

IMZADI - THE LOST CHAPTERS

THE LAST TEARDROPS

Two weeks later

~~~~~

"Mother, I want you to know that I have applied for, and been accepted into Starfleet Academy". Deanna waited with baited breath for her mother to react, to throw something, to howl with rage or indignance. The response she received, however, was not quite what she expected.

"I know dear, you seem to forget on occasion that nothing you say or do goes without my knowledge.. for the most part." Lwaxana looked up at her daughter and carefully put down the book that she had been reading.

Lwaxana Troi had waited four days for Deanna to pluck up the courage to tell her to her face. And now that the moment had come. She had already been given time to 'react', in private. To respond to the knowledge that her child was leaving to chase a lost cause... a man... That Starfleet lieutenant, Will Riker.

Deanna balked as she read her mothers vehement thoughts. "Mother! Will is not a lost cause. I love him with every ounce of my heart and soul, and I will be with him again, soon. But in the meantime, I intend to go to the academy on Earth, and you've known for a long time that those were my intentions, even before Will came into my life. I just never had the courage to disagree with you before now. And I think it still bothers you that I've finally found it, no matter what you say."

Lwaxana pouted her lips as she sulked. "But Deanna...Darling... Earth... What am I going to do without you?"

Deanna recognised the manipulative tone and smiled indulgently at her. "Oh, I'm sure you'll find plenty to do, and I'm sure you could even come to Earth with me for a while, if you wanted... Maybe we could find an apartment together ..."

Getting carried away with her plans, Deanna visibly jumped as her mother's thoughts slammed through her head. \*STOP!\*

Feigning a shocked look, Deanna asked her, despite already knowing what she was going to say. "Mother, what's wrong, I thought that would be what you wanted."

Deanna stopped as Lwaxana held up her hand to stop the tirade. "You know very well that I cannot leave Betazed. I have a duty to uphold. I have certain obligations, responsibilities. You of all people should know how important my role here is, little one"

Deanna hid the tiny smile that tried to break across her elfin face. "Yes, I know mother, but they are your obligations, not mine. I believe that my future...My destiny, lies out there."

Lwaxana watched as her daughter wandered over to the window to stare out at the crystal blue skies, already lost in her thoughts.

The Troi matriarch was solemn as she asked her daughter a question to which she already knew the answer.

"With him...?"

Deanna sighed, and folding her arms she turned back to face her mother once more as she thought about her answer. She desperately missed Will. Even more so upon finding out that she was not pregnant. The emptiness seemed ten fold now that she had nothing to hold on to, nothing except his love and the eventual reunion which she believed, with every fibre of her being, was not so far away.

"One day soon, yes, but until then, I intend to continue with my plans, and they are Starfleet..."

Long moments passed as the two women digested the changes that were about to happen, in both of their lives. Resignedly, Lwaxana asked her, "When do you leave?"

Deanna moved to sit beside her mother, taking the older woman's hands within her own, she whispered, "Two weeks. There is a small transport ship due in, I'm scheduled to be on it at 0900 hours Saturday morning"

Lwaxana gave her a watery smile. There was no stopping Deanna now, her mind was made up. She was just going to have to grin and bear it. "Well, darling, if that's what you truly want..."

The younger Troi stood, her hand still clasping her mothers. She offered her a tentative smile, "It is mother..."

Deanna turned to leave the room but slowed to a stop at the doorway as Lwaxana's parting thought reached her.

\*There will be plenty of time for babies when your older little one\*. Deanna sighed deeply and squared her shoulders before carrying on out of the door.

~~~~~

Deanna's first communique came from Will came two days later. Unfortunately, she had not been there to receive it. When she arrived home from the university, she was dismayed to find the message left behind, unforwarded. With a scowl in her mother's direction, she settled herself down to devour his long-awaited words.

What she was not prepared for, however, was the impact of Will's face when he appeared on the screen before her. She felt a lump rise in her throat before he had even spoken. His image became blurred as her eyes filled with tears which ran unchecked down her cheeks.

Deanna pressed the pause button to collect herself before carrying on with the message. She wanted to hear and savour every single word that fell from his lips. Finally composing herself, she gave a healthy sniff and pressed 'play' once more, gazing at the bright blue, mischievous eyes which smiled out at her.

BR> I miss you Imzadi. It's driving me insane not being with you, but I promise you, as soon as I'm back, I'm coming for you, be ready. I love you Deanna, take care..."

Will's hand touched the screen at the same time as hers touched it, as if by some invisible force the contact broke down the thousands of miles between them, their eyes locked, their souls joined for a fraction of a second, and then he was gone.

Deanna stared at the blank screen for ever before she whispered tearfully, "Oh Imzadi, come back..."

Chapter 2

~~~~~

Deanna Troi stepped out from the shuttle into a fairly chilly San Franciscan afternoon. The sudden assault of the autumn breeze made her gasp as she pulled her arms together around herself.

Turning to a fellow passenger she whispered, "Sweet Heavens, how can they live here, it's \*freezing\*!"

The lady passed around her chuckling lightly. "Welcome to Earth honey, and be grateful it's only the fall!"

Deanna watched her walk away, open-mouthed. Having heard about the changing seasons on Earth, she had not been prepared for it to be quite this cold. On Betazed, the temperature never dropped below a very comfortable level; one often too warm for most human standards, but one she had become accustomed to, having lived on the planet all of her life.

When Deanna had heard about it, she had initially been looking forward to winter, and her first experience of snow. A chance remark from her lover about the Alaskan winters when he

was a child had made her all the more determined to come here, to his world, his past life. But if it were only going to grow \*colder\* than this... She shivered and sighed.

Her lover... her lover did not even know she was here. Deanna had attempted to send him an answering communique to let him know of her plans, but he was gone. She had been too late. In desperation, she had gone to see Tang, she no longer trusted her mother to send on any messages, nor to inform her of those which might have been sent to her at home, but she knew in her heart that Tang would move heaven and Earth to make sure she received anything from Will, and visa-versa.

Of course, Tang knew of her plans, since he had been the one who had made the initial enquiries for her within days of Will' s departure from Betazed. But even he had voiced his concerns to her, worried as he was about not being able to uphold his promise to the lieutenant. He could not - after all -- look after his new charge while she was thousands of light years away from him.

"But ma' am, what will happen when Will comes back for you? He did promise he would." Tang waited with suspended breath for her reply. "You' ve been a good friend, Tang, but I think that both Will and I have some thinking to do before we meet again."

Deanna met the older man' s unwavering gaze and smiled. "If he' s nearer to Earth the next time, then perhaps I can meet him there, but even if he chooses to rendezvous at Risa, I don' t see that it will really be a problem."

The sergeant looked at her worriedly, "But what about the Academy miss?."

Deanna touched his arm gently and Tang watched as her expression grew thoughtful. "We all have goals and dreams, sergeant. Perhaps when Will has had enough of whizzing around the Universe, our lives will find a place in sync once more.

Until that time, it' s always been a dream of \*mine\* to make a difference. I' ve come to believe that I will be able to do that in Starfleet, but I won' t even know unless I try."

Tang watched her shrug and continue, "Besides, you know how those deep space missions can be. If Will ends up on the other end of the quadrant for a while, I can' t just put my life on hold indefinitely..."

Though she sounded resolute enough, Tang saw the uncertainty in her eyes. Just as quickly as it came, however, it was gone, and she tried to reassure him once more,

"One way or the other, Will and I will meet again, of that I am certain..."

~~~~~

Two months later:

Will' s grinning face appeared on the screen in front of Tang' s and the sergeant smiled in response to the young man' s obvious cheerfulness. "Lieutenant Riker, it' s good to see you sir."

Will could not contain himself, he had been so filled with anticipation as he reached communique range, that he had nearly forgotten the end of his duty shift, lost in his thoughts of Deanna. But he needed to speak to his friend before feasting his eyes on her once more.

"Hello Tang, it' s good to be back. How' s my girl?" Will accompanied the somewhat cliché term of endearment with a knowing smile. When he saw the older man' s hesitation, however, an eerie dread stole over his consciousness, making him grow cold. Harsher than he intended, his one word prompt demanded an answer.

"Tang...?"

Tang cleared his throat loudly before plucking up courage to fill the lieutenant in on the events of the previous few months. "I' m sorry sir, but the little lady' s gone."

Will simply stared at him in disbelief. He might have even chuckled at the attempt at bad humour, but when he saw Tang look down at his feet, he knew; he sensed that he was telling him the truth. The air crackled with tension as he asked, hoarsely, "Where is she, Tang?"

Nothing could have surprised him more than the answer he was to receive. "Earth sir" The older man watched Will blink several times, digesting the information.

Seconds later, Will echoed him, "Earth..? What' s she doing on Earth?"

Unconsciously Tang puffed up his chest with pride as he boldly informed him, "Miss Troi has joined Starfleet academy, sir..."

Once more Will stared silently at him before finally spluttering out: "Starfleet... ? What did she go and do and dumb fool thing like that for?. She was supposed to wait for me, we were going to get married, have some babies..."

Will broke his tirade when he realised what he had just said. More to the point, how archaic it had sounded, even to his own ears. He shook his head, and then, more quietly he muttered, "She was supposed to wait for me Tang..."

Unsure of what to say, Tang allowed an empty, guilty silence to surround them both until the sergeant suddenly remembered the disc he' d been given to guard. Digging in his pocket excitedly, he finally held aloft the shiny object, almost like a trophy. "I, uh, I was supposed to give you this when you returned sir, it' s from Miss Troi..."

Will peered into the view screen at the disc and Tang watched him reach out automatically with his hand, then drop it just when the realisation that he could not simply take it from the older man' s hand finally dawned on him.

Tang could almost feel the lieutenant' s disappointment from across the distance. Another silence followed, until Tang suggested hopefully. "I could upload it to your station there sir, at least you could hear it...but it would have to playback here as well simultaneously.."

Will nodded sadly, "O.k. But I' d like to hear it in private if you don' t mind Tang"

The sergeant nodded vigorously as he fitted the disc into the machine, "Of course sir, just give me a minute..." Seconds later Tang walked out of the office and Deanna' s musical voice took his place.

"Hello Will...I know by the time that you receive this I will be at the Academy. Please know that nothing about the way I feel for you has changed. I miss you almost desperately sometimes.

But then I look up at the sky, and I imagine you' re thinking of me, perhaps.. all those many light years away. I am still waiting for you, just in a different place. Before I met you, it had been a distant dream of mine to leave Betazed, to divest myself of all of my mother' s responsibilities and make a difference. I really think that I can do that as a Starfleet officer. Will... I want you to know that if it hadn' t been for you, I may never have realized this opportunity. When I met you, you changed my life... me. You gave me the courage to stand up for what I wanted, you showed me what it might be like to break away, even if it is only for a short while. You' ve set me free Imzadi...and now I can never go back to the way things were...

Tang has my location details so that you can send your next communique directly to me. I can' t wait to see you again, to hear your voice, my love... You know, at night the stars are so bright over the Golden Gate bridge, and every once in a while there' s a Starship that goes by, closer to the atmosphere than the others -- and I imagine that its you, on your way back. And that we' ll be together again very soon..."

When Tang came back into the office a few minutes later he walked into a deafening silence and a blank screen.

Chapter 3

~~~~~

Will could not believe what he had just heard. On the one hand, his heart wept with joy that Deanna had finally found her purpose. But on the other...Would this new purpose take her away from him? And did he have any right to stand in the way of it, now that he had

encouraged her so strongly to seize control of her own life and dare to \*live\* those dreams? One moment, it seemed, she had wanted to be with him. And the next, she wanted to be free...Free to join Starfleet. Hell, she had done \*that\* already, without even a word to him! Then again, he had not exactly been around for her to consult, had he? Slumped in his chair, one hand splayed over one half of his face as her words repeated themselves in his mind, Will allowed himself to mope, tossing her words back and forth in his mind until he could recite them verbatim: "You' ve set me free Imzadi...become a Starfleet officer...until you come and get me...."

Will did not think he had ever felt so torn; so wretched, in his entire life. Staring at the now blank view screen in front of him, he muttered absently, "What the hell am I going to say to her?"

If anyone knew what the demands of a Starfleet career would place on a person, it was Will Riker. And so he sat, unmoving in his chair. Feeling a conflicted sense of depression, mixed with pride for her. It was a full ten minutes before he finally punched in his access code and began recording a message marked personal and confidential: "For Deanna Troi, Starfleet Academy." And it would be five days after that before his hail was answered.

Even though he was desperate to see her, Will really did not expect her to be sitting at home, waiting for his call, so he was taken aback as Deanna' s smiling face lit up his view screen. Certain that she was not going to be there, he had not prepared his response for the reality of the beautiful young empath' s actual presence come alive before him.

"Will!, What a wonderful surprise, it is so good to see you, gods, I' ve missed you so much... I didn' t even realize how much until just now."

Will smiled despite himself. Her enthusiasm lit up her expression and she had never been more beautiful to him. He tried his best to look happy for her, as well. "Hey Deanna, I' ve missed you too, I, uh, I hear you' ve been busy. "

Will had tried to keep his voice spirited. But as Deanna' s entire being came alive with tales of life in the academy, his heart grew heavier and heavier. Knowing from first hand experience that the life she had chosen would take her farther and farther into a realm of discovery and wonderment, he was also (selfishly) aware that it would likely take her farther and farther away from him...

Even once she had finished her studies... A career in Starfleet was day by day, all work and very little play. It was a life he had always loved. But it was also a life which had precluded him from any sort of serious relationship, or even the thought of one. Until he had met Deanna. Now with both of them living the same kind of schedule, the odds of their having a workable relationship had gone from marginal to very, very slim.

Deanna' a voice repeating his name brought Will back to the present and she chuckled at his far-distance expression. "Am I boring you already Will?"

He grinned and shrugged, changing his train of thought. "I' m sorry Dee, it' s been a long haul, especially after being planet side for a while, I think I need a holiday..."

Deanna laughed at the suggestive tone in his voice. "Does that mean we have a date, Imzadi?"

The grin on his face faltered and Will posed his next question carefully, "What about your schedule Deanna? As I recall, classes aren' t exactly very forgiving of lateness or absence."

"Will," Deanna rolled her eyes. "We' re talking about a date, an evening alone.. maybe two." She grinned. "I' m not dropping out of the Academy, and they do let us off for a few hours in the evenings if we' re good." Her eyes sparkled with mischief.

That was it. The wall of pent up emotion within him finally snapped and he shook his head, his gaze serious. "What if I wasn' t talking about just a date, Deanna. What about what happens \*after\* the Academy? When you get assigned to some ship somewhere and we get to spend two days together every five or six months. Have you thought about that at all?"

Deanna watched his face as he spoke, and her eyes grew sober. "Yes. As a matter of fact, I did. And I imagine it wouldn't be a problem ... If we were married Will, we could still be together, even on a Starship."

BR> "Will..you do still want to marry me don't you...Don't you?"

Even to Will's mind his voice sounded hollow as he rapidly answered her. "Yes, of course sweetheart, the sooner the better, but why didn't you wait for me like we planned?". There. He'd said it. Gotten it out into the open, so to speak. But Deanna only sighed.

Will's uneasiness pricked at her conscience, but Deanna ignored the sensation and met his gaze defiantly instead. "I wanted to do something meaningful with my life, Will. When you left Betazed, I wanted nothing more than to be with you, out there, wherever, I wanted to go anywhere, as long as it was with you.

But then you were gone, and I didn't know for how long. A part of me wanted to sit back and wait for you, I won't lie to you about that, but another part of me, a bigger part of me wanted to go somewhere and find a way to make a difference somehow. There's nothing wrong with that is there?"

Will frowned as he tried to understand her logic. "No...But you could have done that on your home planet. Why Starfleet? Why Earth?"

Deanna shook her head, desperately needing him to understand, "Because I had never lived anywhere other than Betazed. Will, can't you see? I needed to find myself, and the only way to do that was to leave everything which clouded the reality of my purpose with the monotony of habit. My mother is such a powerful voice at home, she's an Ambassador to the Federation -- Can you not imagine how hard it was for me, trying to help find a place where I 'fit' on Betazed? I felt like I was hitting my head against a brick wall.

But when I talked with humans, in each experience, and with other non-Betazoid cultures, I knew that there was something 'out there' for me. A way that I might be able to help, not only because I can sense the feelings and emotions of others, but because I finally felt worthy of the challenge. Will...I want to help people..."

Will did not need convincing of her innate urge to understand others. He smiled fondly at the memory of Deanna trying her utmost to get within his head when all he wanted to do was get in her panties, but once he'd succumbed to her way of thinking, their ultimate joining had been like nothing he had experience in his entire life, and would probably never be surmounted in the rest of his existence.. Deanna Troi had somehow taken possession of the deed to his soul, not that he was complaining. The reality of that thought made up his mind for him.

"O.k. you win. And I do understand. I'm not really as dense as I look sometimes." He smiled lopsidedly. "So, how about this? Exactly three weeks from today, you and I meet up at the hotel Parisido on Risa. It's a beautiful resort, Dee, they've got a private holosuite for every client, there are real beaches along the outer city... I'll be there waiting for you, in exactly twenty one days."

Will suddenly grinned. "Oh, and you may want to bring along your Mother and your prettiest dress. I know you do things 'au natural' on Betazed and your mother will probably call for my immediate execution, but I..."

The end of Will's explanation was drowned out by Deanna's sudden cry of joy, "Oh Will, do you really mean it?"

His smile grew wider at the look of unguarded happiness which crossed her features.

"Absolutely sweetheart, we'll be married on Risa... And after that, who knows?" He wagged his eyebrows and she laughed.

Deanna's eyes filled with tears of happiness and her hand automatically extended. She touched the screen, wishing she could touch him instead and she whispered as a solitary tear fell, "I love you Will, you've made me so happy."

Will's heart swelled with love, pride and an overwhelming feeling of completeness as he rose his fingers to his lips, and blew her a kiss. "I love you too Deanna, I'll be counting the days until we meet again, and you'll finally be mine..."

Pausing as he looked over his shoulder, Will turned back to her, an apologetic look upon his face, "I'm afraid I'm being summoned, I've got to go. Take care of yourself, Dee, I'll see you soon."

Deanna barely managed to mouth the word "bye" as their connection became severed. As it was, she sat and stared at the blank screen for several long moments, recalling every precious word of their conversation, her heart filled with an almost painful excitement and ached from the renewed contact of their bond. With a heavy sigh, she finally forced herself to move and to think on other things.

\*Three weeks Deanna, you've just got to wait three weeks\* muttering to herself as she walked out of her quarters, Deanna shook her head.

"If I don't die from insanity first..."

#### Chapter 4

~~~~~ "Set a course for Nerval 4"

The Captain of the Potemkin looked around at his senior officers one by one, finally settling on Will, "Any questions?"

Will briefly looked around his fellow officers before posing his question. "How long have we got to evacuate the crew sir?"

The Captain sighed before answering him, "Previous data indicates that the distortion field should be open for approximately 36 minutes..."

Will slumped back as he thought of the huge risk, "That's not a lot of time sir..."

The Captain nodded silently, finally adding "I know that lieutenant, we won't have much of a window, but it'll have to be enough to beam out everybody down there, unfortunately we're going to have to come back another time to retrieve all the data banks. The initial urgency is to get everyone on board first, the data can wait, it isn't going anywhere, and I don't suppose for a minute that any other visitors would be mad enough to attempt to retrieve it, so I think we can safely leave it there for the time being, now, is there anything else?"

Will looked expectantly around the table once more, and everyone remained quiet. Satisfied that the meeting was over, the Captain rose to a stand. "Good, be ready in the transporter room at 0800 hours, dismissed. Lieutenant Riker can I have a word with you before you go?"

Will nodded and sat back down as the others filed out of the room. As the door hissed shut behind them, his Captain turned to him, a look of concern evident on his face, "Are you sure you can handle this Will?, I know this is your first rescue mission."

Will smiled as he confidently reassured him, "Yes sir, I don't foresee any problems, I know it's going to be tight time wise, but providing no-one panics and runs away to play hide and seek, we should be o.k."

The Captain smiled at the lieutenant's humorous remark, and coming to a stand again, he briefly touched his shoulder, "O.k Will, but remember, your safety is paramount too, so no stupid heroics, I want to see this gorgeous woman you keep telling me about.."

Will grinned, "Just remember, she'll be my wife when you do, so keep your hands to yourself.... Sir."

The Captain laughed heartily as the two officers moved in unison towards the door to the room, but before the entryway opened, the older man stopped and touched Will's arm once more, proudly passing on his confidence. "I'm counting on you to pull this off. Do this well, and I will see that you're commended, Lieutenant." Will swelled with pride, maybe he was going to beat Kirk's record after all...

~~~~~  
"COME ON...MOVE IT!!" Lieutenant Riker' s voice roared above the clamour and chaos which surrounded his team as he herded the frightened researchers towards the transporter site, desperately resisting the temptation to push them. He was acutely aware that they only had five minutes left to complete the transports and there was still ten people to go, plus himself. He knew it was going to be close, but he was cocksure that he would make it. He would make it because he had purposely reduced the time limit by four minutes to make absolutely certain they would all get off the station before it fell about their ears.

The entire planet was made up from living colonies of volcanoes, that stretched from one extreme to the other, bubbling mountains that rose thousands of feet, down to deep crevasses that were immeasurable. The research station had been built on a shallow plateau that was now being threatened by violent volcanic activity. Huge fissures were constantly ripping apart the fragile mantle surrounding the plateau, and the landing bay had long since disappeared taking the only shuttle with it. The distress beacon emitted two days ago finally reached Starbase 9, sending the USS Starship, the Potemkin, the nearest ship, to it' s rescue.

Will watched the last five people de-materialize before him. The floor began to shake beneath his feet, knocking him off balance. Hitting the ground hard on his knees, he tapped his communicator at the same time as he cursed the ship. "Hurry up, damn you, it' s not going to hold much longer!" Will silently began praying until seconds later the Potemkin told him they were ready to beam up.

Coming to a stand, Will prepared himself for the beam out. Nothing happened. Will mumbled angrily "Come on, come on, get me out of here!"

Finally he began to feel the familiar sensation of his body de-materializing, he held his breath until he found himself looking into the face of the transport technician. Will plastered a huge confident grin across his face as he stepped off the transporter pad, his glee at the successful mission clearly evident in his smug retort to the transporter technician, "Piece of cake..."

~~~~~  
Back down on the surface, Will stared unbelieving at the smouldering consuls of the research station. They had failed to get him up. He checked his watch: thirty seconds left. Punching his communicator pin a third and fourth time, he found himself shouting, "Riker to Potemkin...".
Nothing.

He tried again, "Riker to Potemkin, urgent beam-up, come on you guys, I' m running out of time here, request priority one beam up NOW!"

Nothing. The rising panic began to claw at him. Will held his breath, trying to hold on to the last shred of hope, but within a minute, the deafening roar that now resounded and thundered throughout the distant skies told Will that the distortion field had already fixed itself firmly back in place. He was trapped. No one was getting in, and he was not getting out of here now, or for the next 8 years.

Sinking to his knees, Will finally forced himself to look around at his new home. He was stuck, on his own, on a planet that was about to be ripped apart by all of nature' s cruellest forces. But there was only one thought which rang through Will' s head, resounding in all of the corners of his consciousness, seemingly at once -- and it was the worst thought of them all, the absolute worst, he was going to miss his rendezvous with Deanna...

~~~~~  
Chapter 5  
~~~~~

"Congratulations Lieutenant Commander Riker." A multitude of cheers erupted along with several whistles and jesting comments.

Will grinned as he looked around at his Captain and the rest of the senior officers; his newest

circle of friends on board the Potemkin. The ceremony was the second biggest highlight of his life. Nothing could hide the pride Will felt, but the only person he wanted to share his news with, was Deanna.

Deanna who was, even now, on her way to meet him on Risa. She would so proud of his promotion. It would mean a better, easier life for them both. His Captain had even hinted that Starfleet were considering him for Captaincy in the near future, but for now he was on his way to join the Excelsior class ship the USS Hood, as it' s first officer. It would be the next step towards his ultimate goal, and Will was pleased as punch with everything about it..

~~~~~

Checking the stardate, Will estimated that Deanna would reach Risa two days from current. The problem was, his transfer to the Hood would only be effective, tomorrow.

Though he was desperate to see Deanna again and to join her on Risa, the sudden and unexpected promotion he' d received; the change in ship, all of it was going to put a slight kink into his well laid plans. And he was not entirely sure if Captain DeSoto would agree to his request for shore leave on such short notice.

As it turned out, however, Will was not even to receive the opportunity to ask. Two hours after transferring to the Hood, an emergency communique from Starfleet issued orders to the Captain and crew that they were to leave for Turkana 4 as soon as their new first officer was on board. Before Will had even settled into his new quarters, they were heading for deep space once more.... far, far away from Risa, and Deanna.

An hour before they disappeared from communications range, Will sent a message to Tang, hoping against hope that the sergeant would, once again, find a way to get his message off to Risa, so that at least Deanna would know that he wasn' t going to be able to make it back.

"Tang my man, I' m sorry your not there to receive this, but it is imperative that you get a message to Deanna on Risa and inform her that I won' t make our date, something impossible has come up and they' ve sent me off on a new ship. I barely had time to pack. Tell her to return to Earth, Tang, that I' m so sorry... Tell her I' ll contact her as soon as I can and I' ll make it up to her..."

His voice trailed off. "Oh, and Tang.. I' m only asking this of you as a friend. But please...Tell her that I love her... That I haven' t forgotten, and that if I could have been there, I would have. Thanks Tang, I' m depending on you..."

Unbeknown to Will, however, Sergeant Tang had been sent out on training manoeuvres with the security patrols, and would not be due back to base for 5 days...

~~~~~

Chapter 6

~~~~~ "Are you sure there are no messages for me? I' m expecting to be joined by Lieutenant William Riker?" Deanna tapped the desk nervously as she waited for the receptionist to check the guest lists, and communique. Her heart fell as the pretty blond woman looked back up to her, her apology falling quietly from her lips.

"I' m sorry Miss Troi, we have nothing from a Lieutenant Riker. He hasn' t checked in yet and there are no messages...I' m sorry..."

Deanna turned away from the desk and simply stood, lost, alone and frightened. Her mind raced through every possible scenario that might have occurred, and she had an answer for all of them, except one.

\*Is he dead?... no I would have sensed it\*

\*Has he gone on another mission?... no, Tang would have told me\*,

\*Has he had an accident?... no, I would have felt his pain\*,

\*Has he fallen out of love with me?... No of course not, we are Imzadi,\*.

...and the one remaining question came to her mind over and over.

\*Has he changed his mind?...\* She couldn't answer it, she refused to answer it...

Deanna eventually found herself at the docking bays, waiting for the final ship of the day to come into land. At ten minutes to midnight, an announcement echoed throughout the arrival's area, "The shuttle craft from Sector 2148 will be arriving in five minutes at gate 4. This is our last arrival of the day. Thank you for your custom".

Without even realising she had moved, Deanna found herself standing in front of the glass window which overlooked the landing pads. Moments later, she heard the distant hum of the approaching craft, her hands were placed flat against the glass as she watched the ships descent. But even before the ship had powered down and the hatch had opened, tears were running freely down her face. Deanna had known Will was not on board.

Turning her back away from the sympathetic stares of the arriving passengers as they searched the crowd for their own loved ones, Deanna pushed her way through the throng. By the time she had reached the doors, she was running, and she didn't stop until she had reached her room...Their room.

As she slammed the door shut behind her, her back fell against it and the sobs finally came. Dredged up from the very bottom of her soul, they shook her body and forced her to her knees.

Eventually, her tears slowed as her misery melted away into anger. Deanna's eyes fell on the dress that hung on its hanger, new and sparkling on the bedroom door. Her wedding dress. It had taken her hours of pouring over computer images of Earth's bridal dresses to choose just the right one, but as soon as she saw it, she knew that it was THE one.

The garment was made of sheer white satin, plunged low at the front, the back laced with thin shoe string straps. But it was the bodice which had captured Deanna's immediate attention. Hundreds and hundreds of miniature pearl teardrops hung all over the tight intricate webwork of fabric.

Teardrops... Deanna stared wide eyed at the breathtaking creation as she walked slowly up to it, and then began to painfully laugh at the irony. Teardrops...All she had done since she had met Will Riker was shed teardrops. But no more.

Approaching the dress, Deanna reached out to caress the gossamer material, her mind imagining floating up the aisle in the tiny chapel here, the heavy scent of the flowers, roses following her, and Will...Will clinging to her as he escorted her up to the planet's equivalent of a minister, looking down into her eyes, a proud, happy smile upon his face, his love for her emanating from deep inside of him.

Deanna's bubble burst as she found herself still staring up at the dress in front of her. Thankfully none of the wedding plans had been arranged, they were supposed to be doing it together.

Together...

Her heart grew heavy with misery, shame, disappointment, and an overwhelming feeling of loss which made her clutch at her chest; the pain indescribable. It was then that the anger flared.

Before she had realised what she had done, Deanna yanked the dress off its hanger, fingered the beads once more, then gave several of them a sharp tug. It was enough. A thousand tiny pearls scattered like raindrops, clattering into every corner of the room. Deanna watched them fall as still-new teardrops began to cascade down her face. Bitter and totally alone, she screamed at the emptiness which surrounded their suite.

Though devastation and humiliation threatened to overwhelm her, Deanna made up her mind, instead. Choking on her own sobs, she howled into the hollow enclosure: "No... more... Will Riker. These are the last teardrops I will cry for you... no more. Not now, and not ever again..."

The following day, a brand new, very grown up, resolute Deanna Troi took the next available shuttle craft back to Earth.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*