

## *THE UNSEEN SAVIOUR*

By Carol Sandford

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"The baby has a good strong heartbeat, Deanna. All his fingers and toes are just visible and he looks like he's going to be a tall one, just like his daddy."

Deanna's eyes followed her doctors and a smile of pure happiness stole over her features. Beverly slipped Deanna's clothes back into place and she slid her feet to the floor, shaking her hair back over her shoulders as she did so, bracing herself for what she knew was to come next.

Deanna knew what Beverly was going to say next before the words even left the redhead's mouth. Deanna had delayed telling Will about the pregnancy for more than one reason. The one uppermost in her thoughts was that they had only been married for such a short time and because of that she selfishly held off the eventual obvious until she had no choice. They were still in the throws of loving one another without interferences, and most importantly, they were still learning about each other, inside and out, again. Their union had been quick. Their marriage even quicker.

Deep in her heart Deanna knew that Will would be overjoyed about the baby. Sometimes the possibility of having children came up when they talked about their future. Neither were getting any younger having realised that they had wasted a lot of time, and time was almost against them.

Well, maybe not wasted. The last ten years of their lives had been spent getting ready for this cherished moment. Ten years of building a relationship that was based on deep respect, friendship and acceptance, and eventually, a loving bond that had refused to be denied any longer.

But Deanna had a feeling, a feeling that haunted her every waking moment and sometimes her dreams too, now, and nothing could convince her otherwise that her silence was the best thing for everyone, but mostly for her husband. Somehow Deanna telling her husband about the baby was not the right thing to do, of that she was certain. Absolutely certain. She had no reason why she felt so strongly, only that she knew it in her heart.

Beverly's tapping foot brought Deanna out of the daze, a daze that seemed to follow her around like a shadow these days. "I know, I know, you don't have to say it, Beverly. I know I've got to tell Will. I just need a little longer, please, Beverly."

Beverly Crusher looked upon her friend with confused astonishment. Planting her fist against her hip, she scowled exasperated at the tiny Betazoid that sat on the edge of the bio-bed clearly waiting to escape the verbal battering that she knew she was going to get. "But for heaven's sake, Deanna, why!?" She cried. "And quite frankly I'm amazed he hasn't guessed already. You can't hide a baby for too long and your little one is almost ready to try punching his way out!"

The telltale flush on Deanna's face and the quick aversion of her dark eyes spoke another story. "Will has guessed already, hasn't he?" She grilled further.

Deanna was quick to deny the accusation. Jumping to her feet and pushing past the taller woman to make good her escape she murmured, "No, he hasn't. He...he just mentioned about my...my bosom, they've um...grown a little."

Beverly's eyes searched hers as she tried to understand Deanna's reticence to telling Will that he was going to be a father, but Deanna was adamant and she could do nothing more than go along with her patient's wishes.

Deanna's whole posture pleaded for understanding and Beverly could only nod in agreement as she watched her friend hastily walk from sickbay. Sighing audibly, the doctor made her way to the sanctuary of her office, punching the com unit as she sank into the chair. "Crusher to Picard."

His voice filled in the void around her. "Picard here. What can I do for you doctor?"

Beverly tapped the desk as she spoke distractedly. "Are you alone?" She asked and after his

affirmative reply she continued. "I've just had Counselor Troi in for her ante-natal check-up." Picard paused briefly before collecting himself. Keeping the counselor's condition a closely guarded secret was beginning to tell on him, but not as much as the woman that stared back at him as he watched the deep worry lines trace their way across her normally flawless and pretty features. "Is there a problem...with the baby?" he asked with dread.

Beverly heaved a massive sigh and Picard breathed one of relief as she slowly shook her head. "No, no, no problem. But she still insists on keeping it from Commander Riker."

Picard pursed his lips before tugging at his tunic, the resolution dulling his gaze. "Counselor Troi has that right, but she cannot hide it for much longer. It's only a matter of time, a very short time before he learns the truth. You can do no more than keep her well, Beverly, and let things take their own course."

Leaning towards the tiny screen before him Picard seemingly searched Beverly's eyes as though she were there within the room with him. His voice was low as he spoke. "I know this is eating you alive, Beverly, and I'm glad that you confided in me, but we can do nothing more. This is between Will and Deanna. I don't want it affecting you...us, alright?"

Beverly nodded sadly, unable to utter any words. Beverly continued to stare at the black screen for some time after the connection had been severed before making a conscious effort to pick herself up, step back into sickbay and carry on as though everything was okay.

## Chapter Two

Deanna entered hers and Will's quarters making her way slowly towards their bedroom, grateful for the silence and the solitude she knew that she had for at least two hours before Will's shift was finished.

Laying down wearily on the bed, Deanna kicked off her shoes and dimmed the lights, but even so, the inner conflicts that tormented her continuously continued to battle on within her mind. She hated deceiving her best friend and most of all, she hated deceiving the man she loved. The man she adored. The father of her baby.

\*Will.\* Her mind sought him out, finding him in deep concentration with ship's logistics. She switched her mind back to her own conversation with Beverly moaning quietly as the familiar pain of deceit swept through her. But seconds later it was all forgotten as she felt the unmistakable flutter ripple deep inside her.

Unconsciously Deanna's gentle hand touched its source, her heart thumping as she struggled against the tears that welled with the emotion that the precious gift within her evoked. She whispered distractedly to the tiny life inside of her. "Oh, little one, I hope I'm doing the right thing?"

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Tranquillity was shattered barely minutes later by the Captain's request for all senior management to join him in the conference room. Deanna toyed with making her excuses but then thought again knowing that Will would instantly seek her out, demanding to know what was wrong and she just did not need the confrontation at this time as her nerves were already strung as tight as they could go. It would not take too much for them to snap and she was not up to the consequences that would undoubtedly make one almighty scene, a scene that she was not prepared to be a part of. Yet.

Deanna joined up with Worf en route to the meeting and he did a double take at the pallor of her normally olive complexion. His gruff voice unconsciously growled as he asked his concerns and Deanna knew that it was only his concern that made him speak in a tone that would normally scare the pants of anyone else. "You do not look...well, Counselor. Are you sick?"

Deanna tried to smile but failed abysmally. Hastening her step to avoid meeting his knowing eyes she blundered ahead until she came to a jarring halt before Beverly Crusher who automatically reached out to steady her. "Are you okay, Deanna?"

Deanna snapped with anger, the emotion unusual for her. "For heaven's sake, stop treating me like I'm some kind of fragile flower. I'm fine!"

The sound of raised voices carried through the short corridor causing the small group of men gathered already in the conference room to halt their conversation and look towards its source.

Will heard the anguish in his wife's voice and as he made his way out from the room and he almost collided with Deanna who stomped past him on her way in, recoiling with shock as he heard her voice in his head. *\*Not now, Will!\**

Stunned into silence, he could do nothing more as he followed Deanna's angry movements into the room. Sitting herself in her usual chair, her whole aura screamed at them all to, 'leave her alone'. Will's eyes flew to Beverly to search for an explanation but was startled as she blatantly avoided his questioning gaze.

Knowing he could do nothing more until the meeting was over, Will made his way to his own seat. Deanna could feel his eyes boring into her, the questions burning into her very soul. But as Picard began to speak everybody was forced to turn their attentions to the head of the table and forget the problems escalating closer to home.

"I have just received word from Starfleet that a plague has gotten out of control on the planet Lanaare in the Delanare system. We have been ordered to rendezvous there with the USS Caprisia to begin shipments of urgent medical supplies and some medical staff."

All eyes turned to the only senior medical officer on board and Beverly felt herself grow cold, but even so, her professionalism compelled her ask the necessary questions. "Do we know anything about these people...the plague? Is it curable and would our own species be affected?"

It was Picard's turn to be besieged by the sea of eyes, but it was Data who spoke. "The Lanaarians are a relatively peaceful race that have resided in this quadrant for many millennia. They are of humanoid physiology but have evolved to become partially reptilian. They are able to spend a considerable amount of time in the water as the planet is 86.5% water, but they need land to grow their food on which they depend entirely."

Picard took over the conversation. "A plague from an unknown source has poisoned their staple food leaving a vast number of the population, if not dead, then dying. The poison is not harmful to us and it is our duty to help these people in any way we can. But it will mean releasing a medical team for an indefinite period."

Swinging his chair towards Beverly Picard faced her head on. "I'm not forcing you to take on this mission, doctor..."

But Beverly was already on her feet, her decision already made. "I'm going, captain. If I can help these people, I will."

Everyone came to a stand and waited for their orders, but it was Will whom Picard faced, "Will, I want you to pilot the shuttle to take the medical team and equipment down to the planet's surface. I also want you to stay with her. I don't want Doctor Crusher left down there without any means of transportation or without someone I can trust. We have enough staff to spare four medically trained, leaving us three. And we can also spare a team of five to work on the crop problem. Any questions?"

Will spoke, "How long until we get there, sir?"

"Approximate arrival, fourteen hours, number one. The Caprisia is scheduled to rendezvous a day later."

Everyone filed out of the doors their minds already going through the conversation and the subsequent mission coming up. That was, everyone's except Deanna's.

Before Will could catch her, Deanna had made good her escape. Unable to follow her as Picard had called him back on some last minute details that needed to be addressed, Will watched his wife's hasty departure with a sense of foreboding that would haunt him for the next few hours to come.

It was late when Will walked into their quarters. Surprised to find the place in darkness, Will tiptoed to the bedroom door and watched the sleeping form that lay in the large bed. Puzzlement clouded his handsome features and he began to wonder if there was something wrong with Deanna. All she seemed to do was sleep these days and Will could guarantee that every time he came home to see his wife, she would be out cold, whether it be her break time, or early evening. But whenever he questioned her she came up with the same excuse. 'I didn't sleep very well last night, I'm just catching up'.

It was time he had a talk with Beverly, but he was aware that now was not the time. He was beat and he had a long day ahead tomorrow. Quietly slipping out of his clothes he slid soundlessly into bed, shuffling up prone to Deanna's foetal form. His arm closed over and Deanna shifted in her sleep, placing the huge palm over her breast and hugging it tightly. Will grinned in the darkness, moulding the full, fleshy mound until he heard the erotic moan fall from her lips and she moved her body against his, forcing a groan from his own mouth as his body sparked into life.

Moving his hands down, Will gripped her hips as he moved seductively against her bottom, his hardness creating its own magic against her smooth skin, and as he reached his hand across the touch the feminine heart of her, her leg shifted allowing him access. Pushing himself into her heated dampness, Will tugged her over a little so that he could suckle her breast as his fingers danced on the most erotic part of her and then they were both became lost.

As soon as Will touched Deanna, she come alive. It had been so long since she had allowed him this close, but he had been patient, determined not to question her knowing that sooner or later everything it would work itself out. Pushing, he knew, would make her withdraw and he was not going to lose her over something as trivial as sex. Nothing was worth that.

And as they began to reach for the stars together, he was glad. Glad that they were together, in heart, soul, and, for now, in body, too.

And what a body. Will had resisted on commenting on her weight gain purely because he loved her new, fuller figure, figuring that she had been over-indulging in her favourite pastime - eating chocolate. He also knew that she probably wouldn't want to hear him say that. He knew that she couldn't be pregnant. They'd been too careful and they'd both decided that they should wait just a little while longer.

As they slowly fell back down to earth, the happily satiated couple snuggled up close again, and a contented smile forced away the worry lines that seemed to be permanently etched across his features. He couldn't resist giving her one final quick hug as he whispered into the cloud of sweetly scented hair, *\*I love you\**

He felt the squeeze on his forearm and the sentiment returned, *\*And I you, Imzadi\**

And so Will was content, for now.

### Chapter Three

Will woke to an empty bed the following morning and he dimly realised that it wasn't the first time that he had done so. Deanna had taken to rising early several mornings recently. Not every morning, but most and he always found her in the Ten Forward lounge staring out at the passing stars, sipping a huge mug of herbal tea.

Ordinarily, Will would have considered something wrong, but she always looked so at peace, so content and she always greeted him as though she was pleased to see him so he did and said nothing to upset her. He simply figured that she had changed her routine for some reason so he wasn't overly concerned.

Will showered and made his way towards Ten Forward. Stepping through the doors he sought out his wife, and sure enough, there she was, in the same place and in the same position. She hadn't heard him enter and Will took the opportunity to study her from afar.

Deanna loved this time of the day. She had got into rising early to hide the threat of morning sickness and coming here, sipping the tea that Beverly had recommended and just...relaxing, eased the symptoms. Belatedly, she had also come to realise a connection between the nightmares and the nausea. But this morning, she felt wonderful.

Last night, making love with Will had felt like being reborn. The way he had touched her and made her feel was almost like he had understood. Like he had known she was expecting his baby. But he didn't, of that she was certain. But Beverly was right, she couldn't hide it for much longer.

Will watched her as she smiled to herself, but his eyes were drawn to the motion of her hand and the way it rested on her tummy. It wasn't a casual movement, more of a comforting gesture and it tugged at Will's gut. But before he could question himself any further a voice broke into his musing. "She looks happy. Marriage must suit her."

Will started at the hushed voice that suddenly appeared beside him. He studied the El-Alurian briefly before fixing his eyes back onto the topic in question. But he couldn't resist asking her, his puzzlement evident in his voice, but along side the puzzlement was a touch of male pride. "Do you think so?"

Guinan nodded and the eccentric hat that was her trademark bobbed along with her. "You should ask her yourself. You might be surprised at what she says."

Will watched her turn away as quietly as she approached. He walked towards the solitary figure, managing to get close enough to plant a kiss on her neck before sitting down beside her. "Morning, sweetheart, are you okay?"

Will could have sworn that Deanna turned a shade pinker before rapidly composing herself. "Of course! Have you had breakfast yet?" At his shake of the head she continued. "I'm starving, but I wanted to wait for you, seeing as your going to be away for the rest of the day."

Startled, Will was unsure how to respond. "Why didn't you wait for me? We could have had breakfast in our quarters. Maybe even had breakfast in bed."

Deanna laughed outright at the mischievous glint in the sparkling blue eyes; eyes that barely hours ago had begged her to surrender her body to his. She was happy that things were back on an even keel, for now.

Deciding on staying where they were, they ordered scrambled eggs and bacon and chatted like an old married couple.

Guinan watched them from across the room as she polished the same glass for the umpteenth time wondering when Riker was going to cotton on that his beautiful wife was carrying his child. Then she frowned as she began to wonder just why his beautiful wife hadn't told her husband that she was carrying his child.

Something was amiss.

#### Chapter Four

Beverly sat across from the Captain completely engrossed in her meagre meal as the last of her croissant slipped delicately into her mouth, followed by a healthy swig of coffee. Jean-Luc watched her with amusement. He loved these moments. Breakfast with Beverly was the highlight of his day; A time when they caught up, keeping their close comradeship well and truly alive without the encumbrance of having an affair. Not that it wouldn't have been welcome, in his mind, but she was a strong woman, and he was discovering, much to his chagrin, that he was an even stronger man.

Her troubled thoughts broke the tranquil and reflective moment. "Why does this feel like I'm a guest at the last supper?"

Jean-Luc sighed as he threw his napkin down onto the debris of their remains. "I'm sure it won't be, Beverly. You will have more than enough supplies to keep you going, and we will be around as much as we can be. Not all of the time, but a fair amount of your assignment."

Beverly's hands and eyes fell to her lap and her sigh was heartfelt. "I know. I'm being silly."

Jean-Luc reached over and clasped her hand, forcing her to acknowledge him. "You - are - not - being silly, Beverly. What you are doing is very courageous and very noble. You know we could have sent other personnel with medical qualifications. You didn't have to sacrifice yourself for this and I would be right behind you if you changed your mind."

But he already knew her answer even before the vigorous shake of the amber waves began. "No...No, I'll be okay. They're going to need me down there. We don't know what we're looking for, or what we're treating. It's going to need more than someone knowing how to put on a sticky plaster and I'm the logical choice. I am a little worried about leaving Deanna, though."

Picard sat back in his chair as he studied her features with a heavy frown. "Do you think there is anything to worry about?"

He was slightly taken aback when she nodded, "Yes, something is wrong."

She hastened to add as the implications of her word caused him to take a sharp intake of breath. "Oh, there is nothing wrong with her baby, but I am worried about her mental state. There's something going on inside that pretty head of hers and nobody knows what it is except her. AND on top of that, there is the problem with her reluctance to tell Will. What is going on with her?"

Jean-Luc sat back against his chair as he posed his question already half knowing what she would say in response. "Do you want me to talk to Will; have a man to man chat?"

He was surprised as he watched her actually consider his proposal. "Yes...yes, I think that could be quite a good idea. I know we can't break confidentiality, but it can't hurt asking him a few general questions. It might get him thinking about the possibilities of future children." Beverly visibly brightened as she made her decision, "Yes, Jean-Luc, I think that's a very good idea, but I must have your word that you won't let anything slip."

Picard nodded eagerly, "Of course."

They both rose from the table and normally they would have both headed out the door and parted ways along the corridor, but this morning was different. This morning she was leaving for an indefinite period and they were not going to see each other for quite some time.

They stood hesitantly before each other, both loathe to utter the necessary words and both reluctant to leave without saying those words. In the end they systematically held out their arms and moved into each others embraces. Jean-Luc's low voice caressed her ear as he held her close. "I'm going to miss you, Beverly. Promise me there will be no heroic escapades down there. I don't want you putting your life in danger."

Beverly chuckled as she squeezed him tight. "I promise, Jean-Luc. Just make sure you come and get me when it's all over, okay?"

Jean-Luc spoke with his heart on his sleeve, for once. "You have my solemn promise, ma Cherie."

Beverly's eyes filled with tears as he whispered his vow. Too choked to speak she pulled away from his arms, but he captured her hand within his as she moved away. Beverly wanted nothing more than to stay with him... to love him, but she had a duty to uphold. The loving would have to put on the back burner for another time, again.

Picard watched the closing doors with a heavy heart mentally chiding himself for not saying what he really wanted to say. To tell her how he really felt. But the love he felt for Beverly Crusher would stay within his heart until she was ready to accept him. Taking it further was for her to decide.

But he sometimes wished it was his.

#### Chapter Five

"Sit down, Will. Would you like some refreshment..tea, coffee?"

Will's eyes followed his captain as he made his way over to the replicator, taking in the easy smile, a

smile of a friend. A smile that also indicated an upcoming inquisition. "No, thank you, sir, I'm joining the counselor shortly for lunch...before we leave for Lanaare."

Picard's grin widened as he made his way back to his desk with a steaming transparent cup of tea. The amber liquid shifted shades as he lowered it onto the table top, seating himself in the process. "Ah, Deanna. I take it she is alright with your mission...to Lanaare?"

Will openly frowned at the older man before shifting uncomfortably in his chair, moving it backwards so that he could swing his ankle up on to his knee, surprised and suspicious at the question. "It's a routine mission, sir, nothing that she should be concerned about...unless there is something...?"

Will left the question hanging. He hated it when his gut instinct told him that he hadn't got the whole story on a job. Stepping into the unknown was bad enough. Not knowing all the facts was a different story all together.

He heaved a sigh of relief as Picard leapt to his own defence. "Oh, no, no, number one, it is a straight forward mission. But I have noticed that the counselor has been a little...distracted lately. I just thought that you leaving the Enterprise...at this time, may cause her some unnecessary worry."

Will scowled openly, chagrined that Picard would think that just because he and Deanna were married now that she would start getting upset about him doing his job. "Deanna knows the score, captain, and she would never interfere with my duties unless she thought I was in serious danger, and we both know she has the ability to know when something is wrong. Is that what your telling me, Captain. Has she said something to you?"

Picard watched Will straighten up as every muscle reacted to the inner coil that suddenly seemed to grip the younger man's gut.

Picard inwardly groaned and cursed himself for offering to delve into Will's personal life. Looking across the desk at him knowing something that Will should know and constantly having to bite his tongue before he dared to speak was, quite frankly, wearing him down.

But he also knew the counselor. There was a reason, an important reason why she had not told him and it gnawed at his insides more than aware that it could not be anything but bad. It had got to be bad. If any couple were destined to have, nurture and adore children, it was Will and Deanna Riker.

Will watched Picard sigh heavily and the gesture sent a pain to his midriff like someone had punched him...hard. Now he really knew there was something was not right. He couldn't sit still any longer and Picard watched tormented as Will began to pace around the tiny office agitatedly. "I knew it. I knew there was something wrong. She has been acting strangely for ages. I figured it was just a little tiredness or something. But that's not it, is it, sir? There is something else, isn't there?"

Picard pulled himself wearily to his feet, making his way to come before Will and place a calming hand on his shoulder. Picard had not seen Will look quite as scared as he did now and he tried his hardest to dispel that fear with his words. "No, Will, there is nothing wrong with Deanna or the mission, you have my word on that. I'm sorry for making you believe that there was."

Moving away from Will once he had seen that awful glaze subside enough to know that Will believed him, Picard went and sat on the edge of his desk before continuing. "However..."

Jean-Luc watched the tall man's shoulders stiffen again. "However...I am a little concerned about your wife, Will. She is...not herself and I don't want you to go on this mission without talking to her. It may be nothing, but I would be happier with your departure if I was assured that you have spoken to Deanna...made sure that you both have clear minds."

Will nodded slowly, his concern over his wife evident in the worry that still etched his features.

"Okay, sir. I still have the final arrangements to go over with Doctor Crusher and then I will spend some time with my wife."

Picard nodded as he watched Will turn to leave, noticing the slight hesitation as more questions flitted

through his mind, but wisely he seemingly decided against asking them. Seconds later Picard let go a huge sigh of relief along with a painful awareness that he had failed in his mission and had more than likely instigated the counselor to an inquisition that would undoubtedly end in tears.

~~~Chapter Six~~~

Deanna was waiting for Will when he stepped into their quarters barely half an hour later. Will studied her as he stood in the middle of the room suddenly noticing how much different she looked. She had always been stunningly beautiful, but now it was a different beauty that stared back at him. She looked...tranquil. Will thoughts drifted back to the conversation that he'd had with Guinan only this morning who had said almost the same thing, and now seeing her face to face, seeing the evidence with his own eyes he was at a loss as to what to say or do.

Will didn't have to. Deanna beckoned him over with a delicate flutter of her fingers on the end of her out stretched hand, her smile radiant, "Come here. I'm glad you came before leaving."

Will chuckled as he simultaneously reached for her hand and sank to the sofa beside her, "You know I would never leave you without saying goodbye, my love."

He slid forward and kissed her gently on the forehead before sighing contentedly and swinging his legs around so that he could lay with his head upon her lap, one of his all time favourite places.

Deanna smiled as she began to automatically brush away the hair admiring the way it was greying at the temples giving him that distinguished look, making him even more devilishly handsome than he was before, if that was possible. Deanna had always considered Will to be an extraordinarily handsome man and knew her baby was going to be a beautiful boy, too.

Will watched the play of emotions flickering over her delicate features and knew she was far away in some romantic interlude and he just hoped that it included him. Reaching up, he lazily caressed her satiny cheek with a finger, finally coming to lightly trace her lips. The pull was instantaneous as their eyes met and held fast.

A groan a second later had them meeting half way, lips fusing, hands grasping each others heads as they hung on for dear life as they saturated their souls with a wash of love that sprung from their hearts, their bodies, their very essences.

It was with the biggest reluctance when they broke apart gasping for breath, searching each others eyes for an answer to their quandaries. But there was no answer. He was leaving her, for God knows how long. He was leaving the woman who had become almost physically attached to him and he felt like he was being torn apart from the inside at the prospect of being not only apart from her, but for who knew how long and it was killing him inside.

It hurt so much that his voice trembled as he whispered her name as he pulled her tightly to him, crushing her small frame to his enormous one. But he didn't care. He needed to feel her, to touch her, to hold her, just in case.

Deanna mentally squealed when Will's emotions cascaded through her mind as he hung onto her, almost crushing her somewhat smaller body. But she didn't complain. Her Imzadi was leaving. The father of her unborn baby was going away and the only thing on her mind was letting him go with peace in his heart and not with the knowledge that his baby was as good as a million miles away, growing without him being there. Deanna steadfastly refused to load that burden onto him. He had a job to do and it was going to be bad enough knowing he was worrying about her. He didn't need the worry of a baby added to the equation.

Will watched his wife through half open eyes. Through the fog of what her fingers were doing to him and his own creative imagination and he had to ask her, he had to know. "Deanna, are you okay with this...with me leaving you?"

Deanna's fingers stilled for barely an instant, a heartbeat and Will saw her eyes briefly close as she wished the pain she was feeling away. "Of course, Will. You're part of a crew and missions are part



of your job. Just because we are married now, doesn't change a thing."

Will shifted his bottom restlessly as he tried to manoeuvre himself so that he could look at her. Really look at her. She studied him just as intently but Will noticed the unease, and albeit very slight, it was there. He tried a poker tactic. "You're lying, Deanna. Why?"

He felt her release a shuddering breath and her eyes looked everywhere but him. Her response was as far away as she wanted it to be right then. "Betazoid's do not lie, Will."

"Okay. What are you *\*not\** telling me then. What are you avoiding, Deanna?"

Will captured her fingers as they absently trailed his chest, smoothing out the lines of his uniform as they felt the contours of his form beneath. He held her fast, insisting that she looked directly at him. He wanted...needed to see her head on. "Deanna?"

"I...I. It's nothing, Will. I'm considering going home to Betazed while you're away. I'd like to spend some time with mother. With you and Beverly away, it's a good opportunity to spend some time with her and be home amongst friends."

Will was surprised as he reached up and stroked her cheek. "Why didn't you say you were feeling homesick, honey? We could have stopped off en route. Captain Picard wouldn't have minded detouring a little."

She shook her head, her curls bouncing off each shoulder. Will captured one springy lock between his fingers revelling in its softness. "I only really just decided. I thought maybe it would help taking a break from the ship...from my job. I guess I've been a little stressed lately, with not sleeping and such. Maybe being home will cure all that. And then hopefully when you come back we can get on with our lives. We've wasted so much time, Will. Let's not waste anymore, anymore than we have to."

The silence that followed was broken by Picard's voice filling the air. "Picard to Commander Riker. Supplies and shuttle are ready at your convenience."

Will tapped his badge, pushing himself to a sitting position as he did so. "Riker here, acknowledged, captain. I'm on my way."

It sounded so final, so...decided and Deanna couldn't help but sigh as she allowed herself to be pulled to her feet by her husband and straight into his waiting arms. Deanna soaked up his essence as strongly as she soaked up his own intimate scent, imprinting her last moment with him in her heart and mind for the duration of the lonely weeks ahead.

"Oh, God, Will, I am going to miss you so much." She couldn't help the tears that formed despite admonishing herself for being weak. But still, she couldn't stop them and she found that she really no longer cared.

Will soaked up her grief as he sank his face into the heavy fall of her hair. "And I'll miss you, darling. I'll be thinking about you all the time, willing the days to go quicker so that I can get back to you. We've got things to do, my love, a future to plan, and I swear to you, this is going to be the last away mission I'm going on. That's a promise."

Deanna sniffed as she pulled out of his arms, instantly missing his warmth. Instantly missing him. She was missing him before he had even gone and she thought her heart was going to break in two. But she had to lighten the moment, she just had to, for his sake. "You bet it's a promise and it's one I'm going to hold you to. Now, please, go, Imzadi, before I do something foolish and stop you from walking out of that door."

Will tenderly wiped away the river of tears that still cascaded down her face and knew his own were a little glassy, too. His lips met hers in a brief, but, oh, such a sweet kiss, before turning away, pausing to look over his shoulder just once as he stepped out of the door. "I love you. Be here for me when I return, Imzadi, that's all I ask. Just make sure you're here." And then he was gone.

Before Will had even reached the surface of Lanaare, Deanna was crying in pain. But it wasn't just the loss of her beloved husband that was causing her the grief that she could no longer contain, but

the plight of the dying aliens on the planet as they swarmed through her mind now that she'd let her defences down to mourn her husbands leaving. Waiting until she was sure Will had left the Enterprise, Deanna carefully made her way towards sickbay, and salvation.

### Chapter seven

As the away team's shuttle landed on the planet's surface the Enterprise was forgotten as their eyes swept over the scene before them. Never-ending stretches of make-shift dormitories had been erected to hold the ever increasing number of dying Lanaarian's. Beverly gasped with shock as the true impact of the devastation filled her sight, the reality much worse than what she could ever have imagined. The doctor and the commander took stock of the situation together, and then, taking a deep breath, they stepped forward into the turmoil.

Beverly entered the first dormitory she came upon and Will warily tagged on behind unsure of what the worst case scenario would be. The low mewling sounds filled their ears were ones of agony, pure agony as they seeped into the air from each and every Lanaarian that lay prone on the precarious beds writhing in pain.

Before Beverly could stow her things and shimmy her sleeves up to get stuck in they were approached by an oldish, grizzly looking man who had more hair on his face than the rest of his body. His head was totally bald, but the shaggy beard he sported was at least a foot long.

"Ah, Doctor Crusher, I assume? Thank you for coming so promptly. I am Professor Jagla." He turned towards his patients indicating with a sweep of his arm the seemingly futile task of helping the people before him, "And these poor unfortunates are the result of, we believe, genocide."

Turning back to the stunned faces of the Starfleet officers, he smiled grimly, "Yes, we are almost certain that that is what we are dealing with here. New evidence has arisen that strongly suggests that some...alien life form has taken it upon themselves to rid this world of its race, presumably because they have discovered there is something here that they want."

Will stepped out from around Beverly, holding out his hand as he introduced himself. "Commander Riker, sir. Do you have any idea who these aliens might be? Are they from this planet, or are we looking at another planet in the system? The Enterprise didn't pick up any traces of a ship."

Taking the officers by the arm, Jagla led them back outside of the dormitories. As soon as he hit fresh air, he dug deep in his pocket, pulling out a dark cheroot and a lighter. Will and Beverly watched fascinated as the old man lit the cheroot and took a deep satisfying drag. The threesome watched the thin plume of smoke erupt from his lips and Will and Beverly smiled at Jagla's following words. "God, I needed that. It takes away the stench of death from my nostrils."

Embarrassed, he suddenly remembered his guests. "Ship?? Oh, you would have no chance of catching anybody now. This poison has been festering on this planet for some months. My guess is that another few weeks and every Lanaarian on this planet will be dead. Then I guess we'll soon see the perpetrators. All they've got to do is sit back and wait. Rather ingenious, don't you think?"

Beverly felt sick with the inhumanity of it all. "What sick animal would annihilate a whole peaceful race? Surely there could have been another way, any other way but this. This is inhumane!" She cried passionately.

Jagla shrugged his shoulders, the futility of the situation evident in the simple, painful movement. "Beats the hell outta..." A voice from the doorway had them all turning towards its source. A harried looking nurse looked dejectedly at the Professor. "Sorry, sir, we're just about to lose another one." Somehow the older man's shoulders slumped even more as they all stepped back into the dorm, Jagla's voice rumbled angrily as he made his way between the makeshift beds, "This is the ninth today. I don't know if Starfleet has got anything up its sleeve, but I sure hope if it has that it's a miracle."

And as the three of them stood by the poor creature's bedside watching and listening as his last breath

rattled within his chest, Beverly and Will could only look at one another as it finally sunk in just what they had taken on.

### Chapter eight

The days settled down pretty quickly for Will and Beverly on the planet surface. The daylight hours were spent studying slide upon slide, taking samples and endlessly mopping the fevered brows of those who were about to take their last few breaths. And then later, the research began on the body when they had painfully and gratefully passed away.

Will watched the woman as she tucked an errant scraggy lock of her now very lack-lustre copper hair. When he had risen from his fitful sleep, he knew that Beverly had been up for hours before him. She was always up by the crack of dawn, desperate to keep on searching for an answer. But most mornings Will found her in the wards, clinging onto another victims hand, willing them to live, grieving for them when they didn't.

The poison did unimaginable damage to the Lanaarian's delicate bodily systems. Inch by inch, the poison worked its way throughout their body, eating and burning - melting as it went. By the time it reached the impossibly thin stomach linings and ate its way through the delicate system, most were dead - if they were lucky. Some had to endure the added agonies as it began to eat through the walls producing some of the worst cysts and tumours Will had ever seen.

Will heard footsteps come up behind him, but he didn't bother to turn as he already knew who it was. "Get her out of here, Will. I'm ordering you both to take a day out and relax. Take a picnic out to the Barack Forest for a few hours. It's not far away; half an hours walk maximum. She needs to step back for a while, Will, so make sure she does. Doctor Crusher is going to be no good to me if she keeps this pace up."

Beverly heard the low mumble of voices as she patiently dabbed the sweat-soaked forehead of the next in line to fall. Beverly had never felt so helpless in her entire life. Day by day and hour by hour, the gentle invasive people had died before her eyes, and with each one that passed away in her arms, Beverly died a little, too.

Even she knew she was getting severely depressed. Being around so much death she couldn't be anything else but affected. Every slide she slid under the microscope started off as a hope and ended up as hopeless. Beverly struggled against the all consuming emptiness that was invading every pore of her body. All around her was a blackness - a nothingness and it was seeping into her heart, right down her very soul. Beverly felt like she was standing in the bottom of a bottomless pit with no way of getting out.

Beverly Crusher had been so determined and so dedicated to finding a cure when she had first arrived, but within the space of a few short weeks she had hit a brick wall time and time again and the affect was beginning to take its toll.

She barely registered the large hand on her upper arm as it gently but firmly pulled her to a stand. The Lanaarian that she was tending reached out its long fingers and clung to hers as she moved away. Will gently pried them off, sensing Beverly's protest before it even left her lips. He silently shushed her, allowing the nurse that stood discreetly behind him to step around him and take the hand that grasped blindly for the comfort it sought in its last hour, or maybe minutes.

Will guided Beverly away by the shoulders but it wasn't until she was almost out through the door that she let her eyes break away from the bed that she had just left, somehow feeling bereft all of a sudden, like she had left a part of her behind.

It was only then that she finally acknowledged Will sadly. "Why did you do that?"

Taking her hand, Will guided her back to the mess hall stepping around the next batch of nurses heading for the dormitories for the first of the days shifts. "Doctor's orders. Professor Jagla insisted that I take you away from here for a few hours. He's scared you're burning yourself out and I agree

with him. Beverly. You need to step away for a while."

"But..."

"No, but. We're going to pack up a picnic and head out to the forest. We're going to find a nice picturesque spot and we are going to talk about everything and anything, except the project. Okay, Beverly?"

It was several long moments as the two of them faced each other. Will watched her struggle with her conscience and knew when she had lost the fight when she answered him simply on a sigh, "Okay." Within fifteen minutes the twosome were heading off with a bag packed full of goodies, a blanket and a spring in their step. As Beverly looked to the distant tree tops and through to the sun blazing in the sky high above, she suddenly beamed with excitement. Will spotted it and grinned back at her both knowing that this had been the best decision anyone had made in a long time.

### Chapter nine

"Why don't I feel guilty, Will?"

Will chuckled quietly as he heard the smile in her voice and knew she lay there peacefully beside him. - Well, head to head really. They'd spent an hour settling down in the shady clearing with its rays of warm sunshine filtering through the treetops and with a breeze so gentle, one could barely hear its peaceful whispers. They had eaten a large bulk of the food reminding them both just how much their worry had hampered their appetite. Now they ate with a gusto and energy that truly belonged in a school dining hall.

And now they lay completely satiated, shoulder to shoulder, head to head. Brown against copper, a startling combination. Will turned his head briefly and caught her eye, blue to blue. "Because you deserved this, Beverly."

Beverly continued to study his profile as Will closed his eyes and moved his face back to face the sun, soaking up the soothing heat. It had been a long time since she had gotten this close to her commanding officer, she'd realised. When had he sprouted grey hair in amongst that fuzz on his face!? When had he developed those tiny wrinkles around his eyes!? Where had time gone!?

Somehow Will sensed her intent perusal, but without opening his eyes he mumbled, "What?"

When she didn't immediately answer, Will turned to look at her, meeting her gaze head on. Beverly Crusher had a strange look upon her face and Will couldn't help but notice the lines of fatigue etched across her face; the shadows beneath her eyes revealing how much sleep she really was missing.

He repeated his question, gentler this time, "What, Beverly?"

Now it was her turn to turn back to the sun, her eyes closing out not only Will's intent gaze but the myriad of thoughts that flicked through her mind. "I was just wondering where the years had gone, that's all."

Will continued to watch her as he pondered on her choice of words. Was she remembering Jack, and if so, why now? Or was she wondering about her seemingly futile romance with Jean-Luc Picard? He had often wondered about that one. Had there ever even ~been~ a romance with the captain?

But he was mildly surprised when she answered. "Do you realise it's been three very long years since Odan...left?"

The question hung in the air between them. Memories filled their senses and precious moments filled both their hearts. It had seemed like only yesterday that he'd been a part of their lives and the memories were still vivid to them both. The love even more so.

And, yes, Will still remembered.

Will stayed silent letting Beverly lead the oncoming conversation, understanding her need to off-load whatever it was that had sparked the memory.

"I still miss him, you know?" Beverly glanced once more at Will before resuming her original

position. Will recognised her need to visibly shut him out, so he stayed quiet.

"I thought that Odan and I would be together, forever. Y'know, that one true love; That one all-consuming relationship." Beverly sighed heavily, turning her head once more towards him. Will saw the pain in her eyes and felt it in her soul. "I really miss him, Will."

Will missed his presence, too and was surprised when he voiced his thoughts. "In some ways, I miss him too, Beverly. I miss how he..." Will struggled to find the right word but settled on the only one that seemed to fit. "felt."

Will pushed himself to his elbow plucking at a blade of grass as he tried to explain his strange comment. "I learned a lot whilst Odan was within my body...and my mind. I think it was his influence that finally made me see how much my wife meant to me; Made me face up to what I could lose if I didn't stop pretending that she was my friend and nothing more."

Beverly smiled tenderly at him, "You miss her?"

Will tried to grin but failed miserably. Remembering Deanna was like being punched in the solar plexus. He loved her; He loved everything about her, and more importantly, he knew what he could have lost if he had continued to ignore his true feelings. The symbiont Odan had forced him to reach out and show not only Deanna how much she was loved, but himself, too.

Until he had been Odan's host, Will hadn't known just how much self-loathing had invaded his being over time. Odan had taught him to love and for that he was eternally grateful to him.

He tried another grin and succeeded this time, "You bet I miss her. But I'm sorry your not having such a great time with your own loss."

Beverly pushed herself to a seated position, brushing tiny flecks of the various undergrowth from her limbs, "Oh, I'll be alright. Time is the healer, right? One day I'll be able to look back and not wince with pain."

A strange silence hung between them and Beverly felt a burning question bubbling from the man opposite her. Now it was her turn to ask the question. "What?"

Flushing slightly, Will took the bull by the horns and asked a question that had vexed him for a long time. "Don't you wish that...I mean, wouldn't you have wanted to...?" His embarrassment won and he couldn't finish the question, but with a grin, Beverly knew exactly what he wanted to know,

"Do I wish that I had had Odan's baby; that he had gotten me pregnant before...before he went away?"

Will could only nod.

Beverly pondered the thought for barely a moment and Will watched the brilliant blue eyes imagining the impossible. But it was there, the unmistakable maternal look whenever a brooding woman thought of an infant within her arms; The dream. The miracle.

Eventually, Beverly slowly nodded. It was the only answer she could give him as the lump rose in her throat severing the choked response from leaving her lips, and somehow she was thankful for that.

But she couldn't fool the man before her and gratefully stepped into the open arms that welcomed her; Both remembering a time past, and both fully aware that technically, Beverly could have had Will's child, if things hadn't have happened when they did.

Were they both sorry for that?

Yes. In a secret, never to be mentioned again crazy moment of passion that had happened between them, yes, they were both sorry that a legacy, a gift, hadn't been left behind.

On silent sighs they unanimously both broke apart and began to collect up their belongings, knowing that the glorious time out that they had taken was done. It was time to get back to reality, in more ways than one.

But the time had left a lingering effect on Will and his gaze drifted up towards the cloudless blue sky searching for the outline of the Enterprise. Home. "I wish Deanna was here with me, right now."

Chapter ten

"Deanna, darling, are you sickening for something. Can I do anything for you, Little One?" Lwaxana bustled up behind her daughter and the heavy swish of her gown grated on Deanna's nerves, but not quite as much as her mother's interfering voice.

The day that Deanna had made plans to leave the ship and return home, Lwaxana Troi had very much surprised her with an impromptu visit. On arriving, the matriarch had taken one look at her daughter and cancelled all her plans for the foreseeable future.

Was Deanna sorry? More than she'd ever known. She was still reeling from the shock of her husband leaving her for an undeterminable amount of time; Of carrying a child that her husband was totally ignorant of; The struggle against what was happening on the planet below. And now her mother, eating away at the last shred of sanity she possessed.

But before she could wallow in her mother's moment of compassion, Lwaxana laughed out aloud, tapping her fragile daughter on her shoulder. "Oh, silly me, forget I asked, darling. Of course your sickening for something. You want William to come home and pretend to be a husband again, don't you dear? Well, you know ~that's~ never going to happen. William Riker is a Starfleet officer first and foremost. How you ever managed to snare him into marriage, Deanna, will always be a mystery to me. I'm sure you will hardly ever see him and that child of yours will wonder who is daddy is!"

"That's enough, mother!"

The momentary stunned silence was soon broken, "Well, that's all the thanks I get for attempting to make you feel better; To make you accept that William is always going to be off on some mission or another. You have just ~got~ to get used to the idea, dear."

"Mother!" Deanna's warning came out as a low, barely contained growl, but still the woman persisted.

"But..."

Deanna held up a shaky hand to halt her, betraying just how much her mother's hurtful words were affecting her. Worse was that every one of them was true. As much as Deanna hated her mother's constant put down's; Enlightening anecdotes on Terran cultures and almost every other innocent insult that invariably fell from her lips, Deanna knew that every one of them was true.

Her desire to have Will by her side every day, every night; To have him answer her every need, both physically and mentally, along with his love, Deanna knew she was asking for a lot; probably too much. It was times like this that forced it home just how different her husband was from her and how committed he was to his chosen career.

But now there was an added factor; A baby that he was unaware of; A baby that Deanna steadfastly held close to her own heart; A baby that she knew probably wouldn't change the status quo of her husband's life. And what hurt Deanna even more was that she didn't even want Will to change. So where did that leave her?

Right there, listening to her mother who had given up on the verbal onslaught and now tried to get at her telepathically.

::Think of your baby, Little One. Where is Will going to be when he cuts his first tooth, or takes his first step? His first word. Deanna. We all know that a baby's first word is usually, 'Dada'. Doesn't that bother you. Doesn't that make you want to come home and raise your son where he will be surrounded by people who love him and will care for him? To be amongst his own kind.::

That was as far as she got and even Lwaxana knew she had pushed her luck by the way she physically and mentally backed up. Aloud she uttered sheepishly, "I'm sorry..."

Deanna rounded on her like a tiger stalking a startled deer, ready to pounce. So intent on getting her point across, Lwaxana had ignored not only Deanna's distress, but her anger too. And she was angry.

She was livid.

But her professionalism wouldn't allow her to react like the human side of her expected to, or needed her to. Instead she launched herself into not only telling her mother the virtues of marriage to a Terran, but herself. God knows, she needed to.

"Are you listening to me, mother? Because I am only going to say this once, and once only. After I have finished, you will never speak about my husband in that way ever again. Unfortunately he is not here to defend himself against your vicious tongue, so I'm going to do it for him, and you will ~not~ interrupt. Do you understand, mother?"

Lwaxana wisely only replied with a nod. She was under no illusion that her daughter was deeply upset, traumatised even and decided, wisely, that instead of calling the medics, she would let her have her say.

"My husband, is down there, on that planet trying to save the lives of the people who live there. My husband, is one of the best officer's that Starfleet has ever seen. He is loyal, true, honest, and a great diplomat when needed, an even greater friend to his comrades and a true example of goodness. My husband, despite a few hiccups in his earlier life, and God, haven't we all made some? Has been there for me at every turn; every miserable moment of my life; certainly every happy one, because mother, he ~is~ my happiness."

"My husband, mother, loves me for who I am; for what I am, and he'll love me for forever. What more could I ask for? One day soon, Will is going to come home from that planet, safe and sound, and I am going to welcome him with open arms and an even wider smile. And then undoubtably he will be assigned yet another mission. And another, and then another. And do you know what? I am going to see him off just like I always have; With trust, with hope and with my love. That is my duty, mother, and I am ready for it, for all of it, and like it or not, you're going to have to like it, too, because if you can't then I don't ever want to see you on board the 'Enterprise' ever again. This is our home. This is where we belong. Get used to it."

Deanna suddenly spun around and stalked out of the room leaving her mother entirely speechless, backed up against the steely hull, to scared to move one inch. But even then, Lwaxana blamed Deanna's hormones. ::Goodness, is she going to be like this for the next six months!?::

She groaned as she heard Deanna's response back, ::Yes, mother, so get used to that, too!::

### Chapter eleven

"Captain, there is an energy surge on the planet's surface." But before Picard could respond, Data continued, his voice holding a hint of surprise, "Sir, in the past few moments, twenty two more surges have appeared at various locations on the planet's surface."

Drawn to the blank screen before him, Captain Picard stood, his feet urging forward to Data's shoulder. "Source, Mr. Data?"

The android's finger's tapped out a steady stream of commands upon the consul's flush surface, but even Picard's trained eyes could not make any sense of the readings. "They have already disappeared, sir. Readings are showing that the surges were portals. I hypothesize that something, or someone has been delivered to the planet's surface."

Picard's heart thumped painfully in his chest anticipating Data's answer even before he had spoken. The alien's had returned, just as Professor Jagla had predicted.

Spinning on his heel, he faced the sturdy Klingon, tension etching its way across his face as his panic level rose inch by inch, "Lieutenant Worf, get me Commander Riker, priority one. They must be warned of imminent danger."

Spinning back to Data, he was comforted to see Data had already taken matter's into his own hands as data started appearing on the screen before him, but Picard still had to relay the order, "Data, added life signs, weaponry?"

Picard had barely finished speaking as Data reeled off the answers, "Sensors are picking up groups of ten life forms at each portal point. All are armed, sir, and all are heading towards areas that are inhabited."

Picard held his breath as he forced the all too obvious question out, but he had to ask; He had to know, "Are the away team in danger?"

Before Data had even turned his innocent, but all-knowing yellow eyes up to his commanding officer, Picard knew his answer. "Yes, sir, I estimate arrival at two point three hours at their current speed." From then on everything went crazy. Finally locating Commander Riker and warning him of the unwelcome guests, Picard made the decision to send down armed teams to fend off the intruders on the planets surface. The option to bring the Lanaarian's aboard was completely out of the question. There was just simply too many of them. Most were at death's door and the rest too ill to travel. They had no choice but to battle it out on the surface.

As Picard and the away team prepared to transport down to the planet, Data reiterated the reasons for his senior officer not to go to the planet's surface. Picard dismissed his automated statement with a dismissive wave of his hand. "Data, there are only ten of these creatures and there are twenty of us going to the medic station. I see no harm in putting my expertise into practise, it has been a long time since I have been allowed this opportunity. Commander Riker has been most insistent about keeping me tucked away from such confrontations, but not this time. I want to see the monsters that are trying to wipe out this planet for myself. In fact, I want to capture one and interrogate it. I'm making that your job, Mr. Data. I want a hostage. Do I make myself clear?"

Data's, "Yes, sir." was barely received as the transporter's beam locked onto their solid forms and obliterating them into a coalescence beam of translucent atoms.

#### Chapter twelve

Picard's body and his teams reassembled on Lanaare to barely organised chaos. Every humanoid being that could stand on two legs was busy pushing gurney's laden with half dead Lanaarian's into the innermost makeshift dormitories. The deafening shouts of doctors, nurses and anyone else that had an ounce of authority bellowed at the scared staff as they pushed patient upon patient from one dorm to another with the intent of moving what obviously were the targets of the attackers into a more condensed area. It was a tactic well known and usually successful leaving the guardians free to fend off whatever was heading their way.

Picard spotted Riker's tall form dishing out his own controlled orders. The Captain didn't have to search far for the other object of his concern; Beverly Crusher. He'd known that once he'd found Will, he'd find Beverly. If there was anything that Picard was certain of, it was his first officers compulsion to protect his own and the doctor was no exception.

As Picard approached Will and made his presence known, he watched Will's eyes automatically search the rest of the away team. Jean-Luc instantly knew what he was looking for and recognised the relief in his eyes as he realised that the counselor was not with them and that she was still safely on board the Enterprise.

"Captain, this is not a good idea and I strongly suggest that you return to the ship."

Picard cut him off with the same dismissive gesture that he'd used on Data. "Stuff and nonsense, number one, I have been in more battles than you have and I want to meet the visitors first hand. I want to see what kind of creature can do this to these poor unfortunates that have got in their way."

Riker couldn't help notice the distinct sense of disbelief as he and the rest of the team watched the endless stream of casualties pass them by. Picard jumped back in shock as a pathetically tiny emaciated hand reached out and grasped his; Pleading, horror and the acceptance of death stared back at him. Picard tried to disengage his hand, first gently so's not to hurt the Lanaarian, but when he realised the man was not about to let go, more forcibly.



As Jean-Luc silently pleaded with him to release him, he suddenly felt another's hand reach down and pry the scrawny fingers off and replace his own within them. As the nurse quietly moved the gurney along, Riker walked along with it, his eyes finding Picard's as he followed on into the dorm. It was then that Picard understood; The Lanaarian was about to die and needed the comfort of someone as he took his last breath.

For a moment Picard felt disgusted with himself until Data's voice broke through his morose thoughts, "Sir, we have approximately 22 minutes, 15 seconds until the aliens reach camp. I suggest we begin to position the away team for the maximum effect that is required to safeguard the dormitories and fend off the attackers."

Twenty two minutes until showdown. 'Not long,' Picard mused as he struggled to bring himself back to the present and away from the pull of the desperate Lanaarian's plight. "Yes, yes, Mr. Data, quite right. Assemble your team and take up positions. But remember, Mr. Data, I want a hostage. I want to know why they've done this to these poor souls."

Data blinked his acknowledgement, his answer true and clear, "Aye, sir." before moving off, the rest of the away team ready to take his orders and prepare for battle.

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"Lieutenant Worf to the away team. Enemy closing and estimated arrival within the next few minutes. Group have separated and are preparing to circle medical facility. Do you copy, away team?"

Picard tapped his com badge and spoke to thin air as he approached Doctor Crusher, noticing how utterly exhausted she looked, but despite that, she still looked gorgeous. Picard was stunned with the intimate thought but then dimly realised that that was indeed how he felt about her. In the middle of chaos, she was always there, like an angel rising from the dust. Her halo of copper hair glowing like a beacon; like a safe haven for those all around her. He supposed it was because of her chosen career. In amidst the chaos was her steadying force; Her ability to heal; Her ability to calm the soul. And that's just what she did to him; She calmed his soul and he really didn't know what or how he would ever do without her.

"We read you loud and clear, lieutenant. Are the other away teams in position?"

"Aye, sir,"

"Very good, lieutenant. Be informed that we endeavour to capture a hostage so be ready to beam him straight to a holding cell on my orders. Picard out"

"Aye, sir."

And then all hell broke loose.

### Chapter thirteen

"Are you alright, Counselor? Your showing very high levels of anxiety. Your baby is also showing signs of agitation. Would you like me to give you something to help you relax? It will in no way harm your child."

Deanna looked up into the kindly but austere features of the Vulcan doctor as she continued to run the tricorder over her body. Deanna could see the mild concern in her eyes and she in turn tried to reassure the woman, as her fingers consciously splayed across her stomach, searching and calming her child with her own gentle touch.

"I'm alright, honestly, Doctor Selar. I'm just a little overwrought with all the tensions that are building down on the planet's surface. If I promise to be good and relax, may I go back to the bridge? I want to be there in case...in case..."

But she couldn't finish, and before she had even sat up on the bio-bed, she'd known that she was going nowhere. Watching Doctor Selar's eyebrow's rise impossibly higher as the tiny screen before

her took an even more erratic reading of Deanna's anxiety levels and she knew she was going to be held in sickbay for the duration.

Sighing silently, Deanna accepted her fate with a slight nod. Moments later, the doctor pressed the hypo to her neck and Deanna instantly felt it's affect. Along side her tiny baby's somersaults, she felt her own mind's tumbling calm and within minutes, she was in a deep dreamless sleep, oblivious to the chaos happening below on Lanaare; Oblivious to her husband's silent terrified scream.

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Pairing off into teams of two, Will and Worf stealthily made their way to their designated standpoint then the two men took position; phasers at the ready. From their viewpoint, visibility was not at its best, whereas two sides of the makeshift camp had wide stretches of land before it, the other sported a slow moving river, albeit a deep river. Will and Worf's side was the start of the larger fauna, leading eventually to the forest. The same forest that Will and Beverly had spent a glorious day, unwinding and unloading. Now it seemed so long ago. Now it held their enemy.

No-one heard the knife until it made impact. No-one even knew one had been thrown until it hit the commander full force and he dropped to the ground, hard; His rich red blood begun to ooze instantaneously and as it flowed and the Klingon beside him let out a roar and began firing blindly into the brush and undergrowth beyond, angry beyond belief that he had let his enemy close enough to throw a knife. It would be a long time, if ever, before Worf would forgive himself for letting the warrior in him lapse enough for a fellow comrade; A friend, be felled by someone so close that he should have smelt him.

Worf knew he had hit home when a blast of his phaser caused a blood-curdling howl to erupt from the long thicket, and it was then that the guardian's caught a glimpse of their assailants. At first Worf thought his eyes were deceiving him when he thought he was firing at Ferengi. Similar build, similar head shape, but that was where the resemblance ended.

These aliens were hairy and had teeth that even a Klingon would be proud to own. But it was their attire that surprised them all; They were butt naked.

Hunkering down, Worf continued to fire blind into the brush as he cautiously made his way towards his Commander's fallen body. Even without checking his life signs, Worf knew Will was in serious trouble. Tapping his badge, he spoke sharply to thin air, "Lieutenant Worf to Doctor Crusher, medical emergency. Commander Riker has been injured."

Worf attempted once more to evaluate Will's condition, but it was a fatal error on his part. Still on his knees, Worf heard the unmistakable sound of a body flying through the air and before he could react, an alien landed on his back, the attack surprising Worf enough to be momentarily stunned. The alien clung on tightly to Worf's neck, his legs hindering movement to the rest of his body, not allowing him to rise to his feet. Worf roared with indignity and shame as he struggled to shake loose his attacker.

The alien knew he had the advantage and chortled with an evil tone as he tried to raise the Klingon's chin, knowing that if he could do that, he could kill the huge man. But Worf must have sensed his intent and clamped his lower face down, somehow knowing his fate if he raised it. He had caught the glance of the small glinting metallic object within the aliens ridiculously small digits. Worf couldn't call them fingers, but fingers or not, they were still able to grip a lethal weapon, and that lethal weapon was doing its damndest to get at his jugular vein.

But as suddenly as it started, it ended as a phaser blast hit home, knocking the alien from Worf's form. Warily pushing himself unsteadily to a stand, Worf turned to see who his saviour was, hiding his surprise and relief from the woman that stood a few scant feet away from him. But Beverly Crusher didn't even acknowledge that she had just saved his life and was already putting her phaser away and making her way over to Will's inert body.

Before Worf could relay his gratitude, something that he suddenly felt compelled to do, Beverly's deeply concerned voice broke through his first, "Commander Riker has sustained a knife wound that needs attention right now otherwise he is going to die." Slapping her com badge she too spoke out aloud, "Crusher to Enterprise, two to beam directly to sickbay, medical emergency."

Turning away as his comrades began to disperse before him, Worf re-took his place at the battle front, anger radiating from every pore on his massive body. He wanted blood, alien blood, and if he had to die for it, then so be it. Every day was a good day to die, especially if he took a few with him. This time he would be prepared; This time he would be victorious.

Worf could hear the sounds of phaser fire from various other points around the camp and knew the rest of the away team were under attack. His gut instinct was telling him that he had slain the alien's that had been designated to enter the camp from his side but he did not dare leave his position even though he had stared at the somehow comforting silence that lay before him for a solid ten minutes without seeing anything, not even a bird.

He felt useless and he hated it.

The thought barely entered his mind when just as suddenly the noise had begun it went quiet. He heard his com badge chirp and Data's serene voice, "Lieutenant Worf, please rejoin us. We require you to accompany a hostage to the brig. Data out."

At last! Worf was sickeningly elated to finally come face to face with his adversary. His lips curled back at his obvious joy and his snarl of victory slipped through his jagged teeth. He was going to enjoy the next few hours, hoping that he was going to be the one chosen to do the interrogation.

"Acknowledged. I'm on my way. Worf out."

This was it; This was Worf's time. That was until he finally reached the rest of the away team and came face to face with the enemy.

#### Chapter fourteen

"Okay, people, that's all we can do for him now."

Beverly looked around at her medical team as gratitude and relief pored from her as yet again, they had managed to save their first officers life. Not for the first time did Beverly wonder just how many lives William Riker actually possessed. Surely had used them all up by now, twice over.

But he kept bouncing back; Kept defying the Gods. Every time Beverly had brought him back from the brink she had briefly wondered why and how he managed to survive. But one sideward glance at the silent woman beside her always gave her the answer she sought.

Deanna Troi.

Despite her petite size, Deanna was clearly the life source of Will's soul. Her inner strength and devotion was his very breath, each and every one of them.

Even before Beverly had appeared in sickbay Deanna had been waiting. Still woozy from the sedative that Doctor Selar had administered, Deanna clung to the Vulcan's steady arm as she prepared herself to do her job once more; To bring her Imzadi back from the brink and in the only way she knew how; With her love.

Selar had administered the mild stimulant as soon as she had heard that Commander Riker was coming aboard with severe injuries. Even she had known that the Counselor's skills would be required and she was aware the Betazoid would never have forgiven her if she had not have woken her up. The one crucial thing in Deanna's life, besides her unborn child, was her husband.

And right now, Deanna's husband needed her, desperately.

Doctor Crusher watched Deanna's slight form from behind already knowing that she was clinging to Will's hand, willing him to pull through so that they could be together again; So that they could be one. She stepped forward in alarm as she watched the Betazoid sway, cursing herself for ignoring

Deanna's own medical condition. Deanna was exhausted, both physically and mentally. She hadn't been ready to come out of the deep sleep that Selar had placed her in and knew that she needed to put her back in that state if the threesome were going to get through this.

Signalling one of the orderly's to bring another bio bed closer, Beverly lightly touched Deanna's shoulder, bringing her out of the trance-like fog. Deanna looked into her friends eyes and saw her intent. The bio bed came up close to them both and Deanna climbed on to it, never once releasing her husbands hand.

Beverly helped pushed the bio bed up flush with Wills whilst Selar gathered a coverlet, gently placing it over Deanna, her eyes already beginning to droop. The last words she heard as she felt the familiar pull of much needed release was Beverly's tender, 'Now sleep, both of you.' close to her ear and an even gentler, comforting squeeze to her shoulder.

Beverly watched the scene before her; The steady beat of Will's vitals pulsing upon the machines that surrounded him. His wife's hand firmly holding his against her breast and the feeling of peace that settled around the sickbay. Beverly sighed tiredly. It had been one hell of a day and it wasn't over yet. For below on the planet's surface, another set of portholes had emerged emitting yet another wave of the enemy. They were back at war again and Beverly knew without even hearing the orders that Captain Picard had dispatched more away teams.

It was going to be a long night.

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Worf roared with frustration. He had come so close to reaching the holding cells where his hated new enemy was being held. Along side the curious fear, and he did feel fear, was an urge so strong, so profound to step inside the brig and come face to face once more with the creature - he refused to call it a man - the creature that looked so much like him, but was really nothing like him at all, even in the old days when the Klingon world was still evolving, still very primal, very raw.

The shock of coming face to face with what was clearly of Klingon origin mixed with a race, a new race, an evil, uglier, primitive and silent race taunted Worf unmercifully and he couldn't wait to interrogate it. But Worf's moment of glory was short-lived as his commanding officer ordered him back to the planet's surface. He was going back to combat and he wasn't sure which thought thrilled him more; Kicking ass on the planet, or kicking ass on board the Enterprise.

Both, he knew, would be very gratifying.

#### Chapter fifteen

"Welcome back, commander."

Will's eyes struggled to focus on the smiling light blue eyes that hovered close to his face, but it wasn't Beverly Crusher he expected to see or hear. His dreams had been filled with onyx eyes and hair as dark as a raven's feathers; Of her mind holding onto his; Of her love breathing life into him. He licked his lips trying to moisten the arid strips of skin enough to move them without grimacing with pain, adding even more to his torture. Moments later he gratefully sucked on the small piece of damp sponge that Beverly held to his lips, feeling the heavenly moisture revive his parched lips and vocal chords.

His eyes sent his thanks as he found hers again, but his mouth spoke something else; Something that had been haunting for the past few hours as he danced between wakefulness and unconsciousness. His clear, blue eyes struggled as he tried to remember, his brow furrowed as his memory failed him. He looked to Beverly for an answer, "Deanna...I...I dreamt she was here, with me?"

Beverly tenderly stroked the hand that rested upon his chest, but Will had already noticed her eyes fall to shield her thoughts. His heartbeat elevated a notch and Beverly felt it through her fingertips and the slight gasp through his lips. She was quick to reassure him. "She was, Will, but she's resting

now."

It seemed to pacify him, but not for long, "I thought she went home to Betazed."

Beverly smiled wryly and kept it simple, not seeing any reason to tell him anything different or the real reason why, "Change of plan. Lwaxana came aboard instead."

Beverly watched Will's eyes flutter shut and she began to push herself back upright, but suddenly Will's fingers closed around hers holding her fast and she knew the question that was coming.

"Why didn't she keep in contact with me. Why did she lead me to believe she had gone home? I missed her, Beverly, I needed her and all the time, she was here."

Will watched Beverly's features flicker through a myriad of emotions clearly trying to give him an answer. He relieved her of that torment but couldn't hide the bitterness in his words. "Don't bother, Beverly, I'll ask her myself."

But Beverly gasped in horror as she watched the giant, prone man suddenly make to sit up, but before she could force him back down, Will fell backwards, his face going white with the pain that shot throughout his entire body, beads of perspiration dotted his brow.

His groan was laced with terror, "God, what did they do to me?!"

Beverly pressed a hypo to his neck but Will didn't even feel it. All he felt was the burning that ate away at his insides, seemingly setting his entire soul on fire. He'd never felt a pain like it and he took a deep breath to compensate, but only succeeded in making the burning sensation squeeze his throat and he coughed as though he was about to take his last breath. He wished it was for he hurt like the devil.

"For heaven's sake, Will, don't move! We've just spent the past day putting your shoulder back together and I don't want to do it again. Now keep still. You had a very serious knife wound to the deltoideus and on top of that the knife was jagged."

Will searched her eyes as he listened but instinctively knew there was more, just by the way her eyes dulled and he asked the question with dread in his voice, "And...?"

Beverly took a deep breath, "And...the knife was tipped with a poison that on contact began to dissolve tissue, much like an arachnid's digestive system works."

Will asked again, "And?"

Her sigh was heavy but Will read the relief in her words, "We were lucky. You were beamed aboard relatively quickly and we've managed to eradicate the poison and halt its spread. The regenerative process may take a while, hence the pain, but you should recover fully."

Will studied her intently as he listened, trying to deliberate if there was anything else; Any more that he had to endure, until at last, he was satisfied. "Okay."

Beverly patted his hand gently and a half smile relayed her relief that she had appeased him, but as she went to move away, she heard Will's tender voice, "Thanks."

She raised her hand in acknowledgement. It was becoming such a normal frequent occurrence to get Riker out of his various scrapes that she took his gratitude as though he'd just treated her to dinner, not as though she had just saved his life, again! Promptly forgetting Will Riker for the moment, Beverly moved away to attend other pressing matters, like the steady flow of battle worn officers that continued to arrive.

She began to wonder how much more Picard was willing to take before doing something drastic as yet another wave of enemy streamed through the portals.

### Chapter sixteen

The remaining senior crew members sat around the vast table, very conscious of those that were missing; Commander Riker, safely out of surgery, but still out of action. Counselor Troi, sedated, pregnant and mentally exhausted. Doctor Crusher, up to her pretty ears in injuries and no sign of a

lull in the battle yet, equally exhausted. And Data, still down on the planet's surface, fighting for all he was worth, the only man with endless energy, endless resources and endless nerve.

Even though, for the most part, that the aliens were on the losing side, they still kept coming. And coming.

But Picard needed answers and solutions to end the carnage. He turned his attention to Worf.

"Lieutenant, it's time you had a one to one with our prisoner. I want to know where they've come from, what their intent is, and more importantly, who's pulling their strings."

All eyes turned to his as he expected and his smile turned grim as he relayed his thoughts, "I don't believe for one minute that these creatures are the mastermind behind this attack. There is someone out there sending these men to do their dirty work and I want to know who."

Geordi was intrigued with the idea but baffled, even though, logically, it was the only recourse. "Sir, we have scanned this entire sector for a ship, or a space station, anything out of the ordinary, but we can't find a damned thing! Even if they were cloaked we would be able to find something!"

Worf had an idea of his own, even though it seemed totally preposterous, "Sir, they could already be ~on~ the planet. We may be looking in the wrong place."

Geordi shook his head, "No, no we've scanned that, too. Nothing."

A moments uncomfortable silence followed as words turned to silent thoughts. No one had a plausible explanation and that rattled Picard most of all. In the end he sighed and spoke. "Very well. Worf, talk to the prisoner, see what you can find out. I am aware that he appears to be mute, but there may be a way. I'll leave it in your capable hands, lieutenant."

As they all rose to a stand, no one could miss the air of expectancy that emanated from Worf; His lip curled back with his version of glee and Picard found himself denying the man his long awaited moment of glory. His voice was low and reprimanding, "I don't want him harmed, Mr. Worf."

Worf looked guiltily around to his comrades before yielding begrudgingly, "Aye, sir."

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The Klingon's roaring voice echoed through the Enterprise's corridors, "Nuq Hortay. Tl'ang...nuq Segh?!"

The Klingon reeled out his questions one by one, "Ar! pIntIn?!" But nothing registered and nothing came from the alien's mouth. Hovering over the now cowering creature in the corner of his holding cell, Worf roared out the words again, "Nuq Hortay. Tl'ang...nuq Segh? Which Star System are you from. What is the name of your ship. What race are you?"

The alien glowered at him from painfully familiar eyes. Worf balked when he got up close to him, noticing the similarities to his own features; The high ridges on his forehead. The sharp, jagged teeth. But that was all that was alike. The rest was pure animal and it un-nerved Worf knowing that he had probably descended from this strain.

Worf tried again, "PIntIn. Who is your leader?" At the alien's blank stare, Worf cursed as he prowled the tiny cell, "Ghuy 'cha! PetaQ!"

But as he rounded upon him once more, Worf saw red at the vacant expression. Grasping him by the scruff of his thick neck, he hauled him to his feet and beyond, his feet eventually hanging level with Worf's knees. Worf face got so close to the alien's that he could smell his fear; Felt him tremble as he not only clung on to Worf's massive forearms, but seemingly his very life. "Ar?...How many?!"

But moments later, Worf threw the man down onto his cot in disgust. He had failed.

### Chapter seventeen

The tall man stood looking down at the woman sleeping and his smile was tender as he watched her. Deanna Troi-Riker was beautiful awake, but asleep she was ethereal; Perfect even as her ebony hair fanned out across the silken pillow and Will couldn't resist as he gently twisted his finger around one

curl, watching it spiral. But he couldn't keep himself from watching her face; Her eyes, willing her to wake.

He ached to touch her, to talk to her, but most of all he needed to hold her. God, he wanted so much to hold her in his arms, just for a minute. But he was conscious of the woman standing a few feet away from him. He was still very weak on his legs, but nothing, nothing could have stopped him coming to see his wife, nothing. Short of sedating him, Beverly knew better than to stop William Riker from doing what he wanted, even it did half kill him.

But as she stood watching the united couple, she was glad she'd relented; Glad that she had allowed them a few moments to reinforce their unique bond. They both needed it, now more than ever.

Will's quiet voice broke the quietness, "How much longer is she going to sleep, Doctor?"

"Not much longer, Will. Deanna's been through a lot and her mind was close to being deeply traumatised. It was the safest option while we were still in Lanaarian space. When we leave here, she'll be fine, Will. I know you're worried about her, but she IS okay. I promise." Beverly took a step towards him, reaching out to touch his shoulder. "Come on, you need to get back to bed. Deanna needs you to be strong for her when she wakes and this is doing neither of you any good now. You're exhausted, Will."

Will nodded dejectedly, knowing that she was right as even he could feel his body and mind protesting, but he didn't want to leave her. They had come so far together; Taken so long to become one that Will felt like he was leaving behind his very soul. He lifted the lifeless hand to his mouth and gently kissed her fingertips. Placing her hand back upon her chest, Will took one last look at his beloved wife before turning painfully away to leave her in peace.

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"We've got to get through to him, Geordi, there must be a way."

But it was Worf that answered his captain's plight. "We should torture the alien, Sir, It's the only course of action left to us."

As all eyes turned to stare unbelievably at him and Worf squirmed with the intense scrutiny. Picard eventually sighed, exasperated with not only Worf's desire to, 'get at' the prisoner, but with the entire situation. Miraculously, only two crew members had been killed and numerous injured, but they all were exhausted.

The last wave had been over two hours ago and the crew of the Enterprise were relieved to see that only half the amount of portals had opened emitting smaller groups of enemy. But Picard was conscious that whilst his crew were rotating their shifts, the aliens appeared to be sending fresh new groups each and every time.

They were beginning to lose the battle. Time was running out and they needed an answer, and they needed it now.

"That is not an option, Mr. Worf, I will not even consider it. Please refrain from continually thinking that way. These are primitive people, with primitive ways and you of all people should understand their cause...whatever that may be. Any other suggestions anyone?"

Geordi's dark brow furrowed deeply as he thoughtfully chewed his lower lip, "What if we release him and attach a homing device, then at least we would know where they are coming from. I can get a gadget on him without him, or anyone else even knowing."

Worf piped up with another, more sensible suggestion. "We could send a probe into one of the portals, sir."

Picard nodded thoughtfully, "Yes, yes, both good ideas, but I really wanted to know about ~them~. There must be a way to communicate..."

"Maybe I can be of some assistance, Jean-Luc."

Picard didn't know whether to groan with relief or despair as Lwaxana Troi came and took centre stage - her favourite position.

"Tut, tut, Jean-Luc. You know, you really should value my friendship and my expertise. I think together we could become quite a formidable couple. "

Picard balked at what she was suggesting, that was until he saw the twinkle in her eye and realised he was being goaded. "Mrs. Troi, as much as I appreciate your very generous offer, it is your daughter that needs you at this present time."

He didn't get any further. She dismissed his statement with an energetic wave of her hand, "Oh, Poof, Jean-Luc. Deanna is fast asleep and even I, her mother, can't do anything for her at this moment in time. Now, I am a valued member of the Federation and I consider it my duty to assist in any way that I can."

She had made up her mind and nothing Jean-Luc Picard could do, or dare to do would change that. He sighed dramatically. Lwaxana Troi was possibly the last person he wanted to rely on, but with his counselor out of action and Worf's failure, he didn't have any other choice. "Very well, I will allow you access to our prisoner. But Mrs. Troi, I cannot allow you to put yourself in any danger. If you, or I suspect that you are having difficulties, I will remove your presence from his immediately. Is that understood?"

She took a deep breath, puffing up her ample chest, a move that Picard desperately tried to avoid acknowledging and, with relief, somehow managed to successfully shut his mind off from the almost mesmerizing vista just at the critical moment before Lwaxana would have known his thoughts. He consoled himself that he was only human after all, and she was...she was a rather vivacious and reasonably attractive woman.

But he knew he'd failed when her eye caught his as they moved towards the turbolift. Even he had to smile a little at the ridiculous situation. There was only one person more frustrating than Lwaxana Troi and that was Q. Picard looked over his shoulder briefly, half expecting the irksome omnipotent to be there, laughing at his discomfort. But right now, laughter was the last thing on his mind.

He needed an answer and right now, the woman leading the way in front of him was his only option, and he was not happy about it, at all. He was even less happier when on reaching the brig where the alien was being held, Lwaxana Troi demanded to be put inside the cell with the creature, and despite all his authoritative bellowing at the relentless woman, she still won.

They all held their breath as she stepped beyond the invisible screen into the lair of the savage. The savage who upon seeing his quarry, instantly bared his teeth and assumed the posture that could only mean one thing to those watching on in horror.

**KILL!**

### Chapter eighteen

The crew watched with horrified fascination as Lwaxana Troi raised her fist at the poised-to-pounce alien and shook one very long painted fingernail agitatedly at him, and it was obvious that from her posture and expression that she was telling him silently and, in no uncertain terms, to behave himself. So it was telepathy. That was the key.

The alien shrunk into the corner of the cell, shocked that he could hear the woman before him, terrified out of his skull that she was going to do something wicked to him. He'd never encountered anything like her before and the pictures that he could see in his mind were of death, but in amongst the death there was peace. At first he didn't understand what she was asking of him, but at her persistent sending he finally comprehended what she wanted. How did they stop the slaughter of the Lanaarians?

He could only shake his misshapen head at her. There was no way to stop the poison that was rampaging each and every living thing on the whole planet now.



Lwaxana gasped with horror at what she was seeing within his mind. Death. Just a tragic waste of a race that harmed no one. There had to be a reason for it. There simply had to be. She tried to delve further into his psyche to see if she find the source of the poison, but came unstuck. The alien clearly didn't know and Lwaxana could only deduce that he was one of the lower ranks. They were going to need someone of a higher rank if they were going to find out anything more.

Reluctantly, she left the cell feeling somewhat defeated aware that she had garnered no valuable information other than that it was a poison that was killing the Lanaarins, a fact that they were all too aware of.

"Mrs. Troi, what can you tell us?"

Lwaxana faced Jean-Luc Picard head on and on a sigh she relayed the sparse information that she'd learnt. "Well, captain. They are of a very primitive race. I could only portray images to him and vice versa. All he told me was that the Lanaarians were being poisoned. I'm afraid you're going to have to find a higher ranking specimen if you want to know more than that. I'm sorry."

Worf, unable to contain his curiosity spoke before his captain had a chance to respond. "You spoke to him, Miss Troi?"

Lwaxana shook her head at the Klingon officer. "No, Mr. Woof. There is no language, as such, just images. Pictures, if you will. As I said, he is of a very primitive race."

For a long moment the foursome pondered over the findings until eventually Picard addressed them all. "Well, back to the drawing board. Thank you very much for your help, Miss Troi. At least we know there is a way of communicating with them now."

"Oh, you won't be able to communicate with them. That privilege is solely left to me. So, captain, you haven't got rid of me quite so soon. You're going to need me, whether you like it, or not."

Exasperated, Picard turned his face towards her as they all strolled back towards the main bridge. "I don't like it, Miss Troi. This isn't some game that they are playing down there on that God forsaken planet. People are dying. Our people are in danger. We're losing this war and as much as I hate to say it, you are our only hope. I am well aware that we need you, madam, and I think that for now you should return to sickbay and see if you can do anything for your daughter while we try and figure out a way of grabbing someone higher up the evolutionary chain. Good day to you, Mrs Troi."

Lwaxana slid to a halt and watched as the best of the Enterprise's crew left her behind. Another time it might have stung to be dismissed so harshly, but Picard did have a point. There was Deanna to consider and with a sigh, she whirled on her heels and headed down to sickbay. Although what she was going to do when she got there, she did not know. For the time being her daughter was beyond her aid, but even so, she was prepared to do her duty by her.

Deanna was still fast asleep when she came to a quiet stand beside her cot. Tenderly moving away a lock of hair from her forehead, Lwaxana spoke softly to her only offspring. "Sweetest, daughter, how your mind suffers. It is as well that you sleep through this turbulent time but soon - soon I think we are going to need you. We're all going to need you, little one."

She left her daughter to her dreams and left the sickbay. Knowing she wasn't wanted on the bridge, Lwaxana made her way to the Ten Forward lounge. It had been an absolute age since she'd seen it's owner and she was in dire need of some competitive conversation.

Guinan slid the cocktail onto the bar as the Betazoid stepped through her doors. Laughing, Lwaxana slipped into the seat and took a healthy swig of the sweet concoction. "Heavens, I needed that. So glad you can still read my mind, Guinan. How have you been?"

The enigmatic bar-tender smiled at her latest customer. "I'm fine, Lwaxana. Now I hear you've got a story or two to tell. Care to share?"

Lwaxana waved off Guinan's question with a hand. "Oh, pfft. I haven't done anything yet. I failed to get any information out of the alien. I was no use at all, not really."

"That's not what I heard. I hear that Data has captured some general down on that God-awful poor planet and is currently en route back to the Enterprise. Seems however you managed to get through to the previous guy, Data has managed to emulate it down there."

"Has he now? Clever man, that Mr. Data. I'm intrigued. I thought that maybe the captain might have used your unique ability, Guinan. I know you are capable of reading thoughts, even though you are nowhere near my level of expertise."

"I haven't been called yet, but I'm sure I will be. You know the captain. He won't to use us women until he has to, especially you."

Lwaxana laughed. "Yes, he is a little afraid of me, isn't he?"

"Afraid!" Guinan laughed back. "He's terrified of you. He thinks you're going to have your wicked way with him one day."

Lwaxana smiled enigmatically. "Well, it has crossed my mind on the odd occasion, but I'm afraid that if I did seriously go after him, I would never hear the last of it from my precocious daughter. Can you imagine the ruckus she would create!? No, no, he is one that I'm afraid I shall have to let get away."

Guinan chuckled. "Look but not touch, huh?"

Lwaxana nodded, her smile mischievous. "For now."

Pushing herself off the stool she spoke to her friend. "Shall we go and see if we can offer our services, Guinan?"

Straightening her hat, the El-Alurian grinned at her. "Most definitely. Can't let those men have all the fun now, can we?"

Arm in arm, the two curiously looking woman made their way to the holding cells. By the time that they had got there, Picard and his senior crew were more than happy to see them both. Data had failed. Worf had failed, too, so Picard had to depend on the one woman that he rather didn't have to. Picard was the first to admit that he was somewhat scared of Lwaxana Troi's powers. But he was more scared of what she would do to him, if she ever managed to catch him on his own.

### Chapter nineteen

"Oh, my God. I don't know if I can stomach much more of this. This poor creature is pregnant and it's breaking my heart knowing that I can't save them both. When's it all going to end, professor?"

The aged professor rested a weary hand upon Beverly's shoulder as they both studied the dying alien lying on the cot, her swollen tummy evident beneath the tatty sheet that a nurse had covered her with to give her a little more privacy. The poison was already well into her system; her wounds festering and weeping as she fitfully slept, her already pale skin now holding the all too familiar pallor of waiting death.

"The baby isn't even old enough to rescue, I'm afraid. It really does seem like the end of the Lanaarians really is at hand. Come on, help me move her to the next tent. Her bed is sorely needed."

The next tent. The death tent, now so over-crowded that another was being hastily erected to accommodate the ever growing afflicted.

But at least the fighting had ceased, for now. The capture of the general seemed to have called a halt to the battle, for a reason that they had yet to fathom. But at least it gave the medical crews a chance to attend their wounded and plough on with what seemed now to be a completely futile attempt at finding a cure to save the last few remaining Lanaarians.

Beverly helped settle the pregnant Lanaarian into her make-shift cot and as the other assistants moved away, Beverly sank to her knees, wearied by grief and fatigue. The woman's hand limply searched for a hand to hold and Beverly wrapped her own fingers around the chilled ones. The woman's breaths rasped within her throat making her chest rise and fall with the effort that it was taking just to breathe. Beverly's gaze watched the erratic rise and fall with despair, her mind closing to the plight before her.

But even so, she couldn't stop thinking about the unborn baby within the dying body. It had been the first one that Beverly had come across herself. There had been many others passing through the tent flaps, but this was the first that Beverly had to tend to herself and it upset her greatly.

She reasoned that it was because of her own close friends pregnancy that it was upsetting her more than deemed reasonable, under the circumstances. Every baby had a right to live. Every baby needed a chance to be someone, important or not, and the cruel aliens that were forcibly taking away their only chance sickened her.

Lost in her quiet thoughts, it was many moments before Beverly realised that the hand that she held had stilled. One look at the Lanaarian's face soon told her that she was gone. Again Beverly's eyes filled with hopeless tears as she silently mourned the loss of yet another life.

She felt a light pat to her shoulder and looked into the kindly eyes of the orderly that were forever hovering, awaiting to remove the latest casualty. Beverly pushed herself to her feet, fatigue, misery and a distinct air of hopelessness came with her.

"Thanks, Jim, she's ready to go." Beverly made to walk away but then a thought transcended inside her mind. It had built as she'd sat there regarding the now still mound beneath the soiled sheet that lay over the dead Lanaarian. "Jim, scrap that. I'd like to examine the foetus. Can you bring her to the lab tent, please?"

"Sure thing, doc."

With renewed vigour in her step, Beverly made her way to the lab tent, her mind a whirl of questions. So many, 'what if's...?' raced through her that by the time she had reached the tent, she was impatient for the body and paced at its entrance, waiting for its arrival.

Beverly suddenly felt guilty at referring to the Lanaarian now as an 'it', but with what she was about to do to her, she had to switch off her humanity switch. There was an answer to find; a desperate search for a cure to end this annihilation and Beverly had just realised that she may have found the answer. Unfortunately, it lay within the Lanaarians belly and she was just about to do the most hated thing that anyone could do.

#### Chapter twenty

The scene was surreal. Two women, both flamboyant in their own unique ways, equally both silent and intent and both relentless in their joined assault on the alien general as they sat opposite him in the holding cell.

He was an ugly figure of a creature. Even though the previous hostage had been more primitive, the General was as much so but he included an evil edge to him, hence why he was securely fastened to his seat as he sat opposite the seated women.

The occasional grunt and growl emanated from his throat, the sound raw and brutal. The race clearly did not use verbal communication of any kind and the Enterprise crew wondered who was pulling their strings. Someone had to be. Someone had to be out there and the two women interrogating him were going to find out, one way or another.

Picard, Geordi, Worf and Riker watched with fascination. The two seated women's backs were to them and they could clearly see the general fighting against their silent assault. His large misshapen head weaved from side to side as he fought against their intrusion.

It was a long time coming but when it did, the roar of frustration that tore from the aliens throat culminated with him rearing to his feet and lunging at the two startled women. Within seconds he lay slumped on the floor, the laser blast that Riker hit him with now emitting a foul stench of burning flesh as the plume of smoke rose from his head.

Trembling with shock, Picard and Geordi held onto the women as they led them from the holding cell.

"My God!" Lwaxana exclaimed, horror etching her ashen features as she lowered herself to the bench

that Picard had guided her to. "He was going to kill me! The brute!"

Picard struggled to soothe her very ruffled feathers at the same time as trying to tactically find out if they had gained any usable information about their foe.

"You were never in any danger, Mrs. Troi. We had the best marksmen on board the Enterprise covering you. He would never have got to you, that I promise you."

Lwaxana puffed her chest agitatedly, clearly still upset at how close they'd gotten to be molested.

"Yes, well, it got a little too close for comfort." she turned her head to face Will. "We both thank you, Mr. Riker. Considering all that must be on your mind, I'm glad to hear that duty still comes first."

The invisible gasp of horror rented the air but even as all eyes turned on to Will they knew that she had blown it.

"My mind, Mrs. Troi. What exactly IS on my mind?" Will's eyes slowly went from person to person, finally settling back onto the Betazoid matriarch. "What's going on here. Is there something that someone wishes to tell me. Mrs. Troi? Captain?"

Picard took one look at Lwaxana's opening mouth and jumped in head first. "There is absolutely nothing wrong, Will. Mrs. Troi is clearly referring to Deanna's current ill health. We are all worried about her, as I am sure you are too, Will, and I'm sure once all this mess with the Lanaarians is sorted out, your wife will be back to her normal self. Isn't that right, Mrs. Troi?"

Lwaxana looked into Picard's steady gaze and wavered between telling her son-in-law the truth or keeping him in the dark, a fact that rankled her deeply. Why the man couldn't be told that he was to become a father was beyond her comprehension. But the steely stare that she was receiving told her to think otherwise. "Yes...yes, of course. That's all I meant, William. I'm sorry if I said anything out of turn."

For a long moment Will's gaze from one person to another as he sized up the situation. Her rather insincere apology didn't ring true to Will's ears but the expectant look on his comrades faces pleaded with him to drop the inquisition and that made him all the more uneasy. His eyes finally settled upon his much admired captains and grudgingly he relented. "Then let's get back to the matter at hand, shall we?"

He turned his full gaze onto the Betazoid woman. "Mrs. Troi, Guinan, did you find out anything more from the creature?"

Will felt rather than saw the sigh of relief that left everyone's lungs and vowed to get to the bottom of the mystery - after they'd sorted out the mystery that lay beneath them on the dying planet of Lanaaria.

Guinan had kept very quiet until that point and as Lwaxana went to speak the El-Alurian gently rested her hand upon her forearm, effectively halting her response. "Mrs. Troi. If I may?"

Somewhat startled, Lwaxana regarded the dark woman before relenting graciously. Perhaps the startling news would be better coming from a ship's colleague.

Guinan pushed herself to her feet and came to a stand before her crewmates. One by one she slowly looked to each of them, but eventually her eyes settled upon the huge Klingon. "Worf, you were right. The aliens are Klingon, but from long, long ago. They are still very early in their evolutionary cycle, that much I'm sure that you know."

For some unknown reason, shame slammed through Worf. To know for sure that it was his own kind that were killing the poor inhabitants down on the planet ate at his gut and he quietly growled with frustration. His captain's hand upon his shoulder halted the roar of rage from leaving his lips.

"This is in no way your fault, Mr. Worf. Remember that, please."

Worf turned hurt eyes to his captain, gratified only to see sorrow in his and not shame. His curt nod allowed Picard to carry on. "Continue please, Guinan."

She took a deep breath. "However, it is an intelligent Klingon that is responsible for the carnage that is happening now."

This time there was no stopping the roar that erupted from Worf as he quickly turned and slammed his fist against the bulk head. Without turning back to his fellow officers he spoke to the wall. "Who. Who is it. Who is doing this? Tell me."

Guinan stepped forward slowly and lay her hand on his tense shoulder. "Worf, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you. Although it is true, it is a Klingon leading these creatures, it is not a Klingon of our times."

All eyes were upon her and she suddenly felt very small against all those that towered above her waiting for the answer to the riddle. But her answer was aimed at one person only. Her captain. "He's from the future, Jean-Luc."

Their shock was evident in their widened eyes as they continued to stare at her, but it was only the captain who spoke as they all tried to digest the news. "The future? Are you sure, Guinan? Lwaxana, is this true?"

For the first time since since the revelation the crew remembered the Betazoid who remained seated. Now she had been acknowledged, she rose regally to her feet and addressed them all. "I'm afraid so, Jean-Luc."

Turning to look at the creature that still lay dead on the floor of its cell, she grimaced. "Could we all retire to the ready room, please? I'd like to remove myself from this...thing!"

Gathering his wits, Captain Picard said hurriedly, "Of course." Turning to the ensign that stood at the doorway he spoke to him. "Ensign, kindly take this...creature to sickbay and have Doctor Crusher examine him. There may be something on him, or in him, that we can use. Have her report to my ready room when she's done. Thank you."

As the party moved away from the brig the ensign looked at the still smouldering creature with disgust, his response to the order unheard as they left him to his grizzly task. "Aye, aye, sir."

#### Chapter twenty one

She'd found it. She'd found the answer that she had been looking for but her euphoria was quickly subdued as she heard the doors to sickbay swish open. Upon the gurney lay a covered corpse, the ensign pushing it held his hand over his face in a futile effort to dispel the stench that rose from it. Quickly pushing it into a room that led off from the main sickbay area, Crusher followed the young ensign in. "Is that what I think it is?" She asked with reluctance.

"Yes, it is ma'am. The captain requested that you do an autopsy and report your findings to the ready room, a.s.a.p."

And as Beverly lifted the sheet from the dead alien, she sighed. Her news would would have to wait. Two hours later...

"Take a seat, doctor. You look exhausted." Taking pity on his visibly crumbling friend, Picard pushed himself to his feet and ordered a steaming cup of Valerian tea from the replicator. Beverly felt all eyes upon her as she took a grateful sip from the brew. Expectancy poured from each of them as they waited for her to gather her thoughts.

"Do you want the good news or the really good news?"

Picard's nervous chuckle emulated what his other colleagues were feeling. Good news of any kind could only mean one of two things. Grinning at his trusted friend he said with joviality. "I think we'll have the really good news first. I think we could all use something positive right now. What have you found, doctor?"

A genuine, if not weary, smile lit up her features. "I'm almost positive that I have found a way to halt the attack on the Lanaarians systems. If you recall, I did an autopsy on the pregnant Lanaarian and

her unborn foetus. The foetus was untouched by the poison."

"So...?"

"So..." she added patiently, "If we can process enough of the natural antibodies that I found in the foetus we should be able to stop any further deterioration in those that have been infected, provided we catch them early enough. My team are working on replicating the anti-body as we speak. We should have enough to inoculate the entire race within two days."

"That's splendid news, Doctor Crusher. We'll give you every spare hand we can spare to the cause. The Caprisia is still in orbit. We can use her facilities, too, to speed up the process. Congratulations, doctor. A commendation is in order. Do we all agree, crew?"

The agreed, "Absolutely!" rang around the vast table and a gentle squeeze of fingers from all those that could reach her quickly followed. Her struggle with her ethics were soon squashed as she wallowed in the deserved adulation. Her disappointment at all those that they hadn't managed to save up until now, she shoved to the furthest regions of her mind. All her energies now had to be focused on saving those still fighting for their lives.

"And the second piece of good news, doctor?"

It was a moment before Beverly could pull herself back to the present. "Oh, yes. The alien autopsy." She reached into her pocket and pulled out a small vial that held what looked to be a tiny chip. "I found this well and truly embedded within the aliens ear. It's technology is way beyond ours and it took some finding. I won't tell you how I found it, but let's just say, that even his own mother wouldn't recognise him now."

She waited for the appropriate grimaces to radiate around the room before continuing. "He is of Klingon origin, of that I'm sure you are aware, but of a future race. Their technology is way beyond ours, hence why we haven't been able to locate their sources. However, if you can decipher this chip, I think you'll find all the answers you are looking for."

All eyes followed her as she pushed herself to a stand. "Now, I've got a planet to save. If you'll all excuse me." But even as she was leaving the ready room all eyes were pinned to the tiny object that she had left on the glossy table top.

Eventually it was Picard who broke the silence. "Geordi..."

Before he could get any further, the engineer was already tentively picking it up. "I know, captain, I'm already on it. Data, want to give me a hand?"

Even the androids keenness couldn't be missed as he responded to his old friends request. "I shall be glad to assist." But then as an afterthought he turned to his captain. "Permission to assist Mr. Laforge, sir?"

As though a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders, Picard chuckled at his comrade.

"Permission granted, Data. I want this mission wrapped up as soon as possible and the quicker we find out who's leading this merry band of marauders, the better. Everyone else, back to your stations. Unfortunately, there is still a war to be won."

## Chapter twenty two

"Damn it!"

Doctor Selar came to Crushers side and glanced down at what she was working on. "Is there a problem, doctor?"

"It's not pure enough. It won't work after all. Damn it!" Sheer frustration ripped through Beverly's soul as she realised that she had failed in her achievement to recreate the antibodies needed to save the Lanaarians.

"What will you need to succeed, doctor. What can I do to help?" Selar asked tentively, unsure how she could even envision aiding the cause.

Beverly sighed. "Get Doctor Jagla up here. Maybe he's got an idea, or two. I'm too close to this to think straight. I need another perspective on it."

"You're beat, doctor. You need rest."

She smiled wearily at her. "I'll rest enough when this is all over, I promise. Now, get the professor up here for me. I've come too far to fail now. I will \*not\* fail now." She promised with vehemence, but spoke to herself as Selar hurried away to make the necessary call.

Unable to do anything more until Jagla arrived, Beverly washed up and wandered dispiritedly over to her friend. She watched Deanna sleep and silently envied her. What she would do to sleep it all away; the horrors, the nightmares, the death, the despair. She was well aware that the pretty Betazoid was fighting her own demons and knew that keeping her peacefully sleeping was the only way that Deanna could get through what was happening down on the planet.

She wearily sat in the chair that had been placed beside the bed for when Will visited and rested her head upon the bed's edge. Closing her eyes she allowed herself to drift off. Some half an hour later that was how the professor found her.

Reluctantly he gently shook Beverly's shoulder. "Doctor Crusher. I'm sorry to disturb you, but I'm here now and we should press on with your theory."

Beverly woke from her all too brief slumber feeling sluggish as she surveyed the world around her. Her teary eyes settled upon her friends still closed ones and she watched her for a long moment.

"What is wrong with her?"

Beverly sighed as she pushed herself to her feet. "Deanna is a Betazoid. Unfortunately, due to her condition, she is very acutely aware of the anguish down on the planet, even more so than normal. Keeping her sedated saves her the pain of living their lives as though it were her own."

"Her condition?" Jagla asked intrigued.

"She's pregnant. Almost four months along."

Jagla studied the sleeping beauty thoughtfully. "That's a shame. To be missing out on all her unborn's little moments. Is there a...husband close by?"

Beverly nodded. "Yes. Her husband is Commander Riker, but as you know, he's very busy right now." She turned her full gaze onto the professor. "He also doesn't know that his wife is pregnant yet, professor, so I would appreciate complete confidentiality for my patient, please."

The questions flickered in Jagla's gaze as he studied the sleeping woman, but none-the-less, he nodded in agreement, clearly not understanding the reasoning behind the decision to keep the father in the dark.

Both turning away from Deanna, the twosome made their way to the lab where Beverly had been working on her cure for the Lanaarians and within moments they were completely engrossed in the task at hand. Two hours later, Picard found them both still with their heads bent over the table studying Lord knows what. Just by studying their postures alone told Picard that something was amiss with Beverly's discovery, and the fact that she had summonsed the professor away from his beloved patients told him even more. Her initial euphoria at finding a cure had suffered a serious setback.

### Chapter twenty three

"Intriguing."

"That's a very interesting word, Data, but it doesn't help much."

"I am sorry, Geordi. There are not many things in the known universe that mystify me, but I must confess, this item has left me inexplicably perplexed."

"God," Geordi groaned. "if that's true then we are well and truly stuffed."

"Stuffed? How could one minute chip fill you up? Something this small..."

"Not stuffed, Data. Stuffed. You know? As in, mystified. Stumped. Gazumped. Stuck."

"Oh, yes, I see. Stuck. I understand that expression. And yes, my friend, we are well and truly stuck."

"The captain will not want to hear that."

"Won't won't I want to hear, Mr. Laforge?"

The two engineers mentally groaned at the familiar voice behind them, but it was Data who answered, giving his friend a reprieve. "Captain, we have run extensive tests on the microchip, but to no avail. The components are vastly more superior and are beyond what our own can decipher. I hypothesize that in order to read what this chip holds we would have to be aboard the mother ship."

Picard sighed. It was not the news that he wanted to hear, especially after just hearing a similar failure down in the sickbay labs. "Suggestions?"

Geordi didn't hesitate. "Implant it in someone and send it back. Better still, implant it in something and send it back, complete with a nuclear device and send them all to hell."

"That's all very well and good, Geordi, but it won't give us any answers or hope in saving the Lanaarians."

"Let's face it, captain. This late in the day, nothing is going to save this race, short of a miracle and we don't have any of those tucked up our sleeve, do we?"

"Geordi, miracles are not..."

Annoyed with himself for somehow knowing that Data would take his comment literally, Geordi snapped with exasperation, "Figure of speech, Data. Just a figure of speech."

"Sorry. However, I do have one possible solution."

Both men turned to him, intrigue and hope lighting their eyes at the possibility of just one ounce of the miracle that they needed.

Data continued, unaware that the two men now hung onto every word that he said. "Sending it back to where it came from does seem to be the only course to take. However, I it should be myself that accompanies it on its journey."

There was a long silence as the two men digested that piece of news, but it wasn't long before the protest began. But Data held up his hand, acutely aware that with him doing so he was being subordinate. "We cannot allow the chip to return on its own as we will never find out any information that is needed. By sending me along with it at least we stand a chance of gaining an insight as to what is beyond our present comprehension."

Geordi stared hard at his friend for a moment as he digested his news until eventually he came up with a suitable question. "You don't look anything like them, Data. How do you think you're going to slip in amongst them looking like...that?"

Data quickly looked down at himself before addressing both men again. "Geordi...Captain, we can adapt my features to look like one of them."

Both men shook their heads in denial, but it was Picard who spoke. "Not possible, Data. You already know that your unique physiology is unable to be altered that drastically. No, it is out of the question. However, it is a good idea, though."

It was as though a light blinked on between all three of them as after a few seconds they all said exactly the same out aloud.

"Worf."

"Worf."

"Worf."

"He'll never agree to it."

"Oh, I think he will."



Chapter twenty four

"I'll be glad to do it. When do I leave?"

Picard faced the tall Klingon, completely undaunted by his size, nor by the look of vengeance that gave Worf an even more feral air than he had before. "It won't be that simple, Mr. Worf. It means altering your features. Behaving like them and most importantly, you aren't going to be able to communicate with them and that is going to cause a problem, we think. And also..." He hesitated before continuing. "I assume that you have noticed that they are somewhat naked in appearance?" A fleeting moment of panic flared in Worf's eyes but was quickly extinguished at the prospect of getting at those that put his own race to shame. "That's...not a problem, sir."

"You've also got have the microchip inserted into your body."

He wavered with trepidation. "Where?"

"Deep inside your ear. We can do that when we are altering your features. You won't feel a thing.

"The engineer assured him with a wide grin. "We're also going to implant a homing device so that you can get back to us and also a..." Geordi hesitated to go on, suddenly afraid that he was overloading Worf with not only too much information, but too much hardware, too. He cleared his throat before continuing. "We're also going to give you a device that, should anything go wrong, or you feel that you cannot succeed in your task, you can blow them all to Kingdom Come."

For a long moment the Klingon warrior regarded the men that stood around him as he contemplated just what they were asking of him. But, in the end, the opportunity to know more about his long distant forebears as well as be rid of the vermin that was controlling them proved too much of a temptation for him. "I will return triumphant. I will avenge those that have suffered for little more than dirt. I will..."

"Only do what is necessary to halt the atrocity, Mr. Worf." Picard warned.

Reluctantly, Worf relented. "Aye, captain. When do I leave?"

"As soon as we've made your alterations and fitted you with all the necessary technology to make the mission a success. You're sure you want to do this, lieutenant?"

"Absolutely, sir."

"Very well, then. I wish I were going with you. I'd like to meet this...person myself."

Worf had to stop himself from blurting that he would bring him his head on a platter, but as he looked around at his comrades once more he realised that he didn't have to utter one word. It was as clear as daylight that they silently voiced the same sentiments as he.

On a shudder of revulsion, Geordi slapped a hand upon Worf's shoulder. "Okay, let's do this."

Chapter twenty five

"It's just one element that's missing, professor. I just can't seem to find it. It's so frustrating. We're so near, and yet we might just as well be a million miles away. Damn it!"

Beverly was exhausted. she hadn't slept for near on twenty four hours. Her hair was matted, her eyes were bloodshot and she was being unbelievably cranky with everything and everyone.

Professor Jagla gently squeezed her shoulder and pulled her eyes away from the telescope that she was resolutely staring into, seeing everything, but nothing except failure. "I can't stop now," She wailed. "We're so close. So, so close."

He pulled her further away from the bench where they were working with determination. "Come and have a cup of tea with me. Fifteen minutes won't hurt, either way, and you need a break, my dear."

Jagla tugged her along like a petulant child towards her office, not letting her go until she sat in her chair, making sure that she was not going to move before he went to the replicator and ordered up two cups of sweetened tea and a giant sticky bun for them each to eat.

"He lowered himself into the chair opposite her and sighed with satisfaction as he picked up the sweet

delicacy. "I have so missed this kind of luxury. I've been dying to sample the delights of your technology ever since I stepped off your transporter pad." And without further ado, he sank his teeth into the cake, closed his eyes and chewed with unashamed abandonment.

Beverly chuckled wearily as she watched him from across her desk. Slowly she began to break off delicate bits of her own bun and joined him in companionable quiet as they enjoyed the respite. But it wasn't long before the burning questions that ate away at her surfaced. "What can we do now, professor? Where else can we look for an answer? There simply has to be one. Something that we just haven't considered."

Staring with surprise into his now empty cup, Jagla got to his feet and promptly ordered another tea. As he lowered himself back into his chair, determined that they were not going to step back into the lab for at least an hour, he answered her. "Well, let's look at what we do know. We know it's an antibody that is needed to halt the degeneration of the disease, and we know that the foetus's own antibodies that it has developed in its miserably short life is the answer - almost. We've just need to find the missing link."

"We know all that, professor," Beverly snapped with impatience. "But what is the missing link?"

Unperturbed and unoffended by his colleagues cranky behaviour, he held his palm up to her. "I'm getting there." He soothed. "Let's go back to the beginning. We know that the Lanaarians are partly reptilian but mostly humanoid. The foetus that we tested has, we assumed, been a mixture of its parent. What if, just maybe, it is more reptilian than human. What if, over time, the race is changing; becoming more reptilian on a more baser level. What if it is the humanoid factor that is the missing link."

Beverly Crusher was speechless as she considered what the man was telling her. Could it really be that simple? Could a simple human gene be the missing component that they so desperately searched for?

Beverly felt excitement surging through her veins as the possibilities filled her mind. Could it really be that simple? She made to stand but a sharp reprimand from the man opposite her had her quickly sitting again. "You are NOT going to move from that seat, doctor until you have had a rest."

"But!" she protested.

"But, nothing, Beverly. We've waited this long, we can wait for another half an hour, or so. Chill."

Beverly laughed outright. "Chill! Why, Professor Jagla, wherever did you hear such a term?"

The professor laughed right along with her. "Oh, I don't know. Somewhere, I guess. It is a good concept though, isn't it? Do an old man a favour and just do it for me, okay?"

Smiling, Beverly settled back into her chair and picked her cup again, taking a sip of the soothing drink. "Okay. I guess a little longer won't hurt." But even as she desperately tried to push the image of yet another Lanaarian dying down on the planet, she knew that if Jagla's latest theory didn't work, the entire Lanaarian race was going to die anyway.

Three quarters of an hour later the team were back in the lab and as they both stood with their hands in their pockets and surveyed the organised chaos that lay before them, it was Beverly who stated the obvious question. "So, where are we going to get a human gene from?"

Taking a deep breath, Jagla said, "Let's try one of us first, shall we. I'll be the guinea pig." He took off his white lab coat, rolled up his sleeve and held it out to the woman beside him. "Go right ahead. I promise I won't cry."

Chuckling, picked up the necessary tool and held it against his forearm. "I'll have you know I'm a very good doctor. I don't make my patients cry. Well, not anymore anyway." She added just for fun.

But moments later all traces of humour was gone as they began the laborious task of separating the much needed components of Jagla's sample to begin testing. One hour later they sighed with frustration once more. "It didn't work!" Beverly moaned.

But Jagla was less put off. "No, but that was just our first attempt. Now it's your turn. Come on, sleeve up."

Beverly stared at him for a long moment, not quite believing him. But even so, she did as she was asked, removed one arm of her blue lab jacket and held out her arm to him. Jagla took the sample and as before, they tested it.

And as before, they failed.

"It's no use!" Beverly cried again. It isn't the answer. It's not going to work."

This time when Jagla responded to her cry of despair there was anger in his voice. "Giving up already are you, doctor? I thought you were made of sterner stuff than that! We've not lost yet. We just need to..."

"Need to what, professor? Try a dog next, or Data's cat maybe. Maybe they hold the damn key!"

"Hold right up there, young madam! I've heard enough of that talk. We must be missing something obvious; something so simple that it's staring right at us. Come on, think, Beverly. Stop having hysterics and think, girl!"

As tears of frustration poured down Beverly's face she spun on heels at the old man's harsh words. Okay, maybe she was being a defeatist, and maybe she was so tired that she could no longer think straight. And maybe, just maybe, there really was no cure for the Lanaarian race.

Her feet did not take her very far. As she reached the lab door she forced herself to stop. Her beloved sickbay lay before. Her trusted staff continued their duties as quietly as they could, even though it was obvious by their posture that they had heard the heated words.

Guiltily, Beverly's eyes fell upon the sole resident of the sickbay and met the dark eyes of her friend as she sat up resting upon one arm watching her with sorrow. Beverly silently studied her, quickly noticing the pallor of her skin, the dishevelled state of her long hair, and the way that her free hand rested tenderly upon her barely swollen tummy, reminding Beverly that Deanna wasn't supposed to be subject to the level of stress that must be overwhelming her senses. Her baby's senses, too.

Beverly watched as Deanna pushed herself to a seated position, her eyes never leaving Beverly's. Slowly Beverly pushed herself away from the door frame and walked over to her. By the time she had reached her side, the tears were falling again. "We failed, Deanna. We can't save them."

Deanna reached for Beverly's hand and held it tightly. "You're exhausted, Beverly. You should be in this bed resting, not me. I should be doing what I'm on board this ship to do. Counselling. I should be helping you through this, Beverly. Not laying here, pregnant and useless."

Beverly swiped at her wet face with the back of her hand. "I'm sorry," She murmured. "I shouldn't have done that to you. I just..."

Deanna tugged gently at her hand, her voice was firm but still held the soothing quality that made her who she was. "Talk to me, Beverly. Let me help, if I can."

Beverly gave up the fight and sunk to the chair besides Deanna's bed. The same chair that she had last slept in. "You can't help, Deanna. Nobody can. We thought we'd found the answer using a human's antibody to complete the chain, but it didn't work. It was our last hope."

"Who's tissues did you use?" Deanna asked.

"My own and the professors. Either one should have held the answer, we hoped. They didn't."

"I heard you were using a Lanaarian's unborn baby to find the cure. Is that true?"

Beverly squirmed in her seat, reluctant to pursue the delicate situation, especially knowing that Deanna was expecting a child of her own. "Yes, but it's mother was already dead, otherwise we would never have..."

Deanna reached for Beverly's hand again, gripping it even harder than before, shaking it to force Beverly to meet her eyes. "You did what you had to do, Beverly. Don't ever feel guilty about that."

Deanna could only sit and watch as the tears continued to stream down Beverly's cheeks. After a few moments, Deanna's eyes rose to meet the professors as he came up behind Beverly, gently resting his aged hands upon her shoulders with an gesture of comfort.

As Deanna watched the scene for a while until she felt another sensation filter in between the solace. Curiosity. "What is it, professor?" Deanna asked.

But he directed his question at the woman beneath his kneading fingers. "What if the samples were too old, Beverly?"

"The tears stilled with a sniff. "What do you mean?"

"We're working with..." He looked up at Deanna briefly before continuing. "Juvenile material. What if our samples didn't match because they were too old."

Deanna felt and saw both sets of eyes fall to her stomach region, hidden beneath the silky sheath that covered her. Instinctively, her hand drifted to it as her eyes met the professors. "What are you saying?"

Before he could answer, Beverly pushed herself to her feet and turned on him. "No! I will not allow it."

"Allow what?" Deanna cried, a feeling that she knew what they were arguing about was already forming in her mind. But the pair had forgotten she was there.

"You know it's our last chance!"

"I will not allow her to be used, no matter what the cost!"

"It won't harm it. You know it won't, Beverly. Be reasonable!"

"No, absolutely not!"

"Then all our work has been for nothing!"

"We'll find another way! I will not permit this to happen, professor. Deanna is my best friend!"

"Does someone want to tell me what all this ruckuss is about?!"

With a started gasp, all three occupants turned to face the captain who now stood in the open doorway with a look of utter disbelief upon his austere face.

Neither of the warring duo saw as Deanna slipped out of the bed and came to stand beside them.

"They want to use my unborn baby to test to see if it is compatible for the cure. Only neither one of them has yet had the decency to ask me if I even want to help."

Captain Picard stepped further into the room and came to a halt before the three of them. He glanced at each of them in turn, his gaze staying a little longer on Beverly's before finally settling on Deanna.

"And do you want to help, counselor?" He asked, with his heart in his throat.

All their eyes all dropped to Deanna's tiny waist as she settled her hand once more upon her child, she could only murmur brokenly, "Yes. Yes, I do, sir, no matter what it takes. I want to help the Lanaarians."

#### Chapter twenty six

"No!"

"She's made her decision, Beverly."

"I forbid it. She's not stable enough to make a decision like that."

"She seemed very final on the subject to me."

"Jean-Luc, she could lose her baby!"

"Is that correct, Professor Jagla? Is Deanna or her unborn baby at risk?"

Picard didn't like the hesitation that followed. "She...they shouldn't be. The procedure is harmless. However, there is always a slight risk with any surgery, no matter how trivial. We all know that."

"That's not a good enough answer, professor. I need more reassurances than that."

"We can't give you one, which is why I refuse to carry it out. Jean-Luc. This is Deanna Troi we are talking about. Our friend. Will Riker's wife, for heavens sake! What on Earth do you think he'll say when he finds out?"

"Maybe he'll be okay with everything. He may even encourage the tests."

"I wouldn't count on it! Christ, professor, the man doesn't even know he's going to be a father! Do you want to be the one to tell that he may lose his son before he's even been born, in a test that may not even work?! That's just not fair to him, or to Deanna, no matter what she says. This isn't just her decision."

Professor Jagla swung open the office door and said as he gestured for both Beverly and Captain Picard to proceed him., "Let's ask her, shall we?"

Deanna sat with her hands clasped upon the edge of her bed, her feet hanging over its edge unable to reach the floor. She looked small and fragile, but both Beverly and the captain knew that she was anything but.

But even so, the voice that answered their unasked question still sounded pathetically small. "I don't want my husband to know. I want to do this by myself. It's my body, my baby. It's my choice."

Beverly moved closer to her friend and reached for her hands, unlinking them as she held them within her own. Quietly she asked, tears forming in her eyes at the predicament they were now all in. "Will would not let you do this, would he, Deanna, if he knew?"

Deanna had the grace to look sheepish as she answered. "No, I don't think he would. But it wouldn't be because he doesn't want to help the Lanaarians. He would only protest against any harm coming to me or our son. That is the only reason why he would protest, Beverly."

"Nothing is certain, Deanna, and that is why I don't want this to happen."

"What would you have to do to remove the sample?" She asked with reluctance.

Beverly sighed, somehow knowing that the delicate question was coming. But she was saved by Jagla's intervention. "You don't need to know that, my dear. Let's just say that we would put you into a light sleep so that you don't move unintentionally. You have my word that no harm will come to you, or your son. I would not even consider it, if I thought otherwise."

For many long moments there was a silence between the threesome until eventually, Deanna asked her captain. "Where is Will now, captain?"

"He is down on the planet overseeing the crews that have been sent down." Picard was reluctant to reveal the whereabouts of Deanna's husband knowing that it would be the catalyst to her decision, a decision that he silently disagreed with. The baby had been made by them both and he felt that they both should be there together when her decision was made, either way. He had no doubt that Will would want to help the Lanaarians, but not at the expense of his own wife or his son lives.

She slid to her feet around and lay back in her own bed, her decision clearly made. "Then I want it done now, before he returns. Right or wrongly, I've made my decision. All I ask is that Will never knows unless...unless, of course...something goes wrong."

Knowing that there was no dissuading her now that she had made her mind up, Beverly picked up the hypo to send her friend off into a dreamless sleep. As she did so she whispered. "You have my word, Deanna, that you and your son's life will be our first priority. I'm too eager to have a cuddle with your little one to do anything to harm him or you. We'll see you in a bit, okay?"

Warily, Deanna nodded. Within seconds of the hypo touching her neck, she was fast asleep.

#### Chapter twenty seven

"Wow! you look amazing!"

"He's certainly ugly enough."

"Grrrrr."

"Good, good. You'll fit in perfectly."

"Do you think he smells bad enough, Data?"

Data took an exploratory sniff towards their target of scrutiny. "No, I do not think so. However, I think that by the time he arrives he will smell as all the others do."

"Nasty!" Geordi said with laughter lacing his one word.

"Indeed. It is not a pleasant odour." Replied Data, his gaze as deadpan as his gaze towards the Klingon.

"Have you finished ridiculing me?" Snarled Worf.

Geordi chuckled again. "Sorry, Worf, but have you actually looked in a mirror lately?"

"I have. I look...ridiculous." He slurred as he simultaneously glanced down at himself and grimaced. Until he was down on the planets surface he still wore covering. As proud as he was of his unique physique, he was not ready to show the crew of the Enterprise all of his attributes.

The transporter room was buzzing with activity as they waited the captains arrival. He'd been held up in sickbay for some unknown reason and Worf's orders were to wait for him so that he could see him off and give him his last instructions.

They didn't have to wait for long. Within minutes, Captain Picard strolled through the door, smiling brightly at the threesome as he approached. He also rubbed his hands together and Geordie couldn't resist asking. "Everything okay, captain?"

"Yes, yes, everything's grand, Mr. Laforge. Are we all set to go here? Mr. Worf. I must say you look..." He searched for the word to sum up the Klingon's new look, but could only come up with one that fitted. "Magnificent." He beamed.

"Thank you, sir." Worf grumbled, the words barely legible as he struggled with his new teeth. He was still unsure if he was upset that in reality Geordi hadn't had to do too much to alter his appearance so that he could pass for one of the primitive ones, or proud that they had achieved such a remarkable job.

"All set to go, Mr. Worf." The captain returned to business. At Worf's nod, he continued.

"Commander Riker will be waiting for you when you arrive at the co-ordinates below. From there he will lead you to the portal. From there on, Worf, you are on your own. If you can get any information back to us, then all the better, but if not, just keep yourself safe and come home. Understood?"

"Understood, captain. I will do my best, for the Federation, the Klingons and the Lanaarians."

The captain reached out to shake his hand and Worf only hesitated for a moment before settling his own much larger one into it, surprised at the intimate gesture. "Good luck, Mr. Worf. Do us all proud."

"Aye, sir. Goodbye." Worf nodded to his other comrades and headed for the transporter pad. Just as he heard Picard relay the Energise command, Worf whipped off the toga like covering that had kept his modesty. The last thing the Klingon heard as he de-materialized was the stunned gasp of those who were watching him, making Worf smirk with pride at what he had just revealed. He'd just made sure that no one would ever forget him now.

### Chapter twenty eight

The first thing Worf heard as he materialised on the planet's surface was laughter. Commander Riker's laughter, to be precise. Damn Geordi for letting him know he was coming, and not only that he was coming, that he was coming hung like a donkey for all to see.

It took him a great deal of strength to ignore the incredulous laughter and meet Will, eye to eye.

However, before he could get one word out, Will spluttered. "Damn! I can see why Deanna took a shine to you, my friend. Are all Klingons built like you?"

Doing his hardest to play down the flattering remark, Worf smugly growled. "When you see our

women, you'd see why we are...large."

Will's laughter grew in crescendo until tears filled his eyes. Worf stood by patiently waiting for the moment of hilarity to wear off. Eventually Will slapped him on the back urging him to walk at his side. "Damn, Worf, you're full of surprises. Sorry I got carried away. Haven't had such a blast since...Hell, I can't even remember."

The two men walked some distance before eventually Will stopped near a break in the trees. "The portal is just beyond those trees there. Worf followed Will's finger as he pointed to the area where the portal would reappear, and despite his inquisitiveness, Worf felt a ripple of fear thread through him. "The portal, from what we've observed, seems to come roughly every hour. It's getting near to that time any minute now." Will turned to face the big man. "You ready for this, Worf?"

Unconsciously, Worf took a deep breath before answering him. "Aye, sir. I'm ready. Although I do not think I will be coming back."

Will looked at him with surprise and unease. "Are you okay with that?"

"Yes. That is providing that my death is not in vain. If I succeed in my mission then I will go Sto-Vo-Kor with pride in my heart."

Will was momentarily speechless. But not for long. Taking him by the shoulder and squeezing it to show his own pride at Worf's bravery, Will murmured. "You're a good man, Worf, and a good friend. Do your best to get back to us, okay?"

Worf could only nod, suddenly finding that his voice refused to work. Will understood his silence, knowing that no more words could be said. Giving Worf's hand a hefty shake, Will quickly saluted and walked away.

Taking a deep breath, Worf turned to face the area that he was heading to and started walking. As he approached he heard the distant sounds of movement amongst the trees and quickly realised that others were arriving to return in the portal, too.

As Worf hid behind a tree close by and mentally prepared himself to become one of them, he crouched down and began emitting similar sounds that he heard as they approached. Within moments, the area was buzzing with activity as they congregated in the area before him.

Practising the snarl and grunts that he could now hear barely a few yards away from him, Worf finally took the plunge and stepped out to face them. As their eyes turned to face him Worf momentarily wondered if his disguise was good enough. Geordi and co. had done their utmost to replicate the general that they'd kidnapped, but even so, they couldn't get him exactly right. There were subtle differences and if any of the aliens that now stood around him knew the general with any intimacy, they would know that it wasn't him.

One of them stepped towards him. Worf could see the puzzlement in his dull eyes and for a moment Worf was unsure what to do. But then a strange noise began to grow behind him, a strange and eerie windy sound that was completely unnatural to its surroundings and Worf realised that the portal had emerged.

As all eyes turned with eagerness to watch it form, Worf was forgotten. As they began to chant in their own tongue, Worf began to mimic them. One by one they began to walk towards it, stepping into the swirling vortex and disappearing from view until eventually, Worf became the last one to go. With trepidation he stepped nearer to the strange phenomena staring at it as though transfixed. This was it. This was where it began. He took one last look behind him, mentally saying goodbye to all that he knew, then turned back and took that last final step into oblivion.

Only time would tell if Worf Roshenko would ever return to that of what he knew. Only time would tell if he managed to achieve what he set out to do.

Time. The one thing they didn't have. The one thing that he needed to make sure he got himself home

again.

Chapter twenty nine

"Is he okay?"

"He's safe and sound."

"Did it work; The sample. Did it work, Beverly?"

Beverly smiled no longer able to hold back the tears that had threatened. Some were for the success of the trials. Some were for the success of the operation with no damage done to either mom or son. And some were just from sheer tiredness.

"It worked, Deanna. The serum is being reproduced as we speak. It's going to take some time, and unfortunately not all the Lanaarians can benefit from it. But for the others that we've caught in time, we can save."

"And Worf?" Deanna asked not even bothering to hide the fear in her eyes from her friend as she clung to her fingers tightly.

"No news yet, I'm afraid."

"No news is good news, though, right?"

Beverly grinned at her, even though the smile was somewhat wobbly. "No news is good news."

Once again Deanna's eyes glazed over with fear as she asked another more obvious question. "And Will. Is Will back yet?"

Beverly pushed herself to a stand as she answered her. "Yes, he is. He's in the ready room with the captain briefing him with what's happening down on the planets surface. He stopped by a short while ago but you were still sleeping."

Deanna took a shaky breath. "I want to see him. I want to tell him about the baby, Beverly."

Beverly nodded slowly, her face solemn. "I'm glad you've decided to see sense at last. I'll let him know then make sure you have some privacy."

"Can't I go to our quarters? I feel fine now. Well, almost fine." She amended when she saw the doctors eyebrow rise.

The doctor pondered over her request for a moment or two and then relented when she saw the desperation in her young patients face. "Okay. I guess you can't come to any harm tucked up into your own bed. It certainly won't do the commander any harm. The poor man is completely frazzled."

Deanna looked away guiltily. "I know. I haven't been much use to him lately, have I?"

"You had your own reasons for keeping your pregnancy to yourself, and now I fully understand why. You were destined to help the Lanaarians, Deanna. Well," She amended. "Your son was destined to help. And you were right. Will would never have agreed to the procedure if he'd known. But from now on, no more secrets, please!"

Deanna chuckled. "Okay. No more secrets from here on in. Now, where have you stashed my clothes?"

Grinning, Beverly told her. "Oh, I think we can abuse the transporter just for a few moments." She spoke to thin air. "Transporter, site to site transport of Counselor Troi to her quarters."

And as the Betazoid mother-to-be began to disappear before her very eyes in a shower of particles, Beverly wriggled her fingers in a fond farewell.

A deep voice spoke from behind her. "I hope she's gone home to tell her husband something important."

Beverly was smiling as she turned and faced the one man that she could share anything with. "Yes, Jean-Luc, she has. Mind you," She teased. "I'd love to be a fly on the wall when she does. I bet Will's face will be a picture."



Picard laughed as he took Beverly's arm and led her out of sickbay. "What I wouldn't give for an old fashioned camera. The photo would be worth a small ransom."

"Ooh, that's cruel, Jean-Luc Picard. Real cruel."

"Yes, isn't it?" He grinned then leaned closer to her and whispered conspiratorially, "Shall we just go and eavesdrop on them instead? After all, he might need the services of a good doctor once she's told him."

She laughed along with him, the sound wonderful after the stresses of the past few weeks. "Why, Jean-Luc, I never considered you to be so naughty."

He raised his head and laughed at the heavens. "Naughty! Ma Cherie, you haven't even begun to see the naughty side of me yet."

Instantly the joyous moment changed and with it came his words that were filled with the promise of something that Beverly now wanted more than anything after everything that had happened recently. Stopping, Jean-Luc turned towards her and looked deep into her eyes and stroked his thumb along her jawline. He whispered seductively against her cheek. "Are you up to tackling a naughty Frenchman, Beverly Crusher?"

"Um hmm," She murmured dreamily. "As long as we get some sleep afterwards."

"You would want to sleep after I've finished with you."

"Is that a promise?" Her voice now hoarse with desire as she stared dreamily into his grey eyes.

"More than a promise. My place or...?"

"Yooooohoooooooooooo! Jean-Luc, there you are!"

The whole ship could have heard the groan that left the lips of the two expectant lovers. Jean-Luc's forehead leaned against Beverly's as he frantically reigned in his ardent arousal, a task that wasn't as hard as he expected knowing that Lwaxana Troi was about to descend upon him.

The couple steeled themselves for what was to come. In another time and another situation, Jean-Luc wouldn't have been politeness itself. But the very thought of not seeing what he had started with the woman he had always loved though pushed his accommodating button right out of the window.

"Jean-Luc, Beverly, where have you been? I've been searching for you simply everywhere!"

Completely oblivious, or deliberately oblivious to the tension emanating from the duo that stood stiffly before her, Lwaxana Troi ploughed on. "I hear you've discharged my daughter from your care. I must say, that I..."

"Mrs. Troi, please go away and leave us alone. We are both very tired and we are both going to bed - together. And yes, I did just say that. Good day to you, madam."

Both Lwaxana and Beverly were equally stunned as Picard purposely took Beverly's arm and steered her around the open-mouthed Betazoid hurrying down the corridor as though the devil himself was on his tail.

"Damn woman!" He exploded quietly. "I can't even get a moments peace when I'm about to seduce the woman of my dreams. God, how does Deanna...?"

"I'm the woman of your dreams, Jean-Luc?" Beverly asked, pulling him to a halt so that she could look at him head on.

She had her answer as he slowly and lovingly took in her features, his anger at being interrupted evaporating in an instant. Slowly reaching forward he lightly touched his lips to hers. Hovering close, he murmured, "You must know I'm crazy about you. I always have been."

There was no doubt in his sincerity as he took both of her hands and pulled them up to his chest to cradle them as he kissed her deeply. If anybody saw them, they didn't see, and they didn't care who did anymore.

Gently breaking apart, Beverly whispered against his shoulder as he pulled her tight against him.

"Take me to bed, captain."

As he took her hand and hurried them both towards his quarters, he growled, "Just try and stop me, doctor."

### Chapter thirty

Will studied his wife as she lay sleeping in their bed with nothing but the blue illumination of the various panels to highlight her beautiful features. For a while he thought he would never see this day again. He didn't know why but it had been a feeling that had eaten away at his guts for weeks.

As quietly as he could he slipped off his uniform and climbed into bed. Before he had even settled, Deanna slid towards him and curled her arm across his waist. He chuckled in the darkness and sighed the sigh of a contented man and within moments he was fast asleep.

To say he was disappointed to find himself in his bed alone was an understatement. As he lay there on his back with his hands behind his head and thought about their lives as a couple he began to mull over the numerous changes he had seen in his wife since.

And she had changed, dramatically, he realised. Even before the Lanaarian plight had begun he had noticed the change. He had briefly wondered if she was unhappy in their marriage, but then he remembered what Guinan had told him, so he dismissed that issue.

He was perturbed because the changes that he saw in her were ones of contentment. If she was unhappy she would not feel that way. And what was with her vanishing every morning? He'd been so looking forward to waking up beside her this morning that it stung to know that still nothing had changed between them.

He guessed that she'd be where she always was at this time of the day. Ten Forward. Waiting for him. But why couldn't she wait for him in their home? Why was she hiding? What was she hiding?

And she looked different, too. She was always a beautiful woman. Stunning even. But now she was even more so. But why? What had changed? It wasn't her hair or her make-up. Okay, her body looked better than he'd ever seen it and he certainly wasn't going to complain about that. She barely ate enough to feed a sparrow, but even so...

But even so...

She was gaining weight.

And then the penny dropped.

Damn! How could he have been so dense?! The enormous breasts. The way she held her hand against her tummy. Was that swollen too? He racked his brains to try and remember if he'd seen any evidence of swelling, but then he ashamedly admitted to himself that he never seemed to get close enough to her anymore to even know what her body looked like. It also accounted for the many other things about her that had transcended beyond her normal beautiful self.

God, his wife was pregnant with his child and he hadn't even realised.

Before he even counted to ten he was up, washed and dressed. Ten minutes later he was standing just inside Ten Forwards doorway watching his wife.

It was a full ten seconds later before Deanna became aware that he was there watching her. And five seconds more for her to realise that he knew about their baby.

Will glanced across at Guinan who was watching him with interest. Her face held an enigmatic smile and when she bobbed her head in the direction of his wife it freed him from his frozen spot. Slowly, with trepidation, Will walked over to her and her eyes never left his as he sunk into the chair beside her.

"Deanna. Darling?" He croaked, suddenly unsure what to say. What to do. How to ask.

Her smile at his nervousness set free the tension that held them captive and she reached out her fingers to him. He didn't hesitate to take them and brought them to his lips to place a firm kiss to her

knuckles, his eyes closing as his emotions ran away from him.

"Do you mind...about the baby?" She asked tentively.

"Mind?!" he spluttered. "Are you crazy?! You have just made me the happiest man alive! How could I mind, sweetheart?"

Will couldn't stop himself as he pulled her closer to him and kissed her tenderly. There were tears in both of their eyes when they parted. "Why didn't you tell me?" he asked quietly.

"You were so busy with the Lanaarian situation and I wanted you to be completely focused on that. I know you would have only worried endlessly if you'd have known, Will, and I didn't want to be responsible for that, either. It was bad enough for you coping with my psychological problem. Knowing that there was a baby, too, would have been unbearable for you."

"I wouldn't have gone on the mission, if I'd have known, Deanna." He complained.

"You needed to go, Will. Beverly needed you with her. I had everyone I needed here on board." She reasoned.

Suddenly Will's face turned sulky. "I suppose your mother knows?"

Deanna couldn't help but laugh at the ridiculous question or his petulant pout. "Oh, Will, how could she not know? She is an Empath, after all."

"And Beverly?"

"Yes, of course she knew. She's my doctor."

"Tell me the captain didn't know, please!" he pleaded with a whine.

Deanna nodded sheepishly. "He knew, too. Reluctantly, though, I admit. But he IS the captain. He's supposed to know everything that's happening on board his ship, you know that."

"And Worf?" Now he was getting silly.

"No," She grinned. "Not Worf, or anyone else outside of sickbay."

He pouted again and gestured over his shoulder towards the bar where he knew that the quiet bar tender was going about her business. "She knew." It wasn't a question, just a matter of fact statement.

This time Deanna couldn't stop the laughter as it bubbled up from deep inside of her. "Yes, Will, Guinan was in on the big secret, too. Who do you think gave me tea to stop the morning sickness?"

"That's why you come here every day?"

"Do you mind?"

"No," he finally relented. "Only from now on, we both come, okay?"

"Okay." She promised.

"I think I'd like a kiss, Mrs. Riker."

"I think I'd like a kiss, too, Mr. Riker."

"Ready to come back home?"

"More than ready. I've got so much to tell you."

With feigned worry, he asked. "I am the father, aren't I?"

Suddenly realising that she had missed this side of their loving relationship she was quick to respond in kind. "Well...I'm not too sure..."

She squeaked in alarm as her husband swept her up into his arms, his growled, "Don't torment me woman, I'm still in shock and liable to do something weird." was met with her hysterical giggles as they swept out of the lounge.

"I like weird. After all, I did marry you." She cooed as she curled her arms around his neck and snuggled closer to his big chest.

It was seconds later that an explosion rocked the ship hard and all they could hear was the screams of the crew. But the only scream that Will could hear was the one of his wife's still nestled in his arms as

he fell.

### Chapter thirty one

With his wife locked against him Will could do nothing else but take himself and Deanna in a terrifying freefall as the Enterprise tilted sickeningly with the blast, knocking himself out as he plunged against a bulkhead metres away from where they were. Deanna screamed and screamed as she held onto her husband, not knowing what was happening or where they were going to end up as he flew through the air still holding onto her.

When they eventually came to halt in a tangle of arms and body and legs the first thing Deanna thought about was her unborn child. Using her own sense of him had her gasping with relief as she felt the tiny ripples of awareness. He was safe within her.

Her thoughts then turned to the man that lay still beside her. Will was unconscious. She put shaking fingers to his neck and a shuddering cry of relief left her lungs as she felt his steady heartbeat. He was alive.

Slapping her comm badge, she shouted above the wail of the klaxons. "Troi to Crusher. Medical emergency. Will is injured. I need your help!"

At the sound of her friends returning reply, Deanna allowed herself to release the horrors of the last terrifying moments and burst into tears. "I'm on my way, Deanna! Just hold on!"

Deanna managed to manoeuvre herself so that she sat with Will's head cradled in her lap. It was barely a minute before Beverly came bounding down the corridor, her face already showing the bruises of her own traumatic tumble.

She quickly knelt down beside them, her medical scanner already sweeping over both of their bodies as she lowered herself to her knees. "Are you okay, Deanna? The baby?" She asked with her heart in her throat, not quite believing what the gadget in her hand was telling her.

Still visibly shaking the Betazoid quickly reassured her. "We're fine, Beverly. It's Will I'm worried about. He was carrying me so took the brunt of our weight as he fell. What the hell happened?"

Satisfied that Will had only rendered himself unconscious as he'd fallen against the bulkhead, Beverly turned her attention to the counselor. "We don't know yet. The captain thinks that it maybe something to do with Worf."

As she spoke she pressed a hypo against Will's neck and within seconds he began to come round. "Oh, my God," He moaned. "What the hell hit me?"

Stroking his face with her hand, Deanna whispered to him. "I think I did, Imzadi. Sorry."

With her words he suddenly remembered where he was and what had happened and began to push himself to his feet. He swayed with the nausea that attacked him and reached out for the wall to steady himself. "What the hell just hit us!?" It was a second more when he glanced down at his wife who sit sat at his feet and hurriedly hunkered down beside her, taking her still trembling fingers within his. "Deanna? Are you you okay? The baby?"

Deanna completely lost her composure at the care and concern that her husband and on a whimper she reached out for him. "We're fine, Will. We're both okay."

In a heartbeat Will swept his weeping wife into his arms and lifted her back to where she was before the explosion happened. Beverly fussed around them both for a moment before she was summonsed to someone else who was in need.

"Take her home, Will. See she's tucked up in bed before you go racing off to the bridge."

"Already on it," He promised.

As he started to stride away Beverly called after him, clearly thrilled that Deanna had finally revealed her secret to him. "Congratulations, daddy!"

Without missing a step, Will turned full circle and gave her a huge grin and a wink before carrying on

his way. "Thanks, doc."

At the same time as Will entered their quarters the klaxons ceased their tedious clamouring. Will hurried Deanna over to their still unmade bed and gently placed her upon it. His distraction as he tucked her in was evident. "Stay there for me, please, sweetheart. I'll be back as soon as I can."

As he leant down to kiss her forehead, Deanna couldn't hide the fear in her voice as she asked. "Do you think he's dead, Will?"

Will didn't need her to say Worf's name to know that it was him that she was referring to. "I don't know, but if I know Worf, he's still out there somewhere kicking butt."

Tenderly he pulled the coverlet over her. "As soon as I can find out anything I'll let you know. That's a promise. Now, are you going to stay put or am I going to have to put you in cuffs?"

"Haven't used those in a while, commander. You sure you still know how to use them?" She murmured seductively, the twinkle in her eye doing things to him that really didn't ought to, considering the situation.

"Get out of that bed before I return and you'll soon find out." He warned. Reluctantly he pressed another quick kiss to her lips and turned away before temptation gave way to the ship's crisis. But even so, as he reached the bedroom door, he couldn't help himself as he stopped and gave her another hungry look. Deanna chuckled at the growl she heard erupt from low in his throat before he finally stormed from the room.

As soon as she was sure he was gone, she pushed aside the cover and hopped out of bed. There was no way she was going to lay still and do absolutely nothing when her ship needed her, and settling down in front of her consul she spoke to the one person that wouldn't reel off a bunch of health questions. "Commander Data, it's Troi. Could you give me an update, please?"

"Certainly, counselor. It appears the remains of a ship has fallen from a wormhole. We surmise that Worf completed his mission and destroyed the enemy ship."

"Is there any sign of him? Is he alive?" she asked with trepidation.

"We have no news of Lieutenant Worf's status at this time, counselor. However..."

Another more familiar voice broke Data's report. "Are you out of that bed, Mrs. Riker?"

"I most certainly am not!" She responded with as much feigned effrontery as she could muster.

"Good," her husband growled. "You'd damned well better not be. We'll keep you posted, Deanna, I promise. Now rest. Riker out."

Left with nothing to do but pace her quarters, Deanna began to restlessly put things that had fallen in the explosion back into their original places. The few broken things she put into the recycling bin. She didn't even stop to consider that the simple chore she'd just performed would meet with the wrath of her husband when he came home and found that to have achieved what she'd done she would have had to have been out of her bed.

Still restless after her tidying spree, Deanna wilted with relief when the door told her that she had a visitor. Before she even opened it, Deanna knew that it was her mother on the other side and put on a bright smile to welcome her.

Lwaxana Troi swept into the room like a tornado, her first words to her daughter were enough to tell her that her husband had had words. "You're not in bed, little one. You are in no condition to go racing about the ship getting in the way."

Deanna took a deep breath. "I am pregnant, mother, not ill, and I am NOT racing around the ship! Did Will put you up to this?"

Lwaxana swirled to a halt in the middle of her lounge. "He asked that I check in on you, yes. But I would have done so anyway. I'm not completely heartless, you know? I do have your best interests at heart, too. After all, my grandson will eventually become heir to..."

Deanna sighed. Deep down inside she knew that her mother would bring her sons heritage into a conversation, but hadn't figured it out before she'd even completed her second trimester. "My son, mother, will not take over from my role on Betazed. One day he will follow in his daddy's footsteps and his daddy's daddy's footsteps, too. I have willingly broken the chain, mother. You know that. My life...our life is here, on the Enterprise, or even a ship of our own some day. I will not be coming back to Betazed to take over from you."

For a long moment the room was in silence as the two women faced off. Deep hurt reflected in the older woman's eyes and determination shone in the others. Deanna had no intention of returning to her old life. This was her life now. Will and his son was what she wanted and it was time that her mother understood that and accepted it.

But then Deanna hadn't figured on her mother's tenacity. "One day, Deanna Troi, my girl, you will lose that husband of yours and then where will you be?"

Deanna gasped, shocked that her own mother would utter such a thing. "How could you, mother!? How could you compare my life to yours? That was an utterly wicked thing to say to me, especially now!"

Lwaxana stepped towards her daughter, realising that she had probably over stepped the mark. but even so, Deanna needed to know how it was for Starfleet employees. How it was for those that were left behind. "I'm sorry, darling. I didn't mean to upset you. But have you even considered what would happen to you if and when something happens to you husband?"

"I am a Starfleet officer, too. I'm out here with him, not stuck on a planet a million miles away from him waiting for him to come home. I want to be there for him when he comes home, and I want to say goodbye to him when he leaves. I do not want to spend my life wondering and regretting, like you did, and still do, mother."

Deanna knew she had hit home with her last remark. Deanna's father had pleaded with his wife to join him on board his ship so that they could be a proper family, but she had steadfastly refused. He had been away from her for more than four months and Lwaxana had never even gotten close to saying goodbye to her husband before he'd lost his life. Deanna was determined that the same scenario would never happen to her. She was going to always be wherever her husband was.

Deanna would never go through her life with the same regrets as her mother.

The older woman did not even attempt to hide the sheen of tears in her eyes as she shored herself up to hold on to the last shred of pride that she had left. "I see. Yes, I suppose you would see it that way. You always were more independent than I, and I can see that whatever I say will not change your mind. I will say no more on the subject. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll see if there is anyone out there that really does need my help."

As Deanna watched her mother leave her quarters her heart overflowed with pity and sorrow. She'd been hard on her, she knew that. Deanna was going to have to make her peace. Her mother, besides Will, was all she had and she'd hoped, that over time, her mother would accept her way of life. Now maybe that she'd made it clear that she never had any intentions of ever returning to Betazed to live, they could move on.

Moments later her discussion with her mother was forgotten as she heard her beloveds familiar voice. "Deanna, you may want to make your way to sickbay. We've found him."

### Chapter thirty two

Shock rippled through her as Deanna stepped into sickbay and made her way to her husbands side. Feeling her beside him, Will took her hand and pulled her closer to him, preparing her for what she was about to see.

Steeling herself, Deanna finally dared to look at the body that lay on the gurney in front of her. Before her lay a mass of tangled flesh and prosthetics. The blood loss that Worf had endured made it

impossible to see what was Worf and what was not.

Thankfully the Klingon warrior was semi-unconscious but even so, his body jerked with the painful spasms that ripped throughout his body making the medical teams job of making sense of what they were touching doubly hard.

Deanna nudged herself forward and gently lay her hand on Worf's battered forehead in an attempt to quieten him. Will watched with fascination as his wife's tender ministrations gradually soothed Worf's troubled mind, her thoughts clearly getting through to him. A quick pang of envy rose within him but he just as quickly squashed it down again, knowing that she would have done the same for anyone who was suffering as much as Worf evidently was.

Now that the Klingon was somewhat calmer, Beverly quickly administered the necessary drug so that she could get him into theatre. Her grateful eyes met Deanna's as she thanked her. "Thank you, counselor. I don't know what you did to him but whatever it was seems to have calmed him down. He was going crazy when we first found him."

"I only told him that he was home and that he was safe, that's all." Deanna replied, stepping back into Will's arms as they made to move him towards the surgical section. "Is he going to be okay?" She suddenly asked, worry clouding her features.

"He'll be okay," She promised. "I'll make sure he's even prettier than he was before. See you all later. I promise I'll let you know when we're done." She addressed Will. "Take her home, commander. That's an order." And with a sweep of her blue med coat, she was gone leaving them all to wait and worry in the silent aftermath of chaos, the answers about Worf's mission hovering unanswered in the now still air surrounding them.

"I wish Alexander were here. Worf needs someone with him." Deanna quietly murmured as Will turned her towards the doors to lead her away from sickbay.

Will squeezed his wife with tenderness. "Alex is a long way from here, Deanna. He can't help him right now, but I know you can. You're closer to him than anyone else on board. Are you going to be able to get him through this on your own?"

As they entered the turbolift to take them to their quarters Deanna snaked her arms around Will's waist and rested her cheek upon his large chest with a grateful sigh. "Of course. He's done the impossible, for us and the Lanaarians. We're all his friends, Will. He's going to need each and everyone of us."

Will's hand continued to stroke Deanna's hair as he held her close to him, suddenly wishing they were in their quarters where he could give her the comfort that she was clearly crying out for. Feeling her against him reminded him how fragile his wife was, what with the Lanaarians plight and how it had affected her mentally. Then there was her pregnancy along side the added pressure of her mother arriving on board. He had heard through the grapevine that there had been several heated words spoken between them and he silently wondered what they had been about. But more importantly, he knew that whatever had happened between Deanna and her mother needed to be resolved, for their baby's sake.

Their baby.

As he watched Deanna move about the room once they'd stepped inside the sanctuary of their home Will couldn't help but watch her looking for the signs that he had so obviously missed before he went away. And then as she stood straight from bending down to pick a pad up from the table he saw the outline of her figure; the gentle swell of her tummy, the breasts, large enough before, now larger still, and as she turned to smile at him, Will saw the radiance in her beautiful face. Deanna positively glowed with health, despite the fatigue that had plagued her recently leaving dark shadows beneath her eyes. But even so, there was no mistaking the obvious.

How could he have missed such obvious signs?

And with a jolt, he realised that it had been because she'd deliberately wanted him to miss them. She hadn't wanted him to know.

But why?

Slowly he made his way to the couch and sat down. Patting the seat beside him Will beckoned his wife to sit. "Sit down, Deanna. Come and talk to me."

Deanna sighed with relief as she sank onto the couch and snuggled against Will as he pulled her up against him. He kissed the top of her head tenderly and then asked. "Tell me about our baby."

Dreamily Deanna sighed automatically moving her hand to her stomach, rubbing it gently. "He's..." "It's a boy?" Will asked with wonder.

"It's a boy." She confirmed with a chuckle. "And he's going to be born mid August."

Will swelled with masculine pride. "Round about my birthday."

"Well, yes," she grinned. I thought it would save on the parties. You know? Combine the two."

"Not a chance in hell." He retorted. "This kid is special enough to have one all of his own."

Deanna chuckled and snuggled closer. Will dropped his head back upon the couch's edge as an elated weariness crept over him. \*\*August\*\* he silently mused. \*\*Damn, so soon. God, it's already Feb...\*\*

Deanna instantly felt his mind and body shift and she warily pushed herself away so that she could see his face. Confused azure eyes met hers. "You're already four months along, Deanna?"

She nodded slowly.

"Can I ask why you didn't tell me sooner?"

Deanna squirmed in her seat. "I already told you the reason why, Will. I didn't want to worry you while you were on Lanaare."

"I was only gone for four weeks. We didn't know anything about the Lanaars until a few days before that. You would have been almost two months along by then. What was the reason for not telling me before then?"

"I..I don't know, Will. There was something inside of me telling me not to tell you. I don't know what it was or the reason why. All I know is that I knew someone's life depended on me keeping it from you."

Exasperated, Will asked, the hint of sarcasm revealing his growing unease. "So...who died?"

Deanna pushed herself to her feet only to have Will pull her back down to his side. "Enough running, Deanna. Tell me. Who died?"

"No one."

"So you could have told me about my son after all?" He grilled relentlessly.

"No. I couldn't take the risk, Will. I had to wait until the danger had passed."

"What makes you think it has? You've still got six whole months to go, Deanna. Anything could happen between now and then."

"It doesn't matter anymore. You would have guessed that I was pregnant before much longer so the secrecy wasn't warranted."

"You're not making any sense, Deanna." And then a horrifying thought zipped through his mind. "Is my son safe? Is that what you're telling me. That my son is in danger?"

Deanna was quick to reassure him. "No, no, he's okay, Imzadi. The danger has passed. He's fine. We're fine. It was just the Lanaarian situation. It was scary, for all of us. Me especially. The Lanaarians terror tore me apart so much that Dr. Selar had to keep me mildly sedated otherwise I would have probably lost our son from the stress levels that I was experiencing."

As Will studied his wife intently trying to determine if she was telling him the truth - the whole truth, Deanna held his gaze with defiance. She hated deceiving him, especially about something as



important as the welfare of their child. But what had needed to be done had been done and now it was all over with. She was safe. Her baby was safe and her husband was home, safe. She couldn't ask for anything more other than forgiveness.

"I love you, Will, and I'm sorry for not telling you."

Will pulled her back to his side and cuddled her close, his voice hoarse with tenderness. "I love you, too. No more secrets, though, promise?"

Deanna reached up and met his lips with her own. "I promise. Are you going to take me to bed?"

Will traced her lips with his tongue, dipping inside to taste her sweetness. "Do you want to go?"

"Yes," She purred. "Guess what I found when I was tidying up?"

"Not the handcuffs?" he growled.

"Uh huh. You did threaten to use them if I disobeyed your orders."

Will stood and swept his wife up into his arms and headed for the sanctuary of their bedroom, and sure enough, on the side was the silver cuffs. "You disobeyed me? Damn, woman, you really do try my patience at times."

Deanna was laughing as Will gently threw her onto the bed and followed her down, but within moments, the laughter was gone as the love that had been put on the back burner for what seemed to be eons poured forth from their souls. As Will stripped away Deanna's clothes he deliberately halted his crazed ardour and allowed himself a moment or two to study his wife's body.

Gentle hands and eyes traced a path from her cheek and down over swollen and darkened breasts. His large hand came to rest upon the small swollen mound of her tummy. When his eyes raised to meet hers they were misty with tenderness.

He croaked, his emotions suddenly catching him unawares "Oh, God, Deanna, how could I have missed this? You're exquisite."

Deanna couldn't answer her husband, nor wanted to. Reaching up, she tenderly pulled his face down to hers, the need to have him take her in the only way that she knew would hush his fears for good as he settled his large body atop of hers and reverently loved her as though she were a fragile butterfly. But within moments Deanna realised that the tender loving that he was showering upon her was nothing to do with how he felt about her, but his fear of harming their baby.

She quickly remedied that by suddenly reversing the role and reaching for the cuffs she dangled them before his startled face. "What are you doing?" he asked, expectant curiosity lighting his eyes as he studied her in the starlit room.

"Reminding you that I'm a woman with needs, Will, and not something that is going to shatter into a million pieces just because I'm pregnant with your baby. Now," She demanded, linking her fingers with his and pressing them into the pillow beside his head letting her hair swing to hide them away. "Make love to me before I go crazy."

The gasp that left their lungs took their breath away as she slowly lowered herself onto him. "My God!" Will groaned. "You feel like..."

Deanna chuckled seductively against his throat as she licked a trail along it's length. "Like you're making love to a virgin again. You like?"

And as Will released her hands and gripped her thickening waist and thrust harder into her, forgetting for an instant that she was carrying his son, he growled unable to keep the feral, possessive tone from his voice. "Are you kidding? Is it going to be like this all the time?"

Before she could answer him, Deanna found herself rolled beneath him, the position and power suddenly reversed. Not that she minded. She'd achieved what she'd set out to do and now that Will's qualms about making love to his pregnant wife had been unfounded. Instead of answering him, Deanna pulled his head to hers and kissed him deeply.

\*Damn!\* Will thought with wonder. \*She even tastes better than she did before\* It was the last coherent thought as his wife took him to paradise and then further still.

### Chapter thirty three

\*What do I say to them. What do I say to my captain? How can I tell them that I failed? That I destroyed my future without batting an eyelid. I blew them all to hell and I'd do it again in a heartbeat.\*

Worf's still slightly distorted gaze slowly went from one comrade to another as they gathered around his bed. Beverly had done her best with his battered body. His mind, though, that would take a little more than her expertise.

His eyes lingered on the counselor's for a little longer than the others. She would help him, he knew. In some of his darkest hours, Deanna had always seen him through with little more than a comforting touch and a heart-warming smile. Most of the time those had been enough, but just occasionally, he'd needed more and she had given it to him without hesitation.

As though she was reading his mind Deanna moved forward and found his fingers, her eyes and thoughts sending him the comfort that his tumbling mind needed.

"Are you ready to tell us what happened, Mr Worf?"

With reluctance, Worf pulled his eyes and mind back to his captain who hovered at the head of his bed. Taking a deep swallow he straightened his shoulders, ready to face whatever the outcome of his statement had in store for him. In truth, Worf wasn't sure if his actions on board the alien ship were for his own gratitude or were for the good of the cause. A little of both, he guessed.

Could he have done anything any differently - any better? No, he surmised. He'd had no choice in the end. It hadn't taken them long to rattle him and none of them were in any mood to compromise or take prisoners. They would have killed him without hesitation. No, he'd done the only thing that he could.

"Aye, captain. The portal took me on board the ship, but it was not as we thought. The situation on board reminded me of a Borg cube. Everyone on board was just a drone being led by a higher force."

"This...force, it was not aboard that ship?"

"No, sir, it was not."

"Then where?"

Worf grimaced, beginning feeling as though he was being backed into a corner - a familiar sensation that he had endured aboard the alien ship. "I have no idea, captain. I'm sorry, I couldn't find out anything more. My position had been compromised so I had to move quickly to achieve my goal."

"Your initial goal was to find some answers, Mr. Worf." Picard reminded him.

"Sir, I felt that my goal was to stop the slaughter of the Lanaarians. Another few more minutes and I would have achieved nothing as I would have been dead."

"So you saw nothing of who was leading these creatures?"

An image flitted through Worf's mind. An image of a proud Klingon warrior who'd made Worf's blood run cold at just the mere sight of him. To have his most dreaded fear proven; that his own race had evolved to include genocide had made Worf sick to his stomach. To know that he hadn't been able to kill the man himself still hurt Worf more than he'd ever know.

But to tell his captain - his comrades that it was a Klingon that had instigated the mass slaughter of the Lanaarians was incomprehensible. He couldn't do it.

"No, sir, I did not."

There was a lengthy silence as the senior crew digested his news. The Troi woman had told them that she has seen a Klingon when she had grilled the alien and it seemed likely that it had been so. Either way, whether it had been a Klingon or not, the Lanaarians future was safe. Now knowing that there

was a likely possibility of it happening again at some point in the future, Starfleet would be aware of it.

Seemingly satisfied that Worf was not going to give him anymore information, Captain Picard decided to leave him be. "Thank you, Mr. Worf, I will see that you are commended for your part in the downfall of the Lanaarians tormentors. Get some rest and I'll expect a full report on my desk when you feel you are ready."

Worf's shoulders slumped with relief and fatigue as he watched his fellow crew leave him to rest. He'd gotten off lightly, he knew, but then he also knew that they'd never learn the full horrors that occurred on the alien ship and as he closed his eyes he saw himself back on board placing one booted foot into the portal as the explosion began several levels behind him. Worf knew that the screams he heard as the massive fireball made its way through the levels would never leave him for as long as he lived including the one of his own as that same fire tore at his own flesh as he flew through the portal with barely one second to spare with the devil itself following him.

#### Chapter thirty four

##### Epilogue:

Four days later the entire senior crew beamed down to the planet surface of Lanaare. All around them people still worked tirelessly to aide the Lanaarians back to life. A much different story that had met them some weeks before when all they'd got to look forward to was certain death. Now the air was static with hope.

Professor Jagla grinned with boyish humour as he greeted his guests, shaking Picard's hand with a vigour that surprised the normally stalwart captain. "Good to see you all again. Glad to see you all before you whizz off. I don't know how the Lanaarians and I are ever going to thank you for all that you have done for us, captain. We'll be forever in your debt."

With a pride that made Captain Picard's chest swell he could only return the handshake and relay his own gratitude at having the privilege of being the captain of a crew that hadn't hesitated in giving their help. No one more so than his own precious Doctor Beverly Crusher and the invincible Lieutenant Worf Roshenko.

One by one Jagla stepped before each of the senior crew as they quietly surrounded him, shook their hands one by one and thanked them profusely. Unable to hold back his emotions when he finally approached Beverly, Jagla stepped up to her and pulled her into his embrace and hugged her tightly. "I don't know what I would have done without you, my dear. My thanks will never be enough for what you have done for us."

Blushing prettily with embarrassment, Beverly could only chuckle at the older mans gratitude, hugging him back. "I'm glad. I'm glad that I was given the opportunity to contribute. That we were all able to contribute in some way or another. These people would have died even sooner if it hadn't have been for your indomitable effort to keep them alive, professor. You're the hero here." She reminded him gently, her blue eyes now shimmering with tears.

The old mans own eyes were suspiciously bright as he stepped back a little and stood in front of her. He knew that he couldn't have achieved the impossible if it hadn't have been for Beverly Crusher but nobody more so than the next person in line. As he moved to stand before her he held out his hand ignoring the tremble as he did so, knowing that she, in turn, trembled with an emotion that equalled his own.

Deanna slipped her own tiny one into his and smiled radiantly at the professor, her dark eyes misting over as she felt his happiness and thanks trickle through her senses. Leaning forward, Jagla placed a tender kiss to her cheek and whispered for her ears alone. "I'm no hero. No, the hero here was an unseen saviour and we couldn't have done it without him. Thank you Deanna."

And as he stepped back and studied the team before him he was overcome with an indebtedness that

left him suddenly unable to utter one more word as no words could convey just how much the entire crew had done for the Lanaarian people. A crew that he would never ever forget.

The crew of the Starship Enterprise.

End