

THE KING WHO WOULD BE MAN

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TIREDFNESS HAD TURNED HIS NECK INTO LITTLE MORE THAN KNOTS OF PAIN, SEVERE ENOUGH THAT HE WOULD HAVE GONE TO SEE DR. CRUSHER—WERE IT NOT FOR THE FACT THAT SHE WOULD ALSO NAG HIM TO DO SOMETHING HE QUITE FRANKLY COULD NOT DO. Resting simply wasn't in the cards, not with the *Enterprise* stuck out in the middle of nowhere, suffering from apparently random and demonstrably inexplicable computer failures. How could he rest properly, with his ship in danger from an unknown quantity? And even if the problem were one he could be sure was of no danger to his ship, how could he find respite in the middle of dead space, not so much as an asteroid in sight and the holodeck system completely haywire—dangerously so, as an unfortunate ensign had discovered to her cost.

No, rest and recreation was utterly out of the question. He would simply have a spot of tea and try his own bio-control methods and hopefully avoid yet another lecture from the redoubtable Beverly. He swore that sometimes the woman forgot she was his doctor and not his mother. But he put all that from his mind as the turbolift decanted him scant metres from his door and the promise of a few hours sanctuary. The corridor and the ship were shut out behind him and he doffed his uniform as he walked, balling it up and tossing it into the disposal, boots discarded beside the couch. Absently, he scratched at an itch on the small of his back as he wandered over to the dispenser.

"I'll scratch your back if you'll scratch mine."

Provocative, distinctive and coming from his bedroom.

"Q!"

"Picard!" was the answer, the alien throwing his arms wide in theatrical delight. "Long time no see. For a human, at any rate. Oh, you poor thing. You look so tired. So wan. So...alone and palely loitering. You should join me."

"What the hell are you doing in my bed, Q?"

"Waiting for you, of course, what else would I be doing in your bed? I wouldn't dream of starting without you, Jean-Luc. It's really no fun on your own, so I've discovered."

Picard stopped at the foot of his bed, snatching up his robe and shrugging it on, tying it with a vicious tug that showed just how much he wished it were a noose he was tightening around Q's neck. "If you're referring to having sex with me, I had best warn you that I'm..."

"Not in the mood? Do you have a headache? I've heard that's what Humans always claim when they're...dysfunctional, shall we say?"

"Yes, I have a headache, yes, I'm not in the mood and no, neither of those reasons is why I'm refusing to have sex with you."

"Then what is it? Am I not pleasing to the eye?"

"Q, I have a ship that is falling apart at the seams, an engineering system that is going berserk and a computer that has turned homicidal. This is not the time for me to banter useless words with you!"

"I couldn't agree more. So why don't you come in to bed with me and we'll use the language of love to communicate instead."

"I have neither the time nor the inclination to waste my energies on your preposterous rubbish. Do whatever you like, just leave me and my ship alone. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a shower to take."

Q's attention never wavered, dark brown eyes never once blinking as Picard turned his back and disappeared off into the shower.

The luxury of real water was working its usual magic, tension easing from him, spine uncurling. Bio-control in full force, imagination in full flight, he was rapidly approaching an acceptable level of sanity for a commanding officer under these more than trying circumstances. Was, that is, until it registered with him that the hands scratching that irritating little itch weren't his own. He didn't even have to turn round to know who it was who had dared—who had been able—to infiltrate his very shower.

"Q! Get out of here. Leave me alone."

"Why, when you could so obviously benefit from my skilled and wondrous hands. Just think, Jean-Luc, hands that have touched the inner souls of stars, touching mortal muscle. Quite an honor."

Picard wrenched the controls, water pattering to a leisurely stop in silent mockery of his fury. “Q, it’s clear you have decided to add toying with human sexuality to your games, no doubt some leftover curiosity from your recent stint as a mere mortal—if indeed you truly were merely mortal and not just tricking us again. But I am not the person, nor is this the time or place to...”

Wherever he was, it wasn’t Kansas. Nor was it the *Enterprise*, nor any time he had ever known. There were hills mantled in purple fading off into misty gray skies, a snake of silver water flowing placidly between banks of graceful trees and bracken. Taupe-colored ducks bobbed and dived, molten flashes of orange disappearing down their gullets for dinner. And the smell...surrounding them, inundating them, aromas and scents that made him a different man, molded not by technology, but by ecology, myriad life and lights weaving a tapestry of exquisite complex simplicity all around him. The air was warm upon him, as he stood naked, up to his calves in succulent grass, and Q was nowhere in sight. Until, that is, the lilac blossoms descended upon him. Reclining, as was his wont, but upon a great tree branch, Q was regarding him with bright-eyed affection.

“Well, you did say that it was neither the time nor the place. So I changed it. A different time,” a flash of light and Q was behind him, close enough that if he remembered to breathe as a human would, Picard would feel it upon his nape, “a different place. So, Jean-Luc...” Q did as he had probably seen others do, in his many unannounced observations of the crew, and wrapped his arms around Picard.

Who wrenched himself away, turning on Q with a vengeance. “My ship is in danger and you want me to waste my time in a dalliance with you?”

“*Your* time, Picard?” Q said, stealing Picard’s own voice to use as a lash, cutting into him. “Your time? *I* created it, so it is *my* time and I shall waste it any way I want to. But coming to know you, that could never be termed a waste. But,” fingersnap, countryside gone in less time that it took to blink, palace of pink marble and golden cushions, blue-skinned servants and heady perfumes instead, “maybe you’ll like this time and place better.”

“Q, take me back to my ship. Now, Q!”

“Tsk, ts, really, Picard, your manners are terrible. Shame on you.” Another click of the fingers, a flash, and they were in an exquisite gazebo, both men clad in Regency costume, summer zephyr whispering through the vase of cream-colored roses bedecking the table. “Tea? Earl Grey, of course, and you must have some of these strawberry tarts. Made with Somerset strawberries and Devon cream.” With a dab and a flutter of his lace handkerchief he kissed his fingertips. “Perfection!”

“As you don’t eat, Q, how could you possibly know whether or not they are ‘perfection?’”

“Oh, don’t be so mean, Jean-Luc. I’m trying to show you a marvelous time and you’re being so...so prissy. Come now, have some tea, have a cake. Lighten up, as Geordi would say.” Picard, stoically silent, leaned back in his chair, crossed his arms across his chest and ignored him. Totally. “So you’re not going to play. You’re just going to sit there, a lumpen mass of disapproval and spoil everything.” He sighed heavily and then a bright idea dawned in his eyes, and they were in an Elizabethan bedroom, reclining—naked, again, Q not being much for subtlety—upon the spread silk coverlet of a heavy wood bed. All around them intricately carved panels of glowing cherry-wood displayed voluptuous images of men and women ‘sporting’ in athletic abandon, body upon body in erotic profusion bedecking every inch. The corner posts stretched upwards, supporting heavy brocade curtains, the darkness and density of the fabric shutting out both the sights and the sounds of the world outside.

Always presuming, of course, that Q had gone to the bother of creating a world outside...

Picard blinked and Q became the very image of an Elizabethan gentleman, skin flawless white from never seeing the unhealthy bite of the sun, beard well-groomed and delicate, hair long and lush. As Picard opened his mouth to deliver a well-deserved flailing, Q leaned over him, trailing his lovelock over the shivering sensitivity of Picard’s abdomen and responsive hardening of his cock, even as Picard’s mind rebelled.

“Aha! See, you do have it in you, Jean-Luc. Or rather,” he leaned lower, hair still caressing skin while his finger suddenly found the entrance to Picard’s body, the very tip of it pressing there with silent promise, “you *will* have.”

to him and all he can think about is his paltry little human body.”

“Pour your heart out to me? How can you pour out something that is already empty?”

Even his body disappeared this time. Complete void, where not even the possibility of life existed. He thought not at all, he felt not at all, but somewhere, perhaps *somewhen*, he was screaming—

—heaviness drowning him, nailing him to the ground, pain, thickness, weight, clumsy, dragging weight... He was in his own body, in a perfectly standard room that could have belonged to any Hilton the Galaxy over.

“Don’t,” a voice whispered in his ear, breath warm on the side of his neck, “make me angry. You wouldn’t like me when I’m angry.”

Discretion being the better part of valor, Picard held his tongue.

“That’s better,” the quicksilver voice said again. “Now, you have a ship that is not very quietly tearing itself into tiny little pieces. Did you know—oh, but you’re just a mortal, you couldn’t possibly know. Then let me show you.”

The bridge—*his* Bridge. Red lights, blue arcs dancing across control panels, a yellow arc leaping from the ship to bleed into the yellow of Worf’s shirt, every spark leaping like synapse to make the body twitch and spasm. Picard stepped closer, running to help and—

—was looking into the pulsing, glowing lump that had been some lieutenant’s face before the food dispenser spewed coolant acid all over her. Picard stretched out his hand and—

—sickbay, blood slickening the floor, from the body that had been burst like an overripe melon when the doors had begun their inexorable closing. Slipping, feet on floor, mind on horror, Picard stumbled forward—

—into his own quarters, flames laughing down the sides of his shower cubicle, a charred and blackened lump clawed into a fused silhouette with the jammed door. He turned and turned again, hearing himself, shouting, shouting—

“You rang, m’lud?” Then hard, unyielding, power implicit in every word. “You see what awaits you, Picard? A virus, planted on your last visit to Central Information 5. They certainly updated your library, didn’t they? Of course, what Star Fleet doesn’t know could fill the voids

between the stars, but the Romulans have this absolutely *wonderful* plan. One that’ll work, too. And like everything you mortals do, it’s quite simple, really. Plant an agent, wait a couple of your puny decades until he’s beyond question, then have him start loading this rude little virus in every Federation ship and Star Base. Wait another couple of years until he’s managed to sleeper it into more than half the Federation’s toys and then, voilà, wake the virus up and sit back and watch while the Federation’s own computers destroy it from within. Elegant, really, in a neanderthal sort of way.”

“All the more reason to get me back to my ship to...”

“To do what, Picard? Didn’t you see yourself? Look, look at this—”

—and it was before the fire had made the charred lump, it was himself, his hair on fire, his eyebrows on fire, the hair on his chest beginning to lick with flames, his skin turning red, blistering, blackening, and all the while himself screaming and screaming and hammering at a door that should not lock and he was dying, felt himself dying, saw himself, dying, dying, dying in the fires of Hell and—

—he was sitting on Grand’mère’s verandah, sipping tea, wearing his favourite royal blue civilian suit, the only remains visible those of baguettes and butter littering the table, crumbs decorating the wrought-iron balustrade for birds to interrupt their singing to feast upon.

“Now do you see, Picard? If I send you back, your decorous body will be so charred there won’t be enough left to make a sandwich. And what I have in mind, Jean-Luc,” a long-fingered hand traced patterns upon Picard’s inner wrist, the pulse quickening under the touch, “is much more entertaining.”

Picard seized a deep breath and held his desperation in check. It was dangerous to cross swords with Q at the best of times, but it was suicidal to show the weakness of incipient despair. “Send me back to my ship before I get trapped in the shower, Q. Send me back with the knowledge to save all those lives.”

“You’re a man of the world, Jean-Luc. You know that nothing’s free.”

“And I’m only too aware of what the price is going to be this time.”

“Don’t look so distressed, Jean-Luc. It’s not

when I signed on. And it was still a lot better than anything my home world had in store for me. But sir, it's not really any different. You gambled with my life then, and to be honest, I would've liked it better if you'd just used my body. At least I'd still be alive."

"Stop it, Q," he said, voice dangerously low. "Stop it."

—and Q was back, face grim and shuttered, all the buoyancy gone from it. "Or what, Jean-Luc? You'll stamp your feet? You'll scream and yell? You'll..." he made his face a caricature of shock, "develop a headache and tell me 'not tonight, darling'? I'm quaking in my boots. Well, I would be, if I had any on. Face reality, Picard. Here, *I* am the one holding all the cards. I want you. You want to save the Federation from its own complacency and carelessness. I can give you what you want, if you give me what I want. A simple bargain and..."—

—he was being pressed down into the feather quilt by Riker's bulk and weight, the beard scratching a little as he was kissed, limber tongue plundering him with all the hunger in the Universe. "If you don't want me, if you can't fake a little enthusiasm for me as Q, then I'll give you whatever it takes. Is Riker what you want, Picard? Do you fantasize about being dominated..."

—face down, darkness, only the faint red glow of a glimmerglobe giving him sight, leather banding his wrists and ankles, tying him to a Klingon marriage bed, a cat o'nine tails tossed casually on top of a pile of dildos, his attention glued to the threat/promise, hard, heavy hands pressing down on his buttocks, spreading them, exposing him to wet tongue and the roughness of beard that reddened his cheeks. "...by your first in command? Your immediate subordinate? Is that what you need to get you going, Picard? The sting..."

Leather whistling through the air, snapping into him, feather kiss of pain, the pleasure from it running up his spine. "...of pain, the sweetness of yielding command to someone bigger than you, someone you usually order around? Because if that's what you want..."—

—bound to a bed of midnight black, a panoply of stars for his bedspread, Q crouching over him, face millimetres away, hunger in his brown eyes— "...if that's what arouses you, then I'm

bigger than Riker, and not just in height. I can command Galaxies to obey my every whim, but I'd let you command me. If it's what you want. Think about it, Jean-Luc, in the bedroom, you could have me playing Master, satisfying every single desire, but where everyone else can see us I would be a posturing catamite. Just think, Picard, of how they would marvel at your machismo, that you can have someone as powerful as me—me!—under your thumb. Both Master and Servant, the best of both worlds, mon Capitain. And I can give it to you. All of it."

Picard thrust the temptation behind him and faced his incubus, forcing himself to focus on the needs of his ship and not his body. "I'm tired of your puerile games, Q. And although I haven't forgotten, you obviously need to be reminded that there are people suffering and dying while you play with me like a spoiled brat. Why don't you just do whatever it is you need to do, satisfy your curiosity and get me back to my ship!"—

—and he was standing, black fur cloak skimming the granite flagstones of the dank dungeon, black whip with silver stars for tips in his hand, Q, hanging naked and vulnerable from manacles set high on the grim, gray wall, speaking, voice a whispering caress down Picard's spine. "Or if your own submission to me won't give rise to a bit of enthusiasm from you, would *my* submission do? Is that more to your taste? Instead of a break from command, do you crave the intoxication of even more power? Go on, Picard, swing that whip. Feel it bite into my flesh, feel the power of it. Watch it draw my blood to feed you."

The whip clattered to the floor. The wall melted a little until Q could stand comfortably, melted a little more as he simply dissolved through his manacles and turned to face Picard, his own erection in marked contrast to the almost flaccid state of Picard.

Absolute confusion fluttered across Q's face, complete bafflement. "What do you *want*, Jean-Luc?" he asked, shaken, hands open in supplication. "What do you want from me?"

"All I want from you is to be returned to my ship with all the information I need to prevent that whole tragedy from even occurring."

"I can't persuade you with..."—

—and Picard found himself in his own bed,

Picard looked back at Q/Wesley, his hunger growing by leaps and bounds. The best of both worlds, Q had said. This was more like the best of all worlds, a way to have his cake and eat it too. An erotic fantasy, Picard in Wonderland, where he could have anyone he wanted to, in any way. The only limit would be his own imagination. He could have Wesley, time after time, virgin every time. Or Worf. Or Beverly again, without the complications. Or know what it was to mate with an empath. Or to possess any beautiful woman he had ever so much as glimpsed. And the darker desires, the kinds that cannot be explored once and then tucked tidily back into their suitcase if they aren't what your partner wanted after all.

And all of it was his for the taking. Not only free, but with more than adequate recompense—
—and they were standing in a place where there was no place, only time. Time that simply was, with things and people and realities passing, measured on clocks far beyond his comprehension, disorienting him almost beyond thought. Q was before him, stars in his eyes like tears, misery bleeding from him, the bone-deep ache of a pulsar, if pulsars were all the pain of the Universe.

“What do you want, Jean-Luc?” Q pleaded, fading around the edges, colored only by sadness. “What else can I give you? I've offered you all of time and space, I've offered you everyone in the Universe, and you won't take me. What do you *want*? I have nothing else I can give you, Jean-Luc. Nothing. There is nothing more, no more of *me* left to give.”

“No *more* of you?” He shut off the temptation, wrestling it under until it fell to the power of his command, his duty—his honor. But still, he was not such a lying fool that he didn't recognize where the strength to resist had perhaps come from, knowing full well that the result might have been very different if Q had offered him anything more than power and the corruption that goes with it. There was bitterness, a small kernel waiting to grow, in his voice as he thundered his reply at Q. “All those bodies you offered me—tell me, which of them was you? And you claim to have given of yourself? You didn't even *show* me your self. All you offered was sex with no depth and no more pleasure than a...a solitary jerking off has to offer. And

all of it at a price you should have given freely. You didn't want me, Q, you wanted your curiosity satisfied. I've tried to fulfill my side of the bargain, but you were so busy trying to get something we never even discussed...” He managed to find a crumb of pity amongst his own anger and shaken feelings to answer the blind, shivering confusion that haloed Q. “You asked me to have sex with you to save my ship and everyone else. But what you tried to get from me was making love. And when I wouldn't give it, you started your circus performance. It doesn't work that way, Q. I can't give you love when I don't feel it for you, even if that's what you've seen and want to play with.”

Q sat cross-legged on a distant moon, close enough for Picard to be able to see him, but far enough away for his eyes to be shadowed. “So that's your considered opinion. Worf's brain damage is obviously contagious. Something I've seen and covet, like a human child with a toy. That's all it is.”

Abruptly, he was directly in front of Picard again, only the vaguest outlines of human form holding him cohesive. “Think what you want, Picard, but think about this. I was made human, contaminated forever. Think how difficult it is for a non-corporeal being to realize that what he is feeling is physical arousal. And think how agonizing it is to realize that this sick feeling, this feeling of death and decay is actually loneliness, manifest loneliness caused by something he is not supposed to be able to feel. Think, Picard...”—

—and they were whirling through the atoms of time, running backwards in place to undo what had been done and make it so that it had never been—

“...what it is for an immortal to discover...”

—and he was standing, naked, on his own bridge, the crew staring at him, Q's voice reverberating through the very structure of his ship—
“...Love.”

And there was no way that he could even explain it all to himself. His ship, never touched by the virus that no longer existed, sailed on, majestic, through Q's back yard, never once pausing to look over her shoulder for him. As Picard quietly buried it all in a dim, dark musty cellar in his mind, where he hoped he'd never find it again.