...”

Different, Riker thought, his heart thudding, just as Soren said it aloud. Different like Soren, in that all of society told her she was genderless, when she knew in her bones that she was female. Different like Riker, in that ... He swallowed the memories and allowed himself a smile: small, genuine, painful.

“I have to admit,” he said, “I had a feeling you were different.”

Soren smiled back. “I was hoping you would.”

He was fifteen when his father left.

Will was late coming home that day. He was supposed to go straight from the high school to his advanced courses, designed to get him

into Starfleet Academy by age seventeen. He'd been attending religiously since he was eight years old: flight lessons, orbital mechanics, military history, martial arts. But today he skipped; he cut through the woods to his friend Rosa's house and played in the snow with her sled dogs, with her, until the sky was dark.

When he entered the Riker house, his bare hands and cheeks were stinging from the cold. The lights flicked on automatically; a Starfleet transporter pad lay in the middle of the living room floor, still warm. Dad was always leaving on unexpected missions, but something made Will crouch down to brush his fingers over the pad; something made him check the closets, where his father's hangers stood empty. And something made him check the master bedroom. Mom's wedding ring was missing from her jewelry box. The key to Mom and Dad's first house was gone from its hook, leaving a pale jagged stripe on the wall. And Dad's favorite photo, the one that showed Mom with her honey-blond hair in front of that house in Fairbanks, before they moved here — the one where she held a baby, blue-eyed and dressed in a pink jumper — that was gone, too.

He wasn't coming back, Will realized dully. He glanced sideways and caught sight of himself in the mirror. Staring back at him was a gangly teenage boy, his hair chopped short, his skinny frame drowning in weather-stained clothes.

Dad had never minded the clothes or hair. He never messed up the name. But they'd never talked about it, either. Not since Will was four or five, when he first started putting his foot down. Mom, before she died, used to tell him he just wanted to be like his dad. That he insisted on wearing the same clothes as Kyle as early as two years old. But Will couldn't remember that far back; he tugged his tuque off and ran long fingers through his hair, scrutinizing his own face.

They'd never talked about it. They'd never *have* to talk about it, now. And Will would never have to stand at Kyle's side again, face burning, as Kyle introduced him as "my daughter."

He watched his reflection crack a smile.

2353

It was easy to get the necessary treatments, if you knew where to look. Even the first surgery was simple enough, although he lied about why he needed it; by the time Riker entered Starfleet Academy, he'd taken it upon himself to change his birth certificate and retroactively edit all school records. He towered over most of his classmates — broad-shouldered, deep-voiced — and he avoided Medical like the plague.

But sometimes he caught himself eyeing other cadets. Cindy McMorris, who cut her hair short and pitched her voice low, who showed up to class one day flat-chested ... Eric Lefebvre, who wore his hair back in a bun and applied color to his lips, even on PT days. Will never introduced himself; in fact, he was careful to avoid them, and tried not to *think* about them, too. The night before big tests, sometimes he dreamed of being friends with them, just standing in the Academy garden — and the other students would see them together, start to wonder — start to pick out clues they never noticed before, study Riker's body with a critical eye. Other nights he dreamed of surprise inspections, Starfleet officials searching his wardrobe, finding the freezer unit where he kept his medication...

He woke up in a sweat.

The next month, Cadet McMorris dropped out of Starfleet. At the end of the year, due to bad grades, Lefebvre was not permitted to advance. Will remembered his first tentative search on his father's padd — unsure what to even *call* people like him, if a word for it existed — and the list of dead people that seared into his memory. His dreams morphed. He was ousted from Starfleet in one; forced to undergo an invasive body inspection in the next; sent to therapy in another, his brain picked over until he woke, skull throbbing, the taste of bile on his tongue.

No. Nothing would take him out of Starfleet now. He kept his secret; he cut ties with anyone who got too close.

He graduated Starfleet as Ensign Will Riker, and no one was any the wiser.

2358

Betazoid weddings weren't closed to outsiders, but it was still a little odd for humans to be invited. Deanna peeked into the dressing room, where racks and boxes waited to be filled with clothes, and two humans in Starfleet uniforms stood alone. One of them, tall and handsome, looked a little lost.

"I think he was brought here as a prank," the bride whispered to Deanna.

"You mean he doesn't know?"

Chandra shook her head with a tight-lipped smile.

"Well, don't you think that's cruel?" Deanna scolded.

"Not at all!" Chandra looked genuinely surprised. "You haven't heard? He's making waves over at the embassy. Everyone he's come in contact with says he's amazingly open-minded ... for a human."

Deanna snorted. "That doesn't mean he wants to strip nude with no warning. Most humans like advance notice, you know."

In the dressing room, the Starfleet officer was chatting happily with his companion, unaware of what she'd tricked him into. Chandra turned away with a shrug.

“Help me with these flowers,” she said, gesturing to the white blossoms braided into her hair.

Deanna shoved all thoughts of the Starfleet officer out of her mind. She followed Chandra back to the bridal chamber, where they finished the final touches. Deanna held a paintbrush delicately in one hand, using the felt-hair bristles to dab extra hints of color on every flower petal in Chandra’s hair.

A spike of shock broke through the wedding party’s cheer.

“Oh,” Chandra chuckled.

“I suppose our Starfleet officer just found out this is a nude wedding,” Deanna said.

“Yes. Someone just undressed in front of him.”

The shock reverberated and deepened. Not so open-minded, Deanna supposed; she’d hoped he would get over it quickly, but instead the sense of surprise twisted in on itself, became dread. She could practically feel his sweaty palms and the tightness in his throat. In the mirror, she caught Chandra’s eye and saw the line between her eyebrows.

“What is it?” Deanna asked. Distantly, the Starfleet officer’s shock had turned to panic, and she could sense alarm coursing through his companion’s body.

“Oh,” said Chandra, her face pinched. The sense of panic moved farther away. “He’s leaving,” Chandra said.

Deanna hadn’t been so irritated about being left out of the Betazoid telepathic loop since she was a teenager. Since Chandra couldn’t be bothered to tell her, she set her paintbrush down on a blotting pad and went in search of answers by herself. The few Betazoids milling about were awash with sympathy and embarrassment, as if they’d been privy to a serious social gaffe.

Deanna pulled aside Chandra’s father — he could never resist gossip. But what he told her had her searching for the Starfleet officer with renewed determination. She followed the sense of panic out of the dressing room — filling up now with guests — and into the streets. His companion stood alone against the stone wall, her arms crossed over her stomach.

“Your friend—” Deanna started.

“Riker?” The woman waved a hand dismissively. The sting of rejection clung to her skin; of course she, unlike the Betazoids, had no way of knowing why her companion had run out. “He left. If I’d known he was so distressed by the idea of seeing me naked…”

“Where?” Deanna asked, glancing up and down the street.

“That way.”

The atrium. A good choice — plenty of privacy there. Deanna murmured a quick thanks to the human and hurried off, tracking the sense of panic through the atrium’s glass door. Jungle heat closed in on her; drops of humidity clung to her hair as she pushed through hallways filled with exotic trees from the southern hemisphere of Betazed. Shame, fear, despair…

There.

Beneath the foliage of a fragrant tree, Deanna caught sight of a Starfleet uniform and heard a too-short breath. Gently, she hooked her fingers in the lush green leaves and pushed the branch aside. The Starfleet officer — Riker — had tucked himself against a boulder, his hands clasped loosely around his knees, like a man exhausted after a long hike. He gave her a tearful nod of acknowledgment and looked away, red-rimmed eyes fixed on the artificial river trickling past his feet.

“It’s Will, right?” said Deanna, taking a seat on the atrium floor.

He nodded, jaw tight.

“Deanna.” She held out her hand, human-style — or close to it, she hoped. Reluctantly, he took her fingers, his thumb brushing her knuckle, and dipped her hand up and down. The sunlamps flashed off Deanna’s wedding jewelry. “This was your first time, I take it,” Deanna said.

He let her go. No words. Deanna could still sense misery clawing at his throat, though it was scarcely visible in his body language. He didn’t *look* like a man on the verge of a meltdown — he looked like a capable, competent officer worn out from a long day.

That just meant he was used to hiding it, she supposed.

“Why don’t you tell me what went wrong?” asked Deanna gently.

His voice, when it came out, was rough. “You’re the telepath. You tell me.”

“I’m not, though.”

His gaze shot up, wide blue eyes meeting hers.

“Is that a problem?” asked Deanna with a smile. He just blinked at her, too flummoxed to speak. “I’m only half-Betazoid,” she explained, sliding closer. “I can sense emotions, but I can’t read thoughts.” She watched him closely, examining the subtle shift of muscle in his face. “I sense that brings you some relief,” she said.

The column of his throat shifted as he swallowed. "A little. Not much. I suppose most of the people there were full-Betazoids...?"

"All of them," Deanna admitted.

"So they know." The dread in his gut burrowed a little deeper. "I don't suppose I can trust them to keep it a secret?"

Deanna tilted her head to the side. "Does it have to be a secret?" she asked.

He searched her face, another flare of alarm going up inside him.

"There are others like you, Will," said Deanna quietly.

"I know that. I—"

"Not just civilians," she pressed, "and not just aliens. I mean in Starfleet. Your fellow officers. Even here on Betazed, men and women you know by name."

"I thought you weren't a telepath," he said, his voice hoarse.

"I'm not." She sucked in a quick breath. "The bride's father told me," she admitted. "As for the other Starfleet officers, it's common knowledge. They don't hide it."

His face creased. "They don't—" he started with a shake of the head.

"Why would they?"

He just laughed. He pressed the heel of his palm against his eye and turned his face away.

"Do you have parents, Will?" asked Deanna, her voice soft. "Didn't anyone tell you this, when you were young?"

He couldn't speak. He focused on his breathing, a calm sensation pouring over him and into Deanna as he forced all other thoughts out of his head. He'd be a good man to have in battle, she realized with surprise. In a span of a few seconds, he'd erased all traces of panic and met her gaze with steely blue eyes.

"I looked it up," he said matter-of-factly. "When I was a kid. All I saw was a list of dead people. Murder victims."

Deanna furrowed her eyebrows. "Where are you from?" she asked.

"Valdez, Alaska. On Earth."

She searched for a tactful way to say it. "Is Valdez-Alaska...known for its...progressive leanings?"

Riker barked out a laugh, relaxing a little. "It's not that bad," he said. "It's just ... I mean, it's a little traditional. We don't talk about things like this. I never..."

The quiet trickle of the river filled the air. Fallen leaves and stray petals bobbed on the water. Riker lowered his head, his face drawn, a muscle jumping in his cheek.

"It's normal," he said quietly, getting himself used to the concept.

"It's normal," Deanna promised. "Will, there's nothing wrong with you. There's no reason to hide."

"And the others in Starfleet, they just tell people? Anyone who asks?"

"From what I can tell," Deanna said.

He shook his head. His emotions tugged at Deanna's shirtsleeves, pulling her in: relief and sadness, a special type of grief, a self-deprecating amusement at all he'd put himself through.

"I can't imagine telling anyone," he admitted, almost inaudibly, but composed. "I can barely fathom that I won't be kicked out of Starfleet for this."

Deanna tapped his knee, urging him to scoot over. He made room for her, and she slid into place against the boulder, tucked against his side.

"Earlier you asked if anyone will tell," she said. Riker glanced sideways at her, eyes hooded. "Full Betazoids can read each other's thoughts," Deanna said. "There are no secrets among us. But humans work differently, and we know that. In particular, we can sense when a human wishes for something to remain secret. We know how to be discreet."

His composed mask faltered a little. "Thank you," he said quietly. His hands tightened on his knees. He tipped his head back against the boulder and stared up at the trees. "You're the maid of honor, aren't you?"

Deanna half-smiled. Her ceremonial white dress and the flowers in her hair would have made this a so-called 'stupid question' for any Betazoid, but she liked that Riker had picked up on it without being told — when he didn't even know the most basic fundamentals of Betazoid weddings until today.

"The bride, Chandra, is my best friend," she said. "I'm supposed to take part in the ceremony."

Riker's chest rose and fell in a deep breath. He pushed to his feet and offered her his hand.

"Then let's get you there," he said, screwing up his courage. "I'd hate to make you late."

2368

He'd never been comfortable in crowded rooms. The gardens of J'naii were better: the fragrant crack of wet leaves and fresh sap, the snap of twigs and whisper of grass beneath his feet. And Soren at his side. They stopped beneath the shadow of her favorite tree. Its leaves changed color throughout the year, she said. Green in summer. Blue in autumn. White in winter, then green again.

He would tell her, Will decided. When he kissed her, when he leaned his head against her shoulder, when she skimmed her palms up his back and pulled him close. He would tell her; she would understand, more than anyone. He would tell her—

She kissed him again, and he couldn't help but smile when he kissed her back.

—later.

"Wait!"

Her hand in his, moonlight flashing over the dark grass.

"We're almost there," Riker said.

"Wait!"

Her hand tugging him backward. Riker pulling her into the clearing, turning to face her, heart pounding in his chest. Free.

"You cannot do this," Soren said.

"I won't let them hurt you. You'll be safe on the Enterprise."

"I am so sorry." She hesitated; it was like she hadn't heard him, or didn't understand. Her fingers twitched against his palm. "It was my fault you got involved in all this."

"Everything's going to be alright," Riker assured her. "Everything's going to be fine."

"No. It is not."

She pulled away. Riker stood there, his hands empty, his palms cold.

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

She had her back to him. She shook her head, her face hidden. But then she turned to look him in the eye, without hiding. "It was all a mistake," she said with simple, innocent certainty. "And I should have realized it from the beginning."

The names of the dead flashed before Riker's eyes. He'd had them memorized for decades.

"Realized what?" he asked, his voice low.

"That I was sick," she said. "That I had these terrible urges, and that is why I reached out to you." Her eyes shone. The faith of a true convert. "But it was wrong," she said with a nod. "And I see that now." The faith wavered; a hint of guilt peeked through. But she turned away with a shake of the head. "I do not understand how I could have done what I did."

Cadet McMorris dropping out of Starfleet entirely; Cadet Lefebvre failing his first year. Riker rushed forward and caught Soren by the shoulders, his grip gentle.

"Maybe Doctor Crusher can treat you," he said, searching her face. His throat was tight. "She can bring you back to the way you were."

A line appeared between Soren's eyebrows. She stepped away from him, back beneath the shadow of the tree with color-changing leaves. They were green now. Always, they came back to green.

"Why would I want that?" Soren said.

And she pulled away.

He returned to the Enterprise like a sleepwalker.

Deanna felt it the moment he materialized. The swell of emotion in the transport room woke her. It curled into her throat and choked her: grief and self-recrimination, a bone-deep despair. But before she even sat up, before she blinked the sleep out of her eyes, it was gone.

Will had blocked her out of his head.

"It did not go well," Worf said shortly when she asked him. She couldn't ask Will; he wouldn't answer his door. And Worf wasn't privy to the details, had deliberately made himself scarce while Will and Soren talked. Unable to sleep, Deanna stayed in her own quarters,

nursing a cup of hot chocolate and watching the clock.

She could sense Will's itchy eyelids. Lack of sleep. And she could feel the drum of hot water on his back when he took a shower. Physical sensations, barely useful, but at least they confirmed that he was still there. It was always disconcerting when he cut their mental bond off at the root — when he took away that glimpse into his soul. It was too much like dying for Deanna; it left her anxious, tapping her fingers against her cup, eager to see him with her own eyes.

She caught up with him outside the bridge, just before their shift started. He wore his uniform, hair combed, shoulders hunched. There were bags beneath his eyes that hadn't been there before.

"Just tired," he said with a pale smile, when he caught Deanna studying him.

"Will..." She held her hand out, and by instinct, Will hooked his fingers through hers and squeezed. He grimaced as soon as he did it, as if scolding himself for giving in to comfort. "*Will*," said Deanna again, squeezing back. "Look me in the eye."

"I am," he said, his voice a little rough.

She raised her free hand and placed her palm against his cheek. His shoulders tightened, his face carefully controlled.

"There's nothing wrong with you," Deanna reminded him in a whisper.

Will swallowed. Something flickered in his eyes, almost unreadable. He placed his hand over hers, his palm rough, his skin cold. When he spoke, his voice was heavy, his mind still closed off from hers.

"I know," he said.

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