

Home Is Where The Heart Is.

by Carol Sandford

Chapter 1

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Will reclined into his sun lounger, letting the heat of the sun radiate throughout his tired, battle-worn body, his head touched the cushion, sighing with a fatigue that only the crew of the Enterprise D would understand. His eyes automatically drifted shut, only to fly open again when the image that plagued him still, reared it's ugly head.

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Receiving orders from Starfleet command, the Enterprise D and it's crew altered course from it's original destination and headed for the much feared, Breen space. The Science vessel Caprica had been sent to charter the still unknown Black Cluster and had been attacked as they approached on the outskirts of Breen's space, before an explosion in it's engine rooms had left the small craft severely crippled and only able to drift aimlessly. Unable to steer it clear of Breen's territory, the small crew of 45 had abandoned ship.

Starfleet had called on the Enterprise to retrieve the disabled ship, using it's tractor beams then tow it to Starbase 9, picking up the stranded crew afterwards.

Captain Jean-Luc Picard stared ahead, his voice as low as a whisper, "Take it slowly Mr. Data. I don't want to give them any cause for alarm, we all know that they do not need much of an excuse to attack..."

Will watched the screen worriedly, looking for anything that might indicate a cloaked ship, "Is there really no other way around this god-fore-saken hell-hole sir?"

The Captain glanced at his second in command, "No number one, there isn't, it will add days on to our time. We are scheduled to reach Starbase 9 two days from now, unfortunately it's on the other side of Breen's space. They'll blow us out the sky if we even step, one foot as it were, in it...All we can hope for is that they won't think that another ship would approach this area so soon after the last, and let their guard down just long enough for us to sneak in, and sneak out again."

The bridge crew became silent again as they continued staring at the giant view screen. After several minutes, the Captain barely whispered to the counselor, "Deanna, can you sense anything out there?"

Concentrating hard, she shook her head, whispering back, "No Sir, nothing. I cannot sense the Breen's thoughts, but I feel... apprehension Sir, in here, out there, it's so eerie..."

Picard nodded, letting go the breath that he had been unconsciously holding, relaxing a little, he settled back in his chair.

Data's almost panicked voice suddenly broke the uncomfortable silence, " Two ship's uncloaking Sir, 100 kilometres straight ahead, they are preparing to fire torpedoes."

Picard jumped to his feet, the terror in his voice audible, "Evasive manoeuvre's Data, Get us

out of here, warp speed, NOW! They're not even bothering to find out why we're here."

Before they could move, a torpedo hit them with full impact, rocking the giant ship, throwing every occupant and loose object to the floor, Data's steady voice broke through the chaos, "They have disabled us Captain. They are preparing to fire again"

Picard had no choice but to throw back what the Breen were firing at them, "Mr. Worf, return fire..."

Before the photon torpedoes could leave their bays, two more of the Breen's missiles hit the Enterprise with such force, an explosion was heard throughout the ship, once more throwing the crew to the floor, the gravitation force causing them to fly to the rear of the bridge.

Picard asked with an apprehensive dread, "Report Data..."

"Sir, the Breen have blown a hole approximately 50 feet in diameter, on decks 32 and 33. I have activated the gravitational field to secure the area sir."

Picard turned to Worf, his eyes steeled with anger and hatred for the barbaric race that had just blown god knows how many of his staff into oblivion. "Locate and Fire Mr. Worf"

Checking his consul, the mighty Klingon looked back to his superior officer. "They have left the area Si..."

His eyes caught a movement on the view screen, shock reflecting on his usually unreadable harsh features. The other members of the bridge crew turned their attention back to the view screen to see what had halted Worf's words. There was debris scattered as far as the eye could see, slowly rotating as it went on its journey.

It was then they spotted a body, floating, getting further and further away, lifeless. Deanna gasped with horror, "Ensign Healey..."

All eyes turned to each other, some of what they had originally thought was debris, now became apparent that it was life-forms. Picard asked sadly, "How many Data?"

His voice dropped low, his horror as apparent as his comrades, "The computer has acknowledged that are 26 members of the crew missing...sir"

He became silent again as his amber eyes focusing on another body floating barely 20 feet from the view screen. Deanna began screaming uncontrollably. It was a child, about two years old, disfigured beyond recognition...

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They had managed to get all but two of the bodies back on board for a proper burial, including the child, and her parents, then they had limped back to star base for major repairs.

All the crew had been given R & R whilst the repairs were being carried out. Deanna had

headed home to Betazed, needing the comfort of home - and her mother, She had begged Will to go with her, but he had already decided to go to somewhere less...quieter.

Will had realised that it was the ideal opportunity to resume the romance with her, but he wasn't ready. He never seemed to be ready. He often wondered if he would ever be...

The Captain and Beverly had gone home to Earth. Picard had been as deeply traumatised by what had happened to his lost crew as the rest of the occupants of the bridge at the time of the tragedy, and Beverly had desperately wanted to be there for him. So they had headed for the only place Picard knew they would get some peace of mind. France, back to the vineyards, and back to his roots...

Will had headed for Risa. He needed to be around happy people, a sunny climate and beautiful women.

The urge to be around a race that oozed security, and a lack of inhibitions, and the 'not a care in the world' sort of attitude became paramount to Will as he tried to justify his choice of vacation. Deanna had been dismayed at his destination, then had become angry, and jealous, when she had envisaged the scantily clad women draped over him at every opportunity that arose. She made a huge misjudgement when she told him so.

"How could you Will Riker...How could you think about your own selfish needs and desires after what has happened. How could you lay there, being seduced by one, or more of them, when we've just watched whole families, children, members of our crew, die!"

Will stared silently at her in the dazed stupor that had become almost normal for the crew. Deanna hadn't even tried to understand. And for the first time in his life, Will realised he didn't even care what she thought of him, which frightened Will even more. Deanna Troi was the only woman in the whole universe that did matter to him. But not right now, and he hoped to god, the planet below could bring him back to the land of the living, and eventually back to her.

Deanna felt his misery, and for the first time since she'd known him, she sensed that Will didn't care. His body and mind almost pulsated with his own personal distress. And she knew, this time, she wasn't going to be the one to help him. But what she didn't know was it was her who was giving him the worst of his nightmares. It was his own dreams that scared him. That scream, that look in her eyes, and the image of her floating out there, in space.

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Several of the planet's beauties had approached Will, but backed off when he sadly shook his head at them along with an apologetic smile. The planet's magic hadn't begun to heal his wounds yet, but he was content enough to watch the other guests enjoying the pleasures that Risa had to offer, knowing that eventually he would be ready for some much sought after company.

Will had begun to watch the girls in earnest, mainly to see how long it was before they left with a visitor like himself for more, private surroundings. Most of the guests at his resort were men, all were of similar age to him, and all looking for the same thing, to forget.

The resident girls here outnumbered the men three to one, plenty to go around, and if Will had been in a different frame of mind, he would have barely left his room, the girls would have been queuing up for him. But for now, he was content to watch...

Three days later, Will had come out from his room late into the afternoon. He had taken to napping frequently, it had become the only way he had managed to get any sleep at all. Medication had made the situation worse, for once they had knocked him out and the dreams came, he wasn't able to wake himself. At least without the medication he could wake himself up.

Deanna's screams still made sure his nights stayed as an ongoing nightmare, and he had all but given up on even going to bed. He usually found himself in the resorts casino's, content once again to just watch rather than play. His expertise as a poker player seemed to be a lifetime away, and he could not bring himself to play, no matter how much the other players nagged at him. His mind and heart were not in it. But he was confident that he would eventually, when the time was right...

Later that night, Will had been watching a poker game. He had noticed the new guest at the table, and he had seen her a couple of times soaking up the sun by the swimming pool, but she'd had that same 'leave me alone' aura that had surrounded him. Large sunglasses and even larger floppy hat gave her the privacy that she had obviously craved.

Will watched her play intrigued. He had sat at a position that offered him full view of her hand, and was quietly impressed at her composure as she played. She almost had the art of bluffing perfect. Will had been playing long enough in his lifetime to know women were very easy to read, and he could tell when one was bluffing a mile off. This lady was very gifted.

Will had caught her quick glance a couple of times, and she had thrown him a small smile. But it wasn't until she laughed that Will really stopped and took stock of just how pretty she really was.

Her hair was long, very long. It swung just past the top of the stool she was perched on, she could have quite comfortably sat on it. But it was the colour that Will marvelled. It was a deep, rich chestnut, the colour reminded him of when he was a kid collecting conkers. When you opened the prickly shell, you got this beautiful chestnut conker inside.

Her mouth was tiny, made smaller by the shape of her lips, perfect cupid bows, and when she laughed, he had spotted brilliant white pearly teeth. But it was her eyes that made his heart race. He had never seen a colour like it. His only comparison was two bright, translucent emerald chips, and it was these that gave away her alien heritage. No-one on Earth would have ever had that colour eyes.

Will began to wonder where she came from, he tried his hardest to catch her accent, and when he did, he almost fell off his chair, it was definitely Betazoid, but much higher pitched than Deanna's low seductive tone. Now his intrigue was totally piqued.

Will felt a rush of adrenalin course throughout his body. His dormant feelings and emotions that had been shoved as deep as he could possibly shove them, had finally found a reason to re-emerge. Now he felt an urgency to know this mysterious woman.

She had known all along that she was being watched. But in the last few moments, her mind had been assaulted with the tall, bearded mans excitement. She had felt his shock when she had spoken. He had obviously recognised her accent and now she was curious, but only to know who he knew on her home planet. He was without a doubt, Federation, and she found herself beginning to wonder about him. Was he a captain...would he be able to get her home?

Will saw and felt her sigh, he knew that she was now aware of him, but he wasn' t sure if she' d sighed because she thought he was going to try and hit on her, or whether something else was bothering her. He continued to watch her play, but her heart wasn' t in the game anymore. She finished her hand and stood to leave.

Will' s eyes followed her every move, and when she' d stood to her full height, their eyes met and locked. For several moments they simply looked. Neither blinked, neither spoke. Will found himself slowly coming to a stand, but as another guest passed through the gap between them, the spell broke. Carleena quickly looked down, turned and hastily walked away. She didn' t look back.

Will watched her go and he was torn between the desire to run after her, or to call, but he became frantic when he realised he didn' t know her name. Before he had even realised he' d done it, Will had called to her in his head, \*Please, don' t go...\*

Carleena halted her steps when she heard him call her. His plaintive cry of ' please don' t go' filtered through enough to know that he' d sent to her, despite her limited empathic abilities. She swung her head around so quickly to face him, her hair fanned out like a cape, eventually coming to rest over her shoulder and draping itself down her front.

Will watched the action and longed for the day when he could see that same hair contrasted against her naked creamy skin. Once again they stood and stared at each other, the air sizzled with invisible current, passing within the hungry eyes that begged each other, and then he heard her hesitant reply, \*Tomorrow...meet me tomorrow.\*

She turned once more and carried on out of the room. Will' s heart beat returned to it' s normal pace, and for the first time in...weeks, he began to see the light at the end of his dark tunnel.

## Chapter 2

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Will placed himself in the best vantage point at the swimming pools edge the following morning. There was no way he could miss her. He had an air of expectancy about him, but by the time 4.00 p.m. came and went, his expectancy had turned to a deep disappointment.

He found himself beginning to pace around the pool area, then slowly he ambled around the complex, oblivious to the beauty of the flora and fauna that had made the planet become well known in the universe as the nearest thing to heaven. Better, here there were women.

By 6.00p.m. Will was back in his own room, quietly sulking. This wasn' t part of Will' s nature to be dumped. His reputation as a ladies man followed him where ever he went, but his real pride was of all the women he had...had, none had hated him afterwards. His ability to be ' the

perfect gentleman' came as part of the Will Riker seduction stratagem, and he had NEVER been stood up, ever, until now.

Will didn't bother going out to the bar or the casino, his heart wasn't in it as he slowly came to realise that the beautiful, mysterious woman had probably no intentions of meeting him. So by 10.00p.m. he found himself tucked up in bed, laying back, with his hands behind his head, contemplating his next few lonely hours, and the thought that maybe, one day soon, his loneliness would be cured by the infamous redhead. He fought with himself not to go to sleep, knowing that within ten minutes or so, his nightmare would start.

Will had managed to find some soothing jazz to listen to, and had even managed to hum along to the tunes, he didn't know he had drifted off until the scream came. He flew up into a sitting position, his body soaked in perspiration. His face lay in his hands as he tried to erase the dream and settle his ragged breathing. It was then he felt the soft hand upon his shoulder. It wasn't restrictive, and if he'd been on board the Enterprise he'd have known who it was, and for a long moment he thought it was, "Deanna?..."

It wasn't until he turned to look into the emerald eyes that he realised it wasn't her, his hoarse whisper barely registered, "You!..."

He felt her gentle tug as she tried to get him to lay back down, her eyes never leaving his. Will felt nothing but a quiet concern from her as he allowed himself to be pulled back. Her hand moved to his forehead and she continued the soothing stroke. Nothing was said with words, but he heard her thoughts, *Shhhhhh...go back to sleep...I'm not going anywhere*

Will watched her until he felt his eyelids grow heavy, and before he knew it, he had woken to a sunlight that blinded him. He groaned as he turned away from the glare, cursing profoundly at not closing the drapes. Up until now he hadn't had the need, as he had been awake long before daylight broke, if indeed he had slept at all.

He swung his legs around, effectively turning his back to the window, and as he sat on the edge of the bed, his eyes fell on the slight indentation on the spare pillow. His memory came back in a rush. She had stayed with him throughout the night and sneaked off like a thief before he'd woken and had the chance to thank her.

Will showered and dressed with the sole intention of getting out there and finding his mystery woman. He hadn't felt this alive since, well, if he was truly honest with himself, since he chased an equally young Deanna Troi, when he himself was a young upstart of a Lieutenant on Betazed in his late teens.

He had felt the same connection with this woman as he had with Deanna, he knew it was solely based on her being a Betazoid. He felt spiritually connected with the race, and even if a relationship didn't evolve, he wanted her as a personal friend. Anyone who could keep him asleep for more than hour was a friend for life as far as he was concerned, and he wanted...needed desperately to tell her that.

Fruitless hours later, Will made his way back to room even more disheartened than he had the previous night. He flicked the light switch as he passed through the door, illuminating the

room in a soft glow. He came to a standstill when he saw his long sought after quarry sitting apprehensively on his couch.

Again Will was lost for words, until she spoke for him, "Hello..."

Will swallowed nervously. There was something about this woman that reduced him to a blithering idiot, and he visibly cringed when he stuttered out his surprise, "Hello, I...I..How did you...?"

Carleena watched the giant man' s discomfort, and immediately felt contrite for her assumption that he would be pleased that she was there. She tentatively patted the sofa for him to come and sit beside her. Moving slowly over to her, his eyes never left her face. Will sat nervously on the edge, his hands clasped tight to hide their shaking and waited for her explanation.

"I' m sorry...I told them I was your wife...I know this is hard for you to understand, but I promise you, I only want to help. I know that you are deeply troubled...I can see it in your eyes, and I know you know I' m partially Betazoid, so you also know that I can sense your troubles too..."

She let him digest the information before carrying on, "I too am...getting over a personal loss, I was very much like you when I first came here" she chuckled nervously, "Actually, worse. I hid in my room for three days before venturing out to see what this great place had to offer. I didn' t want to come here, but I was coerced, and then unceremoniously, dumped."

Will watched her intently as she spoke, and once again he found himself thinking about how pretty she was. He wondered how long it would be before that mane of hair was spread across his pillow. He mentally kicked himself when he heard her soft laughter as she had ' heard' everything he had just thought. It broke that final barrier... "I' m sorry, that was unforgivably rude of me, I should have remembered my manners, I' m not usually so...open-minded."

Her laughter made him smile, but she stopped laughing when she saw his smile. He was an incredibly handsome man, as his blue eyes lit up with merriment. She also noticed that after his good nights sleep, he had lost some of the blackness from beneath his eyes, and the haunted look had dimmed some what too.

Carleena knew this man needed her, and for the time being, she was happy enough to help. She had no doubts that one day, he would be there to help her.

Will' s word brought her out of her reverie, and she fixed her attention back on his grinning face,

"So...do you have a name? I' m Will by the way."

She returned his grin and stuck out her hand, "Hello Will, my name is Carleena..."

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Chapter 3

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The couple become inseparable over the next few days. Will had learnt that she had lost her entire family, her mother and two sisters in an explosion at their home on Betazed. She had drifted from one friend to another, getting steadily more and more depressed.

Until after four months, her best friend had brought her to Risa, insisting that she needed to be among happy people that weren't telepathic and not among her own kind who constantly recalled the nightmare images whenever they saw her, sometimes it almost felt like she was in a movie theatre watching the horror unfold before her. She herself had been in a coma for a week and mercifully hadn't personally witnessed any of it, but she had almost the entire story from other peoples recollections.

She had confessed to only being half Betazoid, so was only partially telepathic. Her father was unknown to her, but was definitely alien, hence the green eyes. Her mother had stalled for years about revealing his identity, and now, now she had no hope what-so-ever of finding out who he was, or even if her only living relative was still alive.

Will had recounted his own nightmares to her. About the horror of watching families drifting in space after the attack from the Breen. And he had also found himself telling her about other battles that had left scars so deep they would never be healed.

Will found talking to someone who didn't have a clue about the identities of who or what he was describing helped better than any member of Star fleet because Carleena stayed neutral and afterwards. They felt their spirits renewed as they both cleansed their souls to each other. Neither leaving anything out, both many times weeping in each others arms.

They understood that this was an important part of their healing process, Carleena had urged Will, and he, her, to let it all go to the point of actually screaming and shouting at each other. If anyone had been watching them they would have thought that they were an old married couple having a spat. In truth Will felt as comfortable with her as he did with Deanna, he had often wondered if this was what life would be like with her.

Will had chosen not to mention his relationship with Deanna. He couldn't really put a finger on why he hadn't, but he felt an enormous sense of betrayal whenever he thought of her, and he didn't want Carleena to know they were Imzadi. They hadn't become intimate yet, but it was only a matter of time.

Once Will and Carleena had finally got over the worst of their individual demons they had become a twosome to rival Laurel and Hardy, they were totally in tune with each other, and most nights they would be seen in the bar, slightly worse for wear, in hysterics at one or the others jokes and stories. As much as he loved Deanna, she did not share Will's sense of humour in the slightest, and he realised that he missed this side of the relationship enormously now he was experiencing it with Carleena, the laughter they shared in itself was healing him.

One day before Will was rejoin his ship, things changed between the two bosom buddy's. They had become absolute best friends and Will did not want to leave her behind. Carleena didn't want to be left behind...

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When the merry pair staggered arm in arm to his room, they were still giggling like a pair of



naughty school children. Carleena had propped her back up against the door, as usual and Will had put his palms flat on the door either side of her head, her hands gently rested on his waist.

Eventually as the laughter died they found themselves gazing into each other' s eyes. Jollity changed into a smouldering ache as both recognised the want. Both minds begged each other to make the first move.

Will made that first move by sliding his hand beneath her hair to caress her neck. The kiss that followed, happened in slow motion as they teased and tasted. The brooding desire that had steadily built over the past few days finally overflowed. Kiss upon kiss, groan upon groan escalated almost into a frenzy.

Will reached down to open the door without breaking the kiss. It swung open and they both stumbled in, landing in an undignified heap on the floor. Still they kissed.

Gone was the laughter, left was a need, one so desperate nothing existed except them, the moment, the urgency. Will kicked back to slam shut the door with his foot, rolling Carleena underneath him as he did so. Settling his long body over the full length of her, he propped himself up on his elbows, his hands stroked back the silky hair from her face. As he lightly kissed her swollen lips, both became lost in the expectant magic of what was about to happen between them.

Her emerald eyes smouldered with desire, Will was bewitched as he lost himself totally to her, "It' s been a long time since I' ve felt this way. Please...let me love you Carleena."

Carleena could feel Will' s heartbeat through the cumbersome barrier of their clothes. She looked into the blue crystal chips, and saw the hunger. He heard her unspoken assent as his lips descended upon hers once again.

This time, more demanding, more forceful, more urgent, she met his urgency with a guttural moan that made her gasp. Will captured the moan, taking the opportunity to plunder her open mouth with his tongue.

Evidence of his hardness pressed against her pelvic bone, and she found herself pressing back, her own rapidly building ache threatening to make her cry out. The ache won, "Help me Will, I' m on fire"

The two become possessed. Will slipped his hand up under her dress to tug down her panties, her own hands frantically pulled at his shirt, sending the tiny buttons flying. The need to feel his bare skin against hers became so great, Carleena cried out in frustration as she tried to negotiate his zipper on his pants, "Christ Will, hurry!"

Will rapidly stood to his feet to shuck off the offending clothing, along with his boots and at long last, his shorts. He heard Carleena' s gasp of wonderment as he stood before her in all his naked glory. Will felt himself swell with pride. Even more so as he looked down to the woman laying prone before him.

Her dress was bunched around her waist, the chestnut thatch barely hiding her secret. Will

lowered himself back down over her, pushing the dress above her head as he did so. Carleena was surprised when he didn't remove it, but instead held her arms captive within its folds with one hand as he looked longingly, lovingly at her.

She felt a moment of panic as she realised he had her totally at his mercy, but relaxed when his obvious intent was purely sensual. His other hand slid down to raise her leg, allowing him to nestle between her thighs, letting her get comfortable with his large weight.

Each looked deep into each others eyes, as Will began to gently rock against her, slowly, gently easing himself into her. Neither broke eye contact. Carleena's gradually grew wider as Will filled her more and more, and when he was totally embedded, only then did he allow himself a triumphant groan.

Carleena arched herself off the floor as wave after wave of liquid fire surged throughout her body. Once more Will ravaged her mouth as he continued to love her. Carleena felt like she was drowning, never... never in her entire adult life, had she felt like she did now, and as the two lost themselves in their own intimate embrace, reaching for their long awaited mutual climax, Carleena knew he was the one. He had managed to touch her heart, her soul, her spirit and more, he was worthy of the only thing she could give him, she opened up her mind to reach deep into his, \*Only you my beloved, my Imzadi, only you...\*

Will heard her endearment as he filled her with his seed, knowing that he had met hers on the way. He buried his face in her sweet smelling hair, desperately trying to calm his ragged breath, and block out his betrayal to this beautiful woman.

Imzadi. He had heard her call out to him as he climaxed within her. He pushed himself up to look at her face, deliberately blocking out the thoughts that raged through his mind. His stomach turned as he saw the love radiating from her eyes, she brought her hand up to gently wipe the trickle of perspiration away from his temple, after, cupping his face and bringing his face down for a feather light kiss.

"I love you Will..."

"I..I love you too Carleena."

"Will...did you hear me?"

Will closed his eyes, he nodded his head, "I heard you."

Carleena quietly chuckled, Will opened his eyes again to see her amusement, "What's so funny?"

Carleena traced her finger around his lips, then slowly stroked his beard as she answered him, "It's o.k., I don't expect you to understand, I..I just wanted you to know that's all."

Will silently kissed her, cutting off any other communication. Carleena felt his withdrawal from her mentally, but marvelled when she felt his budding desire begin to rise again. Words

became forgotten as they got swept away once more.

This time as they reached their ultimate goal, it was Will who cried out, "I love you Carleena." his declaration turning to a hushed, in awe "I love you."

It was the best he could give her, but she was content with that, for now... Eventually the spent couple managed to crawl to bed, both falling asleep, her enveloped within his safe embrace...

## Chapter 4

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The twosome were still entangled around each other hours later, only waking when Will' s communicator indicated an incoming call. Will reached over to tap the offending pin, drowsily moaning, "Riker here."

Data' s brusque, almost chirpy voice came back, "Good morning Commander. The Enterprise is within transporting range, may I inform Chief O' Brien to lock on to your co-ordinates Sir?"

Will sat up abruptly, causing Carleena to slip from his grasp, almost falling off the edge of the bed, Will managed to catch her as he bellowed, "NO!...No. Mr. Data, I need one hour o.k.?"

"Very well, Commander, one hour it is, Data out."

Carleena had turned herself around to a sitting position facing him, her tousled hair almost covering her naked body, just as Will had imagined, neither knew what to say. There was an awkward silence as they both plucked up the courage to ask, eventually Will spoke, "I need you with me...Come with me to the Enterprise...This is too good to give up."

Carleena looked at him questionably, "This...what? she asked.

"What we have"

"What' s that?"

"Something good."

"Something good in bed?"

"That too."

She watched him closely trying to weigh up the alternatives, there were no alternatives to consider... "O.k."

She wondered at Will' s sudden apprehension, and for the first time she began to question if there was someone else on board he was close to. He hadn' t mentioned anyone other than the ship' s counselor, Deanna Troi. When he had first mentioned her name, something had pricked

at the back of her mind, the name sounded familiar, perhaps she was the Betazoid he knew, or maybe Beverly, or Guinan.

She started as Will went to get up to get dressed, her hand reached out to stop him and she gently asked, "Will...Is there anything I should know before I go on board?"

She caught his guilty look as he weighed up how to explain to her, "I am... very close to someone...we had a relationship once, but we' re just close friends now..."

She eyed him speculatively, "Are you sure?"

He nodded, giving her a long stare as he tried to make her understand, "I' m sure.."

Before she had a chance to say anymore, he turned away and started to prepare to leave. Carleena told him she was going to pack up her own belongings and would be back within half an hour.

As soon as she' d left the room, Will stopped what he was doing and sat down heavily on the edge of the bed, his mind raced at what he was going to say to Deanna, he even toyed with calling her up to tell her now, he balked at how it would sound. "Hey Dee, guess what, I' ve fallen in love with someone and I' m bringing her on board, do make her welcome won' t you?..."

He cringed at his own attempt at humour, at the same time chickening out of that particular scenario. Maybe he could get Beverly to tell her. Yes, that' s what he' d do, as he stood to do just that Carleena came back through the door, dragging behind her a large holdall, grinning at him,

"Hi!, haven' t you packed yet?, what have you been doing?"

Once more, Will managed to look guilty, standing he began to rapidly stuff his clothing into his own holdall, "Um...nothing, just trying to wake myself up."

Ten minutes later, they were both ready to go, Carleena wrapped her arm around his waist as he summoned the Enterprise. "Riker to Enterprise"

He heard the answering bleep, and as he looked down onto Carleena' s smiling face, his head said, *Well, here goes*

His mouth said, "Two to beam up"

Chapter 5

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Deanna stood in the transporter room, her breath held as she waited for him to materialize in front of her. She badly needed to apologise to him for her outburst before he went to Risa, it was unforgivable of her, and had plagued her during her entire vacation with her mother.

She knew she had no right to judge him on his relationships, especially as she herself, had

more than her fair share of ' intimate liaisons' . But deep down, Will would always be hers, and if he had felt the need to be amongst beautiful, hot, seductive women, then so be it.

Her heart began to race when she watched Miles' hand slid up the control panel. She turned to watch the transporter pad, her smile bright, ready to beg for his forgiveness. But seconds later, her mind screamed when he finally materialised embracing a stunning woman who was looking up into his face, her smile radiant.

Will heard Deanna before he saw her. His eyes locked with hers even before the transport was complete, he also knew Carleena had heard it too. Will implored Deanna to welcome the strange woman who was watching the exchange with interest.

As they both walked off the pad, Deanna stepped forward to greet them, the smile purposely fixed in place, her eyes and voice over bright as she spoke, "Hello Will, it' s good to have you home,"

Deanna took a deep breath as she turned her attention to his companion, "Hello, I' m Counselor Deanna Troi, welcome aboard the Enterprise..."

Deanna was surprised when she recognised the redheaded woman' s accent, "Hi, my name is Carleena, It' s nice to meet you at long last, Will has told me so much about you, although he neglected to tell me you were from Betazed."

Deanna bright, false laugh sounded high pitched as she turned her attention back to Will who kept silent. Deanna was astonished when she realised he was deliberately emptying his mind so' s not to reveal the obvious, "Well, you have the advantage Carleena, Will hasn' t mentioned you to us, so this has come as a bit of a surprise I' m afraid."

Will finally decided to speak up, "Hello Dee...sorry, but we' ve been a little...distracted."

Deanna watched as the couple shared an intimate smile. Her heart sank as she realised that Will was deeply in love with this woman, she uneasily wondered if Carleena had attempted to make Will her Imzadi.

Carleena' s head swung back to Deanna' s face. Deanna realised that Carleena had read her mind, a quick glance to Will confirmed it as he looked at her with fear in his eyes. They also begged her not to say anything. "Are you empathic?"

Deanna swallowed painfully, "Yes...Yes I am...are you?"

Carleena nodded happily, looking back up to Will' s face she uttered Deanna' s worst nightmare,

"A little, Will is my Imzadi...Isn' t that gre...?"

Carleena heard the gasp from within both Will and Deanna. She looked from one to the other, finally realisation dawning, "Will...is Deanna your Imzadi?...Please tell me, I think I ought to know."

Will reached out to touch her arm, he sighed when she pulled away from him, "Tell me Will"

Will sighed, but as he went to speak, Deanna cut in, "We were...are, but it' s o.k., we' re no longer together, just close friends."

Once more Carleena' s eyes travelled from one to the other, clearly puzzled, "But..how can that be? The Imzadi bond is eternal, no-one can love deeper than an Imzadi pairing. Don' t you love each other?"

It was Will' s turn to try and explain their unique relationship, "Yes...we do...we love each other very much, but not enough to totally commit, or to have a ...proper relationship. We both have our careers, our independence. But we' re there for each other whenever needed...we help to keep each other alive."

Carleena watched as Will conveyed his feelings to her, but she noticed he was watching Deanna as he did so. A new respect overcame her as she envied the obviously close, and special affinity that the two had with each other. But Will loved her, and on that thought she decided she had the better deal.

Deanna' s heart did somersaults as Will churned out his innermost thoughts, and she dimly realised that she felt the same way. More than once, they had found themselves willing the other alive when either were critically injured, she was in no doubt that they would both be dead if it wasn' t for their Imzadi bond.

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Carleena settled into Will' s quarters like she had always belonged there. Deanna had grown to like her enormously and could see why Will loved her so much. Frequently their laughter could be heard throughout various places on the ship, particularly Ten Forward. Deanna also found out Carleena was a terrific poker player, and it had become an experience to watch both Carleena and Will battling it out across the table. Both being expert bluffers, the games usually ended up just them two, long having swept the other players under the table.

Chapter 6

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Three weeks after Carleena had come aboard, the Enterprise finally met with the prospect of seeking out another race, the first since their run-in with the Breen. They were in orbit of a small class M planet in the Parelli system. Data had informed the bridge crew that the entire planet was blanketed in ice and snow, but was able to sustain life, probably living in the deep caves below the surface, but was unable to determine if they were humanoid or not. A decision was made to send down an away team to have a look.

Will stood and was already making his way off the bridge as he barked his command, "Mr Worf, Data, ensign Jackson, report to transporter room 3 in ten minutes."

Worf and Data followed Will into the turbo lift, "Deck 6."

The three men were silent as they contemplated what they were going to need on the freezing planet. Barely ten minutes later all four men emerged from the equipment room, all decked in

thermal suits, phasers, and emergency life saving packs.

Will was surprised when he entered the transporter room to find both Carleena and Deanna waiting. Even more surprisingly, they were holding hands. He had wondered why the two women had become firm friends, but then he didn't know of any Betazoids that weren't friendly. A truly remarkable race, and he had the pleasure of having the two most beautiful ones waiting to see him off.

He came to stand in front of the two of them, unsure what to say. He saw Carleena gently nudge Deanna towards him, her eyes encouraging her. Deanna circled her arms around his neck and whispered in his ear, "Be safe, Imzadi."

She stepped back from him, her eyes locking with his, a silent understanding passed between them. Only Carleena broke the spell when he felt her arms go around his waist. He felt slightly awkward as she kissed him passionately. When she pulled him back to her for a hug, he found himself staring into Deanna's black eyes. He barely registered Carleena's farewell, "Don't forget I love you, come back to me safe okay?"

Will kissed her on the cheek, then turned away to join his comrades on the transporter pads. The three men's eyes watched him, and as Miles pushed the control to send them on their way, Will stared back at his away team. And as they all began to shimmer out of sight, they still looked at him with a mixture of disbelief, awe, and envy. Will exclaimed, wide eyed and palms up and with a feint twinkle in his eye, "What...!?"

## Chapter 7

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The group materialised at the entrance of a cave in the middle of a raging blizzard. Will hurriedly indicated for them to follow him just inside the dark entrance. They battled against the wind that whipped around them, barely allowing them to keep standing. Jackson fell at Will's feet as the wind sent him flying, Will and Worf dragged the young man up, brushing off the worst of the snow, "Are you o.k. Ensign?"

The scared brown eyes nodded, the action shaking the last of the snow off, "Yes Sir, sorry sir."

Will began to wonder if this assignment was a bit too harsh for the youngster as he toyed with the idea of sending him back. But knew he was a very good geo-scientist, and was sure the boy would have wanted the opportunity to study the planet and get some hands-on experience. "O.k. people, let's move on. Data do you read any life forms ahead?"

Data checked the tricorder for any life signs, it came up negative, "No Sir, I recommend we head due west."

Will nodded, turning away. He turned on his torch and headed into the cave, quickly disappearing into the darkness. The others followed behind cautiously, one by one switching on their own torches as they too disappeared into the murky depths.

The upper caves appeared to be carved out of solid ice, the sounds of large droplets of water

echoed throughout the vast network that they were sure lay ahead, and it wasn't until they had gone in about half a mile that the walls began to show signs of rock. They had also started to descend slightly, making the path down treacherous. Will had noticed that there were several footprints going in, but none heading out, which made him wonder just what lived in there...

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The two women sat opposite one another, lost in their thoughts as they pondered how their loved one was faring down on the planet sized snowball. Deanna hugged the cup of hot chocolate with both hands, gently sipping at it's steaming contents as Carleena watched her.

Carleena genuinely adored Deanna, and could see why Will had chosen her as his soul mate. She had an aura of peace, grace and beauty on top of being compassionate and unerringly tender. Without thinking she spoke, "Did you fall in love with him...It's different from just loving isn't it?"

Deanna looked at her startled. She had been so engrossed in sensing Will's well-being, that she'd been totally oblivious to the pretty red-head across from her. She felt no malice or envy behind her question.

Deanna thought about her answer for a moment or two, before straightening herself up, placing the cup on the table. "Yes...Yes I did, but I wouldn't let Will know that for some time."

She smiled faintly at the fond memory, "He was desperate to get intimate with me, but I wanted to connect mentally... spiritually with him before I allowed him anywhere near my heart, body, and eventually my soul."

Deanna laughed when she recalled the exercise she had made him do in the woods. She wanted to get so close to him and it was the only way at the time that she knew how without the obvious happening, It had only been a couple of years ago when Will had informed her that he'd known all along that it wasn't a real experiment, but all the same, it had worked.

Carleena laughed along with her, eventually the laughter turned back to an expectant waiting game as they both focused back to man on the planet below, Deanna barely heard her whisper.

"I wish Will was my true Imzadi..."

Deanna reached over to grasp Carleena's hand upon the top of table, she understood her friend's dilemma and together they both focused on the giant blue eyed, bearded man that had stolen both of their hearts.

## Chapter 8

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The sound of dripping water became louder as the landing party edged their way down the slippery slopes, The passage began to narrow and before long the away team found themselves hunched over as they continued on. Data had informed them that they had travelled in just over a mile. The walls were now solid rock, with every crack filled with white, solid ice.

Every so often Will' s groping hand would find an ice cold trickle of water, sometimes enough to fill his palm to sip thirstily. His voice echoed through out the intense silence, "Any life-forms yet Mr. Data?"

"No Sir, although the tricorder reads a substantial amount of water approximately 50 yards ahead. There may be signs of life there sir."

Again Will nodded, making his mind up as he turned to carry on along the same path, "If we find no evidence, I' m giving up this futile search. Nothing with any intelligence could possibly live down this hell hole. And I' m cold and I want a nice long soak in a hot bath."

All but Data silently agreed with him as they continued to follow their leader towards hopefully the end of the road.

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Ten minutes later, the tunnel suddenly widened up and they found themselves standing in a huge cavern that housed an underground lake. As Will swung his torch across the indeterminable ceiling, huge stalactites hung so low they nearly touched the black, almost certainly freezing water.

The great plops of water that could be heard echoing throughout the numerous passageways, now appeared to stem from this source. They fell from such a height here that the ripples created hundreds of tiny waves, the gentle lapping sound making the eerie atmosphere a little more natural.

Worf swung his torch around the outskirts of the lake, stopping the beam' s wandering as he spied objects on the slippery cave floor. As the four men approached, it became apparent that it was skeletal remains, of an animal of some description. Will bent down to examine the bones more closely, noting that they were cleanly picked of all flesh, but weren' t white with age. He also determined that the kill had been fairly recent.

Swinging the torch' s beam farther round the lakes sides, it rapidly became obvious that this was a feeding ground. Will signalled to his crew to cautiously, and silently follow him on around the lake, his curiosity getting the better off him.

This was what his life was about, discovery. If it was bad, he killed it, if it was good, and female, he screwed it. Will' s own personal philosophy for life. He found himself smiling as the philosophical thought shot through his head.

Trailing some ten feet behind, Data' s extra sensitive ears pricked up when he heard the faint, high pitched chatter some distance away. He rapidly punched at the controls on his tricorder. Unable to hear them himself, Will spotted the android' s actions, the hairs on the back of neck standing to attention as he felt an uncomfortable sensation wash over him. "Data, What is it?"

"Unknown Sir, but it appears there are approximately 92 airborne creatures heading towards our co-ordinates."

Before Data had even finished speaking, Worf had pulled out his phaser, Will followed suit, his voice becoming urgent as he bellowed his orders, "Turn back, set your phasers to stun and

RUN...!"

As the foursome scrambled back the way they came, the high-pitched chatter got louder and louder, the vastness of the cavern making the sound much, much more sinister.

Will's terrified voice escalated in volume, "RUN...!"

Will was behind his fellow crew mates, his hand pushing onto Jackson's back, urging him to go faster. Even as he tapped his com-badge, he knew that they were too far down the cave's system, and surrounded by solid rock, to get any kind of reception. The Enterprise had no hope of being able to lock onto them. Will needed to get them back up past where the rock turned to ice, only then did they stand any chance.

Grabbing the young man roughly by the arm, he almost dragged him on, "Move it Ensign...!"

Will found himself glancing over his shoulder every few feet, not knowing what was descending on them, or if they were hostile, but his gut instinct told him they were. The chatter became deafening, and they were now close enough for Will to hear humming, recognising the sound of hundreds of flapping wings, he wondered if it was bats. But bats didn't kill and devour large animals did they?

Scrambling through the narrow tunnel, Will was relieved when it opened out once more. At least here they were able to defend themselves when the confrontation happened. Will knew the animals were going to attack, he didn't know why, just that they were, and he wanted to be ready.

But he wasn't prepared for their speed as they poured through the narrow passageway. Before Will could take aim, the first of the creatures, made a electrifying screech and lunged low over him.

Ducking away, Will pushed Jackson hard on his shoulders forcing him to his knees. Following the action himself, Will looked to see Worf and Data do the same before lowering his head, covering it protectingly with his hands, hoping that they would fly straight over them. Seconds later Will knew he was wrong, he had made a disastrous mistake.

Will felt the first one's claws clamp down onto his fingers causing him to howl with pain. Within moments, what felt like at least four more landed on his back and legs. What he thought were beaks pecking at his clothes were in fact tiny hands laced with four inch long nails, determined to rip aside the cloth to reach the succulent flesh beneath.

Within his mind, Will screamed to the one person who could help them,. The only person to help them, \*DEANNA...!\*

Chapter 9

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Back on board Deanna leapt to a stand. Carleena followed her up, surprised at the sudden

movement. It had happened, Will and the crew were in trouble, and he had called to her, "Deanna, what can we do? We' ve got to help them!"

Deanna ignored her friend' s plea as she tried to focus on Will, unconsciously squeezing Carleena' s hand so tight, her nails turned white,.Carleena didn' t appear to notice.

Deanna spoke to thin air, "Troi to Captain Picard, the away team are being attacked, beam them up, NOW!"

Picard didn't even hesitate one moment, "Chief O' Brien, lock onto the away team and beam them straight to sick bay"

Seconds later, Miles relayed the all too familiar dreaded news, "Sorry Sir, they are still too deep within the cavern, I can' t get a lock on them."

His decision made, Picard did the only thing he could, "Assemble a rescue team and beam down immediately. Make sure you have a member of the medical staff go with you with emergency medical supplies"

O'Brien was already on it,"Aye Sir"

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Below the surface, Data had swung into action once he had managed to wrestle one of the creatures off. His spectacular strength had succeeded to lever the talons that were trying to tear at his rubbery skin. But as Data had turned to grasp at his other tormentors, the largest creature had seized the opportunity and gouged out his eye, which now dangled upon his cheek.

The lacerations across his face exposed the tiny flashing lights of his circuitry, the ferocious talons damaging the delicate mechanisms that controlled his head movements, his head twitched alarmingly as he aimed his phaser still with surefire accuracy at the monsters that had begun to peck at the flesh that had been ripped open on his colleagues bodies.

Their screams washed over him as the agonising wails filled the cavern. While on one hand, it unaffected him, but on the other, he knew that his friends were in deep, deep trouble. Will still had five of the creatures attacking him with a ferocity that only rivalled hounds savaging a fox.

Will had been the first obstacle in their path so had got the brunt of the onslaught. Moments later, Will went silent. Worf and Jackson, only had two clawing at them, the other creatures circled above their heads, like vultures waiting for an opening to join the melee. Data could not get an accurate shot at the animals on the three prone men' s torso' s. They were small enough to make precision firing hazardous. If he missed, at this range, the phaser' s fire would have gone clean through his comrades bodies.

Data could see the animals beady eyes watching Will with a rabid anticipation as the blood began to flow freely from the gaping wounds. The android looked for signs of life from the still form now laying prone on the hard floor, his fingers were still laced behind his head, barely recognisable, as they were torn to shreds.

He was sure Will was still alive, but had gone into shock. At some point he had thrown himself across the upper body of the Jackson boy, undoubtedly saving him from a fate worse than death, as the creatures could only claw at his legs.

Worf was still managing to flail around, but unable to remove the life-forms from his back, as they dodged his hands. Worf roared with the frustration and pain as he tried desperately to reach his phaser that had skidded off some ten feet out of reach.

Data fired at the airborne creatures that hovered above their heads, edging his way over towards the phaser. On making contact, he kicked it within arm's reach of Worf, who lunged at it and with a triumphant roar, began firing wildly at his tormentors, backing up to Data so that he could tear away the ones still clinging to his back, almost screaming as his torn flesh came away with their hands, leaving a laceration so wide and deep, Data could plainly see his spine.

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"Deanna, I can't sense him...He's dead isn't he?"

Carleena's voice broke on a sob as she lost the connection with her loved one. Deanna however, still deeply focused on Will, shook her head, whispering, "No...No, he's unconscious, but he is very weak. Try harder Carleena, he needs us both now, reach out to him with everything you've got, and more... focus...will him to live. If you truly love him, it will work, trust me..."

Carleena glanced curiously at her friend who had already closed out the outside world and was already locked with her Imzadi. For the first time since she had met this other person who Will, without a shadow of a doubt, would have laid down his own life for, Carleena began to wonder if she really had enough to keep her new found love by her side permanently.

She had also began to wonder if Will would leave the Enterprise with her when she returned home shortly. A week ago, she would have been certain that he would have. Today...today she wasn't quite so sure.

Bringing her mind back to the present, Carleena shook herself out of her reverie as she reminded herself that they had to get Will, and the other three members of the away team back to the safety of their ship. Closing her eyes, she focused her mind with Deanna's, and began the battle to reach into his helpless mind, urging him to keep alive, as two people on board loved him and needed him back home.

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The floor of the cave around where the team had holed up was nearly knee deep with what Data had now christened Harpy's. He had estimated there to be at least twenty more in the vicinity, as some of the smarter ones had backed off. Data could see them clinging to the cavern walls just out of phaser range, he idly wondered if they were waiting for them all to die so they could scavenge the remains.

Worf had managed to wrench off the last two remaining harpies from Will's body, throwing them against the wall before giving them a satisfying burst of phaser fire. He stood silently watching them as they smouldered, sending up an acrid stench of burning flesh and fur.

"Mr. Worf, could you please assist me with the Commander and Ensign Jackson, I need to assess their life signs. Most of the damage is located on their backs, although the Commander's is extremely severe. Could you pass me the emergency medical pack please?"

Worf knelt down on the other side of Will and Jackson, handing Data the pack. He cautiously looked at Will's face for any sign of life as Data was feeling for a pulse. Eventually he barely felt the slight flutter. "I have a pulse, although it is very weak, how is Ensi..."

"COMMANDER RIKER, DATA, ANYONE, ARE YOU DOWN THERE?..."

Worf and Data stared into each others eyes as relief washed over both of their features. Data broke the spell as he called back, "GEORDI, DOWN HERE!"

Behind the glare of six torches, six anxious faces appeared from nowhere, Beverly pushed her way around the others, her voice hasty, "Let me through please,"

Coming to a halt, her foot hovered mid air as she looked down at the smouldering remains scattered around her feet and as far as she could see. Beverly surveyed the carnage before her, gagging back the bile that rose in her throat from the stench of the burning harpy's. Covering her nose with her fingers, she grimaced, "My God! what are these...things?"

Without looking up from checking over Jackson, Data told her, "The nearest comparison I have been able to find in my memory banks is a harpy, a mythological creature from Earth's ancient Greek legends. But these creatures have evolved their wings for fur covered skin, becoming to be bat-like in appearance. I suggest two of your party keep their phasers locked on those that remain further down the cavern Doctor."

By the time Data had finished his explanation, Beverly was on her knees beside Will and Jackson, rapidly running her tricorder over them. As she jabbed a hypospray into both of their necks, her voice became urgent, "We need to get these people to sickbay immediately. Will has lost over half his blood volume, and if we don't get him into surgery he'll bleed to death. Jackson's wounds aren't life threatening, but he'll need extensive surgery to rebuild his legs. Worf, I want you in sickbay too, There are high levels of bacteria in these wounds and I'm sure yours will also be infected."

Once more her nose turned up as she glanced at the carnage around her. Coming to a stand, she aimed the hypospray at Worf's neck before she started dishing out the orders, "Geordi, Paul, carefully grab Jackson and carry him up within transporter range. You others, create a cradle with your arms, we're going to have to carry Will face down, he's got extensive damage to his back, and I don't want to create any more."

The four remaining men knelt down beside the big man, two either side, gently sliding their hands underneath his body. Shuffling around to make sure they were properly balanced, then on Beverly's mark, hoisted the giant, inert man to their waist level, and began the perilous climb up to get within transporter range. Data followed up last, his head still twitching wildly as he watched for any movement from the remaining harpy's.

Every few seconds Beverly tapped her badge until about a quarter of a mile from the battle scene the Enterprise crackled into life. Captain Picard had never sounded so relieved to hear her voice, "Go ahead Beverly, what' s your status?"

With a sigh of relief, Beverly relayed her findings, "Will is critical, Jackson only slightly better. Worf and Data are wounded but o.k., Beam Will directly to sickbay first, plus myself, and alert Doctor Selar and Nurse Ogawa to prepare for surgery."

Within seconds, Will began to dematerialize with Beverly following on his tail. One by one, everyone left the icy planet that would eventually be called ' Hades Hell' .

## Chapter 10

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At the same time that the wounded and their rescuers arrived in the Enterprise' s spotless, well ordered medical facility, Deanna, Carleena and the Captain hurried through it' s doors. As Beverly began to strip the clothes from Will, the full horror of his injuries became exposed.

Carleena had never in her entire life seen anything so graphic, or so gruesome, and with a strangled cry, she slipped to the floor in a dead faint. Picard managed to catch her before she hit it. Swinging her up high into his arms, he took her over to a spare biobed, giving her a cursory check before hurrying back to Deanna' s side, who was standing pale and transfixed at the grotesque scene before her. Picard gently touched her elbow, letting her know that he was there with her, for her, and for Will.

Beverly finished stripping Will of his blood soaked clothing and administered an anaesthetic hypospray. Then, with nurse Ogawa assisting, rushed him into the operating theatre.

Deanna watched as the better part of her heart and soul pass by her, face down, deeply unconscious. Suddenly, her reflexes kicked in and her hand sprung out to gently stroke his head before he disappeared behind the theatre doors. Tears began to cascade down her face as she began to sob in earnest, her cry bringing Picard back to her side to clasp the counselor to him as he tried to be of some comfort, her wail cutting him to the core, "Come back to me Imzadi...don' t die..."

Across the room, finally rousing from her faint, Carleena watched silently as her friends anguished heartache and terror overflowed into her own senses.

Dr. Selar also had Ensign Jackson stabilised and ready for theatre, and as the nurse pushed his biobed towards the second theatre, the tall, dark vulcan came to stand beside Deanna and the Captain, her face trying to show confidence as she attempted to dispel their fears. "He will be alright. The commander is in the care of the best medical officer in starfleet, Dr. Crusher won' t let him die."

She smiled tightly at them before following her own medical team into theatre to begin the lengthy process of rebuilding Jackson' s legs.

Carleena came up quietly behind the still sobbing Deanna, pulling her up against her own body for support. She slipped her arms around her shoulders from behind, willing her friend to

quieten her sobbing, slowly managing to calm her down until eventually Deanna only cried silent tears. Her hand came up to hug Carleena' s arm, and together they waited.

Worf and Data sat opposite each other on neighbouring biobed' s. Worf was waiting to go into theatre, but he was not priority so he had to wait until Beverly or Dr. Selar were available, the last remaining nurse was busily trying to stem his blood loss until such time he could be ' sewn up' . Meanwhile Geordi was studying Data' s eye as he worked with a laser tool to repair the shredded fibre-optics.

Now that Deanna was in safe hands, Captain Picard came to a stand in front of his two injured senior officer' s, his hands clasped behind his back, he smiled encouraging at them, "How are you faring up Worf, Mr Data?"

"We are fine sir, or we will be, the Commander took the worst of the attack because he was behind us and became their first target, he threw himself over Ensign Jackson to save him. It was a most honourable act Sir."

Data intercepted, "Yes indeed captain, the Commander deserves to be commended for exceptional valour Sir."

Picard nodded his agreement, "Yes Mr. Data, he most certainly does. Let' s hope he survives long enough to see his commendation..."

The room fell silent as their thoughts turned back to the man fighting for his life beyond the theatre doors .

Chapter 11

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The first sight that the weary doctor saw when she emerged through the surgery doors was her best friend and her companion, Will' s lover, sitting face to face, so close their heads were almost touching. The ebony hair against the rich chestnut, that almost touched the floor, hid the sad, melancholy faces. They were also holding hands, and to anybody who didn' t know them, they appeared to be praying, but Beverly knew their minds were locked with the man who now lay in recovery.

The two women sensed Beverly watching them, and both jumped up for news. Carleena' s eyes were frantic, Deanna' s were sombre, but Beverly offered them both a hopeful smile, "He' s not out of the woods yet, unfortunately the animals had began to eat his inner organs..."

Beverly stopped when she saw Carleena begin to sway again. Deanna hugged the taller woman close to her, she seemed to be a permanent prop for the squeamish brunette, but Deanna urged Beverly to carry on.

"His injuries were extensive. Apart from the lacerations to his legs and arms, he' s lost most of the skin from his back and left side. There was damage to his liver which we were able to repair but we had to remove his spleen to arrest the bleeding. The artery supplying his left kidney was severed, we rejoined it, but we won' t know for a couple of days whether he' ll regain full renal function. If not we' ll need to operate again to remove the kidney. "

She took a deep breath and continued, "The most worrying aspect now is the degree of contamination in the wounds. The bacteria were removed by the transporter, but they left the toxins behind. We believe we've flushed them out of the wounds but some may have got into his circulatory system. There's no way of knowing at this point what effect they may have, if any. There was also some damage to his internal organs from enzymes in the creature's saliva. Again I believe we've cleaned the area sufficiently to prevent any further damage, but only time will tell."

"Will will need to stay in sickbay for a couple of days until we are sure that there are no delayed effects. After that he can return to his quarters but he'll need to come back here in a couple of weeks so we can complete the repairs to his skin. The wounds are too extensive to use the dermal regenerator. We've used synthetic skin to cover the wounds until we can cultivate new skin tissue from his own cells to graft on. He'll be stiff and sore until then, but once the grafting is complete, he should be as good as new."

Now Deanna was filled in with the details, her sense of relief made her almost swoon, Beverly's arms shot out to steady her friend before she crumpled and guided them back to the seats, her voice stern as she pointedly spoke to them both. "Now we know Will is going to live, I'm ordering you two to go back to your rooms to rest."

They both protested together, "But..."

Beverly snapped back, "No buts, you either go of your own free will, or I will have you escorted by security and sedated. Do I make myself clear ladies?"

Deanna knew her friend only too well to know that she meant it, Carleena looked from one to the other, Deanna heard her say in her head, \*Aren't you going to put up a fight, we want to stay with him?\*

Deanna pulled Carleena to a stand, resignedly, quietly finishing the argument before it got started, "She's right, come on, you can stay in my room, we can keep connected to Will just as easy from there."

Deanna practically dragged Carleena out from sick bay, but she watched Beverly's eyes as she did so. She had half expected her to lie about Will's condition just to get rid of them, but only sensed quiet concern for their welfare, and her own desperate fatigue. Deanna knew the next twenty four hours were critical for Will, Beverly's worry was far from over.

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Carleena plopped herself down onto Deanna's comfy sofa, she rubbed her tired eyes, her voice defeated, "I don't want to go through another night like that for as long as I live..."

Deanna began sadly laughing as she brought over the two cups of steaming hot chocolate, placing them on the table. She sat opposite her, still chuckling. "Welcome to Will's world, I've lost count how many times this has happened."

Carleena gaped at her horrified, "You mean, this happens...frequently?!"

Deanna nodded, sitting back in her chair, her own hands beginning to rub across her delicate features. "Too frequently. Will is always on the front line, it' s his job, it' s what he loves."

Carleena still stared at her, a touch of amazement opening her eyes wider, she choked out, "Don' t you care?...can' t you stop him?"

As Deanna looked at her sadly, she slowly shook her head, and just as quietly and slowly answered her, "I care more than you' ll ever know, but I would never, ever stand in his way...Y' know, now that think about it, I guess that' s why we' ve never committed ourselves totally to each other. He know' s his life is on the line every time he steps on that transporter pad, or a shuttle craft. Sometimes, we even get attacked while we' re on board, and as much as I...as much as I love him, this is our life, I' ve accepted it, and so has he,. Will would have it no other way."

Carleena said nothing for some time as she digested Deanna' s words, more than ever she wanted to go home, and she was determined Will was going with her. Carleena started when she heard Deanna' s whisper, "He won' t go."

Chapter 12

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The girls entered sickbay the next morning anxious to get near the object of their sleepless night. Long into the night Carleena tried to make Deanna understand that Will would go with her when they reached Betazed. And just as long Deanna argued back why he wouldn' t, and although she never voiced it, she knew Will wouldn' t leave her, even for another woman, even if he loved that other woman, Deanna was confident she was right, eventually they both put aside their differences and joined minds again to keep the man of discussion alive to resolve the question whether to go with Carleena or stay with Deanna...

They found Will face down, and Beverly' s head close to his as he whispered to her. Beverly heard the door to sickbay open and turned to watch the two women enter. Coming to a stand, Will watched her rise, and knew Deanna and Carleena had come in. He had become conscious during the early hours, and felt their calming presence in his mind. This morning he felt different, he could feel the conflict radiating from both of them. He inwardly groaned with one breath, happy to see them with the other.

Deanna stood back to allow Carleena to say hello first. She leant down and kissed him gently on the cheek, Will smiled at her weakly and said a quiet, subdued, "Hello."

She tossed her hair back over her shoulder, Will watched the movement, still marvelling at it' s colour, he thought back to when he was in between his unconscious state and delirium. He saw the mane of chestnut hair spread out across his pillow. But it was Deanna' s black eyes that looked back at him,. It had made him ache with longing as he wished they were both the same woman, His beloved Imzadi with the vitality of Carleena.

He brought himself back to the present as Carleena kissed his cheek again and standing back to allow Deanna to say hello.

Deanna knew he was having a problem looking up, she' d seen him wince slightly when

Carleena had approached him, so she crouched down to his face level, clasping his fingers with hers, neither smiled, just looked, and felt. It was several moments before they unanimously said together, "Hi..."

Carleena watched with a sense of awe as she witnessed the raw emotion that played between the two friends, once lovers, confidants. They obviously adored each other and Carleena was now acutely aware that all she had of Will was his love, Deanna had absolutely everything else.

~~~~~

Four days later, Carleena and Deanna escorted a very stiff and tender Will to his quarters, on the condition that he remained there until Beverly hauled his ass back in for his second surgery in two days time. Will had recovered in leaps and bounds, and Beverly had no doubt that it was the company of the two beautiful ladies that constantly shared their entire spare time with him.

Beverly watched the three of them slowly walk out of sickbay. In one way, glad to see the back of her most regular customer, in the other, regretting that life was back to it's normal, boring routine.

Deanna and Carleena helped Will into his bedroom, collapsing gratefully on the edge of his bed, relieved that the arduous journey from sickbay to here was finally over. Both women stood in front of him. Will looked up to one then the other, the same thought went all through all three heads, *Who's going to get me undressed and put me to bed?...*

Deanna blushed, smilingly broadly, she stammered, "Well...guess it's...time...for me...to go...I'll see you later."

Before Will had a chance to thank her, she'd gone, practically running out of the door. Deanna stood on the outside leaning up against the corridor wall as she regained her composure. For the first time since Carleena had come on board, she had felt like a spare part. She put her cool hands to her hot cheeks, surprised when she found them wet with angry tears. Making her resolve, she wiped her face with the back of her hand, sniffed loudly and headed for Ten Forward.

Guinan watched the dark Betazoid walk in. She walked quickly, determined, and by the time Guinan had said hello, Deanna was sitting at the bar, quietly steaming. "Chocolate, Hot, with extra chocolate chips and cream."

Guinan raised her invisible eyebrows, "My! we're really huffy today aren't we?"

Deanna looked into the eyes that were as almost as dark as her own. In Guinan's she saw nothing but a curious concern, all Guinan saw in Deanna's was pain.

"You wouldn't understand..."

"Try me..."

"I' m not needed anymore..."

"Ah"

"Correction, HE doesn' t need me anymore..."

"Did he tell you that?"

"No, he didn' t need to..."

"Oh, he sent to you telepathically?"

"No, He' s got Carleena now..."

"Has it occurred to you that he might need both of you?..."

"Are you saying that we should become a menage et trois?!"

"Of course not, but have you considered why Will chose Carleena?"

"Because she' s beautiful..."

"So are You..."

"Because she' s intelligent..."

"So are you"

"Because he loves her..."

"He loves you too..."

"He needs her"

"Who nursed him back to health on every occasion up ' til now?"

"But now it' s her job"

"Why, are you leaving?..."

"No, but..."

"So you think Carleena will stay on board?"

"No, but..."

"You think Will will leave the Enterprise with her?..."

"No, but..."

"What's your problem? A few more weeks and she'll be gone."

Deanna stared, open mouthed as Guinan walked away from her to serve someone else. Could that really be true?

Chapter 13

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Two days after his second surgery, Will was back in his own quarters, in his bed and once more, face down. He had begun to wonder if he would ever sleep on his back again, he felt like he'd been in this position for ever.

Carleena was gently rubbing a moisturising cream all over his back and buttocks. It had also seemed like a life time ago that he'd been intimate with her, and up until now it hadn't bothered him. But her hands were beginning to work their magic as the slow circular motion pulsed through him, waking dormant desires.

Carleena felt the change as she felt him begin to push against her hand, she had longed for this moment herself for ages. Her movements began to get bolder, sliding her hands up his sides to graze his nipples, his flinch and groan spurring her on. Moving her fingers down the back of his legs, she dragged her nails up the inside of his thigh, and back over his buttocks, the answering clench pushed her on more.

Easing herself out of the loose shift, she lay down beside him, sliding her hand under his body to caress him intimately. Will turned his head to face her, his hand reaching across to cup her firm breast. His blue eyes heavy with longing, looked into her expectant, green, begging ones. Will shuffled himself across to anchor her body with his leg, she welcomed the weight. His hand trailed it's way down to her own burning ache, setting it on fire when his fingers found it's source. Her legs shifted apart as his hand began to work it's own magic along with the erotic thoughts that surged through her own mind. She felt the pressure beginning to build within her body, and she found herself tugging at him gently, "Will, please, It's been so long, I need you so much."

Will dragged himself to cover her completely, forcing his body to be supported by his arms alone. A bead of sweat springing upon his forehead as he fought the stiffness in his spine. Barely nudging himself inside her, the primal movements erratic and very shallow, made her almost scream out with a burning frustration. She had never experienced anything quite as erotic as this motion, the agony at not having him deep inside her and the sensual movements that touched every fibre of her feminine area, drove her insane.

Will felt himself erupting within barely a minute of entering her body. It had been so long since he'd loved, he couldn't hold on. Carleena still squirmed beneath him, he'd been too quick for her. Kissing her deeply, he carried on the intimate movement, the act enough to, within moments, send her spiralling out of control. Will inelegantly collapsed on top of her, his arms

unable to support his body weight anymore. Gasping, he apologised, "I'm sorry sweetheart."

Carleena brushed back his sweat soaked hair from the side of his face as she struggled to regain her own aplomb, "Shush...don't you dare apologise to me Will Riker, that was the best sex I've had since...the last time!"

He chuckled into her hair, he joined her banter, "Well, I hope I was there."

She playfully, but gently, jabbed him the ribs, "Course you were you big oaf! Come on, get off me so we can get you tucked up for sleep, you must be exhausted after your marathon."

Will chuckled again, gently easing himself back to his own side of the bed. "When I wake up, prepare yourself to be ravished again."

Carleena laughed out loud, happy that his sense of humour was getting back to it's normal self, "I don't think so big man, you've satisfied my lust for at least two days."

Will wiggled his eyebrows suggestively as he smiled at her, "But I haven't had nearly enough"

Carleena giggled at his outrageousness, and slapping him on the back side she chided him, "Tough Commander, your going to have to wait."

~~~~~

Four days later, they were on course, and close to Betazed. Tension began to build between the threesome as decisions had to be made. Over and over Deanna said to herself, "He won't go with her, he won't leave the Enterprise...He won't leave me."

But every time she said it, the little voice at the back of her mind said "Would he?"

~~~~~

Will and Carleena sat cosily against each other, hand in hand on his couch listening to some quiet music. Will was almost back to normal, with just occasional spasms keeping him from going back to work. But Beverly had ensured him that they would subside within a few more days. Carleena's soft lilting voice roused him, "Will, are you coming to Betazed with me, are we going to make a real go of our relationship, on a real planet with a home of our own, children, no dangerous missions?"

Will had thought of nothing else over the past three four weeks since the run in on Hades hell. He had begun to question how many more times his luck would stay with him, and he had lost count of how many times he had nearly lost his life at the hands of something or someone else, and he was getting too old for it.

He had wondered if his mind was being made up because of the deep rooted depression that followed after his surgery, or because he didn't want to leave Deanna, or because he genuinely wanted to spend his life Carleena. He felt he now owed it to himself to have some sort of normal life, and Carleena was handing it to him on a plate.

He'd made his mind up. "Yes Carleena, It's time I settled down, I'll come to Betazed with

you."

~~~~~

Deanna found herself back in Ten Forward after hearing that Commander Will Riker had handed his resignation and would be going to Betazed with his intended when they docked in three days time. She stood before Guinan, tears streaming down her face, mostly from anger, humiliation and despair, "You said he wouldn' t go Guinan,, you said she' d be the one to go, not him."

Guinan looked straight at her and confidently replied, "I give him a month..."

Chapter 14

~~~~~

The Enterprise left Betazed' s orbit two days after minor repairs and re-stocking, leaving Will and Carleena waving to Beverly and the Captain as they transported back to the ship after a party held by his former comrades. Deanna had struggled to close her mind from the moment she had heard that they were leaving. In fact Will and Carleena didn' t see her until the last half an hour of the party. Will was deeply upset that she had avoided him, he thought that although he knew she was distraught that he was leaving her, at least she had been friends with Carleena, she could have said goodbye to her.

But at half past eleven, half an hour before the party was scheduled to wind up, she appeared at the door. She had put on his favourite blue dress, her hair cascaded over her shoulders in it' s usual wavy splendour, and her face was heavily made up. But no amount of make-up could hide the haunted look in her eyes.

Will and Carleena watched her hesitate at the door. Carleena urged him to go to her. He didn' t need any urging, he was pulled to her like a magnet. As Will approached, her eyes locked to his as she begged him not to say anything. There was nothing in the universe that could help how she felt right then.

Taking both her hands, he pulled her tight into his embrace. She hugged him back. Nothing was said, and for several moments they remained silently united, until Deanna finally pulled away. Still clutching his hands she attempted a smile, but she couldn' t manage it, and as Will watched the tears begin to cascade down her face he heard her, \*Until the next time, Imzadi...\*

She then turned and walked out of the door she had only, a few moments before, entered.

Unable to speak, desolated, he found himself remembering a moment, a long time ago, in the museum when he had been in exactly the same position as he was now.

## Chapter 15

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Starfleet had found the couple a small apartment temporarily until they found a place of their own. They spent most of their early days house-hunting, and their nights loving. What Will didn' t know was Carleena knew he spent his sleeping hours aching to back up among the stars, back with his crew mates. Back with Deanna.

She had caught him wide awake, hands behind his head, staring out at starlit sky on more nights that she'd care to remember. She had also noticed that he had begun to lose his sparkle. Starfleet had offered him a high ranking job, apparently it was almost the same position as he'd had when he'd been stationed on Betazed many, many years ago. Only this time, it was behind the desk, she had remembered him telling her about a Mr. Roper, Will now did his job as he had long, long retired.

Will couldn't really complain, he knew it was going to take time to get used to being planet side again, and he enjoyed doing Mark's job. Luckily things had become a lot easier from when Mark did it, they had finally taken on two more secretarial staff and a lot of the work got delegated out to them, which suited him just fine.

But he did miss the Enterprise, the action, the prospect of new life forms, Deanna...

What he didn't miss was the frequent ear-bashing he got from Deanna's mother. She made a point of at least once a day mentioning what a louse he was for leaving her daughter yet again, and on her home planet of all things! And time after time, Will told her that he and Deanna were no longer an item, that he was settled with another, and that they were all blissfully happy, and her answer was the same every time,

"Bullshit!"

~~~~~

Six weeks after being grounded Carleena knew she had made a dreadful mistake by taking Will away from what she now knew was his true home. His despondency had now spilled not only to their home life, but he had begun to hate to go work. Several times he had begged his seniors to allow him to go on routine field operations, but they had slapped him down every time, "No Sir, you cannot. We have specialised units for that sort of undertaking, there is no need for a senior ranking officer to step outside of his comfy office."

Will had nearly screamed with the frustration.

Carleena decided to take him on a surprise trip. In all her innocence, she had hired a tent and in the runaround she had rented for the week, she had headed for, much to Will's dismay, the Jalara Jungle. As they approached the outskirts of the tall forest trees, Carleena felt Will's distress. "What is it Will, what's wrong?"

"I...I don't want to go in there... I can't go in there, I'm sorry..."

"Why not Will, it's beautiful, there's nothing to be afraid of. Well, maybe a few mud pits, but there's this incredible place, it has a waterfall so clear you can see through it, it's called..."

Will cut her off before she could utter it, "Janaran Falls..."

Carleena was surprised, "You know about it?"

He nodded sadly as he stared out of the window. Realisation finally dawned on her, "This is where you and Deanna became Imzadi isn't it?..."

His answering silence said it all. It was also the last straw.

~~~~~

Two days later when Will was at work, Carleena visited Lwaxana Troi to relay a message to the Enterprise to return to Betazoid space a.s.a.p. When Lwaxana had asked her why, Carleena told her that Will's destiny lay not with her, but with her daughter, Deanna on the Starship Enterprise.

For once the regal woman was stunned into silence as she acknowledged Carleena's selfless act. She began to wonder how the strikingly young woman was going to survive. Carleena sensed her concern, and as she squared her shoulders, her pride and determination shone through her brilliant green eyes as she answered her, "I'm home, I can live with whatever happens to me now. If I can find a place to live, and a job, even if I have to scrub floors, all what matters to me is that I'm home."

Lwaxana's heart went out to the pretty young orphan, and before Carleena had a chance to defend her status, Lwaxana had grasped her arm in a friendly manner and was steering her inside. And before Carleena knew what had hit her, the lady who was as good as royalty had offered her a roof over a head, and had promised to have a word with her Starfleet contacts to get her a cushy job, in an office. No adopted daughter of hers was going to scrub anything!

Chapter 16

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Will was surprised, and secretly overjoyed to hear that the Enterprise was returning to orbit, docking the following day at 12.00 hours. He barely contained himself when he went home at the end of the day to tell Carleena, "Hello sweetheart, did you have a good day? Guess what, I've just heard that the Enterprise is returning. I'm not sure why, but it will be nice to catch up on my old friends."

Carleena watched as Will came alive before her. Seeing his animated face, convinced her heavy heart that she had done the only, and the right thing. Will was dying on this planet. He was dying without Deanna. Love hadn't been enough, and only now, watching him talking about his beloved crew mates, did she truly realise that the Imzadi bond was a two way thing only. Will could have never been happy with her, and she unhappily acknowledged that it wouldn't have even been enough if they'd stayed on board.

She had given her whole heart and soul to someone who only had been able to give barely half his heart back. It wasn't enough...

"Will...I...I called the Enterprise..."

He looked at her astounded, "But...why?"

"I...I've met somebody else, someone who's happy to look after me, to love me, someone who needs me Will."

Will was amazed, "But I need you Carleena, I love you."



Carleena shook her head slowly, a faint trace of a smile heightening her sad face. "Yes I know you love me Will, but you belong out there...up there..."

Her face turned to the window to look up at the sky, her voice determined but she barely whispered, "You belong on the Enterprise. You belong to Deanna, Will."

He began to shake his head as she turned to face him again. But the shaking slowed to a stop and as dawning finally sank into his head, he knew she was right. Over the past weeks, every day the ache worsened as he imagined the ship getting further and further away. As Deanna got further and further away.

They stared at each other for an eternity as she relayed her understanding, her compassion, her sorrow, her loss. Will's thoughts bounced between losing her, and regaining Deanna, somehow the misery of one out-weighed the joy of the other, he didn't know what to feel.

Carleena came to stand close to him, he looked down to her upturned face, and she tentatively touched his waist, she needed his embrace, he gladly offered it, enveloping her within his huge arms. The feelings flooding throughout their bodies, until eventually, it was Carleena who pulled away, and with one tender kiss, she said her goodbye's, "I'll never forget you Will, be happy."

Will watched her walk out of the door into the arms of Lwaxana Troi, who after sending him an odd, pitying look, turned and led Carleena away.

~~~~~

Will had a welcoming committee when he materialised aboard the Enterprise D. Looking round the smiling familiar faces, he was momentarily disappointed when the one person he wanted to see wasn't there. But then he chastised himself as realised the reason she wasn't there.

He had left her. He had actually met another women, settled down and even left the ship, no one had ever come close to doing that before, not even her. He had a lot of grovelling to do.

Beverly clasped him in a bear hug, clearly happy to see him back. "It's so good to see you Will, welcome home."

"Thanks Beverly, you really mean it' ll be good to see some action in sickbay again, things been pretty dead huh?" Everyone laughed in unison.

Data turned to his Captain, his tone serious as he followed protocol. The Captain smiled at him as he formally demoted him, "Mr. Data, I hereby release you from your temporary position as second in command. Thank you for standing in."

Data nodded formally, completely unmoved by his demotion, he acknowledged the order, "You are most welcome Captain, I was glad to be of service."

And turning to Will, clasping his hand in a vigorous handshake, he just as unemotionally he

told him, "Welcome back Commander, it was an honour to keep your seat warm for you sir."

Will laughed as he slapped his friend on the shoulder, "Thanks Data, it's good to be back."

Geordi clasped the tall man's hand bringing him in for a manly hug, "Hi Will, we can have a decent poker game now. It's great your back."

Will laughed, "Glad to see I was REALLY missed."

He finally came face to face with his Captain, Will reached out to clasp his hand first, Picard used both of his hands as they shook hands smiling. Will knew this was as good as a hug from him, "Hello Captain, reporting in for duty sir."

"Good to have you back number one, things haven't been the same without you. I'll see you on the bridge at 22.00 hours. You'll be pleased to know you've got the night shift."

Will stared after his retreating back, a huge grin spreading across his face, he acknowledged cheerfully, "Yes Sir...Oh, by the way, how did you know I was going to come back?"

Picard paused in the doorway, a grin across his usually craggy face, "I had it from a very reliable source that you wouldn't be gone for too long. She told me to wait before permanently replacing you, although I think you even managed to surprise her, she expected you back long before now."

As he watched Picard leave the transporter room, his grin died as his eyes settled on the late arrival that had come to a halt in the doorway. Will was lost for words as he stared longingly at the beautiful woman. He didn't think he would ever forget the image of her as she was now, framed by the doorway. Her eyes, huge with unshed tears. Her stance hesitant.

The other crew members began to quietly file out as they sensed the need for the reunited couple to welcome each other in private. As the twosome continued to relay inner turmoil's and emotion's, slowly, step by step, they came closer to finally filling in the missing space. Within moments, they stood barely a foot away from each other,

Hello

Hello, How have you been?

Lost without you

I'm sorry

Don't be, I needed this to make me see

Make you see what?

That I can't live without you

What are you saying?

I think it's time we became Imzadi again, heart body and soul

Will spoke aloud, surprised at her request, "But we are already Imzadi"

Her voice was unsteady as she answered, "No, I mean everything Imzadi, together, as one, side by side, I want marriage Will, a family, you beside me as I sleep, and you beside me when I wake, I want it all. Are you prepared to give me it all Will?"

Will stood barely a hair's breath away from her, watching her tears break free from the well in her eyes. Catching the tears with his thumbs, he leaned down to kiss the salty moisture with his lips, moving to settle on her mouth. He felt her surrender, deepening the kiss as he pulled her tiny frame into his embrace. He felt and heard her sob, he kissed her as she cried, plundering her mouth as his own emotions came to the surface and he too began to weep. Exhausted they broke the earth-shattering kiss, hugging until they were ready to face one another again. Will finally lifted her chin, he needed her to see his sincerity, his love as he made his declaration, out loud,

"I love you Deanna, I always have, you know that. But it wasn't until I was down there, on that planet, away from you, my ship, my friends that I truly knew where I belonged. This is my home, this is where my heart is. with you, up here, among the stars...I need a little time to mourn Carleena, I need to separate my feelings for her, from what I feel for you. I just need a little more time o.k.?"

Deanna nodded her understanding, unable to hide her happiness, she pulled his head down to hers again, kissing him with need, pushing herself up against him, he groaned, "I think we should carry this on with a bit more privacy don't you? I don't want Chief O'Brien to walk in while we're finding a comfortable position on his transporter station!"

Deanna chuckled huskily, "Y' know, I've often wondered what it felt like being transported somewhere while we're making love!"

Will looked down with surprise at her mischievous innuendo, gently patting her behind, he swung her into his arms and headed for the turbo-lift, "I think we've picked up a few of a certain red-heads expressions and cheekiness."

And as the turbo-lifts doors closed on the reconciled soul-mates, the happy laughter echoed along the decks of the Enterprise D...

Home...

~~~~~  
In Ten Forward later that day, the senior crew of the Enterprise stood in front of it's hostess, all chanting to her crestfallen face, "Come on Guinan, you lost the bet, he lasted more than a

month, come on, pay up."

Five hands, palms up jostled for the promised bottle each of authentic scotch from her own private stash she'd lovingly lugged around the universe since her visit to Earth in the late nineteenth century.

Inwardly she seethed, "I'll get you for this Will Riker. One day, I swear, I'll get you..."

~~~~~

The end

HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS...

By Elvis Presley

Home is where the heart is and my heart, is anywhere you are,
anywhere you are, is home.

I don't need a mansion on a hill that overlooks the sea,
anywhere your with me is home.

Maybe I'm a rolling stone that won't amount to much,
but everything that I hold dear is close enough to touch,

For home is where the heart is, and my heart is anywhere you are,
anywhere you are, is home, home, home...