

## The Battle Within

He looked a pathetic sight. Slumped so low in the armchair, it could almost be classed as laying down. One fist propped his head as his eyes, heavy with brooding, stared at the hologram on the low table before him.

The room was silent. Will Riker wanted the solitude to accompany his mood. He was miserable. The miserablist he had been in his life, and it was all down to her. It was all her fault. If she hadn't stepped into his life, fallen in love with him. Made HIM fall in love with her. Made him feel the way that he did today, he wouldn't be suffering like this. He felt totally and utterly bereft.

He sighed dramatically, his huge chest puffing up with the exertion his breath had just enforced on it, along with the pain that hurt his heart more than he would have ever admitted to anyone, least of all himself. And certainly not to her.

The curse that slipped from his tortured lips as he pushed himself up out of the chair was barely an inkling of how he truly felt; frustrated, tormented, downright angry, and God, so, so sorry. His eyes fell to the hologram again; to the image of him and her. His arms wrapped around her, fitting her so close to him. He remembered her giggle as his hardness made sensual circles on her lower back. She fitted against him like a well worn glove. Perfect.

Then there was her smile. Deanna's special, private smile, breath-takingly beautiful, sensual, happy and ready to break into laughter any moment.

And then there was her eyes. Everything Deanna felt for him, for the happiness she felt, for the love that she felt, it all shone from those eyes that stared back at him, and he felt sick.

Will's fingers dug into the back of the seat. The dark shadow's under his eyes mirrored the misery from his dull eyes as he stared up at the ceiling, groaning with pain, his voice low with the wretchedness that he felt. "God, Deanna, what the hell am I going to do?..."

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Deanna Troi had snubbed his advances, again. After nearly nine years of working together, building an incredible friendship together, being there for each other, through thick and thin, Will was ready to take the next, what he thought, natural step. He remembered visibly recoiling with shock as his last conversation with her some two days ago now sent him into a downward spiral that had led him to this point. To this state. To the edge of hell. One step and he was sure that's where he would be, because he figured even hell was better than here right at this moment.

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"Don't you think it's time Deanna, time for us to be together, as a couple. As lovers? I want that now Deanna, more than anything. I ~want~ to marry you, soon. I ~want~ us to have a family. I want you so much Deanna, I love you."

Will had laid his heart on his sleeve, in his quarters, just two days ago. As she sat on his sofa and he knelt at her feet, his body between her knees as he clutched her hands, holding them

close to his heart. He wanted her to feel his heartbeat; Feel it's excitement and know it was for her.

The silence lingered between them like a heavy raincloud, ready to burst forth with whatever nasty secret it had hidden. Will watched the woman he adored stare at him as though he had grown another head, her thoughts effectively blocking him out. She hadn't done that for a long time.

A full minute past before Deanna finally spoke. "I love you, Will, more than you'll ever know, but I can't be your wife, not now, not ever."

As she moved to a stand, Will Automatically moved aside to let her do so, but remained seated on the floor. In truth her statement had knocked him sideways, and he didn't think he could have stood if he had tried. Deanna didn't need to see how much her words had hurt him, she felt his pain rip right through to her very soul.

Teary sapphire eyes met equally teary onyx ones. Will's voice broke on the one word, the only word he could summon up to utter, "Why?"

He watched Deanna turn a full complete circle in the middle of his quarters before slowly coming to a stop in almost the same place as she started. Only this time when she faced him, the tears that had filled her eyes, now slipped effortlessly down her porcelain cheeks.

Her voice cracked with emotion as she attempted to make him see, make him understand. "My...my first mistake was to fall for you..." She stopped her words as his audible gasp rocked her to the core, but not as much as the man who's heart she had just shattered in one fell swoop.

Going to his side once more, Deanna sat down on the edge of the seat, her eyes never once leaving the man before her. His own eyes were locked with hers, and nothing, nothing could have torn his disbelieving gaze away. His hand reached for hers and held it tight. He held on for dear life.

"Don't say that Deanna, don't ever say that. I love you more than life itself. How could you not love me. How could you throw away everything that we had, everything we've got? Deanna, you can't deny us! we were always meant to be. How can you say we were a mistake?"

Deanna's anguished look as she battled with her own demons gave Will an ounce of hope as he realised that she was looking for a reason to believe what her head wanted to tell her, but her heart was screaming something else.

"Don't you see Will? we were a mistake. What we had was born out of a need to be together at a moment in time that was right for us. Our time in the jungle was the most intense, most passionate, most beautiful thing either of us had ever experienced. But we should have left it there. We should never have become Imzadi."

Will swallowed painfully as he tried to absorb what she was saying, but his mind was still

swirling from her very first statement, until he finally registered her last, 'We should never have become Imzadi...'

"You can't mean that?"

"Yes, Will, I do." Deanna was very certain, and very final.

## Chapter Two

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Deanna stared at the object in her hand, unsure how to hold it, or even how to use it. She had asked the replicator for the unusual request, turning down several different varieties, until at last, she was satisfied with what she'd settled on. That was until she'd tried out the unfamiliar task, and had to go back and replicate some more.

Deanna's first written words were shaky and blotchy, but she was determined, ignoring how much litter strewed her carpet. Sheet after sheet of the lily white paper hit the floor, and she tried again. And again.

And again.

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'Will. This letter is to a man who I love, have loved, and will always love. You. I know right now that you are hurting, and that I am the cause, and I am sorry for that.

My words to you seemed out of character last night, and I had hoped, with all my heart that I would never have to say them.

Our time in the Jalara was...inimitable and led us to now; Two special friends, with an even special tie to keep us together. But I want you to let me go, Will. I need you to let me go. I need you to release me with your blessing, and happiness. I know I can't expect that of you yet, but I hope with these words you will come to understand.

So many years ago, I gave you my love, and my soul, as I welcomed yours. But more than that, we gave each other ~us~ We were fated to meet on my planet, Will, of that I am certain. Whether it had been sooner, or later, it would have happened. What might not have happened, is all the other things that came between us that led us to here...now.

Day by day, year by year, our friendship got stronger, but our love stayed a long past memory. What is truly amazing is that the memory is as vivid today as it was back then. That is testament of our true feelings; To remember ~that~ moment. To remember that intensity.

To remember.

And I do, Will, reverently. But that is how I want to us to be, just as we are. Treasured friends with cherished memories.

You may wonder why I have put my thoughts into words. I remember your poem, Will, it will

be forever imprinted on my heart. I could recite it here and now and know that its impact would reduce me to tears, as it always does when I need you to calm my muddled mind.

I'm going to quote it to you now, Will. Feel its impact from my soul and I hope at the end you will understand.

*~I hold you close to me.  
Feel the breath of you, and the wonder of you  
and remember a time  
Without you  
But only as one would remember  
A bleak and distant nightmare  
And you shudder against me in your sleep  
Do you share the memory with me of dark times past?  
And you smile  
Do you share the memory of times to come?  
The future holds such promise  
And just as I cannot imagine how I survived the past  
Without you  
I cannot imagine a future  
Without you~*

How could I deny our Imzadi bond, Will. How could I do that? Denying that would be like ripping out my heart, and yours, and discarding it. But both you and I know that it wouldn't make the slightest bit of difference. Our bond is here for keeps. For ever. For eternity, whether we like it or not.

Be my friend, Will, please. Ask nothing more of me, you already have it all. Let the past stay in the past. Let ~us~ be who we want to be. I want to be friends.'

Yours eternally,

Deanna

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Chapter Three

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If there was one person Will didn't expect to see outside his door, it was Deanna Troi. He didn't know why because his head had been crying out for her since she had walked out of his life three days ago. Correction, three, long, miserable, lonely days ago.

He didn't give a damn that he probably looked like shit, he knew he looked like shit. Picard had checked on on him the morning after his world fell apart. One look was all it took for Picard to put him sick leave with strict orders to get his life, and his career back in order Will was sick; Sick and tired, dog tired. He had expected Deanna to come back within an hour of walking out, she always had before, even if it was just check on him. If there was one thing

Deanna always made sure of, it was that he was okay for duty.

But not this time.

She had left him to fester in his own self pitying, pathetic apathy, leaving him believing that he really was the lowest form of dross to crawl the floor. And for what? For telling her he loved her. He was beside himself with longing, and loathing and agony, and he hurt, horribly.

And it was still all her fault. That was until she stood before him at his door and every debilitating thoughts of her flew out of the nearest port hole

The silence that permeated between them was thick with pain and agony, neither managed to find a voice to even begin to make things right. If they were ever going to make it right. Deanna's words still throbbed in Will's head. So final and sure. His stomach twisted painfully just reliving those devastating moments.

Deanna's eyes shimmered with unspent tears as she faced the man before her. She didn't notice that he looked unkept, unclean. Or that his clothes looked like they had been put through a wringer then slung onto his body. But she did notice the misery within his eyes. Once clear blue laughing eyes that no matter how hard he tried, showed her just how much he had loved her. Now they were a horrible cloudy misty blue, but worse than that she could see the hatred in them.

Deanna nearly backed away as the intensity of his gaze filled her senses with feelings that only she could have caused. But desperation to mend the rift between her and her dearest friend, kept her rooted to the spot. Taking a deep breath, Deanna implored her arm that seemed to be forged to her side, to rise.

The motion of stretching her shaky arm towards him released a large suspended teardrop. Fascinated, Will watched it trickle down her cheek in ultra slow motion, eventually dropping onto her quivering chest. It was then Will noticed the object in her hand. Searching her eyes, he could feel the urgency, the plea, to take whatever it was from her violently trembling fingers.

Will's own fingers clenched and unclenched systematically at his side, as he willed it to raise and remove what looked to be a rolled up sheet of paper from her fingers. Half of him told him he didn't want to read her, he was sure, heart-breaking words. But the other half made his heart thump with hope that she had changed her mind.

As he reached for the paper, briefly, very briefly, their fingers touched. Deanna pulled her hand away like it had been burned and Will's hopes plummeted to his feet as the impact of the movement told him everything he wanted to know.

She didn't want him.

Their eyes found one another once more, just for an instant, and then she was gone. Will didn't watch her go, he couldn't. Instead he found himself staring at the object now clasped tightly in his own long fingers. It wasn't until an ensign stared at him curiously as he walked

by that Will realised that he still stood at his door with it wide open.

Stepping away, allowing those very same doors to whisper shut behind him, Will made his way to his bedroom, seeking the sanctuary of its smallness to hide him away from the rest of the ship, from her and from himself. But it was several long minutes before he plucked up enough nerve to unroll the sheath of paper and begin reading...

## Chapter Four

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"Can I ask you something?"

Deanna stared up at the tall man that hovered uncertainly at her door some 30 minutes after she had walked away from his. Without question, Deanna stood back and allowed him to enter. Both stood in the centre of her living area, both unsure what to say, both scared that words spoken could make their unique relationship crumble even more, if that was even possible. And neither of them wanted that.

Deanna hugged her body with her slender arms, partially to hide her tumultuous feelings, the other to conceal just how much her body was shaking. And she was, so much. Never had it been so obvious that Will wanted more than she was willing to give, but she wasn't sure who was more embarrassed about it, herself, or Will.

Since Deanna had opened her door, Will's eyes had never left hers. He seemed to be searching, but Deanna was unsure of what. Whether it was the all clear to speak his heart, and she no doubt that that was why he had come to her, to finish the disastrous conversation from three days ago. Or to see if she was going to speak first.

Taking a deep breath, Deanna broke the silence, 'What did you want to ask me, Will?'

It was then Deanna noticed her letter in his hand as he held it aloft, "Did you really mean this Deanna, do you really want to keep everything that we had...have, in the past?"

And again, Deanna found herself searching his eyes for understanding, but she could see that he didn't. Disheartened, Deanna could only nod as she averted her eyes from his, but she had barely moved her face an inch before she found firm fingers gently, but securely moving her face back to his,

"No, Deanna. Look at me and tell me that you don't feel how I feel. I love you God dammit!"

Will watched as his harsh words brought on a fresh wave of tears, making her already beautiful eyes even more so as they shimmered before him. His heart broke as he released her chin and brushed away the tears that had escaped with the back of his index finger, his eyes as tender as his voice.

"I'm sorry, Deanna, I don't want to hurt you, I just want to understand. How can we have so much love between us and be so far apart. I don't want us to be apart. I want us to be happy, Deanna. I ~do~ love you, with all my heart, why can't you love me in the same way? Help me

understand, please. I want you back Deanna, I can't do this without you."

Will was surprised when she slipped away from his caressing fingers and moved to place herself against his body enfolding her arms around his waist, hugging him tightly as if she never wanted to let go. "Hold me, Will, please, just hold me."

Will needed no further prompting. Slipping his own arms around her tiny body, Will soaked up her grief along with his own, not believing he would ever be this close to her again. And it felt good. More than good. This is where he wanted to be, and he knew in that instant that if he persisted with making more of the relationship than there already was, he would never feel the way that he did right now.

And it was then that he also realised that Deanna was more than a friend and nothing in the universe was going to change that, not marriage, not commitment, not anything. He really did have it all, and it was right here, within his arms.

Kissing the top of her head, Will whispered into the mass of her dark curls, "I understand Imzadi, I finally understand. Forgive me."

Deanna had already felt the change within him, knew when he had comprehended that they could be more without going any further. But she couldn't help ask him, "What made you change your mind, Will?"

He pulled back so that he could look into her eyes again, but didn't release her body. he couldn't let her go, not yet. The need to feel her close to him after so long apart was still so raw, letting her go meant back to reality and he wasn't ready for that, not yet.

"It was the poem. In all the times I had recalled its words, I had never imagined that you would feel the same way; That your life would be as bleak as mine if we were to be separated. And we nearly were weren't we Deanna. Because I wanted more, I nearly lost you didn't I?"

Deanna could only nod, "But there isn't more is there, Will? What we have surpasses anything that could happen in the future. I look back and I really can't imagine ever living without you. Without you I wouldn't be here, on this ship, with the only man that I have ever loved, and I do, Will, with all my heart."

Will kissed her lightly on the lips, "And I love you Deanna Troi."

Pulling her against him once more, Deanna felt the smile against her temple as his one word filtered through the fog, the uncertainties, symbolising the future ahead.

"Friends."

Will barely heard Deanna's contented sigh, but it was there and as the two friends united once more, the bleak and distant nightmare faded into the past where it belonged.

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