

Split Ends

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Summary

After months in a Cardassian labor camp, Will Riker returns to the U.S.S. Enterprise with a dashing new white streak in his hair, a mane to rival Samson's, and a whole heaping pile of unspecified trauma.

There weren't many men who would come back from a months-long stint in a Cardassian labor camp undaunted. When William Riker beamed back onto the Enterprise for the first time since he was kidnapped, he was unrecognizable — thirty kilos lighter, with hair down to his shoulders and a beard down to his chest, with dark circles beneath his eyes and a few new scars littering his body where he'd been tortured.

Still, he greeted Beverly with a smile.

"Do you like it?" he asked, his voice a little rough from disuse.

She was so focused on healing an infected gash on the side of his neck that she didn't know what he was talking about at first. When she glanced up at him quizzically, he gestured to his hair.

"Mm..." said Beverly with an ambivalent shrug.

"No?" He paused, eyes sliding to the sickbay door. A half-smile tugged at his cracked lips. "I think Deanna likes it."

"Really?" asked Beverly doubtfully.

"Oh, yes." Riker tapped his temple. "I felt it. When I beamed up, she took one look at the new hair and I felt this rush of joy coming off her in waves."

"Well, I'm sure it's *only* to do with the beard," said Beverly drily, "and nothing to do with the fact that her best friend is back."

"Certainly." Riker kept his head still while Beverly mended the gash ... but he rubbed his thumb against his index finger the whole time.

"Since when can Deanna project emotions?" asked Beverly casually.

Riker froze. He glanced at Beverly out of the corner of his eye, lips tightly shut.

"I always knew there was something between you two," said Beverly, amused. She held her regenerator back from Riker's neck and examined the newly-knit flesh of the wound. "What is it?" she asked. "A mind meld?"

A pale blush colored Riker's cheeks. "It's not like that. It's just ... sometimes I can sense her. The same way she senses me."

Since he was apparently embarrassed about it, Beverly decided not to tease. She ran her regenerator down his arm, slowly healing the little cuts left behind by his escape. She held Riker's hand the whole time — just to keep his arm straight, not to comfort him — but she felt his fingers twitch against her own and suspected he could use the comfort anyway.

"Can you sense anyone else?" she asked finally.

"No," said Riker, his eyes far away. "Just Deanna."

Unbearably romantic, but Beverly kept that to herself. She'd always liked Will — seen how comfortable he and Deanna were around each

other, how happy he made her — so she'd never disapproved of their relationship, really. But now she approved even more. She pushed lightly against Riker's shoulder until he lay back on the examination table, his bruised ribs exposed.

"No less than six breaks," Beverly said after she scanned them. "Did you receive *any* medical care while you were down there?"

He just gave her a painful-looking grin. With a sigh, Beverly turned her scanner off and reached for two things: a hypospray of anesthetic and a laser scalpel.

"You're a whole lot of work sometimes, Will," she said.

"I try."

In the end, he trimmed the beard but kept the hair. It didn't look bad when it was washed. It was salted with little white streaks here and there, but his vanity would survive (boosted a bit by the seven — count them: seven!! — crewmen who called him a silver fox in Ten-Forward).

"We match now," he said to Worf, who wasn't amused. Not even when Riker flipped his hair back. So Riker repeated the joke to Deanna the next time we saw her, and Deanna was kind enough to chuckle.

"You need some curling spray and another twenty centimeters of hair before we'll match," she said, eyes bright. She reached out to tuck a loose strand of hair behind his ear and Riker, still smiling, stepped away — out of her reach. He turned to the bar to hide the way his heart was racing.

"Two champagnes," he said to the bartender. Then, when Deanna gave him a questioning look, "To celebrate."

"Your escape?" Deanna asked.

"No. My fabulous new hair." Two glasses of champagne arrived while Deanna was rolling her eyes. Riker passed one over to her and clinked his glass against hers. "And getting to see you again," he admitted, his voice soft.

Deanna's happy expression fractured. Her eyes were big and dark.

"Will — I thought I'd never—"

"Cheers," he said, and he took a long draft from the champagne flute, and after a moment of hesitation, Deanna followed his lead. But he could never shake her off that easy. As soon as she swallowed, she said,

"You're still hurting."

Riker took some time to let the champagne rest on his tongue. It tasted sour.

"You don't like to be touched anymore," Deanna noted. She reached for his forearm, but she didn't actually make contact; she just paused, her fingers hovering, so Riker could see how his muscles tightened against his will. It was almost like a flinch. "What happened down there, Will?"

"It was a Cardassian labor camp," he said, trying to keep some humor in his eyes. "*Everything* happened."

She expected a flare of remembered pain to rise inside him. Anger, for the way he was treated. Sadness, maybe, that any people in this day and age would treat their prisoners so poorly. But what welled inside him, instead of pain and anger, made Deanna's throat tighten like a vise.

"You're ashamed," she said. The sad attempt at humor in Riker's eyes died; he looked away. "What happened to make you feel ashamed?"

"Let's not do this here," he said, his voice rough.

"Alright," said Deanna hesitantly. She scanned his face, the tight muscles just beneath the surface, the careful mask — and she mirrored his posture, leaning on the bar next to him with her hands clasped. "My office, then," she said. "Later."

He drained his champagne in one long swallow and set the glass down with a clink. He didn't quite meet her eyes, but the emotional storm inside him softened a little, their old familiar bond peeking through.

"Later," he agreed.

He never complained when she treated him like a patient, but ... well, Deanna wasn't an empath for nothing. She could sense his level of comfort as easily as her own, and she knew from experience that he vastly preferred it when she treated their counseling sessions more like a date between friends.

So when Will arrived in her office that night, Deanna had a full Betazoid picnic spread laid out on a blanket over the floor, with two of her most plush cushions spread out for seating. Will froze in the doorway — obviously not what he expected — and then let his lips curve in a smile. It was genuine, Deanna noted with some pleasure; she could feel his delight curling in her own gut.

"We always get interrupted on our picnics," Deanna told him. She sank onto one of the cushions and patted the other with her hand. "Join me."

He didn't need to be told twice. He got down on his knees and shuffle-crawled onto the blanket, flopping down with the cushion beneath his stomach and all his weight resting on his elbows. He looked up at her from beneath his eyelashes.

"I dreamt of this," he said softly, half-smiling.

"This...?" asked Deanna.

"A Betazoid picnic." He reached for a piece of toasted pita and then paused, raising his eyebrows to ask permission. Deanna nodded and he sank the toast deep into a ceramic jar of spicy spread. "They didn't give us a whole lot of food. I'd go to bed at night and just daydream about it ... Betazed. The color of the sky. You know that was the time I ever saw a violet sky? And the glittering grass. The way those flower petals floated on the water at the Janaran Falls."

Thomas Riker had done the same thing, Deanna remembered, her heart aching. Thought of Betazed — of her — during his hour of need. A hint of strain entered Will's eyes as he took a bite and offered her the next one.

"I often dream of it, too," Deanna admitted.

"Do you?"

"Yes." She parted her lips and took a bite of the pita while he held it steady for her. "It's not as good as the real thing," she said after she swallowed.

"That's replicated food for you." Still, he shot her a devilish little grin and took another bite. "Better than prison food, though."

"Especially *Cardassian* prison food," said Deanna, wrinkling her nose.

Will choked out a laugh. He was open like this — relaxed, easy to read. As they ate, she could sense the way his nerves jangled every time her hand came too close to his body — and the way that surge of adrenaline always faded and left him cold, flushed, ashamed. He didn't let any of it show on his face, and he kept up a steady stream of light conversation and jokes.

His spikes of positive emotion came whenever he met eyes with Deanna — when she laughed — when she told him a story he'd never heard before. Something unintentionally hilarious that Worf had done while he was gone. Wesley's latest woebegotten science experiment. The captain's near-deadly psychic tantrum when Data got into *speed-knitting*. On the bridge.

"I assure you, it requires no focus at all," said Deanna in her best Data impression. "And I am fully capable of reaching the bridge controls, as I am one of very few humanoids capable of knitting one-handed. Observe!"

Riker collapsed on his side, covering his face with the cushion so Deanna couldn't see him laugh. "One time — one time he told me he was interested in music," Will said, still breathless. "He said he studied music and realized the heart and soul of it all was ... the beat. I said, yeah, I agree with that. So he said that's what he wants to be. The beat. The metronome."

"Be?" said Deanna. "He wanted to *be* the metronome?"

"*Be*," Will confirmed. "He just followed Geordi around emitting a perfectly rhythmic clicking noise until Geordi lost his mind. And you know it takes a *while* for Geordi to snap."

He brushed his hair out of his face as he spoke and there it was — another spark of pleasure, subtle and new. Deanna cocked her head.

"You really do like it," she murmured.

Will froze, scanning her face.

"The long hair."

His expression melted a little. "Oh. Well..."

"What's the old Earth story?" asked Deanna. "Samson and the strength he took from his long hair."

Will pursed his lips. There was a glimmer of affection in his eyes and a slight blush on his cheeks. "It's not that," he said. "I just..." His chest rose in a long, slow breath, one that he held until his lungs burned and he was forced to release it. "I just wanted a change," he said, staring down at his clasped hands.

Deanna studied him, her heart aching in her chest. If she reached for him, she knew, he would shy away. And he was Will Riker — he'd never shied away. Touch was as fundamental to him as empathy was to her. It was the way he communicated, the way he showed affection and sought it out in return. For that to be stripped from him...

Deanna pushed to her feet. She didn't offer her hand to Will, but she stared down at him softly, hands on her hips, until he craned his neck to meet her eyes.

"What?" he asked.

Deanna didn't give herself time to doubt her methods. She just took a steadying breath and forced a smile.

"How about a traditional Betazoid bath?" she said.

She had to replicate some of the perfumes, but most of the oils and soaps came from her personal stock. The low, wide tub in her personal

bathroom made for a perfect Betazoid bath away from home — the tub walls flattened into low shelves where she could sit and watch as Will sank into the water, letting the fragrant water seep into his skin.

Some people said Betazoid baths were healing. Others said they made you look younger, your hair more vibrant and thick, your skin soft as silk. In reality, Deanna suspected they were just especially good-smelling ... but she couldn't deny the therapeutic quality of a good-smelling bath. She trailed her fingers through the water close to Will's ankle, but not touching, and watched the steam and the muscle-relaxing oils in the water go to work.

Finally he tipped his head back and let the water soak his hair. With his ears beneath the surface, he let out a sigh he probably couldn't hear.

Will you let me wash your hair? Deanna asked.

Beneath the water, his abs tensed and he shifted his legs, like he was looking for purchase. Like he wanted to run. But he kept his head underwater and let out another short sigh.

Please, he said.

His heart was racing. She could feel the knot of anxiety in his stomach like it was her own, and even without an empathic sense of his emotions, she could hear the short, quick breaths he took as he sat up and Deanna shifted to sit behind him. The first light touch of her fingers against his scalp made his lungs freeze. He didn't breathe at all as she ran her fingers through his hair — as she gathered a luxurious Betazoid hair cleanser in her palms and worked it to a lather — as she worked the suds into his hair and scratched at his scalp.

A full minute passed — maybe more — before Will released the breath he was holding and leaned into her touch. His eyes closed; his heartbeat gradually slowed; the tension in his muscles never entirely faded, but it relaxed, and she only knew it was still there from the occasional twitching of his shoulders. Involuntary, like a flinch.

But every time he flinched, he leaned back in for more. And when she washed the suds from his hair and combed her fingers through it, when she placed her hands gently against his temples and leaned his head back, when she pressed her lips against his forehead in a kiss — the flare of anxiety rose and fell, and in its place was warmth. Comfort. Love.

He reached up and smoothed his palm over the back of her neck, his skin warm and wet from the bathwater. He pulled her down, her hair dangling over his face and clinging to his shoulders — into a proper kiss, warm and soft, his lips parting beneath hers.

I dreamt of this, he said, and Deanna could feel all the grief and shame and fear inside him, all those memories of the prison camp bubbling to the surface. But she kissed him again and those emotions faded, so she just smiled.

I know, she said. *I dreamt of this, too.*

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