

## Sea of Nonbelievers

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## Sea of Nonbelievers

by [BeatriceEagle](#)

### Summary

All Ro Laren wants is for people to understand.

### Notes

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It's been a really long time since I dashed off a quick 1500-word character study, but *Star Trek* has done things to me, man. I wrote this in one night and have only given it a single glancing edit, so sorry for any major writing fails, and please give me a heads-up if you spot a mistake.

Songs for this fic are "Rebellion (Lies)" by Arcade Fire and "Don't Panic" by Coldplay.

When Laren heard that there might be war with the Cardassians, her reaction wasn't anxiety, or fear, or even the gruesome sort of excitement that proliferated among the ensigns and NCOs aboard the *Enterprise*. In the limited space that Laren allotted herself for emotions of any kind, there was room only for satisfaction. *Now they'll see*, she thought. *Now they'll understand exactly what the Cardassians do. When they feel it themselves, they'll understand. Good.*

An ugly thought, but not one that she could bring herself to be ashamed of. Not even when it became clear that Jean-Luc Picard was the Federation representative selected to feel what Cardassians did.

#

Laren went to see Riker, after he was relieved of duty. She wasn't the only one, she knew; Counsellor Troi was in and out, whenever she could be spared, and more than one ensign had stopped by to demonstrate their support. So she was a little surprised to find the man in his pajamas.

"Aren't you a sorry specimen?" she said, leaning with self-conscious grace against the doorframe.

"What were you expecting? A mutiny-in-progress?"

"Maybe some angry pacing, at least."

Riker smirked, Laren thought maybe just because that was what his face was used to doing. "I know when I'm beat," he said. "It's on Jellico to sort this mess out, now. I hope he can."

"I don't think you do know when you're beat," Laren said.

"I told you I'm not going to—"

"Captain Picard's not coming back. You should resign yourself to that now."

"Picard is strong. He—"

"It's not about strength, it's about reality," Laren said. But she could see in Riker's face that he didn't understand that reality. None of them

did.

Jean-Luc Picard was dead, or would be very soon. He had died, or would die, horribly, in stages: first his dignity gone, then his hope, then his will. Finally, when it almost made no difference anymore, his body.

But no one on the *Enterprise* would believe that. And if they did, they wouldn't really understand what it meant.

"Why are you here, Ensign?" Riker said, annoyance finally winning the battle with resignation for control of his voice.

Good question. "I'll leave, then."

It was funny. Laren had grown up surrounded by Bajorans who understood the horror of what the Cardassians did as a fact of life — and she had fled, as soon as she could, into a Starfleet uniform. Now here she was, successful at last. Alone in a sea of nonbelievers.

#

Laren wasn't on the bridge when Jellico made his demands of the Cardassians, but it hardly mattered. Two hours later, there wasn't an officer aboard the *Enterprise* who couldn't recite the encounter in detail, as if they'd been an eye witness.

War averted. The Cardassians forced out of Federation space. Hooray.

Everyone seemed to think that this meant Captain Picard was coming back, as though his body weren't already cooling in a Cardassian graveyard somewhere. There were cheers and rounds of drinks in Ten Forward. Someone tried to press an Andorian ale into Laren's hands; she nearly spilled it on both of them, refusing.

She should just leave, she thought. She could go back to her quarters, or go to the gym. She didn't have to be here for this dreadful celebration. It would be a wake, soon enough, anyway.

Maybe the mood wouldn't change all that much, Laren thought, remembering her own premature wake in this very room. Maybe Captain Picard would attend, as a *borhya*. Certainly if there was an afterlife, the captain would begin his by walking the *Enterprise* one last time.

There was no need to cry at the thought. Captain Picard was just one more in a long line of people Laren had lost. They hadn't even really been close. A few painful conversations. A chance taken, when none had been required. Some blankets. Nothing worth crying over.

Over by the bar, Keiko O'Brien tapped her glass, and the room gradually quieted to a low murmur.

"I just heard from Miles," Keiko announced. "Captain Picard is aboard the *Enterprise*!"

Ten Forward erupted in cheers. If the mood had been celebratory before, now it was positively rapturous. Someone produced champagne from somewhere — not from Guinan, because Laren had seen her slump in relief at Keiko's news, and she still hadn't stopped leaning against the bar for support.

The image of Guinan blurred, then cleared, as tears welled in Laren's eyes and then fell. She couldn't be here right now. So she left.

#

It took effort to be a hermit on a starship, and Laren didn't put in that effort. She had friends, and friendly acquaintances, and a few enemies, and she ate and drank and exercised with her fellow officers plenty. Her only standing social engagement, however, was a weekly holodeck date with Guinan. Usually they only walked through a park or a forest trail, because Laren knew that regular exposure to outdoor conditions was healthy for a starship officer, but Guinan was always trying to convince her to do something more exciting. Occasionally, she succeeded.

Guinan had never missed a date, never flaked a single time, and it was only this that brought Laren to the holodeck at their scheduled hour, the morning after Captain Picard's return.

They walked in silence for about ten minutes, riverside on a pink-skyed planet Laren had never heard of, until Guinan brought them to a halt so that she could examine a patch of flowering, thorny vines.

"I'm sorry," Laren said.

Guinan looked up from the vine she was very carefully handling. "What for?"

"I know how close you are to Captain Picard. These last few days must have been... very hard for you. I should've checked in."

"You needed your own space to process. I understand."

Laren shook her head. "I should've sucked it up."

"Have you seen him?" Guinan asked, stroking a finger along a blossom.

"It's not really my place."

"Mm," Guinan said, in that frustrating way she had of not-quite-agreeing. "I saw him last night. As soon as Dr. Crusher declared him fit for visitors."

"Good," Laren said.

"Aren't you going to ask me how he was?"

“I know how he was.” Laren didn’t intend to snap, but then, she never did.

“Do you?” Guinan said, returning Laren’s snap with a mildness so deep it was almost anger. “Please, tell me.”

Laren stared at the river water, stained pink by the reflected sky, rather than look at Guinan.

“He was tortured,” she said. “Brutally, I’m sure, because that’s how the Cardassians torture. He was... the way people are, after that.”

Her eyes were still on the river, so Laren felt, rather than saw, Guinan leave her thorns and come to stand next to her.

“When the Borg took him,” Guinan said, “I was devastated, obviously. Not just because my friend was gone, but because it was the Borg. It seems... selfish, maybe, that it would be worse to lose him to the Borg than to anything else, but you have to understand that I *knew*. I knew exactly what had happened to him. And since then, it’s true that we share something even beyond what we shared before, but his experience isn’t mine, and mine isn’t his. I’ve never been Borg. And Picard did something that no one else I ever lost to the Borg did.”

Laren looked at Guinan. She was stunning in her white robes, with a carefully-plucked pink blossom in her hand. “What’s that?”

Guinan tucked the flower behind Laren’s ear, patting her hair gently into place over it.

“He came back.”

#

Call her a coward, but Laren couldn’t bring herself to visit Picard in sick bay. If there really were many different ways to be destroyed by the Cardassians, she didn’t want to be an expert in all of them.

Besides, no matter what Guinan said, she couldn’t help thinking that if she were Picard, she would want as few people to see her in that place as possible.

She waited until he was back in uniform, back in command of the *Enterprise*, back where they could both safely pretend that whatever version of himself he had been in Cardassian custody had never existed. Then she found her way over to the turbolift, just as she knew he would likely be exiting at the end of his shift.

“Captain Picard,” she said, when he stepped into the corridor.

Even though she’d known for two days that he was alive, it was a shocking relief to see him whole and upright. There were deep, painful circles under his eyes, and maybe Laren was imagining it, but she thought his back was even straighter than usual, as if he were struggling defiantly against an urge to slump. But his face lit up when he saw her, sending the same stupid little thrill through her stomach that she always got when she pleased him.

“Ensign Ro! Where are you headed?”

Her plan had been to brush this off as a chance meeting, but faced with a direct question from her captain, Laren found herself telling the truth.

“To see you, sir.”

“Do you have something to report?”

“No. Yes. Sir, I...”

But she’d reached the end of her words. Everything Laren could think of to say was either embarrassingly trite or unforgivably selfish. *I’m glad you’re alive? I’ve been sick with the thought of what was happening to you? Thank you for not making me lose another person this way?* What exactly *was* the point of this meeting?

Picard stared at her, mutely staring at him, and for a second his face changed from a polished if tired officer’s smile to something sick and desperate. Something Laren could swear she recognized.

It was just a second, then it was gone. But Laren saw it.

Picard smiled again. “I understand, Ensign.”

Yes, Laren thought, in a wave of welcome grief. She believed he did.

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