

Another Kind of Justice

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Notes:

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The only TNG story I've ever written, and probably the only one I'll ever write!

It seemed to Beverly Crusher that her skull must surely explode from the pressure inside it. Data and Picard were babbling – yes, the captain had that much right, anyway – about ships that were gods and the Prime Directive and being in several places at once, and all the while, on the planet below, the terminator moved inexorably toward the city where her son was being held. And when darkness touched that city, it would touch Wesley, too. For eternity.

“*The Edo want to execute my son!*” she blurted out, cutting into Data’s objective recitation. She turned to Picard, knowing her precarious emotional control was slipping away. “I will not allow that to happen, Jean-Luc.”

She turned and ran, half expecting him to follow, to counsel her about the sacred mission of the Great God Starfleet, and about maintaining objectivity, and about the needs of the ship. She wanted to hear none of it. In her brain, in her chest, in her gut was a cold, nameless churning that screamed danger and demanded response.

“Dr. Crusher?” The transporter tech looked up from his monitor board in surprise as she flew through the doorway.

“Beam me down to the location of the Away Team.”

“I’ll need the Captain’s—”

“This is a medical emergency. Do it *now!*” she snapped, glaring at him. She had a split-second of panic when she realized her total lack of medical equipment made the lie hard to support, and then felt the beam take her.

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Riker watched Liator's face as Ravonne spilled out her story of the strangers' powers – of the city in the sky and the instant transference from place to place. The more she offered, the less he accepted. Finally he turned to face the four visitors.

“Your powers of restraint amaze me,” he said. His voice still dripped with the sarcasm he had earlier used to Captain Picard. “I fail to see why you have not levelled this . . . insignificant place—” He gestured at the Council Building around them. “—and taken the boy.” He sat back, folding his arms across his chest. “Or could it be—”

Liator's voice broke and his attention swung past the team, to the transporter whine behind them.

Picard, Riker thought, turning to follow the Edo's gaze.

“*Where is my son?*” Crusher's voice pierced the fading transport shimmer even before the rest of her body had solidified. She began to move as soon as the beam released her, brushing past Troi and Yar, detouring only around Worf's bulk. Clearly, she was homing in on the two Edo whose central positions marked them as authorities.

“Doctor—” Riker put out a hand to stop her and was flung aside with a force that left him gaping. The tall, slim woman ignored him, striding to Liator, who rose to meet her. The Edo lifted his hand as if in instinctive protection against a flame-haired demon, and she closed slim fingers around his forearm, forcing it down, burning him with the fury in her eyes.

“I want my son!”

Belatedly, Riker moved to reassume command. “Dr. Crusher, this isn’t going to help. They’ve assured us—”

“What *is* going to help, Commander? Standing around and waiting for these . . . *butchers* to murder Wesley?”

“No one is going to be murdered, Doctor.” Captain Picard’s voice was quiet as the transporter field released him. He crossed the chamber and took her arm. Riker saw the tensing of the woman’s form and thought for a moment she would shake Picard off as easily as she had shaken off his executive officer. The intent was there; then it seemed to freeze under what the bridge crew referred to as Picard’s ‘command chill’. Still holding her arm, he turned her to face Liator, now on his feet again and trying very hard to hold on to his temper.

“Liator, this is Wesley’s mother.” There was no acknowledgement from the Edo. “May we have a place of privacy, or must we return to our ship for this discussion?”

The blonde man hesitated for a moment, then gestured. “There. The garden beyond the pool. You will not be disturbed.”

Picard nodded brusquely. “Come with me, all of you.”

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As the six made their way across the building, Picard’s grip on the doctor’s arm tightened to the point of pain. “What the *hell* did you think you were doing?” he hissed, keeping the words for her alone.

“I’m doing what I have to do. I’m not going to stand by and let them kill my son!”

“And you thought / would?”

“You brought my husband home in a body bag, Captain. I don’t want you bringing my son home the same way.”

She jerked her arm out of his grip and stormed to the far side of the garden, as far away from Picard as she could get. He stood, fighting anger at the injustice of her accusation and fighting shame at the truth of it. Riker’s voice brought him back to the here-and-now, with the past still unresolved, still as bitter in his mouth as the taste of old, old blood.

“You have some new information for us, sir?”

“Some, yes. Though I’m afraid it rather complicates things. Lieutenant Worf’s ‘faulty sensor reading’ has turned out to be a multi-dimensional being – or group of beings – with a fiercely protective attitude toward the inhabitants of this planet, who consider it – them – a god.”

“According to the woman, they’re also convinced *we’re* gods,” Worf rumbled. “And different gods may have different rules. I suggest we impose *our* rules in this case.” Almost as an afterthought, he added, “It will give their theologians something to argue about.”

At another time, the Klingon’s blunt honesty and his commentaries on human mores would have amused Picard. Under present circumstances, however, the comment was dismissed without the barest glimmer of a smile.

“No, Lieutenant. We’re dealing not just with the Edo and their ‘god-given’ code of justice, but also with the beings who gave them that code. And while we were learning about those beings, they were learning about us. They know about the Prime Directive, and about our plans to expand into this star cluster. According to Data, they’re willing to share some three thousand planets – but not if they think

we're untrustworthy, or apt to impose our own system of justice on the inhabitants of *this* particular planet."

"And if we were to challenge them with force?"

Picard looked at Yar, bristling with the self-importance of youth and the cockiness of inexperience. "We would lose, Lieutenant," he said flatly. "We would lose the *Enterprise* and every life on her. We would lose the new colony we just helped establish in the Str'naab system and every life there. And we would lose the potential for exploring and colonizing a star cluster that would essentially double the size of the existing Federation."

The Security Officer had the grace to look chastened. "They're that powerful, then?" she asked quietly.

"Potentially, yes." He stopped the argument he could tell was coming by continuing with his statement. "They have the capacity to be in several places – in several *dimensions* – at once. That does make them a rather elusive target. And they have total knowledge of our attack and defense capabilities—"

"*Total* knowledge sir?" Riker's voice held disbelief and just a hint of anger.

"Essentially, yes. At any rate, all the knowledge Data had available, since he was the exchange source."

Troi spoke for the first time, with detached hesitancy. Picard had learned to recognize the tone as a kind of thinking out loud on the part of the Counselor. He had also learned to heed it as he did his own inner voices.

"If their source was Lieutenant Data, they learned everything about the ship. But how much did they learn about *us*? About thinking

beings, with a personal and social code of morality; about how we act when those codes conflict with each other or with our own desires?”

“If they’re anything like their ‘children’, probably not much,” Riker offered. At Picard’s unspoken question, he continued. “We got to Wesley just about the same time the Mediators did. And ... well, it seemed so unfair, sir – I mean, the punishment and all, and ...”

“Riker, will you *please* get on with it?”

“Yes, sir. I struck one of the Mediators—”

“You *hit* an Edo official?”

“Yes, sir, but—”

“On a planet where we were attempting to establish peaceful---”

“Sir, permission to continue.”

Picard bit back the rest of the reprimand. “Go ahead, Number One – and this had better be good.”

“Yes, sir. The point is, Captain, that I *did* physically attack an official. And they did ... *nothing*. They were ready to execute a boy for crushing a few plants, but they did nothing about one grown man physically attacking another – *because we weren’t in a Punishment Zone.*”

Picard considered the possibility, and the gamble it represented. “It may be a weapon to use,” he conceded. “But if we lose, it’s Wesley’s life. Dr. Crusher—” He turned to her and found only an empty space at the far side of the garden. He didn’t have to ask where she had gone.

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“I don’t understand your proposal,” Liator was saying as they entered.

“And *I* don’t understand how you can contemplate murdering a child for smashing a few *goddamn marigolds!*” Crusher’s voice was verging on hysteria. Picard moved to restrain her; she pulled away from him and kept her attention fixed on Liator.

“It is the law,” the Edo repeated. “The law must be served, or there will be chaos.”

“The law demands a death?” There was little question in the woman’s tone, but Liator answered her anyway.

“Yes,” he said, relieved that someone among these visitors finally understood the concept of the thing.

The woman’s eyes bored into his. She spoke very clearly, enunciating each word precisely. “And any death will do?”

Picard suddenly realized where she had been leading the conversation. “I forbid this!” he shouted, stepping forward.

“Jean-Luc—”

“*Doctor* Crusher, the temporary suspension of Starfleet discipline on this planet is *over*.” He turned to Riker. “Number One, you said you know where they’re holding Wesley?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Go and get him. You are authorized to use such force as may be necessary to beam back to the ship with him – and take his mother with you.”

Crusher opened her mouth to protest, then realized what it was she would be arguing for. Her attention wavered between Picard and Riker, and then she broke into a run to catch up with the First Officer as he left.

Liator's eyes glowed with rage; the contempt was back in his voice. "This is an example of your kind of Law?" he demanded.

"No," Picard snapped. "It's an example of *your* kind of law, when it meets the challenge of a thinking being. Your law says there is only one punishment. And it says that punishment exists only inside the Punishment Zone. I'm gambling the lives of everyone in my group that this is *not* a Punishment Zone."

"You have—" Liator began.

"*Is it?*" Picard demanded.

Liator looked at his co-Councillors, then back at Picard. "No," he said. "And you knew that, I think, when—"

The Edo broke off as pandemonium erupted in the room. All around him rose gasps and shrieks as his people fell to their knees and assumed the attitudes of prayer. Picard felt the stirring of a visceral fear mixed with hope, and turned slowly to view what the others in the room had already seen: the shimmering of the wall behind him and the formation of the evanescent globe that was their conduit to God.

The air rumbled and he tried to prepare himself for the assault he knew was coming. Despite the hands he clapped over his ears, the pain lanced through him, right to bone-marrow.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING, HUMAN?" the booming voice demanded.

Picard reached deep into his lungs and roared back at the globe in a voice that had been known to melt rank insignia on junior lieutenants' uniforms. **"WE DO AS YOU DID."** He dropped back to his normal speaking voice as the air seemed to stop vibrating around him. "We are responding to a threat against one of our children, even as you did." He looked at Revonne, kneeling again, and at Liator, standing defiantly even in the face of this divine messenger.

"You would have destroyed us then," Picard went on. "All of us, even those who had nothing to do with your child's fate. You were protecting your child, Revonne. And now we are protecting our child, Wesley."

The globe went dark for a moment, as if thinking, or relaying the information. There was a stirring of movement among the Edo, and then the brilliant flashing returned.

"We can still destroy you, Human. We can wipe out those life forms you seeded on Str'naab. We can close this star cluster to your exploration forever."

"If you claim the star cluster, the Federation will respect your claim. If you claim Str'naab, we will remove our colony there. But we will not allow you to demand the death of our child, Wesley. And we will not allow you to harm our brothers and sisters on Str'naab."

"How will you stop us, Human?"

"Any way we can. Any way we must."

"Even at the cost of thousands of lives?"

"If necessary."

“To save one child?”

“No. To save the *idea* that child represents. We value our young, as you value the Edo, because of the potential they embody. Without them, we are nothing. Our laws allow for them to grow, and to make errors, because that is the way they learn. Your children aren’t allowed to do that. They fear chaos if they deviate in the least detail from the path you – their god – have laid out for them.”

“Doesn’t your God protect you, Human?”

“We are a diverse people, with diverse notions of the attributes of god. But the one notion that recurs again and again is that the greatest protection our creator gave us was the capacity to protect ourselves – to determine our own destinies, to develop our own justice.”

“Would you have us abandon our children, Human?”

“Would you have *us* abandon *ours*?”

“*Stop this!*” Liator stepped forward to address the globe, shaking off the restraining hands of Revonne. “You play with words, and these strangers take the boy. You argue with them while the justice You gave us is trampled under their boots.”

The globe flared, the pinpoints of light inside expanding to a miniature lightning display. The air thickened and rumbled as its voice roared forth.

“DO NOT CHALLENGE US, LIATOR!”

“I am First Councillor here, and I *will* challenge you! I say now: you are no god, and we honor you no longer!”

Picard saw the Edo's movement almost before it began, and the sight of Data falling to the deck of the *Enterprise* at the touch of the globe flashed through his memory.

"Liator, don't!" Even as he moved, he knew he was too late. The air was acrid with a smell that was first cousin to the tang of a phaser, thick with screams and the taste of panic, full of blue light and numbing roar that was Liator. And then, suddenly, was not.

The globe's actinic flash brushed Picard's chest, hurling him into Yar, who had moved up a split second behind him. He fought to draw breath, to keep the black pools at the edge of his vision from engulfing him as both fell. He sensed more than saw the movements of Worf and Troi – Worf interposing his solid form between fallen humans and frightened Edo, Troi offering a different kind of shield as she checked for injuries.

Like water through a ruptured sea-wall, the Edo flowed from the chamber, eddying around the pair of blue-garbed Mediators pushing their way in. The hum and babble of Edo voice blended into nonsense, but beneath it, Picard could hear a hot and dark strata: Worf, tapping an unresponsive communicator and calling with growing impatience for a response from the ship.

Picard felt like a man watching slow motion images of an explosion he was powerless to stop: Yar twisting away from the tangle of limbs and rising to stand with Worf; Mediators moving in, phasers being drawn and leveled, the inferno in his chest that barred voice and breath and coherent thought.

"Wait – please!" The Mediators paused briefly as Revonne pushed her way through the last of the fleeing Edo. *"Don't harm them."*

The larger of the two Mediators glared past Revonne at Picard. “How can you protect Liator’s killer?”

“He’s innocent, Temos! I was here – I saw what happened. He would have saved Liator, not harmed him.”

The two Mediators exchanged uncomfortable glances. “There is still a punishment due,” Temos insisted. “They took the boy; the Law has not been satisfied. In the name of the First Councillor—”

“No!” Revonne took one step backward at the Mediators’ advance, but no more. Her hand came up and touched the triangular medallion on her neckband. “I am First Councillor now. The decision is mine.”

She turned her back on the two angry men, and the gesture spoke loudly of her new status. Picard thought she even looked different – the childlike prettiness replaced with something both stronger and sadder. As she approached them, Worf’s communicator yielded to his insistent signals with a welcome voice confirming contact. Picard tapped his own communicator in override.

“Stand by,” he croaked as he pushed himself to his feet. His voice might be gone, but he’d be damned if he would greet the First Councillor of Edo on his knees. He stepped between Yar and Worf. “Phasers down. No aggressive action.” It was little more than a whisper, but his icy glare elevated it unmistakably to command status.

Revonne had halted a little more than arm’s length from Picard. Again, she touched the talisman at her throat.

“I say the Law is satisfied. There was a transgression, and there was a death. Let it end with that.”

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Picard wished it could, in truth, have ended there in the Edo council chamber. Getting all his people off the planet was a step in the right direction, of course, but he was uncomfortably aware that both his ship and the new colony on Str'naab were still in jeopardy from the strange multi-dimensional ship/being sharing orbit with *Enterprise*.

And before he could even begin to deal with *those* crises, he had to survive Sickbay.

The moment communication had been re-established with the ship, the medical scanner in his communicator had begun relaying information about his physical condition. And that, of course, guaranteed that a medical team was standing by when they transported back up. The only bright spot on that particular horizon was the absence of a certain red-headed female CMO, whom Picard was more than willing to postpone confronting, at least until he had his voice back. He had a feeling he would need it.

Meanwhile, he was being pumped full of something that was making it possible for him to breathe, though he certainly didn't seem to have the energy to even think about doing anything else. He could hear Doctor Pei, in the next room, explaining to someone that they could see the captain only if they kept it brief and didn't expect much conversation.

He heard Riker agreeing to the limitations and pointing out that the captain did, however, need to be given a situation report. That was another potential problem. The Admiralty was not going to look with favor on a captain who left his ship under siege and got himself put out of commission – even temporarily – on a landing party. Although, given the severe dent Picard had just put in the Prime

Directive, it was entirely possible that Riker would find himself in the center seat much sooner than either of them had anticipated.

“Captain?”

He sat up, motioning Riker into the room. Lieutenant Data trailed close behind the First Officer

“I’ve instructed the Str’naab colony to go on total alert, Captain. We’ve been monitoring them closely, but nothing’s come up there yet. However, just a few minutes ago we did receive a communication from the other ship. Lieutenant Data was contacted again, and since he indicated there was no imminent danger, I asked him to report directly to you.”

Data barely waited for Picard’s nod before beginning.

“We do have a name for them now, sir; they call themselves the Kamai. And ... they want to open negotiations over joint development of this star cluster, if we promise no more contact with the Edo.”

“I think we can guarantee that,” Riker offered. Picard nodded affirmatively.

“There is one odd thing, Captain...”

Go on, Picard gestured.

“As I said, they do want to begin negotiations – but not immediately. There’s some sort of ceremony that has to be completed first. They said ... at least, I *think* they said ... they won’t be able to begin the talks until they’ve completed ... mourning. Do you understand what they mean by that, sir?”

He nodded, then dismissed the both of them by the simple expedient of closing his eyes and lying back on the pillows.

Yes, he thought. *I do understand what the Kamai are doing. They're grieving ... for their children.*