

THE VISITOR

by Carol Sandford

Chapter One

=====

"I've requested that a brilliant young geo-physicist join us on this expedition. Starfleet is fortunate to have her, as she grew up on a planet whose weather and atmospheric conditions are very similar to the planet we have been sent to survey." Picard's eyes flitted around to each member of his senior crew as they took in the details of the upcoming mission.

Commander William Riker, First Officer, grimaced as he spoke.

"Captain, how could anyone survive on a planet as brutal as this one appears to be. It's 90% snow, 10% ice, and it's as cold as a witch's..."

"Yes, Number One, it is cold." Picard sat forward, resting his clasped hands on the table beneath him. He smiled at Will Riker as he spoke. "Actually Commander, you spent about a month in a similar place some eight years ago."

Riker stared at him then, his blue eyes clouded over as he thought about where he was eight years ago, and then it hit him.

"Paradise!, you're talking about Paradise?" Will's voice boomed throughout the room. His fellow comrades turned curiously to him.

Beverly Crusher was the first to speak,

"Oh I remember, isn't that where you had to fend off those mutant animals, oh, what were they called?..."

Will's handsome features contorted,

"Wild Things, Beverly. They were called Wild Things, and believe me, you'd never want to come face to face with one. I don't, not ever again." Crusher smiled sympathetically and turned her attention back to the captain. Will let his attention drift, thinking back to his last encounter with the mutant monsters that had claimed his very good friend Jackson and maimed Ellie, his wife. He'd been lucky, damned lucky.

The Wild Things had almost killed him and his young charge, Jackson's daughter, Stephy. Stephy Carter. Will smiled faintly as he recalled the vibrant young girl she'd been back then. Just fifteen years old, Stephy possessed a serious maturity that made it easy to forget her youth. Jet black hair that constantly hung over her eyes, a figure that most women would kill for. And nerve, Lord, did that girl have guts.

Picard's voice brought Will back to the conversation at hand. He sat only half listening to the rhythmic rise and fall of voices which changed intermittently each time someone asked a question.

"The planet has a mean temperature of..."

Without warning Will sat forward in his chair, and cut Data off in mid-sentence.

"Captain if I may, who 'is' this geophysicist? I don't recall any female members of the team specializing in that particular field. I thought they were all genetic scientists."

Picard glanced at Data who sat close-mouthed with his eyebrows almost hidden in his hair. He had all that he could do not to laugh aloud at the surprised expression. Instead he turned towards his exec and nodded his agreement,

"That is correct, Commander. However, when the last of the mutants were

"Thank you Stephanie, but I didn't work alone. No, actually it was our Counselor that really saved your mother. Meet Ship's Counselor Deanna Troi. Deanna's empathic sense alerted her that your mother was still alive. Everyone else thought she was dead, including me when I first saw her."

Stephy came face to face with the pretty dark haired woman that stood beside Will. The smile she tendered to the black eyed woman did not quite reach her eyes. Stephy felt the first stirrings of envy at the comfortable way that the counselor stood close to Will. She quickly squelched the emotion and extended her hand.

"Then I owe you my lifelong gratitude Counselor. The loss of my father was an experience that I will never forget. Having my mother alive, thanks to you, lessened the pain a little."

Deanna grasped Stephy's hand and shook it firmly. She allowed her senses to probe lightly and clearly felt the young woman's turmoil as she relayed her gratitude. Deanna knew that Stephy's thanks were genuine, but underneath, the empath felt the underlying current of something more.

"I'm very glad my abilities helped to save a life. I only wish we'd made it in time to save your father. I understand he was a very good friend of Commander Riker's"

Both women turned to face him as Will and he took his long awaited turn to greet the visitor. His eyes sparkled with obvious pleasure to be renewing a connection that had been born out of a desperate fight for survival. He tugged Stephy into a bear hug and embraced her warmly.

Deanna didn't miss Stephanie's closed eyes and secret smile. She had the answer to the her earlier unease. Stephanie was jealous of her, and as they embraced, Deanna realized that the young Terran was in love with him.

~~~\*~~~

When Stephanie stepped into Will's arms she felt as though she had come home. She'd dreamed of this moment for what seemed to be a lifetime, and found the reality worth every painful second. Will was in her arms at last, and she was in seventh heaven.

"Will! Gods it is so good to see you! Do you have any idea much I've missed you? How are you?"

Will grasped Stephy's shoulders as he stepped back to get a good look at her. Her hair was short now, so short it almost looked boyish; it suited her to perfection. He took in the sparkle in her green eyes, and pulled her back into his arms for another brief hug, his voice turned husky as he spoke,

"It's good to see you too kiddo, you look wonderful, I can't believe how much you've grown!"

Will was startled when she pulled out of his embrace and punched him smartly on the arm, but her outburst made him grin.

"DONT call me kiddo Will Riker! I am twenty three years old and I swear, if you dare call me anything but my given name, this entire ship will know the meaning of your well deserved nickname..Th.." Before she could utter the one fateful word that Will had hoped she would have long forgotten, he butted in, holding his hands up in surrender.

"Okay, okay!...I promise. Just...please...don't say it...Please!"

Stephanie grinned at him before turning away to speak to the captain, leaving Will to back out of the transporter room followed by two very curious, interrogating women. Stephy and Picard stood laughing at Will's horrified face.

"Welcome aboard the Enterprise, Stephanie. I have the feeling that it's going to be interesting having you among us for a short while"

"How will they feed themselves? They'll be unable to grow crops, or breed livestock on land that is covered by snow all year round."

Picard provided the answer to her question, not Stephanie as she'd hoped.

"Good question Counselor. Starfleet will send teams of terraforming engineers to clear the land and vast solar paneled buildings will be erected. Everything, including plants and animals will be cultivated or bred within these structures. It will be very much like living in a greenhouse. Although it is a mammoth undertaking, it will be well worth the effort. All of this is, of course, providing the planet's core is stable. That, ladies and gentlemen is what we are here to determine." He got to his feet...

"Any further questions?" When no one responded, Picard rubbed his hands together."Very well. We will reach orbit tomorrow morning, so until then, I suggest you all get some rest. The away team will meet in transporter room three at 0900 hours. Dismissed"

As the group stepped from the observation lounge, Will felt a hand slip under his arm, even without looking, he knew it was Stephy.

"Commander, can we meet for dinner, catch up on old times?"

Will caught Deanna' s laughing eyes, and frowned slightly. \*\*What was that all about?\*\* he wondered. Stephy tugged on his arm again...

"Well? Do we have a date?"

Will patted her hand, and smiled down at her. He missed the subtle intake of breath, Deanna didn't.

"Of course. Tell you what, I' m going to change into civvies, and I' ll pick you up in say, an hour?"

Stephy grinned and planted a kiss on his cheek. "Great!, I look forward to it. See you then."

Will watched her walk from him and the grin fell away as another deep seated emotion came to the surface. Concern, that Stephanie's attentions were something more than just the pleasure of reuniting with an old friend. He smiled and waved when she turned and looked back over her shoulder. Then he turned to Deanna.

From the doorway, Stephanie's breath shuddered as the warmth of that smile spread through her. He wanted to have dinner alone with her. It was too perfect, and had been so easy. She walked across the Bridge on a cloud of sensation. How would she get through the next hour?

~~~\*~~~

Stephanie was ready and waiting half an hour before Will was scheduled to collect her. Half the contents of her wardrobe lay across the surface of her bed, the result of a mad rush to choose the right outfit. In the end she decided on a simple but stunning, dress.

Long, slender and strapless, it was a figure-hugging creation, split to mid thigh and designed for impact. The rich, burnt orange color shimmered between dark brown and fiery orange with every tiny movement, and suited her to perfection. A delicate make-up and amber drop earrings that just brushed her shoulders, finished it off. **This should knock his socks off!** Stephanie told herself while she looked in the mirror, brushing nonexistent wrinkles from her torso.

Ten minutes later, she wasn't disappointed when the doors parted to admit Will.

"Wow!, You look spectacular Stephy. But you might feel uncomfortable in Ten Forward."

Stephanie's smile brightened and her eyes glittered.

"Well then I guess we'll just have to go to a fancy restaurant. I know that the holodecks here on the Enterprise could conjure up a girl's fantasy. This is a

she spoke.

"I know Will, really. But, it was alright; I had Quinny at the time. He was there for me when it hurt really bad."

Will frowned, Quinny?, Surely Stephanie wasn't talking about Quinton Stone, but then logically she must be. Who else could it have been? Will's heart began to pound as an unfamiliar sensation pricked within him. He hated to ask, but had to know.

"I take it you and Stone got it together then?" Will watched as Stephanie failed to hide a small smile as an obviously private thought ran through her mind. She nodded.

"Yeah, we did, we were close...for a while. But it didn't last, it couldn't. You know what he was like, a total oddball. But he was there for me and for mom, before she...before she died." Stephanie finished on a sigh, "Yeah, we were close..." Her words trailed off again until moments later her trembling voice quietly told Will something that he already instinctively knew.

"They got him you too know, the wild things, they got him. I swear to this day, it was just how he wanted it."

Will found himself mesmerized by her voice as he realized that she was totally alone in the universe. Stephanie had no one; no family, no relatives, nobody. No..that wasn't true. Stephy would always have a family...him.

Will wasn't quite sure when or how he got there, but moments later he found himself pulling Stephanie into his huge arms. Without speaking, he poured every ounce of compassion, warmth and love into his embrace. Stephanie took everything that he had to offer, and more.

For Stephanie, the room disappeared the instant that Will took her into his arms. Everything that surrounded them, the tantalizing smells, the twangy, somber oriental music faded away. For her it was just the two of them locked in their own private world, healing the still raw, re-opened wounds, building a closeness that would see them through tough times ahead.

~~~\*~~~

The couple left the holosuite soon afterwards and made their way to the observation lounge. Since neither of them felt like being with people, or even wanted other company for a while, Will offered her a tour around the Enterprise. Arm in arm, they entered the empty room and Will led her to the forward viewport. Stephanie stared in wonder at the stars as they whizzed past.

Will propped himself against the viewport's frame with his hands wedged in his pockets as he watched, and silently admired her. She'd matured into a beautiful young woman..and from the signals she'd been giving off, a dangerous one. He'd thought her lost in her memories until she spoke, but continued to stare entranced at the stars.

"After Quinny died, more than anything in the universe, I wished that we'd have had a baby Will. I felt so lonely, so...abandoned. I would have given anything to have had someone to love and to cherish,"

"So, I left Paradise, I couldn't stay there any longer. I had nothing to keep me there any longer. It was time to move on. I had a goal to achieve and I needed to leave to make it happen."

Her eyes briefly locked with his, but Will seemed so deeply immersed with her other news that he missed her last comment. She let it slide.

Will listened without comment, his soft heart hurt for her more and more, with every word that fell from her lips.

"I didn't head straight for Earth when I left. I traveled a little. I guess it was my state of mind. I felt lost and I went from outpost to outpost trying to find something or someone that would make me feel whole again. I kept at it until eventually I ended up on a transport ship bound for Earth. If that ship hadn't been going there, I don't honestly know where I would have ended up, but I guess I lucked

turning away from Deanna to hide his acute embarrassment, but his head snapped back as Deanna spoke.

"How do you feel about Stephanie? Are you attracted to her, Will? Have you given her any encouragement?"

Will stared at her horrified as the implications of her words slammed home.

"NO!...No, never, Deanna, she's a child!"

Deanna's eyebrows rose at his outburst, and then she frowned.

"Will, Stephanie is a woman, a twenty three year old, very beautiful woman. A woman who has had a lover and enough heartache to catapult her into adulthood before she left adolescence. Stephanie Carter is no child Will, and you know that. You can see and feel that, and it scares you. Admit it Will"

Will looked away and ran a hand over his beard. He cracked a sheepish grin and groaned.

"Hell, I hate it when you're right, Deanna. And as usual, you're right. How can I admit that I think she's attractive? It makes me sound..so..so.."

"Normal? Will really, you shouldn't feel so upset. Stephanie is a beautiful young woman. Feeling attracted to her is normal and I think you know that. Whether or not you want to act on the feeling is what's really bothering you." Deanna stood and began to pace the room, her own crossed armed posture giving away her own unease."How did it escalate this quickly?...What happened tonight Will?"

Will shrugged, clearly puzzled by the question,

"Nothing, we had dinner, we talked. We went to the observation lounge to look at the stars, then she left, end of story."

Deanna grinned knowingly. Backing up to the doorjamb, she propped herself against it, crossed her arms and legs and asked again.

"Try again Will, tell me what really happened."

Will scowled at her, pushed himself back into the corner of the couch, put his ankle upon his knee and started again.

"I picked her up at 20:00 hours, like we agreed, and I took her to holosuite four..."

Deanna butted in.

"You took her to the holosuite, why not Ten Forward?"

Will frowned and looked confused by her question.

"Because Stephanie had put on an evening gown, and I felt that she was a little to overdressed for Ten Forward, so I took her to the holosuite and set up a restaurant scene." He answered her with another scowl, the sensation of digging himself into a hole growing as her silence lengthened.

"Will think about it. Why would she wear an evening gown for a dinner with an old friend? Never mind, what did the dress look like?"

Will sighed, shuffling forward again, clasping his fingers together,

"What difference does that make, I mean is there a special kind of gown or something? It was long, and a gorgeous shade of amber...It was just a dress Deanna!"

"I'll get to that, now what else Will?"

The puzzled look returned as he tried to picture Stephy in his head..it wasn't all that difficult. That realization made his queasy. What had he missed?

"Well, it was strapless, and had a split up to here."

anyone. His black hair and blue eyes held a magnetism that even she had found difficult to resist. Yes, she remembered him.

"Yes Will I remember Stone..now what happened?"

"Well I expressed my concerns about Stone, and for her. She laughed and said that Stone had loved her, as a man loved a woman and that she loved him too. I tried to tell her that I thought Stone was far to old to have an intimate relationship with her, but she just laughed it off. Then she kissed me."

Will's last words hung in the air like their breath, suspended as the shock of Will's words sank in. Deanna realized that she was gaping at him as the impact of his words wore off.

"She...kissed you?"

He nodded. Deanna's eyes locked onto Will's even they darted away from the knowing gaze, his guilt blasted against her empathic sense and then vanished as he tried to block her. Deanna ignored her urge to pursue that guilt, but decided against that course of action, for now. Instead, she repeated herself.

"She...kissed you?"

Riker nodded and once again Deanna felt his guilt. This time she went after it.

"Will, what made you allow her to kiss you If you suspected that she was attracted to you, why didn't you stop her?"

Will shrugged and blushed a little. He crossed his own arms over his chest and tried very hard to look nonchalant.

"Never mind that for now..what did you say to her?"

His eyes clouded as he thought about what had happened earlier. Deanna saw the storm brewing as he spoke.

Deanna, she was only fifteen!. He took advantage of a girl who had lost her family. He stole her innocence, he should have known better, and if he was still alive today, I would have him court-marshaled!"

Deanna let him finish his outburst, the atmosphere became highly charged with feelings and anger until Deanna spoke quietly,

"What did you say to her after the kiss, Will?"

"Nothing..she walked out on me. I was so flabbergasted that I walked around for awhile trying to figure out what had just happened, and then I came here. What the hell am I going to do Dee?"

Deanna stared down at the rug and tried to compose herself against the emotions he projected. Anger acid and destructive hid something far deeper, especially considering the flashes of guilt she'd felt earlier. Could it be?

"Why are you so upset Will? Is it possible that you have feelings for her. Could you be in love with Stephanie?"

Will laughed outright at the preposterous suggestion, but that laughter dissipated to leave a questioning ache that ate away at his heart, and his conscience. Turning away from her, he stared out of the viewport. Deanna felt Will's turmoil as the question bounced around in his mind, but the empath already knew his answer.

"No!, Yes!... no, I...I don't think so, but I can't deny that I felt attracted to her. Damn it she kisses like..like..."

"Like a woman?" Deanna said in her soft understanding voice.

"Yes damn it, like a woman! I actually responded. How could I have responded to her Dee? I mean I feel like she's my responsibility, I always hoped that I could replace her father in some small way. Jackson was a good friend Deanna, and he left behind a child that needed a father figure in her life, someone to look after her. But what she got was that weirdo Stone, who stepped right in and abused that child, and I should have been there to stop him"

No luck there however. Deanna was staying aboard. Will jumped when a cargo case was dropped behind him.

"Damn it watch where you throw those things!" He snarled at the tech behind him. The man's brows rose but he very wisely kept his mouth shut. Will started to apologize, but the man turned away and went back to his work.

\*Damn!. She'd managed to make him drift off again!\*

Will grabbed his pack and hefted it to his back.

"Let's get to it people, and remember..take care of yourselves, and watch out for your teammates." The team trooped into the tight confines of the shuttle and prepared for launch.

~~~\*~~~

The shuttle landed with a soft bump and Riker's team sat in silence listening to the howl of the wind as it whipped around the body of their vehicle. The cozy confines of the shuttle changed dramatically as Will activated the door. As it swung away from the hatch opening, gusts of wind whipped inside the shuttle doorway. The icy fingers of the wind slashed into eyes and found any opening in jackets or hoods. Stephanie quickly pulled the thick hood attached to her thermal coat close around her head.

As Will stepped from the pilot's seat, he caught Stephanie tucking an errant curl into the top of her hood. He smiled, she'd changed so much and so little at the same time. Her tiny, almost elfin face was barely visible as the fur surrounding the hood framed her delicate features just as she'd looked years ago. Her eyes in contrast, looked huge and anything but child like.

Stephanie felt rather than saw, Will. Her eyes locked with his and within the confines of the tiny shuttlecraft, she smiled. Will grinned. For him the smile was that of two friends. For Stephy, the smile formed an intimate friendship. She needed that before leaving the safe haven of the shuttle for the wilds of the unknown outside.

Geordi held out his hand for the young Geo-physicist as she stepped down from the shuttlecraft.

"Thanks Geordi, Don't want to fall flat on my face before we've unloaded do we?!", "

Geordi chuckled at the spunky response, "No ma'am, The Commander would crucify me if I let one hair on your head get ruffled" Stephanie stopped short as the tone of Geordi's voice filtered through. Muttering an unladylike curse, she shook Geordi's hand from her thickly padded arm. Planting her feet firmly on the icy ground and making sure she was evenly balanced, she turned towards the front of the craft, where Will stood checking their equipment.

"Hey Commander..may I speak with you?" Stephy shouted over the howl of the wind, which caused most of the team to look in their direction.

Will eased his long body from a crouch beside the shuttle's entrance and straightened gratefully, his breath turning frosty as he exhaled. He made his way to where his chief engineer and Stephanie waited. The tell-tale steely glint in Stephanie's eye told Will all that he needed to know.

"Will, why'd you ask Geordi to baby-sit me!?"

"Stephanie, you said yourself that you didn't want to get 'planted here', as you put it. So I asked Geordi to keep an eye on you. I would never forgive myself if anything happened to you. You understand that, don't you sweetheart?"

Stephanie melted into the intense gaze as Will made point. Her heart soared. Will cared for her and he didn't want to lose her. She looked for the promise in his eyes, the promise of things to come.

Stephanie's icy breath shuddered from her openly surprised lips, and she knew that her eyes sparkled with tears of joy as she looked into Will's handsome face. Will cared. He cared enough to entrust her into another's hand when he couldn't do it himself. Her voice was husky as she answered him.

It was Geordi who responded, but Will was sure he heard a slight smirk in his voice.

"Yes sir! We're all ready and waiting!."

Will hand paused on the helm as the implications of his words sunk in. Turning quickly, Will turned his eyes to Geordi again, doing a double take when he came face to face with his huge pearly white grin.

Unwillingly his sight moved on to Stephanie. Perturbed, he was taken even further aback when her face held her own secretive little smile.

"Enough of that.. I meant are you all ready to get the hell off of this ball of ice!" He feigned anger and turned back to face the panel before him as he attempted to collect his wits.

Powering up the engines, Will eased the shuttle through the dense cloud. Flying blind, Will depended on the shuttle's navigation system to guide them safely through. The air was fraught with tension and silence as the seemingly never ending journey dragged on.

Stephanie jumped when Data's voice broke the quiet.

"We must find a way to exit from this cloud Commander, the shuttle's engine's are beginning to lose power. The lack of oxygen in the upper atmosphere is overloading the intake conduits. The cloud formation has altered in its composition. It is no longer purely water vapor as it was when we descended. At present the clouds appear to contain helium, nitrogen and delenium in concentrated amounts. Its mass is therefore more dense. I suggest further analysis on board the Enterprise as a number one priority sir."

Will broke his intense gaze from the viewscreen briefly to acknowledge Data's statement.

"Agreed Data, once we're back we'll launch a probe. How could we have missed this phenomenon?"

Geordi moved forward to peer through the viewscreen, Will could see his deep frown behind the visor as he spoke.

"No clue, Commander. I ran the sensor scans myself and to all when we first got here, this cloud was just what it should have been, pure water. Any probe we may have sent would have given us the same information. This has happened since we landed. How much longer until we break through?"

"Breaking though in 5 seconds, 4, 3, 2,1, we are clear of the clouds"

"Good, I want to get back and find out what the hell is going on."

Chapter six

=====

"Initial thoughts Miss Carter"

As the senior crew and Stephanie made themselves comfortable around the conference table, Picard addressed her in a brusque manner.

"Well sir, my initial tests have come back very positive. The preliminary readings show that the planets crust has not shifted dramatically for at least 500 years. But I can't be any more definite than that until the equipment is checked in three days time. One thing though, I'm a little concerned about the planet's atmosphere, it appears to very volatile and tomorrow I would like to send a probe in to see just what we are dealing with."

Picard nodded his agreement, turning to his Number One, he was surprised to see him staring into his lap.

"Commander Riker, first thing tomorrow...Commander Riker, are you listening?"

Lost in his thoughts, Will's startled eyes flew up from his lap which were

come to tell me of your brilliance in handling this situation."

Will chuckled as he felt the huge weight lift from his shoulders. With a renewed bounce in his step, he wondered why God had decided to bless him with the most wonderful, most understanding, most gorgeous best friend a man could ever have. His heart swelled with pride and gratitude for the woman he had just left.

God, I love her to bits

He wasn't surprised and chuckled when he heard her answer back. *And I love you too, Imzadi*

Chapter seven

=====

"I knew you would come."

"I couldn't stay away any longer, I needed you"

"And I needed you Will, more than you'll ever know"

The slow seductive music drifted around the barely moving couple as they danced in the center of her living quarters. Will held Stephanie close, so close that they could feel each others hearts beating, her hands gently trailed the length of his body, savoring every hard muscle that moved below her sensitive fingers.

Will's hands were tracing their own way along the curvy lines of her body, gently cupping her small derriere and hugging her tight against his own growing desire.

Throwing back his head, he closed his eyes and groaned to the charged air that enclosed them, locking the twosome in it's own private aura. Will began to feel light headed as his ache began to reach fever pitch, his breath involuntarily became faster, shallower.

His mouth finally found hers and his tongue entered her mouth, giving her too little time to take a breath. But at the same time, Stephy's fingers found their way to his head, and released a whimper as the intimate action licked at the very heart of her femininity. She drowned in the sweet moistness as her tongue wrapped itself around his and began the erotic dance. The dance of lovers. The dance of the mind. The torment of the soul.

Intertwining, slipping in and out, twisting, aching to get in deeper and deeper. Mindless with hunger and need, Stephanie broke away breathless. Will fixed his mouth onto her throat, unable to break the contact and unable to stop his body gyrating against her burning heat until he heard her gasped and desperate demand.

"Help me Will, I'm going to explode"

Scooping her up into his arms, Will carried Stephanie into the bedroom and gently lay her down upon the black, silky coverlet. Stretching himself alongside her, Will searched her face to give her one last chance to stop what was about to happen. Her wanton eyes shone bright like two emeralds, silently begging him to lead. Tiny beads of perspiration sat upon her forehead, her lips, swollen with his brutal kisses, parted expectantly as she waited. Will felt her tremble as her desire seeped from every fiber.

Will stroked her cheek causing Stephanie to capture his fingers and turn his palm over. She kissed it gently, her eyes never leaving his. Will moaned and his eyes flickered shut as he felt her tongue make a wet trail along it, sending a pulsating shock wave straight to his loins.

Taking barely a minute to divest each other of clothes, it only took seconds for Will to settle his long form on top of her tiny frame. Propping himself on his elbows, Will tenderly played with the damp tendrils that framed her face, gently kissing her as he allowed her to get used to his weight. The kisses deepened until they were both lost within each other.

Capturing her floundering hands above her head with one hand, he used the other to pull up her satiny thigh. Will entered her with a slow thrust and heard

"Christ, I have got to deal with this!" he said and turned back to his bedroom. He glanced at the chronometer beside his bed, was surprised to find it only 1.00am. He sighed knowing that he was not going to be able to sleep for some time. He found himself wondering if the little minx a couple of decks down knew just what she was doing to him. Will growled,

"I'll bet she's sleeping like a god damn baby....Computer, location of Stephanie Carter?"

"Stephanie Carter is currently in the observation lounge."

Will released the painful breath in one long, drawn out whoosh. This was his opportunity to straighten out this mess and put him out of a painful situation, one which had taken him by surprise.

~~~\*~~~

Silence washed over Will as the doors hissed closed behind him. The room was bathed in half light allowing the stars that blinked in the inky blackness outside the viewport, to put on their own magical show.

Stephanie Carter lay spread along three of the joined seats, her knees pulled up. Her chest rose and fell in a steady rhythm, and she appeared to be sleeping. The image rocked Will to his core as he made his way over towards her. He would to just walk over to her, say what he had to say, and leave.

Will's arm stretched down towards Stephy's shoulder until in the dimness, Will found her eyes watching him intently. His heart thumped so hard that he was certain that she could hear it. He did nothing more than let his hand fall back to his side.

"Hello Will."

Her voice, barely a whisper slammed through Will's senses and his eyes fell shut as he struggled against the intimate sensation that washed over him.

Stephy watched Will's face as he tried hard to cover his reaction to her voice. Somehow she knew that he battled against the feelings that he had for her. It hurt her to know that he even wanted to fight the attraction.

Couldn't he see that underneath the bravado, behind the tough scientist, was a fully grown woman. He must be able to see that the skinny 15 year old was gone, replaced by someone who was desperately in love him and ready to give her heart, soul, and aching body to him. Will's expression wasn't difficult to read, he didn't want her..or rather, he didn't want to want her.

He had come to tell her something that she really did not want to hear. She pushed up onto her elbows, gasping as Will stepped back, startled. What did he think she was going to do?! Stephy watched the tell-tale flush touch his cheeks, as he looked away to hide his own embarrassment.

"Steph, we need to talk. What you want from me..it just wouldn't be right." He met her eyes, the apology written within the cobalt gaze. Stephy smiled gently at him.

"It's okay Will, I understand."

surpass the love that he had Deanna.

"It's more than love for us, it's life. She looks after my soul, and I hers. I live because of her, she keeps me alive. If either one of us should die, the other would soon follow, the tie is very strong, I could not live without her."

"Why aren't you together?"

"Because at this moment in time it's not the right thing for us."

"Does that mean that you're just playing with me Will?"

"No Stephanie, what I feel for you is just not the same way that I feel for her."

"We have no future, do we?"

Poignant seconds passed before Will finally answered her.

"No...no, we don't."

His confession hung in the air. Surprised and silenced at Will's honesty, she had absolutely nothing to say to him. Somehow, deep in her heart she knew that their relationship was never likely to have been permanent, but even more surprisingly, now that she understood, she did not mind.

"It isn't that I don't find you attractive." Will began, and then he looked at her more closely. Her eyes shone with adoration, for him, and his throat tightened with a vice like grip. He couldn't sit near her any longer. He didn't know who was surprised more, when he got up from the seat to place himself well out of arms reach.

"I'm sorry Stephanie, I can't be what you want me to be, I can't become intimate with you, not now, not ever. It's not you. You are one of the most beautiful women I have ever met, but I see you as someone to protect... a treasured friend. Maybe if circumstances, our past history were different, I would have been honored to be everything you wanted me to be...and more, but I can't...I'm sorry."

Will had every intention of leaving as soon as he had said his piece, he even turned to do so, but then he looked at her. The half smile upon her elfin face confused the hell out of him.

"What?"

Stephanie shrugged. Will watched the movement before searching her eyes again. He was surprised at what he saw, at what she said.

"I said it was okay Will, I understand your reasons for not...loving me. I can see and feel your inner turmoil, I feel you fighting so hard not to give in to what your body wants. I won't deny that I want you Will, I have wanted you since Paradise, but I won't be content with only half of what you could possibly give me."

Will was rooted to the spot as Steph slid her feet to the floor eased herself from the couch with a natural sensuality. She moved to stand within a few inches of him. Will could smell her own intimate scent. He could see the desire in her eyes. Will wished with all his heart that he could kiss her, just once, but it wasn't until Steph spoke that Will realised he had spoken the thought out loud.