

Speck in the Distance

By

Carol Sandford.

Chapter 1

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“Come!” Jean-Luc Picard’s voice elevated slightly to the questioning hail to allow entrance to his ready room. Looking up from the consul in front of him, the door opened to reveal his first officer.

Picard did a double take once he had seen who his visitor was, and his heart gave a painful thump before continuing on with its now noticeably harder, painful beat.

Picard swallowed hard before allowing his mouth to utter a sound. He needed to settle the tight feeling that threatened to strangle him. Several poignant silent moments passed before he dared to tell Will to enter, hoping his voice sounded more encouraging than he felt.

“Will!!..come in, take a seat” Half raising himself out of his chair, he mentally kicked himself for doing so when he saw the frightened look that flared in Will’s lacklustre eyes.

He promptly sat back down.

The tall man quietly..hesitantly, stepped into the room, looking around it uneasily to settle his mind that no one else was present.

Picard watched him as he gingerly looked at the chair and barely hid the sad smile that had been a seemingly long past memory. A few weeks ago, Will Riker would have bounced into the room, swung the chair around and straddled it without breaking a step.

This was now. Before him stood a man that could no longer rightfully be called Will Riker, First Officer of the Starship Enterprise.

Now what stood before him was the shadow of his right hand man. A haunted, broken counterpart of his former self.

The spark had gone from those unforgettable blue eyes, Picard was not sure when it finally went, but when it did, his Number One died along with it and left behind this..an empty shell.

The captain was also conscious of how much effort Will had made to arrive here.

Picard cleared his throat and gestured towards the man standing still before him.

“Please..Will..sit down”

Will silently took the seat, but hovered on it’s edge, Picard recognised it as an ‘instant escape’ position. One wrong word and Will would be out of the door before he could stand to stop him. Picard watched as Will’s hands began a tortuous game with themselves, elevating even more the man’s unease.

Picard sensed that Will needed to collect himself and regain his momentum to say whatever he had ventured from his room to say, so he kept silent, but tried desperately with his eyes to encourage him to speak.

Picard's eyes watered as he watched Will's mouth try to utter something, but nothing came out. Will had learned that to prevent himself from stuttering like an idiot, he stayed mute until eventually it all came out in one long torrent, and if you missed any of it, tough, you did not get it again.

Will's eyes flickered between Picard, the ceiling and back to his ever circling hands. With one last glance to his mentor, his friend, he held his breath, shut his eyes and spoke.

"I want to go home Captain, I want to go back to Alaska...I need to go home...please."

Chapter 2

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Picard fell back into his chair. Both hands swept over his head and settled back on his lap before he looked at Will again. There was so much he wanted to ask him, but if he began firing questions, Will would run. The only way he would answer any questions was with a 'yes' or 'no'. if he was lucky. Usually he either nodded or shook his head.

Sighing loudly, he shifted in his seat as he thought about his first question, even though it was a simple one.

"Are you sure that's what you want to do Will?" Will nodded slowly.

"Have you discussed this with anyone else?", as expected, he shook his head.

"Are you going to discuss this decision with anyone else?", once more Will sadly and slowly shook it.

"Not even Deanna, Will?", Picard was incredulous when he got a negative response to that too.

Picard paused as he tried a different tact. "Will, has Beverly released you from her care?"

It was the wrong thing to say.

Dismayed, Picard watched as the giant bounded from his seat and flew from the room as if the very devil himself was on his tail. Picard got up to follow, but stopped short of the closing door realising that going after Will would only agitate him more. He stood and stared solemnly at the steel hulk before him and quietly cursed.

"Damn, damn, DAMN!!"

Making his way back to the desk he violently poked the com panel before him. "Picard to Doctor Crusher."

Moments later her voice echoed around him, "Crusher here."

Picard sighed heavily again, "I'm sorry Beverly, Will has just run out on me again in a highly

agitated state.”

A pregnant silence followed before she replied, clearly saddened by the news. “What caused it this time Jean-Luc?”

Picard cleared his throat once more, but failed to hide the choke in his voice, “He.He came to inform me that he wants to go home.to Alaska.”

She was more curious when she spoke back to him, “Does Deanna know this?”

Picard shook his head to himself as he replied “No.No, I don’t think she does, I asked him, and he said no.”

More puzzled, Beverly wondered what set him off, she asked him outright, “What did you say to him Jean-Luc?”

Picard noisily cleared his throat again, uncomfortable with having to own up his confession, “I...er...I asked him if you had released him from your care.”

Picard cringed as Beverly’s voice boomed around him, he was thankful that he was on his own in the ready room as she ripped into him, “Damn you Jean-Luc, what a totally stupid thing to say to someone who is clearly, clinically depressed. He obviously hasn’t been released, and he knows that I would not release him, I had only just begun to get through to him and Deanna’s working around the clock to help. That was a really stupid thing to say.”

Shamed into silence, Picard could only sit and take the barrage, his heart getting heavier and heavier with each scathing word. By the time she had finished, there were tears in his eyes and he never thought he would smile again. Misery surrounded him like a shroud.

Beverly’s miserable voice once more spoke to the silence, effectively cutting him off with the same effect of a knife being plunged into his heart.

“O.k. I’ll go and find him. He’s probably where he usually is, cowering in the corner, like he usually is.”

“Damn you Jean-Luc.”

The connection was severed abruptly, and at that moment Picard felt the first stirring of helpless anger. His eyes glistened with angry, helpless tears. His mind grieving for the nearest thing to a son that he would ever have. But right at this moment the Captain of the Enterprise wished that his first officer had died along with all the others that he had been too late to rescue on that damned planet a month ago. Because all that was left now was a walking, breathing corpse.

The members of the bridge crew jumped as they heard the crash that emanated from the ready room and the haunting wail that followed it.

Worf stepped towards the door, but Data's voice stopped him in his tracks.

"That is not advisable Mr. Worf, I suggest we give Captain Picard a few moments privacy."

Worf silently eyed the android as he contemplated on ignoring his request, but as he beseechingly looked to the other bridge members and saw the pitying looks, he thought better of it and took his place back at his station once more.

Chapter 3

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Beverly and her companion hurried along the stark corridors that led to the cargo bays. The doctor gently held the tiny woman beside her, effectively slowing her down so as not to draw attention to their destination.

Deanna's eyes shimmered with tears, her face pale against the mane of black hair, her lips pinched as she battled to hold back the sobs.

Deanna had known as soon as Will had left the Captain that he was distraught. She damned herself for not being there. She damned Will for going alone, and she damned Picard for still being an insensitive jerk.

As they reached the cargo bay door, they took a moment to compose themselves. Under no circumstances could they walk in there looking and feeling like they did. It would only distress Will even more.

So they plastered a false, bright smile on their faces, punched in the admittance code, took a deep breath as the door opened, and stepped inside.

Why Will always headed for the cargo bays was still a mystery. It was a totally illogical thing to do, but then, Will's breakdown had been totally illogical too. Considering he had always had an immeasurable inner strength that had been admired by Starfleet's finest, he had completely taken everyone by surprise when within hours of returning from the planets surface, he had retreated into his own private, silent hell.

A quick perusal of the immediate area told them where he was likely to be. Both sets of eyes settled on the stack of containers piled high in one corner. A glance to each other said, *There*.

Cautiously they stepped towards the containers, and Deanna spoke quietly to the deafening lull, only broken by their timid footfalls and gentle breathing.

"Will...sweetheart.I've come to take you back home."

Silence.

The two women stepped around the containers, both coming to a stop when they spotted their sufferer directly in front of them.

He was sitting in the corner, his knees drawn up but his feet and legs spread apart, and the familiar hand wringing motion played on between his knees.

Will glanced quickly to the welcome intruders, but his eyes just as quickly darted away again as his own embarrassment took over.

Seeing the doctor with Deanna, his hand movements sped up when he realised what was likely to come next.

Deanna came to kneel one side of him, Beverly the other. Deanna lightly stroked his arm, and he could feel her trying to calm his mind, but he was too agitated to let her in, Beverly moved and Will spotted the glint of silver and jerked away. He held up his hands in a defensive stance, surprising himself as well as his friends with his coherent outburst,

‘NO..NO hypo!, I don’t want to sleep’

Beverly moved the hypospray away, but held it where he could still see it. Touching his shoulder, she smiled softly at him, and whispered, ‘O.k Will, I won’t until you let me, you know it helps don’t you?’

Will’s eyes sparkled as he looked directly into hers, and stiffly nodded. His voice lost him again and he mouthed one solitary word, ‘later’.

Deanna regained his attention when she spoke to him, ‘Will...are you ready to go home now?’ He looked longingly into the onyx eyes that once captured his very soul, now he could only see concern, and pity, but he knew he had no right to feel that way.

Deanna loved him without recriminations, and was prepared to stick with him, through thick and thin, but he had nothing to offer her. He felt dead inside, and he knew he looked dead on the outside, and if he did not get off this Starship soon, he also knew it was going to kill him.

Deanna and Beverly waited for his nervous nod, and both moved to hoist him off the floor. As he came to a stand, he automatically clung to Deanna’s shoulders and pulled her close to his side. There were very few places Will felt safe, this was one of them... In her arms.

Deanna held him around the waist and led him out from behind the containers.. Beverly picked up her medikit, and headed out into the open space of the cargo hold, Deanna and Will followed on behind.

Deanna could feel his body trembling. She hugged him tighter. He was frightened and she tried to calm him with her thoughts, but as they neared the door, his terror increased tenfold. It was then Deanna realised that they were not going to be able to walk to their destination.

Beverly turned back to them to speak, but her smile faded as she read the panic on Will’s face. The tiny beads of sweat that begun to form on his forehead, and the way Deanna desperately hugged him close to stop him falling apart again.

Her doctor mode kicked in again as she reached out to soothe her patient. “It’s o.k Will, we don’t have to go out there, we can transport straight to your quarters, no one will see you Will.I promise O.k.?” Will searched her eyes again, reading the trust within them, and he nodded. Beverly smiled encouragingly at him then turned and spoke to thin air. Moments later they were back in his quarters.

Both women fussed over him until Beverly was happy that he was not going to go anywhere tonight, or fall apart again. Then she left Deanna to do her part in his healing process, and for that, they did not need an audience.

Chapter 4

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Although she sat on the same couch as him, Deanna might as well have been sitting a million miles away.

Will... her Will was locked away in his own mental torment for what, at this moment, seemed to be forever. But occasionally, when he was quiet, and they were alone, and his mind was in relative peace, did her Will come to the surface. Even if it was only for a minute or so, at least he was still there.

And it was these moments that gave her faith. Within her heart, Deanna never lost the hope that her Imzadi was coming back. Life would go on. They would go on. But until then, they were still in the black tunnel that had claimed him, and the light was barely a speck in the distance. But it was there.

“Do you want to talk about what happened Will?” She was rewarded with a shrug. A good start that looked promising. Will looked everywhere around the room but at her. She tried again.

“Did Captain Picard say something to upset you Will?” Will nodded sheepishly. It pushed her on.

“Can you forgive him for saying something bad. for upsetting you?” Once more, he nodded, quicker this time. She caught his eye, he had made contact, Deanna’s heart soared.

“Will, would you like me to make you feel good?” Deanna watched his face as the various emotions flitted across it, until he finally made up his mind and nodded.

“O.k, come here.” she patted her lap and the big man slowly swung his body around and put his head upon her lap. His long legs draped over the couch’s arm and began to gently swing like a pendulum. Shifting slightly, Deanna made herself more comfortable then began to caress his forehead, until his eyes began to drift shut. Gradually her fingers traced their way around his entire face. she lovingly took in the features that she knew intimately. She lightly stroked his beard, noticing that it needed a trim, but he was a long way from facing the barbers yet. She felt his mind relax and carried on for several minutes until she could almost feel his trance like state. It was at that point that Deanna tried to reach him again.

“I love you Will, you do know that don’t you?” The tiny positive movement gave her

answer.

“Imzadi, do you trust me?” She got the same response.

Everyday her sessions with Will started the same way. Deanna knew that he needed to feel secure and safe, and the one thing guaranteed to certify that was the love and trust between them. If it went wrong, he still knew that she loved him, unconditionally.

“Tell me what happened Will” It was several moments before Will had formed the words in his mind in order to get them out in one go. “I want to go home Deanna. I want to leave Starfleet.”

Deanna’s heart stopped but she managed to keep the steady stroke upon his face going. “Why Will?” she felt Will’s sigh, seconds passed before he spoke again. “Had enough.”

Deanna frowned, her mind struggled to keep neutral “Do you think that it will help, leaving Starfleet...leaving the Enterprise?” Will nodded and whispered one word “Yes.”

Deanna felt an odd sensation, like she was falling, and her heart began to sink. This was serious. After everything that had happened, on this mission and all the others before, Will had never, ever wanted to leave the Enterprise. This was his home. This was where all his friends were and this was where she was, the only woman who he truly loved, adored and worshipped.

She was here, with him, on board. And now he was planning on leaving it all behind.

He was planning on leaving her behind.

As her rampaging thoughts threatened to consume her, she struggled to collect herself.

Trying to keep her voice even, she ploughed on needing to get as much information from him before he clammed up. “Where will you go?” Deanna felt a pain in her heart as he relayed his plans.

“Earth...Alaska...Home...I want to go home...I must go home.” Her hand stopped in mid stroke as she held her breath for his next answer.

“When Will?”

“Soon...Now...I must go now.”

Chapter 5

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After unsuccessfully carrying on the conversation, Will made it clear that he was tired and wanted to go to sleep. Sitting up abruptly, Deanna recognised his need to be alone. She was unhappy that things had progressed to this point but nothing concrete had been settled.

Deanna sighed and stood to leave. Turning sad eyes onto the man that now almost covered into the corner of his couch, she asked him gently, “Will, do you need your sleep medication, do you want me to call Beverly?”

Dull blue eyes briefly glanced up to her before darting around the room at everything and everything but her, he jerkily shook his head, folding his arms and protectingly hugged himself.

Deanna bent slightly at the waist to get more to his eye level, she needed him to understand the seriousness of his refusal.

“Will, you know that the bad dreams will come if you don’t, don’t you??” Deanna’s heart lurched at the fear that lit up his eyes and if possible, he shrunk into the couch even more. He nodded slowly.

Deanna tried again. “Will you promise me you’ll call her before you go to sleep?” He nodded resignedly and spoke his last word of the day, “Promise.”

Deanna reached out to caress his face. She needed to touch him, to comfort him, to show him how much she loved him, but the hand fell to her side as he almost climbed over the back of the couch to avoid her touch. Broken hearted, Deanna stepped back and turned away before he could see her tears. As she waited for the door to open, she whispered “Good night Imzadi” and hurried through it as soon as there was enough space to squeeze her tiny body through it.

As soon as the door had closed, she let the tears fall. Covering her face with shaking hands, she strove to keep herself from crying out loud. She felt so...useless, so...alone. Nobody...nobody could know how she felt at this moment. Her whole universe was sitting on the other side of the wall, but with every ounce of life sucked from his soul so that all that was left was a frightened little boy that had locked every emotion away.

Will Riker, First officer of the Starship Enterprise.

The proudest man in Starfleet.

Her Imzadi, had gone.

Deanna had lost...everything, and nobody understood. Without him she was dead inside too. Her life had no purpose, except to be here to try and bring the tortured soul of her Imzadi back from the brink of death, and at this moment, she was losing.

Chapter 6

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Deanna sat cross legged in the comfy armchair. The tiny swing of her dangling foot mirrored the anxiety in her fingers as she twirled the glass, still full of the iced tea that she had ordered some half before, around and around.

Sighing heavily, she continued to stare unseeing out of the porthole at the passing stars. Normally the sensation of soaring through space filled her with an excitement like no other. Wondering where they were going to end up next, or who, or what, they were going to meet was still a challenge.

But not tonight.

Nor the last twenty or so nights that had passed since Will came back from the planet that 'crushed' her Will.

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This had all started off as being a relatively peaceful mission to a distant outpost in the Mantos system. Having established relations with the Traldians, a small colony that were survivors of a holocaust that had ripped their own home planet, Altradia, apart. The few remaining people had fled and settled on the tiny M class planet, which up to recent times, had believed to be uninhabited. But even after discovering that they indeed did have neighbours that were reluctant to make themselves known, the new colonists had granted them their privacy and kept away from their territories.

For two years they had lived in quiet harmony. Colonies soon formed and families were beginning to get settled, and new generations were starting to be born. There was hope for the future.

Until the Enterprise arrived.

The Enterprise D and its crew had been in orbit for nearly five days. Fascinated with the colonists simplistic way of life, the crew were keen to understand and learn the planets diverse flora and fauna, and their amazing healing qualities.

The landing party made its way around the swampy marsh, carefully watching their feet to avoid falling on their faces into the wet mud.

Will Riker frowned as he made his way towards a clearing on the other side of the small lake, he addressed his companion who was busily scanning a hovering cloud of insects, "Data, have you noticed the distinct lack of animals here?"

Data's yellow eyes looked up to his Commanding Officer with a feigned look of surprise, and immediately punched the information he required into his tricorder. After a few moments, he too frowned and told him his findings. "You are correct sir, according to my readings, there are no animals other than insects and very small invertebrates within a 20 kilometre radius. Perhaps sir, there are none to be found."

Will studied his companion briefly as he thought about the findings, then his eyes swept the area once more, his puzzlement clear in his voice, "Don't you think that's highly unlikely considering everything here, It's a perfect habitat for animals. I don't buy it."

Making up his mind, he began to walk off towards the rest of the party and a couple of the colonists that had tagged along, curious as to what they were all doing. Will threw over his shoulder as he walked away, ‘I’m just going to ask them what they know, I’ll be back in a minute.’ Data acknowledged him with a raised hand and continued on with his readings.

Will made his way back over to the main party and approached the two hovering planet dwellers. Coming to a halt in front of them, he threw them a cheery smile before diving straight in, ‘Hi, I was wondering, do you know why there are no animals here?’ The two men looked puzzled at each other before looking back to Will. ‘Animals?’

Will grinned at their stupidity, ‘Yeah, you know, pigs, cows, birds, anything.’ Dawning rained on the men, ‘Ah, you mean protein food.’ Will shrugged as he tried to see the connection between animal and protein, but figured they were on the same track. ‘Yeah, I guess’. Both men shook their heads, ‘We did bring a few with us when we first came, but they soon disappeared, we simply stopped eating protein and became organic.’ Will nodded, and muttered ‘O.k. thanks.’ Turning away he began to head back towards Data. Lost in thought he did not notice the tiny sets of eyes that watched him from the thick foliage that lay some distance away from the landing party.

Chapter 7

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‘Commander, we are being observed. Humanoid life forms, fifteen in number, approximately 30 metres in that direction.’ Data pointed his tricorder in the direction of the dense forest. Will’s eyes followed it’s line, squinting his eyes against the glare of the sun as he tried to peer into thick undergrowth. His voice lowered as he voiced his concern to the android.

‘Hostile?’

‘Unknown sir, however the colonists are aware of them. They have said that they have never been approached nor have the colonists approached them.’

Will openly frowned, ‘I wonder why?... Data, I have a real bad feeling about all this’ His hand gestured to everything but nothing in particular. Data desperately tried to see whatever his Commanding Officer was seeing. It was apparently clear that Will Riker was bothered about something.

But what?

‘Sir, do you want me to recall the away team?’

Will stood silently for several moments weighing up the situation before finally making up his mind. ‘Yes... Yes I do, I want to find out a bit more about this other tribe before we resume our studies.’

Data acknowledged him with a curt nod and set off towards the crew members. After a few more moments Will followed on, determination now set in his step. Catching up with Data, he joined the group as they de-materialised from the surface.

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‘Counselor, do you sense any malice from the colonists, or any reason for commander Riker’s concerns?’ Picard aimed his question from his usual perch at the end of the ready room’s conference table. All eyes turned to face her, but her own eyes settled on Will’s. She could feel his unease. His eyes focused intently on hers and Deanna unconsciously shuddered as the sensation of dread washed over her. Breaking the mesmerizing gaze from her beloved, she turned her face back to her captain disappointed that she had nothing concrete to tell him.

‘No sir, I don’t, other than the normal primitive emotions that one would expect from a culture that is just that, primitive. But, it would not do any harm being extra vigilant, it is not often Commander Riker’s ‘gut instinct’ is wrong.’

Will threw her a small grateful smile. If anyone trusted him with his misgivings, it was her, and it was comforting to know that she was on his side. He just hoped that he was wrong.

Picard’s voice brought him back to the present as well as making his stomach somersault painfully.

‘I’m curious about this elusive ‘other’ tribe. I find it odd that neither groups have tried to communicate. In the long run, it would almost certainly be to everyone’s benefit. A good opportunity to broaden their knowledge and fresh blood as it were, to stop the interbreeding that is bound to occur with such a small colony.’

Will could feel the tension building within him as he began to realise where his Captain was heading.

‘I think it’s time we introduced ourselves to these ‘other natives’. You never know, we could be doing them a huge favour’ Will watched him grin, evidently pleased with his decision. Will was not pleased and as he went to say so, Picard held his hand up to silence him.

‘I know your concerns Commander, and believe me, I’ve taken them into consideration, but I think we’re judging these strangers a little too harshly considering that we haven’t even met them yet. When we beam down, we will take a full security team with us. Counselor Troi and I should be all that’s needed.’

Will shook his head, indignant that he should have even considered going down instead of him.

‘Sir, with all due respects, I disagree. It is my job to introduce ourselves to new life forms, your safety is paramount and I insist that you send me instead of yourself. I’m not happy that the Counselor should go either, but, unfortunately, she is the only one that can sense danger or deception and I DO think that there will be trouble sir.’

Picard pondered on his words for several moments, before reluctantly agreeing, ‘Very well Number One, you may go instead, I’ll allow you to be the mediator on this one, and that is our prime directive, to unite these people, but, at the first sign of anything amiss, I want you all back on this ship understood?’ Picard looked at each of the three senior members of the away

team that would be going making sure that they understood the severity of his remark. Deanna, Worf and Will simultaneously murmured “Aye sir”.

Chapter 8

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The six members of the away team were stunned as they materialised on the edge of the ‘strangers’ camp. Various people of all ages were around a large camp fire, two children were steadily turning a spit that held a variety of vegetables that Will recognised from the colonists camp.

The away team approached cautiously, but although they carried their phasers, they were aimed at the ground. Feeling the necessity to be armed, but not threatening unless threatened, they noticed that nobody reacted to the sudden appearance of the away team.

A youngish man stood as Will came within ten feet of the camp. His questioning eyes fell to the phaser in Will’s hand and back up to Will’s face. Will’s face reddened. These people obviously unarmed and he turned enough to indicate to the others to disarm themselves. Will felt the tension leave the away team, their relief evident.

Will took a step forward and introduced himself, and his team.

“Hello, I’m commander William Riker of the Starship Enterprise, and this is Lieutenant Commander Deanna Troi, our Counselor. Lieutenant Worf, Ensign Howard, Jones and Pierelli”

Never taking his eyes of the man that curiously looked to each of the team, Will noted that he took a little longer looking at Deanna. She caught Will’s gaze, and the laughter in his eyes, so taking the bull by the horns, she stepped forward to encourage the conversation. “Hello, I hope you don’t mind us intruding, but we were curious.”

Several others gradually made their way to the gathering. Will was surprised at how similar they were to the colonists considering that these people were the true natives here, the only difference that Will could see was that they were not very tall. Most of the adults seemed to be about five feet, but all were quite sturdily built.

Finally the leader spoke, but it was a strange language that no-one recognised. After several minutes of failed communication, Will summoned the Enterprise and requested Data’s presence. If anyone could decipher the language, it was him.

Data materialised beside the group and a hushed sense of awe swept through the strangers as Data stepped forward to introduce himself.

Will quickly told him of the situation and they attempted once more to communicate. Within a few moments Data had established a repartee as Will and the others looked on in amazement.

Chapter 9

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A tryst had been finally arranged for the following morning between the two clans. Both had been keen to be introduced. Data had managed to outline the benefits to the native Mantosians and Will had convinced the settlers of the same similar benefits to be had by joining the two factions. Once the language barriers had been bridged, life, in theory would become 100% better.

In theory.

Data acted as the translator as the two leading men, Will, Data and Deanna gathered at a chosen meeting point, and within an hour, there were hearty handshakes all round.

As Will watched from the sidelines, he whispered to Deanna. ‘Dee, can you still sense nothing from the Mantosians?’

Deanna smiled into Will’s worried face, laughing quietly at his obvious discomfort, ‘No Will, I sense nothing untoward at all. In fact I was about to compliment you on your success as a mediator. I think you’ve done a wonderful job here, Stop worrying, everything is fine.’

Will smiled grimly, and silently hoped and prayed that she was right.

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One week after the negotiations, the Enterprise prepared to leave orbit. Data had remained down on the planet as the two tribes attempted to interact with each other. A simple, basic language had been established and the Mantosians had agreed to move themselves gradually into the colonists camp. Their ‘technology’ was slightly more improved and they had more living space, although preparations were underway to build some temporary shelters until a suitable site could be cleared for more permanent accommodations.

Although the colonists had refused practically everything that the Enterprise had offered, on Will’s insistence, and after a lot of cajoling, he persuaded the colonists leader to accept a small transmitter. One flick of the switch and they would come back.

Four days later~~~~~

‘Incoming transmission signal Captain.’ All eyes turned to the tactical officer. Worf looked down to his senior officer seated in front. The captain glanced briefly at his first officer.

‘Source, Mr. Worf.’

Worf’s eyes caught Will’s stare. ‘It’s coming from the the Mantos system sir’.

Will let go of the breathe that he’d been holding and along with it he muttered, ‘I knew it.’

Despite Picard silently agreeing with him, he was still forced to tell the worried man. ‘We don’t know that for sure yet Commander...Ensign change course for the Mantos system, warp eight...Engage.’

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The away team shimmered into life a few yards away from the base camp and on first perusal everything seemed quiet. too quiet. Data whipped out his tricorder before Will had the chance to say 'Life signs Mr. Data'.

Moments later Will's heart stopped beating as Data relayed his findings.

'There are none sir.'

Will's heartbeat came back with a painful thump as he looked incredulously at the android, 'None! that's impossible, there must have been near on one hundred people here a few days ago. They can't have all gone.'

As the away team began to step into the camp's grounds, an eerie sensation washed over him. Making his way towards one of the huts his ears were assaulted with a frenzied buzzing.

Will's first thoughts were of bees around a honey pot.

But before Will had even reached the makeshift doorway he knew the sinister sound was flies on rotting meat.

A startled gasp followed by a distinct retching noise from one of the security team told him everything he wanted to know.

Every Traldian was dead.

Taking a deep breath he readied himself for whatever lay beyond the door, but as he went to step through, a hand grasped his shoulder and pulled him back. Data's warning voice halted him in his tracks.

'I do not advise you to go in Commander'

Searching blue eyes looking into yellow ones, 'Why not Mr. Data?'

Without any emotion Data informed him of his findings.

'I am sorry sir, they have all been murdered.'

Will looked back at the hut's entrance as he tried to imagine the worst scenario. 'How Data?'

After a moment's silence Data finally told him. 'It appears that they have had their throats cut.'

Will's guttural moan halted Data's explanation, and he wondered if he should tell him the rest. he chose not to as he realised that Will would go still in and find out for himself.

Will took a tentative step forward and stopped again. His eyes drawn to the dark, dank hut's

interior.

“I must see for myself Data”

Data nodded. “I understand sir, but I caution you, that is not all that has happened to them.”

Once more Will’s eyes caught his. But after squeezing them tightly shut, he finally took the last step inside.

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Every man, woman and child had been killed. An autopsy carried out on board the Enterprise had shown that the slit throats had clearly been the initial method of slaughter, but then the Mantosians had systematically cut every person from neck to groin and removed their entrails. Beverly had been horrified to find even the unborn had suffered the same fate.

The mantosians did not want anyone left alive.

And from the moment that Will had stepped into the first hut, and had seen what he had truly believed was entirely his fault, Commander William T. Riker, First Officer of the USS Enterprise D had ceased to exist.

Chapter 10

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The muffled exclamations from her fellow crew mates brought Deanna out of the trance like state that she had drifted into.

Turning her face from the porthole, Deanna’s eyes collided with the man standing in the entrance. Deanna’s heart broke and she choked on a sob as she hurriedly rose to go to him.

Will Riker stood in the doorway. Apart from a pair of navy silky pyjama bottoms, he was naked. His face was streaked with moisture from crying, his eyes large and frightened, and his lips quivered as he fought against the onslaught of more tears. Deanna looked down his body. Her eyes briefly resting on the broad expanse of his chest almost totally covered with a matt of dark body hair that tapered down to his waistband.

Her eyes travelled lower to his feet which were also bare.

As she looked back up into his face, tears ran unchecked down her own porcelain features. He looked pitifully sad and lost. A wail broke from her throat as Will’s arms reached out for her. Deanna instantly stepped into the embrace and hugged him to her. Turning him away from the stares, weeping quietly she whispered for his ears only, “Come on Imzadi, lets take you home.”

When they were clear of the lounge, she summoned the transporter room to transport them back to his quarters, along with a request for Beverly Crusher to join them there.

Once she had got Will tucked up into bed, she patiently waited for Beverly’s arrival. As she

clutched Will's head to her chest she gently stroked his face, her murmured words calming him and her own shattered emotions, down.

Using her access code Beverly entered the bedroom and quietly made her way to Will's side.

"Hello Will, you fell asleep again before calling me didn't you?" He hugged Deanna tighter and nodded sheepishly. Smiling gently at him she whispered "O.k., Will, I'm going to give you your hypospray now alright." He nodded briefly and winced as the cold metal touched his skin.

Beverly stood to leave but as Deanna went to do the same, Will's arms tightened around her once more. She saw the desperation in his eyes as he muttered one word "Stay". Deanna relaxed beside him once more "O.k. Will, I'm not going anywhere, just let me see Beverly out, alright?"

Will reluctantly let her go and the two women quietly left the bedroom area. Before Beverly left her Deanna whispered her thanks. Beverly smiled and squeezed her arm. "Anytime."

Deanna watched her leave, then with a sigh she made her way back into Will's bedroom. Now bathed in near darkness, Deanna made her way around to the spare side of the bed. She could feel Will's eyes watching her progress. Slipping off her tunic, she slid into the cool sheets, and as soon as she had put her head on the pillow, Will snuggled up close. Hugging him to her, Deanna forced her mind to relax until eventually a combination of her gentle thoughts and the hypospray finally sent Will into a deep dreamless sleep.

Chapter 11

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Deanna woke first. At first she was puzzled by the heavy weight across her waist, but turning her face slightly, her eyes met Will's closed ones. He was still heavily asleep and Deanna took the opportunity to study the man that she still deeply loved.

Lightly tracing every feature on his face, Deanna heart ached as she touched the newly formed worry lines that now marked the handsome features. But even so, the lines seemed to heighten even more, the potency that oozed from every pore of his body.

His hair, now sprinkled with grey only accentuated that potency even more. Deanna felt her insides grow warm. What she would do to have the man beside waken and take her in his arms like he once used to. To kiss her until she begged him for her release. To connect spiritually, to rejoin the bond that no other could even understand. She closed her eyes and let the once familiar sensations wash over her.

She dreamed of Will's lips touching hers, his tongue forcing its way to the inner sanctum of her mouth, igniting the flame that smouldered deep within her loins. His hands feeling their way around the all too familiar territory, burning their own trail over her secretive spots. Unconsciously, her body moved gently against his, seeking out anything that the sleeping man had to offer. But eventually, remembering where she was and the futile position that she had put herself in, she groaned quietly to herself.

Opening her eyes that were still suffused with the passionate thoughts that now raged throughout her body, she came face to face with Will's bright blue gaze. Deanna felt the blush rise, she knew that she had no right to behave this way with a man that could clearly not give her what her body screamed for.

She went to pull away, needing to put some space between him and her traitorous body signals, but was surprised when Will's hands held her fast. Deanna searched his eyes that were barely inches away from hers. Both stayed silent.

Deanna did not know what to do, or what to say, unsure if she was misjudging his actions.

As the intensity of Will's gaze lingered on, she finally, questionably...hesitantly... whispered his name.

“Will.??”

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As Will's head approached hers in slow motion, Deanna's eyes fluttered shut. Not believing this would happen, she waited for Will to change his mind and leap from the bed like a scared rabbit. But seconds later his warm lips lightly touched hers. She felt the spark ignite the ache that had been forced to the very depths of her soul, Deanna held herself still but could not suppress the moan that slipped through her lips as the hunger that she had woken up only moments before, surfaced to give her a pain that she could only describe as someone grabbing her heart, and her womb, and squeezing them with all their might.

She felt Will's body move closer to her until every part of each other touched. Deanna could feel Will trembling against her, and she began to gently caress his arm, until she felt him begin to relax.

The kisses remained feather-light, but they were enough. As his tongue lightly circled her own, his body slowly moved gently against hers. And even though Will clearly could not have made love to her, Deanna did not need the physical intrusion of her womanhood. The magical kisses were creating their own erotic torture, and as she felt her arousal build up within, her own sensual emotions brought her all the release that she needed, and within minutes, a cascade of climatic abandonment surged throughout her body, shaking her to the very core, leaving her quivering with desire within Will's arms.

Eventually when her spiralling emotions had settled, she opened her eyes.

Will silently watched her. Deanna lifted one finger to his lips and whispered, “Thank you Imzadi”.

Will smiled briefly, then turning away, he swung out of the bed and disappeared into the bathroom. Deanna sighed, and swinging her own body out of the warmth of his bed, she put on her tunic.

Another day had begun.

## Chapter 12

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Four members of the senior crew sat around the ready room. The captain looked at each of his crew. He hated this time of day when they had to sit here and daily relay Commander Riker's condition.

Turning his eyes to Beverly, he resignedly asked her what he already knew the answer to. "Do you think Will is able enough to return home Doctor?" All eyes turned to the CMO and without hesitation she shook her head. "No...no I do not. He took the entire blame for the Traldians deaths on his shoulders. He knew his gut instinct was right and yet he still allowed the two tribes to meet." Picard butted in. "But it wasn't his decision, it was mine...I was more at fault than Will, I ordered him to arrange the merger, he simply obeyed my orders."

Deanna sighed as she tried to reduce the tensions that were rapidly building, as they usually did everyday as everyone tried to understand the senseless massacre of a peaceful people that they had instigated.

"It was no ones fault Captain. Chances are, this would have eventually happened anyway. One day, the two clans would have amalgamated, and who knows if the same thing wouldn't have happened. We will never know, but what is done, is done. It's too late to help them. Now we've got to concentrate on getting Will back, and I agree with Beverly, he is not able to function on his own. He needs constant supervision, day and night, but I think we need to respect his wishes and let him return to Earth. Perhaps this ship is hindering his recovery. Perhaps there are just too many reminders on board. too many memories sir."

The captain nodded slowly, thoughtfully. "Yes, perhaps you are right counselor...Maybe it is time to let him go. I want my first officer back, as he was, and if sending him home might help, then so be it...Counselor, do you have any objections to going with him?...You are the only one who seems to have any success with him"

Deanna eyes sparkled as she contemplated just what the Captain was asking her.

No medical facilities, no help, and no friends on hand to be there for her when the going gets bad, and she knew it undoubtedly would. But still, she felt privileged and honoured that her Captain had put Will's destiny into her tiny hands.

Offering a watery smile, she simply said, "No sir..I don't mind at all."

## Chapter 13

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The shuttle touched down on the ground and as the door opened, a cold, wintry blast assaulted its occupants. Deanna gasped with shock as the frost bit at her lungs, causing her to clasp her chest as she tried to acclimatise herself to the sensation. Will on the other hand, stood in the doorway and took a huge, healing breath. Deanna observed with wonder as she watched Will transform in front of her. Gone was the haunted look, even if it was only briefly, Will came alive in front of her very eyes, and it was then that she saw her first glimmer of hope.

As the hovercar took them to their destination, Deanna looked around at her surroundings. It was plain to see why Will loved this country so much, despite the freezing cold. The entire countryside was blanketed with snow which made everything sparkle. The sun caught the

individual crystals making them twinkle like millions of tiny diamonds. Deanna had never seen real snow before, only what Will had shown her on the holodeck. This was much, much better, and much, much colder, but by the time they had reached the Riker homestead, Deanna was beginning to thaw, both inside and out. Her eyes began to see what Will could see, and once she had got past the freezing cold, she could see the beauty.

Looking around what was going to be her new home for the next few weeks, maybe months, Deanna began to question her agreement to come here. A feeling of overwhelming loneliness washed over her.

Never, ever in her entire life had she felt like she did right now.

She sought out Will who had disappeared from view, finding him quietly opening his holdall on top of his bed. His sideways glance found her nervously standing in the doorway. Arms crossed defensively across her chest, the dark eyes shone with uncertainty.

Deanna watched as Will made his way slowly to stand before her. Deanna looked up into the melancholy eyes that not so long ago would have sparkled with merriment at her predicament. Would have laughed to see her standing there, shivering from the unaccustomed cold. Would have wrapped his huge arms around her and swung her off her feet, probably would have slung her on the bed and ravished her senseless. But all that was gone, Deanna often wondered how long it would be before they were doing those things again.

Deanna looked away guiltily as the rampaging thoughts threatened to bring on tears that were never far away these days.

She started as she felt Will's finger reach for her chin and bring her face around to look at him head on once more. As azure met onyx, time froze, but as she felt Will penetrate her mind, she fought back the choke that rose within her. It had seemed a lifetime ago that Will had sent to her. Deanna's heart soared as his words filled her with every dream that she could ever wish for.

\*I'm glad your here with me Imzadi.\*

## Chapter 14

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Their days had begun to follow a familiar pattern. Sometimes they rose together. Sometimes Deanna slept in her own bed, but more often than not, she woke beside Will.

They never attempted to make love. Because of their unique bonding, for them to reach that magical moment when they joined, it took everything their hearts, minds and bodies could give, and Will was not capable of achieving that depth of union.

Despite Beverly's pleading, Will had steadfastly refused to take any medication with him

when he left the Enterprise. Understanding that he finally needed to stand on his own two feet, Will knew that he had to break the drug stupor that he seemed to be forever in. Deanna would be his drug now. She was all he needed to help him get through this, and together, he had no doubts that they would.

After breakfast, they would bundle themselves up in warm clothes and take a walk through the woods that surrounded the house. Usually it was done in silence, but every so often Will would point out something that had caught his eye, a bear, or a moose, or an eagle and say the one word that connected with it.

Deanna always made a point of holding his hand whenever they were outside. Mostly to dispel the feeling of loneliness that she sensed within him. But day by day, slowly but surely he improved.

Will began to speak more words. The nightmares gradually lessened, and if they happened, she was there.

Deanna was always there.

September soon rolled into October, life became settled. Will was almost back to his normal self, only a quieter version.

Talk still only happened when Deanna forced him to have a conversation. But it was the quiet times that did the healing. Day after day, Deanna forced Will to talk about the tragedy he had left behind until it came to a point of what it should be, a distant bad memory. A harsh lesson learned.

At first, Deanna hated making her beloved an emotional wreck. Hated making him reduce to tears, day in, day out. But slowly, the tears lessened.

Commander William T. Riker was coming back.

## Chapter 15

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Deanna flicked off the troublesome bug that fluttered up her arm, but still it persisted. She tried turning over and huddled lower under the heavy quilt, it began to tickle her temple. Slapping at her head, she woke up with a start, groaning at the self inflicted pain she had just caused herself. Sighing loudly, she opened one eye to peer dazed at the clock.

She jumped back with shock as her one eye came face to face with two sparkling blue ones.

Instantly alert, she reached out to touch him, her voice husky with drowsiness. "Will...is something wrong, can't you sleep?"

He smiled secretly at her, tugging at her hand he beckoned with his eyes to follow him. Swinging her legs around, she noticed that he was partially dressed. Puzzlement amongst the daze of sleepiness made Will's heart skip a beat as he watched Deanna come awake before him. Her hair circled her head in a huge fuzzy black halo, stray tendrils kissed her cheeks, and the moonlight steaming through the window surrounded her form with an ethereal glow.

She looked like an angel. For Will, she was an angel. Without her he would have probably been dead by now. It was his Imzadi that had brought him back from the depths of despair, and he loved her beyond any logical reasoning. Deanna Troi had given him back his life.

Taking her hand, he pulled her gently towards the window. Deanna watched his animated face, aglow with his secret. Despite her fatigue, she smiled at his obvious pleasure.

As she stood in front of the window, Will circled her from behind, cradling her close within his arms. Reaching out, he pulled aside the shutter and pointed to the distant skies. Deanna followed his outstretched hand and gasped as her eyes met the most beautiful sight she had ever seen.

The blackened skies were ablaze with brilliant hues of varying colours. Dancing across the heavens in zigzag formations as they shimmered and undulated off into the distance. Deanna felt his lips by her ear, his whisper sent a shiver of delight throughout her body.

‘It’s called the Aurora Borealis, or Northern Lights. The natives believe it to be torches carried by the old souls to lead the new dead to the after world. The scientific explanation is an interaction between the solar winds and the Earth’s magnetic field.

Still mesmerized, Deanna whispered to the icy air, ‘I like the natives version better, it’s much more romantic.’

Deanna sank into Will’s embrace as the emotional impact soaked through her senses leaving her feeling warm and cherished.

Puzzled, she questioned him further, ‘Why didn’t you tell me about this before Will?’

Rocking her slightly, he quietly told her. ‘I wanted to wait until my mind was healed enough to share the experience with you’

Will rested his lips on top of her curls, savouring the closeness. Hugging her closer still, his arms enfolding her totally, he felt a deep longing begin to surface. Sliding his hands down her sides, he pulled her hips against his body. Deanna gasped in surprise. Swinging her face round to his, she took in the mischievous grin. Turning in his arms, Deanna found herself swung up into his strong arms and carried over to the bed.

Deanna searched his eyes, she wondered if Will was ready for this. This was the first time that he had initiated anything more than the comfortable companionship that had become a sacred part of his healing process. But Deanna sensed the change within him. Will was ready to take things further. Her own body’s needs had been pushed away as Will’s mental needs needed her more, but now her body, woken up at last by just his very touch cried out for more.

Deanna silently begged for him to be ready.

Heaven help her, she hoped Will was ready.

Will lay along side of her, his head rested upon his hand. His finger traced along the outline of her face, gently pushing the wayward curls from her cheeks. In the silence, only their expectant breathing could be heard. Deanna ached to reach out and touch him, but instinct told her that Will needed to do this on his own. Instead, she held herself still and let him take the lead.

Gradually his finger ended up upon her mouth and he delicately traced her lips. His eyes, heavy with desire watched the movement, until he could no longer resist the pull. Needing to devour her mouth's sweet recess, he slipped his finger inside. He groaned out loud as she gently sucked it's tip. Seconds later, he gave up the fight and easing her mouth open, Will replaced the finger with his tongue. Deanna surrendered herself to him. To the feelings that had laid dormant for so long.

She felt the difference in the kisses. These were much more subtle, it eventually dawned on her that he was experimenting...testing. He was getting used to his own emotions and his body's responses.

But with each thrust of his tongue, Will became stronger until he became merciless with his onslaught.

Deanna felt herself become breathless. Her throaty cries spurring him on into near oblivion, until at last, they surfaced, momentarily catching their breath and their scattered emotions. But within seconds, Will was plundering her mouth once more, positioning himself above her tiny frame, totally capturing her beneath his body.

The kiss deepened further, until suddenly, Will's lips left hers. She felt the loss immediately. Her eyes flew open along with the tears that dragged themselves up with the pain of being rejected along with the hunger that raged within.

Will searched her face in the dimness of the room, the only sounds to be heard were their laboured breathing as they regained their momentum.

But precious moments later, Will finally whispered huskily, "I am ready Imzadi."

Deanna cried out aloud with jubilation and the tears that had threatened, cascaded down her face. She had waited so long for this moment, and at last, it was here.

"Oh Will.I love you so much."

And before his mouth claimed hers once more, he murmured "And I love you Deanna, with all my heart"

They had waited for a long, long time for this moment, and now, it was finally here.

They had come out of the darkness into the light.

They had finally reached that speck in the distance,

They had made it.

Outside, as the torches blazed across the hemisphere, the spirits left behind one soul that they thought they once might have been taking with them.

A soul that had been given a second chance of life.

Inside, silhouetted by the moonlight, two naked bodies became one. One rejoicing in having his life saved by the woman that lay beneath him. The other filled with a joy that would never leave her. Her Will had returned, but not the original version. This one was ready to finally commit, finally ready to give every part of himself to her. He was ready to become her husband. The father of her children.

Their children.

Her Imzadi had returned.

Two lovers had gone to hell and clawed their way back, and had come out the other end, more in love than they ever imagined possible.

And as their bodies claimed the ultimate release, the chains that bound their souls together, pulled tightly together, and locked them together, for always.

## Chapter 16

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One month later~~~~~

“Are you ready, Will?”

Deanna looked up into the handsome face as they prepared to re-board the Enterprise.

Will clasped her to him for a final, searing kiss before nodding breathlessly. “I guess... I am going to miss this though.”

They both looked around the home that had now firmly become theirs, and they both felt a nostalgic pang at having to leave it. “We can always come here for our honeymoon, Will”

His arms tightened around her, Deanna lost herself in the grin that she thought at one time, she would never see again. “And I want our children to see the old souls torches.” He kissed her once more before reluctantly summoning the Enterprise for beam up.

“Riker to Enterprise, three to beam up.”

Chief O’Brien’s puzzled voice came back to them. “Three sir, I can only detect two.”

Will and Deanna chuckled knowingly, before putting him out of his quandary. ‘It’s o.k. chief, that was just a private joke between us, two to beam up.’

Will and Deanna were expecting the entire senior crew to be waiting for them when they materialised on the transporter pad. Surprised to only find Captain Picard and Beverly Crusher, they hurriedly stepped down, and walked straight into their embraces.

‘Welcome home Will, it is so good to have you back.’ Picard tried and failed miserably to hide the catch in his voice. His eyes sparkled as he fought back his emotions.

‘Thank you Captain, its good to be back’

As Deanna hugged Beverly close, grinning as she heard the tell tale bleep of the tricorder behind her back. Seconds later, Beverly stood astounded in front of her. ‘Deanna...your pregnant?!’

Deanna nodded happily as Will pulled her into his arms. ‘We most certainly are Beverly, this baby is going to be the most precious thing to have ever happened to us. This baby is the result of a woman that gave her very soul to keep me alive, and more, and I love her with such an intensity that I’m afraid I’m probably not going to be much use to anyone for a while, certainly not until after our honeymoon anyway.’

The two comrades now both stood open-mouthed before them. Deanna stepped in with the final piece of news.

‘Captain, would you do us the honour of marrying us before we leave orbit?. We have a very special place and moment when we would like the ceremony performed, and we want the rest of the crew to witness the experience too.

Picard nodded happily ‘I’d be honoured to perform the ceremony, wherever, whenever. For you two, I’d even go to heaven.’

As the foursome fell into gales of laughter, Will said, ‘Well, your not far off sir, it’ll be where the torches are carried by the lost souls as they lead the newly dead to the afterlife.’

And as the two friends laughter trailed off and looked on with puzzlement, the two lovers turned and made their way out of the transporter room to begin making preparations for a wedding surrounded by snow, stars, lights, and a lot of love.