

## Going Back

by Carol Sandford

William Riker stood and surveyed the area around him, taking in the mildly humid air, the lush grass and the profusion of colour and scents emanating from the flowers. He remembered it, he remembered it all. Everything.

Including the day he left her, as though it were yesterday.

Placing one booted foot on solid ground, Will swayed a little, but soon regained his equilibrium as fresh clean air filled his lungs instead of the artificial stuff he had breathing in solidly for the past six months.

Others disembarking the shuttle ambled around him, most were loaded down with luggage of some sort, all except him. He came empty handed, unsure of how long his stay was going to be. He wanted it to be a while, but in his heart he knew he was likely to be leaving on the same shuttle he had just arrived on when it left Betazed in two hours time.

Will thought he knew where his first port of call was going to be, but now he was here, he hesitated, even turning towards his original goal. Moments later, he turned and took tentative steps in the opposite direction.

Even his own brain was calling him crazy, whilst his heart was glad of his choice, and glad of the chance to gather its wits and courage before facing his biggest challenge by far; Deanna.

But his head kept shouting at him to do the right thing; to go and find her, apologise, hope she accepts it and let him into her heart, and her arms once more. But somehow he had a hunch that that was not going to happen. He didn't know quite why at that point, but he had a feeling in his bones that he was going to be leaving there with his arms and heart as empty as when he'd arrived.

As he made his way along the spotlessly clean streets, with its impressive collection of buildings in the white stone that was unique to Betazed, Will barely glanced around him, remembering the route he needed to take to get him to his goal with a single minded focus that brought numerous stares from passers by.

Some acknowledged him briefly with a nod, but most simply ignored him and that suited him just fine. He wasn't in the mood for inane chit-chat, nor discussing the latest military tactics. Nor did he want to listen to their undying gratitude for what he had done for them the last time he'd been on the planet.

The Sindareen. Damn animals! But then his heart twisted as he begrudgingly admitted that without their intervention, he would still be in a stalemate situation with the infamous Ms. Troi. He would still be trying his damndest to get into her panties rather than nursing a

heart and soul that now badly needed fixing. Not only his, but hers too.

Unless by some sheer miracle Deanna had met and fallen in love with someone else. The thought slammed an invisible fist into his gut, bringing a nasty taste of bile to his throat as an image swam before his eyes of Deanna laying beneath another man's body, doing what they had done.

But as quick as the thought entered his mind, he dismissed it even quicker. Even a Terran thunkhead like him understood what an Imzadi union meant. Even he knew that what they'd done, and what they'd become, meant more than that.

But even so, he felt his feet move quicker still towards his destination. He wanted to see Deanna desperately but he had a few ghosts to dispel first, and his first stop was his first exorcism, he hoped.

As Will stepped up to the gallery doors, he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirrored doors. The sight shocked him. He was aware that he had changed, but the face that stared back was almost unknown to him.

When he had left the planet six months ago, he had been a young, carefree, handsome man with a chip or two upon his broad shoulders. Now he saw a face etched with knowledge of what scum filled the universe and he'd just tangled with some of the worst of them, and in his heart, he'd felt he'd lost against them too.

The battle had been long and bloody, the blood being mostly his own men, and even a little of it his own. But he had been mended. He had been lucky, his comrades had not been. He sighed as he dropped his eyes away from the tell-tale face before him, pushing the door and stepping into the cool, calming interior.

He instantly felt all his bad vibes slip away from him and he took a deep, cleansing breath, feeling better than he'd felt for months. Will Riker was a survivor and he firmly believed it was because of a pact he'd made with his own soul. He had a woman that he needed to get home to. A woman that he had fallen hopelessly in love with the last time he had been here.

When he'd left last time, he'd taken her love, his ego and his life with him. When he'd come back, his love was still intact, he'd left his ego behind a long time ago, at about the same time he'd watched the first of his comrades fall dead at his feet. And his life? He still had that, for now. Whether he still had it when he went on his next scheduled mission he wasn't so sure.

As he passed through the corridor's to his destination, he suddenly resented that his feet had led him there. As he neared the picture, he became scared; Scared of what he might find. Scared of finding himself, a prospect that didn't hold right with him one little bit.

He muttered, more to himself than anyone, "This is torture, damn you. Why the hell did you bring me here of all places? Damn it!" as the memories began to surface. He clenched his fists tightly, ignoring the sting of his nails biting into his palms.

But when he finally came to a halt in front of the picture, he understood. ~She~ had brought him here. ~She~ had wanted him to see and understand her, and what better place than where they had said goodbye in front of a picture that he didn't have a clue what it stood for.

But he did now. It stared at him straight in the face, its clarity unmistakable. Its intention pure. Deanna Troi had sent him here to look inside of his own heart and seek what he had been searching for.

Forgiveness.

He didn't need to see what the goopy swirls would coalesce into. He'd been drawn to the picture because of her. Because Deanna Troi, somehow, somehow had wanted him to. She had wanted him to understand why he had returned.

Will also knew that he was not going to see Deanna Troi today either. At first he was disappointed. He was initially beside himself at his lost chance. His one chance of redeeming himself. But then he had approached the picture and everything had slotted into place, even without seeing her, touching her or loving her.

And now as he studied the picture in silence, with his heart on his sleeve, love written upon his face for all the world to see, he'd seen what Deanna had wanted him to see; Their future, their hopes and dreams.

Will continued to stare at the picture, soaking up the peace that radiated from its forms, letting it rejuvenate him, just a little, until the colours began to swirl before his very eyes. Began to mix and merge, revealing a picture that made Will's body go rigid.

He closed his eyes, fighting the image until he felt the fear fall away. Opening his eyes again, he studied the image before him. It was an eagle, soaring through the skies. Free and untethered, in a land of mountains and snow. Prairies and skyscrapers, and Will knew in that instant that Deanna had left her home planet and had gone to Earth.

To his home.

And that could only mean one thing in Will's eyes; Deanna had gone looking for him, and it also meant that she still loved him as much as he loved her. She truly had forgiven him, enough to have left her own home, her mother and her destiny, seeking out a new one.

Their one.

Six months ago, they had forged a bond. A bond that they had never gotten a chance to begin, and yet, for Will and Deanna, it would never end. Somehow, someday, they would get that chance.

But that day was not today.