

The Writing on the Wall

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The Writing on the Wall

by [AgentTroi](#)

Summary

January 2382: The Titan is exploring the abandoned surface of a ruined world, its sentient population long ago destroyed by war. While on the surface, Captain William Riker gets tossed through a time portal to the planet's ancient medieval past, with seemingly no hope of rescue by Titan's crew, unless he finds a way to leave a message that can survive the centuries and tell his crewmates when and where he is...

Notes

Minor plot spoiler from the TNG novels *A Time to Kill* and *a Time to Heal* (Riker on Tezwa) and major plot spoilers from the TNG novel *Doors Into Chaos* and the TNG part of the Star Trek novel *What Lay Beyond* (Picard and the Iconian gateways).

Chapter 1

Riker swore loudly as he tripped over a loose stone. “What idiot designed a courtyard with *stairs* in the middle?”

“There used to be some sort of statue in the center,” said Commander Vale. She smirked. “Besides, you didn’t have to come. This is the first officer’s domain, not the captain’s.”

“Like I was going to miss out on a perfectly good away mission.” Riker rolled his eyes, then he noticed Lieutenant Commander Pazlar coming from around the corner. “What have you got, Commander?”

“I finally figured out why there seem to be two radically different styles of architecture on this world,” said Pazlar. “Because it was once inhabited by two radically different sentient races— a humanoid race, the Nocri, and a plant-based race, the Dhuldrods. As near as I can figure, they were at war since pretty much the beginning of their recorded history. The most recent records I’ve found speak of some kind of ‘doomsday weapon’ the Dhuldrods claimed was invented by the Nocri, and vice versa, and then suddenly everyone seemed to disappear.” She consulted a padd in her hand. “I don’t know exactly what the weapon was, but I have been able to rule out several possibilities. There’s no evidence of the kind of damage that would have been left behind by a nuclear weapon or an antimatter warhead. The buildings don’t show any signs of damage other than the wear and tear you would expect from millennia of disuse and neglect. However, there is one unusual fact that can’t be easily explained: the organic life here is at an unusually early stage of evolutionary development considering the age of the planet. That coupled with some schematics I found in a Nocri database would seem to suggest...”

“Suggest what?” asked Riker.

Pazlar shuddered. “That the weapon in question was thalaron-based.”

Riker shivered involuntarily, recalling the thalaron weapon Shinzon had nearly deployed against the *Enterprise*. “So instead of just targeting their enemies, they ended up exterminating all organic life on their world.”

“Looks like it,” said Pazlar.

“Captain,” he heard Deanna’s voice calling. He turned to see her and Keru approaching from the far side of the courtyard.

Riker smiled at his *Imzadi*, glad for the chance to think more pleasant thoughts. “Did you two find anything interesting?”

“You might say that,” said Deanna. “Come look at this...”

She led the away team to a small outpost on the edge of the former city. Inside was what appeared to be an enormous, sleek silver doorway to nowhere, carved with intricate,

elaborate patterns. All around it were numerous control panels, dark and silent. Decorating the buttons scattered among the inactive screens was a series of intricate alien runes.

“I thought these looked familiar,” Troi said, gesturing to the runes. “So I ran a comparison against the computer’s language database, and it’s very closely related to several Iconian languages.”

“Iconian!” Riker’s eyebrows shot up. “So this is another one of their gateways? What’s it doing here?”

“From what we were able to translate, this looks like it was some sort of research station, and it’s several centuries younger than the surrounding ruins,” said Keru. “We think the Iconians discovered these ruins too and found them worthy of study, and then they abandoned the site along with the rest of their settlements.”

“They must have left through the gateway,” said Pazlar. “Was this gateway active like the others during the gateways crisis six years ago?”

“Presumably,” said Deanna, “but we have no way of telling now. Besides, it looks like it’s currently dormant, so Captain Picard’s mission to shut down the gateways was obviously a success.”

Riker paced slowly in a wide circle around the gateway. He reached out a hand and traced one of the carvings on the doorway. “I’ve always been a little jealous that Jean-Luc actually got to *meet* the Iconians, and even to use their gateways... It’s a shame that we had to shut down the network. These gateways could have been enormously useful for scientific research and public transportation, among other things.”

“We can still learn from what the Iconians left behind,” said Vale. “Maybe we’ll even be able to reverse-engineer them someday and build our own gateways.”

Riker grinned as he walked under the derelict portal’s archway. “Now that would be—.”

It was like the flipping of an old-fashioned light switch. One minute he was standing right in front of them, the next he was gone, just blinked out of existence like he was never there. The away team stared at the space where their captain had been, flabbergasted.

Vale recovered first. “All right, people, I want answers. Pazlar, get a science team to comb every inch of this place. If this gateway was somehow reactivated, I want to know when, how, and by whom. Keru, take a security team and sweep the ruins. Vale to Titan,” she said, striking her combadge, “begin a full sensor sweep of the planet for the captain. If we don’t find him here, we’ll search the other M-class worlds in this system.” She tapped her combadge again without waiting for Tuvok’s reply, then turned to Deanna, who alone out of all the members of the away team did not spring into action as soon as Vale started barking out orders, but continued to silently stare at the gateway. “Deanna, do you sense him anywhere nearby?”

Troi closed her eyes, reaching out with her empathic senses. When Riker had disappeared, part of her mind had seemed to simply go dark, as if a curtain had descended abruptly

between her mind and Riker's. When she extended her senses now, she could feel the beginning of that connection, like a ray of light in her mind, but it seemed to abruptly drop off into a black, starless void. She shivered, although it was actually rather hot on that nameless desert world, even indoors.

"I can't tell if he's nearby," she said. "But I think he's all right. At least he's not seriously hurt or injured or—." She stopped. "He's fine," she insisted.

Vale nodded slowly. "Okay. Let me know the minute you sense anything." She tapped her combadge again. "Vale to Titan. Two to beam up."

Eight hours later there was still no sign of the captain. Not long after his disappearance, it was discovered that Pazlar's tricorder, which had been set to passive mode, recorded a momentary energy surge when Riker touched the gateway, and again at the moment he passed through it. "Picard thought that the gateways operated partly on a psionic component, that the user could affect his choice of destinations by the power of thought" Pazlar said. "So most likely Captain Riker was sent to— well, wherever he was thinking of at the time. Deanna, do you remember what he was thinking right before he disappeared?"

"I'm not a telepath, Melora," Deanna said through gritted teeth. "Besides, you know what he was thinking. He was saying it aloud, about using the gateways for research and travel."

Vale groaned. "So you're saying he could literally be anywhere?"

"I do not understand how this is even possible," said Tuvok. "Even if the gateways could be revived— for lack of a better word— from a dormant state by thought alone, which itself has dire security implications for the other gateways, it was my understanding that Captain Picard's action shut down the gateways permanently. So how could this one still be active?"

"Maybe it wasn't connected to the network," suggested Xin Ra-Havreii. "They had to have built some prototype models before they erected all the main gateways. Maybe this was one of them."

Vale was about to respond when the sound of her combadge buzzing interrupted their meeting. "*Keru to Commander Vale. I think I've detected the captain's combadge beneath one of the ruins.*"

Vale sat up straight. "Any life signs?"

"*No, but it's pretty far below the surface. I can barely make out the combadge, never mind any life signs. I recommend getting more people down here to sweep the lower levels.*"

"Acknowledged," said Vale. "Take as many people as you need."

"Commander," Deanna said suddenly, "I would like to request permission to join Keru's search party."

"Deanna," said Vale gently, "are you—?"

“I can’t just sit here and do nothing, Chris.”

After a moment, Vale nodded. “All right. I’ll go down too. It’ll be better to have more hands on the job anyway.”

They were in what appeared to be an ancient medieval dungeon. The iron bars that separated each cell from the corridor they were currently traversing were rusted to the point of disintegrating upon contact. Several of the cells contained humanoid remains, relics of the long-ago war between the Dhuldroids and the Nocri. Evidently this had once been a facility for the detention of Nocri captives.

“This place is downright *creepy*,” said Keru.

“Hardly a professional observation, Commander Keru,” Tuvok replied.

“No, but it’s an accurate one.”

They resumed their cell-by-cell sweep. Keru had been able to narrow down the location of Captain Riker’s combadge to the floor which they were currently searching, and he was sure they would come upon it any—

“It’s in here!” an ensign called from up ahead. Keru and Tuvok rushed forward and entered the cell which the ensign had indicated. It was without a doubt the dreariest, most decrepit-looking hole in the wall Keru had ever seen. It reeked of decay, dust, and God knew what else. At the far end of the cell was a humanoid skeleton, its ankles bound together and chained to the wall.

Keru slowly walked forward and plucked a silver-and-gold Starfleet insignia from the floor beside the skeleton. He straightened just as slowly and turned to face Tuvok. “This can’t be the captain... right?”

“At first glance that would seem highly implausible,” said Tuvok. He raised an eyebrow and indicated the combadge in Keru’s hand. “However, it would appear to be somewhat logical, given the circumstantial evidence.”

“I refuse to believe the captain is dead,” said Keru firmly. “There has to be another explanation for—.”

He stopped as he heard footsteps down the corridor, afraid that it was Troi and she would overhear their speculations. It turned out instead to be Commander Vale. “You found something?” she asked.

Keru nodded. “The captain’s combadge. But—.”

He stopped again as he heard another set of footsteps. This time it was in fact Commander Troi. She had her tricorder out, and her gaze immediately went to the combadge in Keru’s hand. She let out a breath which she had apparently been holding. “Did you find—?”

Then she noticed what was behind Keru, and her breath caught in her throat again.

“We don’t know yet if that’s the captain,” Keru said hastily. “There’s no reason to believe that —.”

He stopped talking as he realized that Troi was no longer looking at the skeleton. She was now fixated on something which had been carved into the wall behind it. In actuality, it was many, many somethings that spread radially out from the skeleton up to an arm’s length away from it in all directions, which had appeared to Keru to be nothing more than an irregular pattern of cracks in the wall, which was to be expected in a building of such extreme age. But Troi had apparently noticed something of interest. Her fingers traced one of the cracks as they started to shake uncontrollably.

“Deanna,” Vale asked slowly, “what is it?”

Deanna turned to face Vale, the trembling quickly spreading to the rest of her body. Her breath came in short, ragged gasps, and her eyes were frozen wide with horror.

“Deanna!” Vale seized her by the shoulders and shook her slightly. “What the hell is it? What did you see?”

Slowly Deanna regained some measure of self control. She stepped away from Vale and pointed at a spot on the wall. Her voice sounded hoarse. “Look...”

Vale looked. At first she didn’t understand what she was supposed to be looking at. But as Deanna’s finger traced what had been written there, she began to realize the situation was more dire than she had anticipated.

Carved into the stone was a single word, over and over, repeatedly doubling back on itself until the end of the word became its own beginning. It was not a Dhuldrodian, Nocrian, or even an Iconian word. It was a word with a singular, unique meaning, and Vale knew of only one other person on this planet besides Deanna, past or present, who could have put it there. The evidence stared her right in the face, silent and accusatory:

IMZADI.

Chapter 2

“— amazing.” Riker stopped abruptly and looked around, blinking rapidly. He was no longer in the abandoned Iconian research station. Instead, he appeared to be in a crowded marketplace. About ten feet in front of him was a statue of what looked like a giant plant wrapping its vine-limbs around a humanoid and squeezing the life out of it. All around him were smaller, ambulatory versions of that same plant, although they were all still at least a full foot taller than he was. Most of these were merchants hawking wares or customers haggling over price, but a not insignificant minority were wielding multiple spears, swords, and shields and standing sentinel at regular points along the perimeter of the square.

Oh no, Riker thought. He tried frantically to remember what Pazlar had just told him. *One of the races that lived here was plant-based, and they were at war with their humanoid neighbors... but that means... oh, shit.*

“Stop that Nocri spy!” Riker turned around to see three giant green Dhuldrodian soldiers charging toward him. Riker decided that it would be prudent for him to find safety first and ask questions later. He sprinted away as fast as he could, weaving and dodging his way through the crowd, which he soon realized was deliberately trying to impede his progress. Everywhere he looked there were vine-limbs extended, trying to trip him or herd him into a dead end. He tried valiantly to continue his flight, but the vines became tighter and more densely packed, until at last there was simply no room in which to run. He struggled futilely against his bonds as the lead Dhuldrodian soldier approached him.

“Thank you for your courage, brave citizens,” he proclaimed to the Dhuldrods who were holding Riker captive. “Your service will be remembered and honored by our leaders for generations to come. Now we must take this Nocri beast into custody.”

Riker was trying to figure out how to explain that he wasn’t a Nocri without violating the Prime Directive (and the Temporal Prime Directive??) when he received a sharp whack on the side of his head with the butt of the Dhuldrodian soldier’s sword, and he knew no more.

When he came to, the first thing he noticed was a pounding headache. As he slowly returned to full consciousness, he realized he was on his knees with his limbs bound tightly behind his back, and he was being held upright by two Dhuldrodian soldiers.

“Good, you’re awake,” said a booming voice from somewhere in front of him. Riker winced. “Now we can sentence you.”

Riker lifted his head groggily, trying to think through the pain. He squinted ahead of him until an elaborately carved throne came into focus. Seated atop the throne was the tallest Dhuldrod Riker had yet seen. She was wearing an enormous gold crown bedecked with multicolored jewels, and was draped in ethereal, glittering fabrics. One of her vine-limbs was wrapped around an obsidian scepter. “What’s my crime?” Riker inquired of the alien potentate.

“Espionage against the Dhuldrodian people, of course,” the ruler sniffed imperiously. “Did you really think you were going to get away with strolling openly through the royal square? I have sentenced many Nocri spies during my reign, but never have I met one as audacious and arrogant as yourself!”

“But I’m not Nocri,” insisted Riker.

“Clearly you lie,” sneered the Dhuldrodian leader. “There are no intelligent beings other than ourselves. The Nocri claim the privilege to be called intelligent, but they are still scum, far inferior to us Dhuldroids. You are most definitely not Dhuldrod, and you have the nerve to claim you are not Nocri. This is clearly a bluff, designed to put us off our guard and trick us into sparing your miserable life. To the oubliette with you!”

“No! Wait! You don’t understand—” Riker struggled futilely against his bonds as the Dhuldrodian soldiers dragged him away. “If you look you’ll see I’m not Nocri! There are certain biological differences that—.”

“Make him shut up,” the Dhuldrodian overlord commanded dismissively. Riker received another sharp blow to his head, and unconsciousness claimed him once more.

Riker was not sure how much time he’d spent in that dank, deserted pit. The utter lack of any light source made every passing minute seem much the same as the next. After the Dhuldroids had first flung him unceremoniously into the cramped, fetid cell and chained his ankles to the wall, he’d hollered until his voice was hoarse, and had received no response. No one had come to check on him or give him food or water, and he was beginning to wonder if they had deliberately forgotten about him.

Now that he had had some time to himself, his thoughts kept turning to his current situation. Obviously, the rumors regarding the Iconian gateway’s inactivity had been greatly exaggerated. Apparently this gateway could send people through time as well as space, if Riker’s encounter with the Dhuldroids was any indication. He had absolutely no idea how the gateway had been activated, but he realized upon reflection that he didn’t need to know. That was a job for Commander Vale and the rest of Titan’s crew, back in the distant future.

Thinking of his crew led inevitably to thinking of his wife, and his baby girl. He was torn between wanting to keep them as far away from this place as possible and wanting to see them again, to hold them, if only for a moment. He thought back to his experience on Tezwa, spending an interminable month as a prisoner of war in a filthy, reeking cell similar to this one, completely cut off from his then-fiancée. He hated having to put her through this again, especially now that he’d left behind not only his *Imzadi* but his daughter as well. She was too young to miss him at the time he left, but if he never returned home she would grow up without a father. He and Deanna had already endured so much in order to start their family. It infuriated him that he should be sundered from them so soon.

How much time had passed, for them, since his disappearance? Had Vale and the others figured out a way to retrieve him, or had they not yet realized where (and when) he’d gone? The other Iconian gateways had not exhibited any evidence of time travel, so it might never

occur to them that he'd been flung through time as well as space. If they couldn't determine from the gateway itself the temporal coordinates of his destination, he might very well spend the rest of his life in this world's distant past, leaving behind no discernible evidence he'd ever been there. He himself didn't even know how far back he'd traveled. There might be nothing left of him but dust, if that, by the time Titan arrived.

He would have to find a way to leave some sort of message. But how? He couldn't trust the Dhuldrods to keep a completely accurate record of his capture and imprisonment, and besides, the records from this era might not have even survived to the present day (Titan's present day, that is). His combadge might very well survive the centuries, but it would be buried beneath millennia of dust and decay, and even if Titan's crew somehow managed to find it, there might be nothing left of his body for them to find. It would be as if he'd simply vanished from the face of the earth. He didn't have any writing utensils, or—

He suddenly flashed on an old Earth movie Deanna had insisted on showing him, shortly after they had gotten back together. It was called *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and the titular character was a man who had been wrongfully imprisoned. During his incarceration, he had carved his lover's name into the wall of his cell. Being a hopeless romantic, Deanna had found that to be very moving. Half-jokingly, she had asked Riker if he would do the same for her, and half-jokingly, Riker had said that he would.

Well, now you'll see that I meant it, Imzadi. He felt around on the ground for a rock that was adequate for the task before him. He found one with a sufficiently pointy tip, and he turned it over in his hands, considering. It was quite possible that erosion would render his message partly or entirely unreadable by Titan's time. He would have to carve it multiple times, to be sure that enough of it would survive the intervening years, and it would have to be something short, simple, and unique, impossible to mistake for the last words of a Nocri prisoner. Not enough time or energy to say all of the things he wanted to say, then. Besides, most of his feelings could be summed up in a single word.

He smiled, then lifted rock to wall and began to carve.

Chapter 3

It was all over but the waiting.

After the (more than a little disturbing) discovery of Riker's remains and last words in the depths of the erstwhile Dhuldroidian dungeon, Vale ordered everyone to return to the ship. Carbon dating revealed that Riker's skeleton was somewhere between 5,500 and 6,000 years old. Such a wide range was useless unless it could be narrowed down, so Vale sent several science teams to the surface with the task of figuring out how to activate the gateway without themselves passing through it. Deanna had vociferously requested to accompany the away team, but Vale had refused her. "You've had quite a shock," she told her gently, after the rest of the senior staff had left. "You should get some rest before going back down there." Deanna started to argue the point further, but Vale held up a hand, forestalling her. "Besides, there's nothing you can do that the rest of us aren't already doing. There *is* someone on Titan who needs something only you can provide, though."

Deanna couldn't argue with that, so now she was on her way to Titan's childcare center to pick up little Natasha Riker-Troi. *At least she's not old enough to understand this*, she thought. *I won't have to explain to her why her father isn't home tonight.*

The doors swished open to reveal several small children at play, among them Alyssa Ogawa's son Noah Powell, the Bolajis' toddler Totyarguil, and Lieutenant Keyexesi's immature budlings. Her own daughter was in a crib by the window, beside which T'Pel was singing her a Vulcan lullaby. She stopped abruptly and looked up at the sound of Deanna's entrance. "Good evening, Commander Troi."

"Good evening, T'Pel." Deanna crossed the room and picked Tasha up, gently cradling the half-sleeping child. The baby made a few small noises, then burrowed her head closer to her mother's chest. Her mind reached out and poked Deanna's weakly, as if she were trying to say: *I remember you. I know you. I love you.* Deanna smiled and kissed the top of her daughter's head, hugging the baby closer, as if afraid she would vanish if she didn't hold on as tightly as she could.

"My husband informed me that he was going back to the surface," said T'Pel, referring to Tuvok. "He said that Commander Vale wanted him to attempt to interface with the gateway and see if he could bring it online."

Deanna nodded. "Actually, I argued that I should do it instead," she said ruefully, "because if my— if Captain Riker could activate it by touch without any native psi abilities, touch telepathy or otherwise, then Tuvok's touch telepathy wouldn't give him any innate advantage, and other than him my psi abilities are the strongest of anyone on this ship. But Vale overruled me."

T'Pel raised an eyebrow. "Perhaps a wise decision, considering your personal involvement in this situation."

“I never allow my personal feelings to interfere with my ability to perform my duties,” snapped Deanna.

The second the words were out of her mouth she regretted them, especially the tone. “My apologies, T’Pel. It seems I don’t have my feelings completely under control after all.”

“That is not surprising.” T’Pel’s face softened. “You are, after all, only human.”

Deanna smiled. “*Half*-human.”

“I meant it as a figure of speech.”

“Of course.”

Deanna said her farewells to T’Pel and the other children, then she left, taking Tasha with her to her office. She couldn’t bring herself to retire to her quarters yet, not with so many reminders of Will there. Her office was a much more professional setting, with fewer distractions.

Nestling Tasha neatly on her lap, she turned her attention to one of many journal articles from the *Manitoba Journal of Interplanetary Psychology* she had agreed to review. She tried to lose herself in the esoteric writing, but her thoughts kept drifting in another direction. Without conscious awareness of her actions, she realized she was no longer looking at the article but instead at a series of holos taken on the occasion of Tasha’s first Christmas, just a few weeks ago. Will had decorated the entirety of their quarters, including Tasha’s crib, and he’d actually replicated a Father Christmas outfit for himself and an elf onesie for Tasha, complete with a little pointy hat and pointy boots, with a bell on the end of each. Deanna had professed to find the whole thing ridiculous at first, but eventually she hadn’t been able to keep from laughing at her husband’s Father Christmas impressions. Tasha had enjoyed it so much that she cried every time Will tried to take off either of their getups, so for almost a whole week afterward their quarters were filled with the sound of bells tinkling, and Will’s every off-duty minute was spent in that silly outfit. The rest of the senior staff tried to tease him about it at the weekly poker game the following Tuesday, but he seemed strangely immune to embarrassment. When Deanna asked him about it afterwards, he’d said: “I would be willing to do far more ridiculous things in order to make Tasha laugh.”

The memory simultaneously warmed her heart and brought tears to her eyes. She was just wondering if it would be therapeutic to settle in for a good long cry when her door chime sounded. She hastily blinked back tears and brought the journal article up on her screen again. “Come in.”

The doors opened to reveal her counseling staff, Counselor Huilan Sen’kara and Counselor Pral glasch Haaj. Their expressions were inscrutable, but their intentions were blazingly clear to her empathic senses. She sighed wearily. “What can I do for you, gentlemen?”

“You can stop pretending you’re fine,” said Haaj with typical Tellarite forcefulness. “You just discovered your husband’s thousands-of-years-old remains. No sane person would be as composed as you’re pretending to be at this point.”

Deanna tried to retort, but she found that her throat had closed up until she could hardly breathe. As the tears finally started to spill out, she managed to gasp, “I don’t think I’m in the mood for your brand of therapy tonight, Pral.”

Haaj looked at her tear-stricken face, then nodded. “I’ll leave you in Huilan’s capable hands — er, claws— then.” He left, the doors swishing shut behind him.

Huilan padded over to the couch and lifted himself up until he was seated beside Deanna. The diminutive blue S’ti’ach regarded the sleeping child in her lap. “Her slumber appears untroubled.”

“It is.” Deanna smiled wistfully. “I almost envy her. She has no cares, no responsibilities... her entire world consists of me and—.” She swallowed. “Me and Will.”

Huilan laid a furry blue paw on her shoulder. “You and the captain have faced seemingly certain death, of one or both of you, in the past.”

“But this time is different,” Deanna insisted. “This time he’s *already* dead, and if we don’t figure out where— I mean, *when* he went, he’s going to stay that way. And Tasha and I will be all alone.”

“Not entirely,” said Huilan. “You have myself, and Counselor Haaj, and Commander Vale, and every single member of this crew. They say a starship is like a small town, even a family. Well, we are *your* family, Deanna. And we won’t permit you to be alone.”

It took all of Deanna’s waning self-control not to laugh bitterly at Huilan’s statement. She wanted to say to him, *you don’t understand, none of you can replace Will, you have no idea what my Imzadi means to me, to us*, but instead she smiled through her tears and said simply, “Thank you, Huilan. Now if you don’t mind, I’d like to be left alone now.”

Huilan nodded. “You are welcome, Counselor.” He hopped off the couch and made his way out of her office, leaving Deanna alone with her daughter and her memories.

Chapter 4

Tuvok was not having much success in his attempt to meld with the gateway.

“There is simply nothing here,” he insisted.

“Keep trying,” sighed Commander Vale. They had been at this all night, taking shifts so that the crew could get some sleep, with the exception of Tuvok who as a Vulcan could go for days at a time without rest. Despite all their efforts, they were still no closer to a breakthrough than they were the night before.

Ra-Havreii’s engineering teams had managed to restore power to some of the consoles surrounding the gateway, but strangely none of them appeared to have any control over the gateway itself. Instead, their functions seemed to be related to maintenance of the rest of the Iconian facility. It was becoming increasingly more probable that the gateway was controlled by some form of touch telepathy, as they had originally suspected. However, Tuvok’s lack of progress on that front was throwing something of a wrench into that theory.

“Are you sure you’re doing it right?” Vale asked Tuvok. He slowly turned around, raising one eyebrow. She sighed. “Never mind.”

A shimmering column of light materialized to her left, eventually solidifying into the form of Commander Deanna Troi. She strode forward until she was standing in front of Vale, then she glanced sideways at Tuvok. “Any luck?”

Vale frowned. “I thought I told you to get some rest.”

“I did,” Troi said firmly. “Any luck?” she repeated.

“No,” Vale said wearily. “Tuvok’s getting nothing. Pazlar thinks that maybe the captain used up the last of some residual charge when he accidentally reactivated the gateway, and that’s why it’s not working for Tuvok. So we’re trying to see if one of these control panels can reactivate it manually, but so far we’re coming up empty.”

Deanna slowly paced around the gateway, regarding Tuvok’s silent psionic struggle. “Maybe we’re thinking about this the wrong way,” she said at last.

“What do you mean?” asked Vale.

“Well,” Deanna said slowly, as if thinking aloud, “so far Tuvok has been trying to meld directly with the gateway, just like he would if he were trying to communicate with any ordinary entity. But the gateway isn’t an entity, or even sentient, as far as we know. It’s more like a nonsentient computer. If the gateway mistook my— Captain Riker’s desire to be able to use the gateway as an actual intent to travel to this world’s past, then the way to get through to it would be to picture a specific destination in your mind, just like you would give a transporter a particular set of coordinates.”

“I have been attempting to do just that for the past hour and a half,” said Tuvok as he turned away from his fruitless efforts to rouse the gateway. “I have been attempting to instruct the gateway to display the last destination to which it sent someone. However, it is not responding to my entreaties. I believe the problem stems from the fact that we still do not know exactly where the captain was sent. We know where he ended up, but if that was where the gateway had originally sent him, we would almost certainly have recovered him by now.”

He paused for a moment, considering. “Commander Troi,” he said finally, “your psionic bond with Captain Riker is a form of quantum entanglement, correct?”

“That’s the prevailing theory,” said Deanna, confused.

“And the prevailing theory regarding this particular gateway is that it also operates on the principle of quantum entanglement, yes?”

“Yes... Tuvok, what are you suggesting?”

“I am suggesting,” said Tuvok, “that if Captain Riker was entangled with this gateway at a point in the recent past, and you are entangled with Captain Riker, then it may be possible for you to— what exactly do you find so amusing, Commander Vale?”

Vale was sniggering. “I’m sorry, but you said she was entangled with— I’m sorry, Tuvok. You were saying?”

“I was saying that it may be possible for Commander Troi to entangle with the gateway, and in so doing reach the captain’s mind at the point at which he himself was entangled with it, thereby using his mind to give the gateway a specific image of his destination and retrieving him from the moment of his departure through the gateway.”

Troi and Vale blinked at him, then looked at each other. “It’s a little far fetched,” said Vale skeptically.

“But we’re out of other options,” said Troi. “I have to try, Christine.”

Vale nodded. “All right, go ahead.”

Deanna took a deep breath, then slowly approached the gateway. She reached out with one hand and placed it on the gateway, in the very same position Riker’s hand was in. She closed her eyes and extended her empathic senses, searching for the familiar glow of her husband’s mind. She felt for the golden thread that signified their connection, which was always present in her mind, even when they were far apart. Like a tightrope walker, she followed the thread across the void between their minds...

“Stop that Nocri spy!” Riker turned around to see three giant green Dhuldrodian soldiers charging toward him. He turned and ran, weaving his way around bazaars and passersby in an effort to dodge his pursuers. Suddenly the image of his wife’s face flashed across his mind,

for seemingly no reason at all. He knew he had more pressing concerns at the moment, but he wished he could be with her now, instead of being lost in time while running for his life—

“Whoa!” He tripped and went sprawling, his arms and legs flailing. Hastily scrambling to his feet, he looked around wildly, expecting to see an army of vines and spears descending upon him— but the Dhuldrods had vanished. Instead, he found himself back in the Iconian outpost, standing face-to-face with Troi, Vale, and Tuvok. He blinked rapidly. “Did I zone out there for a second? I feel like I just had one hell of a hallucina— *oof!*”

He was suddenly interrupted mid-sentence when Deanna ran forward and tackled him, all but leaping into his arms. She wrapped her arms around him, weeping tears of joy. His bewilderment increased even further, but he instinctively embraced her in return, holding her tightly against him. He kissed the top of her head. “It’s okay,” he said, stroking her hair. “It’s okay.” He lifted his gaze until he made eye contact with Vale. *What the hell happened?* he mouthed to her.

“*Keru to Vale.*” Keru’s voice suddenly issued from Vale’s combadge. “*The skeleton just vanished, and so did the carvings. Did we get the captain back?*”

Vale smiled. “Yes, we did, Keru. Vale out.” *Later*, she mouthed to Riker, then she tapped her combadge. “Vale to Titan. We’ve recovered the captain. Stand by to beam the away teams back.”

Riker looked down at Deanna. “What does she mean, ‘recovered’?”

Deanna sniffled and looked up at her husband. She reached up and gently stroked his beard, smiling. “Later, *Imzadi*,” she said, moments before they dissolved into glittering pillars of light.

“Wow.” Riker sat back and tried to absorb everything Deanna had just told him. They were reclining on the sofa in their quarters, Tasha sitting on the floor in front of them, playing with a set of small multicolored foam blocks. She was repeatedly tossing them at her parents’ legs, giggling hysterically all the while. Riker reached down and picked two of them up, tossing them back and forth between each hand. Tasha laughed melodically, reaching out for the blocks while making grasping motions with her tiny hands. Riker put them down and picked Tasha up, bouncing her gently on his knee. He looked back at his wife and smiled. “It’s a good thing you came to my rescue, *Imzadi*.”

“More than you know.” Deanna smiled back and kissed him tenderly, running her fingers through his hair. She pressed her face to his for a moment, and Riker felt tears running down her cheek. He reached out with his thumb to delicately wipe her tears away. “I’m here,” he said softly.

“I know,” she whispered, her voice quavering. “But for a while there, it felt like you were gone forever.” She started to sob harder. “Oh gods, I was so scared, *Imzadi*. Seeing you... what was *left* of you... it was even worse than Tezwa. At least back then I had the option of

hoping you were still alive, but this time... I could see with my own eyes that you were dead. And all I could think was how Tasha and I had been left all alone—!”

She broke off abruptly, too overcome with emotion to continue. Will adjusted his grip on Tasha, who had started to fuss, so that he was cradling her with one arm and Deanna with the other. Deanna buried her face in his shoulder as he stroked her hair, whispering to her soothingly. He opened his mind to hers, doing his best to project an aura of love and compassion. It must have worked, because eventually her sobs ceased. She reached out and took Tasha from him, cradling her close to her chest until she stopped fussing and yawned drowsily, snuggling her head against her mother’s shoulder. Will wrapped his arms around them, resting his head atop Deanna’s as he hugged them both.

“You know,” he said finally, “when I think about how I must have spent my last moments, thinking of you, and Tasha, and our time together, it reminds of something Jean-Luc said to me after the Enterprise-D crashed: ‘What we leave behind isn’t nearly as important as how we’ve lived.’ And I think I’ve lived pretty well since you and I got back together.” He pulled back just far enough so he could gaze directly into her luminous black eyes. Smiling, he gently cupped her face with his hand, touching his forehead to hers. “Odds are one of us will eventually outlive the other anyway. But I swear to you, we’re going to make the most of the time we have left.”

The brilliance of Deanna’s smile left him breathless. She didn’t say a word, just took him by the hand and led him to Tasha’s room, where she laid the sleeping infant in her crib. Then she took his hands in both of hers and gently pulled him back toward their bedroom.

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