

WHEN LOVE NEEDS MORE THAN WORDS

by Carol Sandford

The quiet music whispered around the lounge.

The two solitary figures sat in Ten Forward's only cozy corner ignoring the flute's hauntingly melodious harmony. Not hidden away, but discreet enough to hold their private conversation without being over heard.

Two dark heads almost touched. Her rich brown eyes were intent on his clear blue ones, hers sympathetic, his wistful. Her fingers tenderly held his, offering him some warmth, some comfort, and silent encouragement.

"Tell me how you feel, right now, right at this minute." Her velvety voice, low with an unending patience and understanding urged him to talk to her. The gentle tug on his fingers made him swallow painfully as he tried to verbalize his desolate emotions.

His eyes flickered between hers and the table, she watched him chew his lower lip as he contemplated his first words.

"At this minute, right now...my heart is so heavy with misery that I swear, if she walked through that door, I think I would cry."

The almost black eyes blinked several times at the quiet, honest admission, her fingers squeezed his tighter, the long nails dug into his palms, he liked the pain, it forced the rising choke back down to where it came from until he could be alone to let it all go.

"So why don't you, it would probably do you good, you have been storing it up for a long time, maybe its time to let it go...let her go."

His blue eyes flashed with annoyance, he tried to release his hand, she refused to let it go.

"NO!...no never, she just needs a little time, she'll come back, I know she'll come back..."

The flash disappeared to be replaced with glistening tears his voice broke as he tried to convince not only her, but himself.

"She's just got to come back Guinan..."

~~~\*~~~

The tense silence stretched on between them as Will attempted to regain his composure. The newly appointed Counselor and her distraught patient had met daily since Deanna Troi had left the Enterprise some three weeks previously.

Will still was not sure why she had left and no one had been more shocked than he when Picard had relayed the news that she was leaving.

The announcement had left Will speechless. When it had come, it was out of the blue and totally unexpected. Even when her closest friends had gotten over their initial shock and expressed their sorrow, Will had remained silent.

Even when the strangled words burst from her lips, bringing a startled gasp from her comrades, Will did not even flinch.

"You...Bastard!"

Even when Deanna had ran from the ready room in tears, Will had stayed in his seat, he did not even turn his head to watch her go.

Long after Picard had left with the rest of the senior crew, Will remained where he was, totally lost, devastated...frozen.

Chapter two

=====

Deanna had tried and tried, she had tried so hard that when it finally sunk in that Will was not going to pick up where they had left off from the Briar Patch, she realized that she could no longer be on the same ship with the man that had not only captured her heart all those years ago, but had also left it shattered.

She had dreamt about the reunion with her beloved, over and over. The dream was always the same, Will would see her, sweep her up into his huge arms, utter the one word that would cast the years of doubt away, and they would be together, forever, just as they were meant to be.

But what happened was Will saw her and pretended that they had never been anything more than friends. Deanna was crushed. Her soul mate had forgotten the promises that they had made to each other when they were so young and desperately in love.

Forgotten the way that he had made her feel.

Deanna still groaned when she closed her eyes and remembered the way Will used to touch her, inside and out. Her tummy still twisted painfully as she still ached for his tongue to explore every corner of her willing mouth, devouring her very essence.

Gasped as the most intimate joining of all, still took her breath away, shaking her to the very core, every single time.

Every damned time she thought about her Imzadi and what they had, and what they had lost, the chasm in Deanna's soul grew wider and wider until she could ignore it no longer. She could not take it anymore.

Deanna could no longer stay on the same ship and face him day after day, feeling the way that she did, knowing about the way that he felt. She just could not do it any longer.

It was time to go.

### Chapter three

=====

Will stood and silently watched Deanna's shuttle leave through the viewport. The glass of neat whisky now nearly empty of its contents, found its way unsteadily to the table beside him. The hand that guided it there visibly shook as his eyes were unable to tear themselves away from the miniature ship as it followed her departure.

"Why did you let her go Commander?"

Pulling himself to his full height, Will knew that this was inevitable, someone on this ship was going to blame him, and he thought it would be Beverly, he did not expect it to be her.

Will swallowed painfully, still staring at the shuttle's emission trail, one half of him expecting...hoping, to see it bank back towards the ship, the other knowing that this time, he had lost her for good.

"Not now Guinan."

"You know that all it needed was one word...one word Will, and she would have stayed."

Pivoting on the spot, Will swung fiercely on the tiny hostess, his eyes blazed with fury, and his hands clenched into tight, white knuckled fists. He loomed over her as he tried to reign in his temper and his agony, while his breath came out in short angry, hoarse bursts.

Guinan quietly stood her ground, she knew Will would not hurt her, but she also knew that he needed to off load the huge penance that was eating him alive before it destroyed him, and she knew of only one way to achieve it, and that was to make him blazingly angry.

"Don't you think I don't know that Guinan?, Don't you think that my every waking moment, every nightmare that I've had since she told us she was leaving, is filled with the guilty knowledge that its MY fault that she's gone. That its MY fault that I was not man enough to let her in, to allow her to take over my heart, my body, my very soul?. Guinan, she wanted too much of me, I don' t have enough to give back to her..."

Will swung away from her and continued to stare out, unseeing to the empty void that filled not only his vision, but his heart.

Guinan remained silent, knowing that he had more to say, but she could not stop her hand from reaching out to place it comforting upon his shoulder. She felt Will's posture slump as he finally accepted that she had gone.

"Damn it Guinan, I loved her more than anyone will ever know, more than she ever knew, but she just wanted too much..."

The two friends remained like that for some time. The new Counselor and her first patient, the empty, miserable shell of William Riker.

## Chapter four

=====

Guinan had been meeting with Will almost daily, and although she was reasonably pleased with his progress, he still had a long way to go. At least he had made the move from his quarters to Ten Forward. At least he could talk without breaking down.

But Guinan knew that Will's problem would never be solved, he visibly pined for his lost link, and no Counselor in the universe had a cure for that, except one.

~~~\*~~~

"So, what are you going to do to make her come back Will?"

As Will thought about her question, he idly turned the fingers over, marvelling at their smallness, the colour of her nail polish, the deep lines that mapped across her palm, He wondered if her future was going to be as rich as her past. He also wondered if his future was going to be plagued with the never ending misery that constantly shadowed him.

Her voice brought him back to the question at hand.

"Will?"

Will shrugged lightly. That same question had gone through his mind constantly over the past three weeks, and he still came up with the same solution.

"I...could ask her to marry me."

"Do you really think that she would marry you now?"

Guinan saw the defeat in his eyes, heard the resignation in his voice.

"No...no she wouldn't."

"So what are you going to do to change that Will?"

Will solemnly regarded the El-Aurian through lowered eyelashes, she watched him chew on his lower lip, a habit of late that seemed to be a constant tell tale sign of his nervousness.

"Do you think I should go after her?"

"Why bother? You've said yourself that you don't have enough to offer her. You said yourself that she would want every part of you. Why should you bother to go after her Will?"

He shrugged again, but Guinan saw the change in his face. Something had happened, something had changed, and as he spoke, Guinan saw that he had, at last, seen the light.

"I can't live without her any longer Guinan, its as simple as that, she belongs by my side, I'm incomplete without her... I'm going after her."

Guinan grinned knowingly,

"Well, thank the stars above, its about time!, now, we need a plan..."

Chapter five

=====

"Why hasn't he come mother? I can't believe he hasn't come after me, its been three, whole weeks!"

Deanna's wails grated on the very edge of Lwaxana's already jarred nerves. It had been the same every single day since she had arrived back home.

Every day, Deanna checked the communique's for a message, any message, and everyday she wailed until she thought her heart would break.

"He didn't love me mother, he didn't love me at all!"

Lwaxana hugged her daughter as the slender body shook with her sobs. Her soothing words did nothing to diminish the devastated Betazoid.

"Shush little one, of course he loves you, Will just needs a little more time. You watch, a few more days and he'll come charging down here, declaring his undying love and he'll whisk you back off among the stars before you've even had a chance to blow your nose!"

Deanna sniffed loudly, before hiccupping as she gulped for air, causing her mother to grimace with distaste at the unladylike gesture.

"Do...do you really think so mother?"

Lwaxana stroked the matted curls away from the puffy face, smiling gently at the expectant, normally pretty, features.

"Yes little one, I do, If there is one thing that I have learnt about men, especially men in love, is that they cannot stay away, no matter how hard they try."

Pulling her gently, but firmly to her feet, she began to push her towards the bathroom.

"And when he does turn up, I want you looking like you didn't give a hoot whether he came or not, so get in there, have a nice long bath, do your hair, put a pretty dress on and a smile on your face, and make that man grovel for forgiveness!"

As soon as the door had shut, Lwaxana hurried along to her own bedroom. Sitting in front of

the view screen, she sent a communique to the resident Counselor aboard the Starship Enterprise.

"Personal transmission for Guinan, all systems are go, await your arrival with some degree of relief, I have had enough tears to last me a life time and I hope to God that this is going to work otherwise I think I am going to strangle the pair of them! Lwaxana Troi out."

Chapter six

=====

Deanna paced across the parlour for the umpteenth time that day. Her thoughts were furious, but her heart thumped painfully in her chest. And for the umpteenth time she muttered, "Where is he, why hasn't he come?"

It had been three days, three long days since she had pulled herself together and waited.

And waited.

"Oh, for heavens sake child! Go for a walk, go and see a friend, go and get a job! Do something before you drive us all crazy!"

Deanna pouted sulkily before flouncing out of the door, glaring at her mother over her shoulder who stood behind her, one hand on her hip, the other pointing towards the door.

"Okay, OKAY, I'm going!"

Lwaxana winced as the door slammed, she audibly sighed and spoke to thin air.

"Thank you, now William T. Riker, don' t you dare let me down..."

By the time Deanna had walked off her seething anger she had found herself at the museum entrance.

Deanna let out a long, cleansing breath smiling as she did so. Every time she came here, it had the same affect. Just seeing the door put her mind back on its even keel.

Stepping inside she made her way through the maze of corridors, everyone leading eventually to the sanctuary that she sought, like a homing beacon.

She came to a halt in front of the large picture, feeling better as soon as it had come into view. sitting down on the back-less bench, she emptied her mind and let the picture take her far away from her troubles, her pain, her insecurities and hopefully Will.

Closing her eyes, Deanna fell captive to the tranquillity that surrounded and embraced her. A flute quietly played in the background, its throaty sound matched her mood to perfection, and within moments she was in a trance-like stupor.

Her head fell forward putting her chin almost upon her chest, her wavy hair fell over her face, hiding her from view.

~~~~

When she first felt the feather light kiss on the back of her neck, Deanna ignored it, but inside she burned.

When she felt the gentle warm breeze as he blew lightly on the slender exposed skin, she chuckled huskily, sending a ripple of anticipation racing throughout her body.

When she felt the gentle tug of her hair forcing her head up and her face to look at the ornate ceiling, she was smiling, the love shone in her eyes.

When she felt his lips upon hers, she sighed inside and out with an inner relief that washed over her soul bringing it slowly back to life.

And when Will teased her mouth with his tongue, her entire body came alive, opening like a flower gasping for the first rain drops to quench its raging thirst.

Her hand snaked up clasping the back of his head to deepen the intimate gesture. Her fingers hung on to the hair that caressed his collar and she knew without even seeing him that the wayward curl that fell across his face when he was in need of a haircut would be there, making him look even more rakish than usual.

Deanna whimpered when Will pulled his lips away from hers and sat down beside her, but facing away from the picture.

"Hello Deanna."

"Hello Will."

"I've missed you."

"And I you...Why have you come?"

"Because I think its time to face up to a few things."

"What things?"

"Us...Where we've been, where we' re going, what we're going to do."

"Oh, what made you change your mind?"

"I haven't changed my mind Imzadi, my feelings for you are as strong as the first day that I met you, but I wasn' t sure until you left that I realized just how strong those feelings were."

"So how come it took three weeks to get here?"

"I had to go through some intense counselling before I felt ready to face you and open my heart enough for you come in and take it over completely."

"But I don't want to take it over completely Will."

"You already have Deanna, and I'm ready to accept that. It's taken a long time for me to finally understand, to grow enough to accept that this is what I wanted, and needed. I can't live without you Imzadi, I no longer want to live without you, and at last, at long last, I can see that our union will give me everything that my heart desires, and most of all, it gives me you...only you. I love you so very much Deanna, please...come home."

Will held his breath as he poured out his very soul to the woman who sat barely a breath away. So close that he could see his own reflection in the tears that pooled in her beautiful eyes.

But moments later, his heart plummeted into hell, as those same teardrops fell as she shook her head.

"No...no, Imzadi, its going to take more than that to convince me. You have shown me only words, I need to see beneath the surface. I need to see more than words...you know what you have to do, Goodbye Will...for now. Don't make me wait to long...I'll be waiting."

She rose and walked away from Will, leaving him silently, staring blindly after her. His own heartbeat pounded in his ears as he struggled to take the painful breath that threatened to suffocate him.

So certain that his words would be enough. So certain that she would fall into his arms as though the last three weeks would become a long distant nightmare, Will felt his confidence take a downward spiral, knocking him into a place that he did not ever think he would visit, and he was shattered.

Chapter seven

=====

"YOU DID WHAT!!?"

Lwaxana Troi swung on her daughter with such an astounded look upon face, Deanna almost chuckled, but tactfully bit her lip instead.

"I turned him down mother."

"But...WHY??"

Deanna sank into the chair, her energy spent, her heart heavy with her decision, even though her head told her it was the right thing to do.



"I deserve more than he's offering me mother, he only offered me meaningless words, its not enough."

Lwaxana collapsed onto the seat beside her daughter as realization dawned.

"Do you know what your saying Deanna, do you know what your asking of a human being, of the sacrifice that your asking him to make?"

Deanna nodded slowly. Convinced that the depth of their Imzadi bond would instinctively take over Will's Terran upbringing.

"Yes, I do, if Will is my one, true Imzadi, he will know, he will understand."

Lwaxana sighed heavily, slapping her thighs with sweaty palms, she pushed herself to a stand, looking down at Deanna with concerned eyes. But behind that concern lay a quiet confidence that the Earthling would do the right thing, but as she turned away, she silently wondered if he would take on the challenge. She hesitated her step as Deanna's mind reached hers.

\*He will mother... I know he will\*

Chapter eight

=====

"SHE DID WHAT!!?"

Guinan stared at her patient as though he had gone mad, until she belatedly remembered that he was her patient and she had just bawled him out.

"Sorry Will, that was not how it was have supposed to have sound, let me say that again...She did what!!??"

Will simply raised his eyebrows understanding the dark woman's perplexity, since he had all but stumbled back to the Enterprise, he had been as bewildered as she.

"She said that words weren't enough, that she needed to see more, and anything less would not even be considered."

Guinan felt her hackles rise again, her fingers tensed painfully on the tables surface, her obsidian eyes wide with disbelief.

"More...more of what?, I don't understand, you love her, she loves you what more could there be?"

Will smiled darkly, his head shook wondrously as he spoke.

"Oh Guinan, you would have to understand the Betazoids to know, you have to experience the Imzadi bond to know what she's expecting of me."

Guinan looked hopefully at the handsome man before her.

"You mean, you know what she wants?"

Will nodded as he sighed loudly,

"Yes, yes I do. I remember Deanna telling me a story a long, long time ago, but I had forgotten about it until I had spoken to her..."

Guinan almost screamed with impatience as Will fell silent as he tried to remember the long past conversation.

"What story???"

Will's mind drifted off as he tried to recall the intimate time. A time when lovers frequently became one. When lovers revealed their innermost dreams and desires. When nothing else mattered except them, the time, the pleasure. The magic.

"There is a ceremony. It has been performed only a handful of times, and only between Imzadi couples. If we go ahead with it and it is successful we will be the happiest couple in the universe, loving no other. But if we are not true Imzadi, we will suffer a fate worse than death..."

The implication of his words hung around them leaving no doubt to the severity of the position that he had placed himself in. Guinan barely whispered her question, reaching out to squeeze his hand relaying its seriousness.

"Do you have any doubts Will?"

He thought about her question and then asked himself that same question before staring her straight in the eyes and shrugging.

"I'm not sure, but I love her enough to risk it, so I guess that answers the question...Doesn't it?"

## Chapter nine

=====

Two days later, the arrangements were set. Lwaxana Troi and several other people, including Guinan, all come to bear witness to the rare occurrence, led the couple to the entrance of the deep cavern, on the outskirts of the Jalara jungle.

Its gaping entrance was partially hidden by the natural foliage of the jungle's vines, and the overhanging branches, heavy with the sweet scented blossoms of a bougainvillea type plant outlined the darkness of the invisible perils behind.

Lwaxana fussed around Will and Deanna, checking their provisions, checking their

equipment, making sure that the rope had no frayed sections to its length, all sixty feet of it!

Will searched Lwaxana's face for anything that would give him a clue to what they were facing, but her steely gaze gave nothing away, nor did her inane chatter.

Giving a final yank to the harness strap around her precious daughters waist, she kissed her demurely on the cheek before stepping away to address them both, head on.

"Will...Deanna...What you are about to face has only been undertaken a handful of times, its success even less, but, if you come through this, you will never know the meaning of misery ever again. Your life will be blessed with happiness, your life will also be blessed with many children, you will be rich beyond your wildest imagination, but not with material things, or wealth, the richness will come from your own hearts, and it will start right here, in this sacred cavern."

Many sets of misty eyes turned towards the cave's mouth once more. Some were afraid, some were curious as to what secret wonders it held. Others were envious.

Very few people had met their one, true love, their one, true Imzadi, but most had not been brave enough to face the unknown that lay beyond the black, sinister, entrance of the cavern.

Lwaxana's voice broke through the many thoughts of the silent bystanders as she addressed the twosome once more, stepping between them and clasping their hands firmly. It made an interesting sight, one could feel the power dancing between the trio as they faced the unknown ahead.

"The journey through will take two complete days, and two complete nights. When you reach the other side...if you reach the other side...at noon, we will be waiting. As we have witnessed your entrance, we must also witness your exit. No one must come to your aid, no one must answer your thoughts, you will be alone. But remember, you must not breath a word to anyone, ever, what you see, it is a secret that you must take to your graves...Our prayers are with you my angels...Be safe."

Taking a step back, Lwaxana released her hands from theirs, and then drawing them together, place Deanna's within Will's. A tender touch to their backs forced them to take that first step.

Will and Deanna turned to each other, their eyes locked, both were scared, but then Deanna felt the gentle squeeze to her fingers, saw the tiny smile on his handsome face, instantly calming her fears, and then together, hand in hand they stepped into the abyss.

The small crowd watched them disappear into the darkness, some sighed, some gasped in awe at their bravery, some had tears cascading down their cheeks as the couples love and devotion washed through their senses.

Lwaxana felt rather than heard Guinan sidle up to her from behind, she smiled slyly to herself, knowing what the dark woman was about to ask.

"What's in there Mrs Troi, what are they going to see?"

Lwaxana chuckled, emitting a curious scowl from the El-Aurian, and then, in a quiet, jovial voice she whispered,

"Nothing my dear, there is absolutely nothing in there."

The puzzlement on Guinan's face caused Lwaxana to laugh out loud.

"What do you mean, if there's nothing in there, then what is the point of doing...this!?"

Guinan's arm swung around, gesturing the area, the cave, the people.

"The point is, that they have taken on the challenge, so therefore they have already passed. Will has already proved his love just by having the courage to seemingly take the risk."

Guinan stared at the older Betazoid open-mouthed, speechless for some moments before stuttering,

"So, just what is in there?"

Lwaxana shrugged as she spoke,

"Oh, a few trails, a few pools, a few surprises, nothing of any real danger, don't worry, they will be perfectly safe. They will come back out more in love than ever before. It is a place of discovery, mostly for them."

Guinan finally smiled, understanding the concept of the deceit, marvelling at the ingenuity of these wondrous people. She had one more question.

"How long will it take us to get to the other side in order to meet them coming out?"

Lwaxana turned away, preparing to follow the intimate crowd back to their homes, speaking over her shoulder as she moved gracefully away.

"Oh, it's right here, there is only one way in and one way out, only they don't know that!."

Chapter ten

=====

They stepped into the black void, leaving the outside world behind, while wondering silently if maybe it would be forever. Will and Deanna came to a halt barely five meters in when the path reached a fork.

Swinging the beam before him as he scanned each tunnel as far as the comforting beam would allow, Will muttered more to himself than the woman beside him.

"Great! That didn't take long did it? How in the hell are we supposed to know which way to go?"

Deanna stepped closer to him releasing his hand but slipping her arm through his, forging the closeness that made her feel instantly better.

"I'm not sure, maybe we should just follow our instincts...what our hearts tell us to do."

Will stared at her as if she had gone slightly mad, before turning back to the darkness that beckoned them ahead.

"Deanna! If we take the wrong turn it could be the end, we could fall into a fissure or worse, and I am not putting our lives in danger just because our hearts tell us to go that way or this, that has got to be the stupidest thing I have ever heard!"

By the time Will had finish his condemning speech which had reached escalated in volume that was deafening within the confines of the rock walls, Deanna had stepped away from him, her pain radiated around her as she listened to him belittle her words.

Will felt like a heel as he watched her huge eyes well with tears. Instantly sorry for his harsh outburst, he hastily pulled her into his arms, hugging her tightly.

"I'm sorry sweetheart, but I'm scared, not for me, but for you, I don't want to lose you again, I am NOT going to lose you again and if that means following our hearts, then so be it, it seems we don't have any choice...do we?"

Both faces turned simultaneously towards the paths once more, moments later, Deanna gingerly lifted one arm and shakily pointed to the left juncture.

Sighing loudly, Will shifted his pack, squared his shoulders, grabbed her hand and made the first tentative step forward.

"OK...let's see what's in there shall we?"

~~~\*~~~

"Do you hear it Will, do you hear the water?"

They had been walking for what felt like hours, sometimes they found themselves climbing, sometimes descending off miniature cliff faces, none were what Will would consider a danger to life and limb. Both being, particularly himself, reasonable rock face climbers had confronted the minor hazards with relative ease, but they' re energy was about spent.

Will pulled her towards the welcome sound, but moments later, backtracked rapidly, pushing her back towards the tunnel that they had all but emerged from.

"What is it Will, what do you see?"

Stepping gingerly forward, holding her at arms length as he craned his head forward to look over the steep overhang that loomed in front of them. Deanna was beside herself with impatience, her initial fatigue forgotten as her curiosity got the better of her.

"Well??"

Will scanned the distant spectacle that spread out before him. Its awesome appearance was pushed aside for the moment as he plotted a route to descend. Finally he stepped away and began unbuckling his pack.

"It's a waterfall that we can hear, there's a small pool at its base, and I think it will be an ideal place to set up camp for a while, we've just got to get down there. Remove your pack, I can send them down on the same line when I lower you."

Deanna fingers halted the tugging on her buckle as his words filtered through.

"Lower me!...But, who's going to lower you Will?"

His cock-sure grin and the sparkle in his eye instantly dispersed the rising panic that she felt come from the pit of her tummy. She found herself grinning back at him.

"Sorry, silly question huh?"

"Uh huh, I guess that makes us even now... now, lets get this harness on you, I for one, am starving."

In the dimness their eyes met, capturing the intimate suggestion. Smoky blue met sultry brown, the chilly air turned their breath to mist, meeting between them like a caress. Will cleared his throat.

"Come on, time to go sweetheart."

Locking the final clasp onto her slender waist. Will secured his end of the tether by forcing it between a crevice on a rocky outcrop that jutted out from the wall of the cavern.

Bracing his feet, he began to lower Deanna down the sheer drop. Before she vanished from his view, Will heard her call the endearment in his head.

I love you Imzadi

Tightening his hold as the weight began to take its toll on his body, he could only answer her with a grunt. He heard her chuckle from the depths of the chasm, and turned his eyes heaven ward elevating the tension that bunched up between his shoulder blades.

Deanna's feet constantly slipped on the shiny granite like stone that was typically indigenous to Betazed. The only way she could keep her foot hold was by pushing out so that she was practically laying flat in mid air, it was the only way she could keep her feet flat against the

slippery surface.

Luckily Will had the foresight to have loaded the packs on first so they were beneath her rather than above, but their constant swinging motion made the descent more perilous than she would have liked.

Several minutes later, the packs hit solid ground and Deanna sighed with relief. She had not dared look down, not even once for fear of panicking, but putting her two feet on solid ground had never felt so good, and she found herself laughing at the simple luxury.

Unbuckling her harness, she looked up. And up and up, swallowing painfully, the inner laughter disappeared when he saw just how far she had come.

"Good lord!"

She heard Will's distant voice calling to her.

"Are you OK? Are you down yet?"

"Yes...YES, I'm OK."

She tugged twice on the tether and watched it begin to make its way back up towards him. Pulling her torch from her pack, Deanna switched on and took stock of her surroundings.

The wide beam of the torch caught the iridescence of the waters surface, throwing a rainbow of colours that twinkled in the light. Tiny ripples broke its surface and Deanna moved the beam to its source.

Water gently cascaded into the pool, like a shower. Deanna followed its path up. And up. She found its source, barely visible from the great distance, but it was there, a tiny opening, ejecting the stream, its heavy trickle running down the cliff's face until the rock fell away, eaten away over the eons of time to create the simple, but breathtaking spectacle.

Deanna heard Will's slow, precise descent above and she swung the torch onto his form and watched his final few meters with admiration. He was clearly enjoying the challenge, his expertise showing in his sure footed decline.

Puffing with mild exertion, Will grinned as he jumped the last few feet to land before Deanna. She found herself grinning stupidly back at him, her relief evident in her over bright eyes along with the excitement of discovery.

While Will set about freeing himself from the harnesses, Deanna turned away and began a sloop with the torch's beam for somewhere suitable to set up camp. Will came to stand beside her, following the torches beam as his eyes squinted in the dimness, before pointing to a shallow plateau that jutted out from the cliff's edge.

"There, that will do, high enough off the ground in case the water level rises, large enough to

sleep on, and the added bonus, our own personal heat rock."

Reaching for his phaser, he altered its setting and fired at the largish stone, within moments, it began to glow, not only with heat, but with light, sending an ethereal glow around the small cavern, basking it in a luminous blue radiance that made Deanna gasp with awe when she saw its effect.

"Oh Will, its...wonderful!"

Will stood beside her, resting his arms across her shoulders as he took in the scene with her. The peace and serenity that surrounded them was broken by the ragged sound of Will's breath which escaped his lips like a fiery dragon as he fought to recapture his spent energy from his hasty decline.

The silence was further encroached upon by Will's stomach as it protested against lack of food.

They both laughed as they turned away to begin unpacking their backpack to satisfy their immediate hunger.

Barely fifteen minutes later they were silently munching on soda crackers and heated chunky soup.

Will lay back sighing with contentment as his body began to feel the effects of being nourished. Deanna lay along beside him, propping herself on her elbow so that she could look at him.

Will's eyes were closed but he knew what she was going to say before she opened her mouth.

"You noticed there was no way out as well didn't you?"

His steady eyes found hers in the dimmed light, but as she opened her mouth, Will reached out to silence her with a finger tip to her lips.

"Shush, not now, we'll worry about it in the morning. We're both too beat to do anything tonight, so I am not even going to think about it until then okay?"

Deanna shuffled her body closer and lay her head upon his shoulder. Will felt her nod as he pulled her close, capturing her hand within his. Pleased that she trusted him enough to accept his lack of worry, he chuckled lightly, Will's heavy eyes slipped closed as he sensed Deanna's own struggle to stay awake. The tranquil sound of the waterfall along with their own fatigue had them in a deep, dreamless sleep within moments.

Chapter eleven

=====

Deanna woke first, at first disorientated until she felt the heaviness of the arms that still held her close to the inert form that lay lightly snoring beside her. Deanna smiled to herself basking in the knowledge that they were here, together, still alive and still speaking.

But in the next instant, her thoughts turned more sinister. But what lay ahead, what is in here that could take our lives, could separate an Imzadi couple, a couple that are destined to be together always?

Uneasy, Deanna untangled herself from Will's arms, he grunted in protest, a few moments ago, she would have laughed, but not now. She found herself sitting up and hugging herself, missing the warmth of Will's body. The air was chilly, but not cold, she expected it to be cold.

Locating the phaser, she aimed it at the rock and fired a long steady burst enough to bring back to warm glow to her face. She heard Will move and knew that she had woken him.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you."

Will's body groaned in protest as he moved from the same position that he had fell asleep in.

Hell, I must have been more tired than I thought, so much for the night of passion that I had in mind!

His sleepy eyes focused on the back of the seated woman beside him. Will could feel her inner turmoil without even seeing her beautiful face.

"Deanna...come here."

Will gently but firmly tugged on her arm, pulling her back to the safety of his arms. Deanna snuggled up closer again, lifting her face to meet his. Will lowered his mouth to hers, giving her a searing kiss that left her breathless.

The audible sucking sound echoed through the cavern as their lips reluctantly parted. Will hovered above her face, Deanna caught the glimmer of mischievous in his eyes. Her eyes flew to his fingers when she heard the rustle of clothing being removed, his own clothing.

"Fancy skinny dipping?"

Deanna scoffed at the absurdity.

"You have got to be kidding me Will Riker! I bet that water is minus plus!"

Will growled seductively as he stood pulling her with him. Shucking off his outer coat, he began to work on her fastenings. Deanna could only stare stupidly at him, unsure if he really meant to do what he was planning.

The coat fell to the floor beside his, he began to raise her jumper over her head.

"Upsy daisy sweetheart, your going to love it once your in, there is nothing quite like an early morning dip to put some spark into your body."

Deanna playfully pushed his hands away as she realized that he was not playing fair.

"Hey, big guy, I want to see you stripping off too, if I'm going to be freezing my butt off, you can too!"

Will laughed outright as he continued removing his own clothes. Deanna felt her insides grow warm as he removed his last piece of skimpy clothing, but before she could do any more, Will turned and dived straight into the icy looking water.

Seconds later he came bursting from its depths like a naked Greek Adonis, unaware of the erotic image he portrayed as his strong, muscled arms swept his dripping hair back from his face. Deanna watched the water trailing rivulet's down his torso. Droplets of water captured by the healthy covering of fur on his chest, sparkled like tiny translucent diamonds.

The provocative image drew Deanna to the waters edge. Will stilled as he watched her perfect form stand barely feet away from him. Lord, she was glorious. Swallowing painfully as his body instantly reacted to her shapely silhouette, Will held out his arms to her, but it was the look in his eyes that gave Deanna that final push.

Feeling like she was stepping into nowhere, Deanna slipped into the pool, her eyes wide with shock as the cold permeated through to her very soul before she had even got her waist wet. Despite knowing that it was likely to be that cold, she still found herself screaming, the sound bouncing over the cavern walls, she dimly wondered if anybody had heard it on the outside.

Will drew her close to his body, rubbing her shivering limbs with his large hands, trying to disperse the huge goose-bumps that now peppered her skin.

"Try and move around sweetheart, you' ll be okay once your moving. Its not that bad, come on it'll be fun."

Deanna's teeth chattered as she stared at him like he was from another planet.

"F...f..un...y...ou c...call this f...f...fun!"

Will laughed as he began to draw her through the water, forcing her to swim along beside him. Within minutes she had thawed enough, body and mind, to venture towards the waterfall.

As they slipped under the gentle cascade, Will pulled Deanna back to his frame. The water fell around them creating their own intimate shower.

Hitching herself around his waist Deanna linked her hands behind Will's head. Leaning backwards, her face lifted and she let the pure water trail over her skin, the tingling sensation set her skin on fire with the most wonderful feeling that she had ever experienced and she found herself laughing, the glorious sound echoing around them.

Will grinned as he watched Deanna lose herself to the excitement. He knew she would. His eyes trailed down her body to her high breasts, standing alert with the chill of the water. He inwardly groaned as he felt his loins respond.

Deanna felt the change.

Bringing her face back to search his, her breath caught in her throat. Will's eyes blazed with desire. The sapphire blue pools turned smoky as they reflected his innermost feelings. He wanted her and God help her, she wanted him.

Will released his hands enough to allow Deanna to slide down his torso, stopping her when he felt the juncture of her thighs touch his bludgeoning hardness, and as their waiting open mouths collided so did the most intimate joining of all.

Tongues twisted and caressed as the rising thrusts catapulted them both to another dimension. A time in space where there was no beginning and no end. A time to lose oneself to the infinity of wondrous discovery. A precious time for lovers.

The water continued to cascade over their bodies, attempting to chill the red hot lovers that were still locked into oneness, but nothing could cool the fires that burned within until, at last, their mouths broke away as their heads fell back hanging on to each other for dear life as wave after wave of ecstasy washed over them again and again, leaving them trembling and weak.

Clinging to each other as they both slowly came back down to reality, Will said one word that summed up the intense emotional experience.

"Wow!"

Pushing him back so that Will was floating on his back supporting her on top of his huge body, Deanna chuckled, laying her head upon his broad chest as Will slowly manoeuvred his way back towards the camp fire.

Will climbed out first, firing up the heat rock before Deanna stepped out of the icy water, her teeth already beginning to chatter again as the loss of activity began to chill her once more.

Will scabbled around in the back packs for something to dry themselves down with. Triumphant, he pulled out a small hand towel, barely big enough to wipe your face let alone an entire body, but it was better than nothing.

Pulling Deanna's chilled body closer to him, he rubbed her down briskly, his own body heat helping the thawing process.

Deanna bent to pick up her clothing but stopped when Will's low voice told her not to bother.

She turned her puzzled eyes to his.

"Why not? It's freezing in here Will."

His steady eyes met hers, Will could see the question churning over within her mind until she at last, found her own solution. They both turned to the pool again, Deanna gasped horrified.

"No! There must be another way out Will, there must be!"

Her spirits fell a million miles as he answered her plea.

"No, I'm afraid not, except the way we came in and I don't think we can manage that. The pool disappears under that shallow tunnel over there, I'm going to go under and take a look...see where it leads to."

Deanna's eyes followed Will's outstretched finger as he pointed toward the farthest wall. The water flowed under a shallow lip with about six to eight inches of space above its surface.

Deanna felt the rising panic surge from her soul bursting from her mouth as the wave of nausea rose after it.

"NO! You can't do this Will, I might lose you, you could be drowned, I'm not letting you go Will. To hell with this, lets go back, I don't care if we fail or not, I'm not going to lose you Will!"

Deanna bordered on the point of hysterical, her eyes streamed with huge teardrops as they bulged with fear. Will's large hands locked onto her upper arms as he shook her, trying to break through her stark terror. Hell he was scared too, but it was the last thing he wanted her to see.

"We don't have a choice Deanna...."

She broke him off mid sentence.

"We do have a choice Will, we can go back, we can..."

Will watched her as she swung around and picked up the harnesses and ropes. He reached out to gently take them away from her.

"No Deanna, we can't...I disconnected the line after I came down because I had a hunch that this mad game that we are playing was just that, a game, a challenge of our feelings, a test, I figured that there would have to be an easy way out of here...only I was wrong. I'm sorry."

His words hung heavy in the silent air, the waterfall's calming sound faded into obscurity as the turmoil battled within the two naked forms that only minutes ago filled the silence with gasps of love and laughter.

"How could you Will!, You've killed us, you've killed us both, we're going to die here because the famous Will Riker thought he was so damned clever, thought he would take my life in his hands and discard it...Again!"

Will was furious.

"Enough! How dare you say those things Deanna, how dare you discard my feelings, I am sick of you putting the blame on my shoulders, how many times do you want me to apologize Deanna, how many damn times!? This is YOUR fault we're stuck down here, this was YOUR idea, not mine, how much more proof do you need to show how much I love you. What is you want Deanna...my life!?"

Will stalked away from her, taking a few angry steps away then just as quickly swinging back. Deanna staggered back from the rage in his eyes, she had never seen him so angry, so...raw.

But before Deanna could utter one word in a sorry attempt to make things right, Will turned and jumped back into the pool, Deanna screamed. The scream echoed on and on through out the cavern, slowly dying along with Will's raging anger.

Half way across the pool Will stopped and turned back to her speaking quietly, his voice heavy with pain.

"For once in your life, trust me Deanna...please."

He did not give her the chance to respond. Turning away, he swam towards the narrow opening, pausing long enough to take a deep breath and then with a splash, Will disappeared beneath the surface out of sight.

Chapter twelve

=====

Deanna slipped to the cold floor as her knees buckled beneath her, unable to carry her weight as the shock reduced her limbs to jelly. Heedless of her naked state, and heedless of the sobs that raked through her slender body, Deanna cried as though her heart would break.

If there ever was a moment when Deanna hated herself, hated her mother, hated stupid Betazoid customs and most of all, hated Will Riker for putting his life before their happiness, it was now.

Silently Deanna began counting, *1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6...84, 85, 86...How long could it take? How long was the tunnel? How much longer was he going to be?*

Had he made it?...

Deanna could not feel him at all. She began to panic, *148, 149, 150...come on, where are you Will?...151, 152, 153...*

With each number escalating, Deanna felt the rising terror begin to force her to her feet, until she reached a point where she could not take the uncertainty any longer.

"That's it, I'm going after him", and before she had a chance to think about what she about to do, she dived head first into the icy water, her final words, but also maybe her last, echoed in the stillness, "I'm coming Will!"

~~~~~

Deanna was startled as she felt a current pulling her along, she knew she was within the tunnel because she was plunged into total darkness. A pitch, black nothingness that frightened her more than being dragged to lord knows where.

Deanna felt her lungs begin to burn as they struggled with the lack of air. Silently praying that there was still a gap above the water, she pushed her way to the surface.

Her hand broke the surface and touched a slimy roof within inches of her face as it too broke through and gulped the precious lungful of air, just enough before she was dragged back under. Her terror dissipated a little when she knew that at least the air was there when she next needed it.

Deanna felt herself being carried along at an alarming speed. What seemed to take eons in reality was barely seconds, until in the distance, she heard it, the roar of another waterfall and she dimly realized that she was going to go over it, whether she wanted to or not.

Deanna surfaced again and finally saw light looming before her. Seconds later, she reached the edge and as the scream left her mouth, she tumbled into the roar of the pouring water. Seconds later, Deanna felt herself hit the bottom, the water forced her under, seemingly wanting to keep her there, wanting to take her life. Deanna wondered if it had taken her Imzadi's life.

As her inner voice screamed \*Nooooooo\*, she frantically clawed her way to the surface, until at last she floated into calmer waters, breathless, exhausted and freezing cold.

Looking around, she found herself in another cavern, similar to the one she had just left, only this one had daylight. Searching the high ceiling she found the lights source. A gap between the rocky outcrop outside of the cavern let in the welcome stream of not only light, but warmth too. She felt it touch her face and she lapped up the wonderful feeling until a voice broke through her senses.

"I wondered how long it would take you."

Deanna swung around on hearing Will' s voice behind her sending her dripping hair into a showering cascade all of its own, landing with a slap against her body. But none of it was noticed as tears of overwhelming relief run unchecked down her face at the sight of Will sitting on a large rock away from the waters edge.

He sat casually with one knee raised, his arm wrapped around it, his fingers laced as he watched the emotions flit across Deanna's face. Immensely relieved that she had made it through, Will was also bitterly disappointed too.

Will watched Deanna step from the water, he grinned grimly at the image. Still stark naked, her perfectly toned body glistened as the water droplets clung to her curves. Her black hair

that framed her elfin face hung in tight ringlets practically covering her upper torso with just a glimpse as she moved, of the delights beneath.

Deanna threw herself into Will's waiting arms, mindless of saturating him with the icy water that he had eventually managed to rid himself of by jogging and jumping on the spot, effectively warming himself up in the process.

"Oh Will, I am so happy that you are okay, I was so worried about you, why didn't you come back for me?"

Will sighed dramatically as his hand swept the space before him.

"Take a look around you Deanna, there is no way up, and the only way out is that tunnel behind me."

Deanna grinned, the relief sparkled in her dark eyes.

"Oh thank heavens, I think I've seen enough water to last me a lifetime...What's wrong Will?"

Deanna had turned back to share her evident joy with Will, but caught him frowning, no... scowling. She repeated herself, only this time with a degree of dread.

"What's wrong Will?"

"Nothing is wrong Deanna, except that in your haste to find me, you neglected to bring the back packs with you..the backpacks that have our food in, our equipment, and more importantly, our clothes...Deanna, we are as naked as the day we were born, in caverns that drop to freezing, we still have one whole night and one whole day to get through, I suppose you thought that maybe our love would keep us warm..and fed, and god help us if we come across any more cliffs or maybe crevasses...or worse..."

Will's voice dripped with enough sarcasm to reduce Deanna to a gibbering wreck at what she had done, or rather, had not done. How could she have been so stupid to have put her heart before her common sense.

Will was right when they had first stepped into the cavern, you can't go through life on what your heart tells you. Now it was her turn to utter those awful words that barely an hour ago, she had accused him of.

"I've killed us Will. Because of my incompetence, I have condemned us to death, in here, alone. The prophecy was right all along, we were destined to never leave here, our love was not strong enough to see us through..."

Deanna was bordering on hysterical. Will stood and pulled the distraught woman into his arms, instantly contrite of his words.

"I'm sorry Deanna, I'm sorry, I didn't mean it, we'll make it, you have my word, we ' will' get

out of here alive, we 'will' prove them all wrong, we are Imzadi, and we 'are' strong enough to get through this, we can adapt...we'll have to adapt. Please...stop crying sweetheart, I'm sorry."

For many long moments the only sound to be heard was the gut wrenching wail of the woman in his arms and the distant roar of the waterfall, until at last, she cried herself out.

Giving her arms a warming, comforting rub, Will kissed the top of her head before forcing himself to pull away from the inviting warmth of her body.

"Come on, we need to get going. We're going to have to keep moving until we're out of here. if we stop, we freeze, it means a lot of walking and let's just hope that we're over the worst of the hazards...hell, it couldn't get any worse, could it sweetheart?"

Will tried to make light their predicament, but inside, he was scared. God he was scared, and he vowed that when he got out of here he was never going to take his relationship to Deanna for granted again.

Throughout their ordeal, Will had gone over and over his feelings for Deanna Troi. He thought he knew the depth of what he felt for her when he took on the challenge, the ancient contest to prove that his love was worthy, that their bond was strong enough to endure whatever was going to happen to them, down here.

But with every step they took into this unknown world, Will's love grew stronger and stronger. Not so long ago he couldn't imagine a day without her, now he could not imagine a minute.

The moment he landed in the pool after falling with the falls and he had seen he could not back to her, back to his one true love, back to his Imzadi, Will had nearly lost it, until common logic told him that she would be feeling the same way and would eventually follow.

Only he did not figure on her leaving behind their backpacks.

Taking Deanna's hand, Will looked to her. The need for words gone as he asked the question with his steady blue eyes, \*Ready?\* Her own eyes, apprehensive, but confident that now that they were back together answered him. \*Ready\*

## Chapter thirteen

=====

On and on they trudged. With no lighting to guide their way, every step was almost a leap of faith. Between them they lost count of how many times they cursed as they either stubbed a toe, or trod on something that they were glad that they could not see.

Hand outstretched, Will felt along the contours of the walls. Still linked to Deanna with his other hand, he began to notice that she was beginning to pull back. She was getting tired, he was getting tired too, but no way was he going to stop until their immediate predicament changed somewhat, either by leaving this god forsaken tunnel that had began to incline,



making the trek even more exhausting, or stepping out of this nightmare all together. Deanna's whine slowed him to a stop, causing her to collide with his taut body.

"I can't go any further Will, I'm tired and my feet hurt, my head hurts and I want to cry."

Will pulled her limp, worn out body into his embrace and hugged her tight.

"I know sweetheart, it can't be much further, by my reckoning we shouldn't have much more to go. If...things had gone to plan, right now we should be sleeping, so in the morning we should have reached the exit point, so if we keep walking, and we have to keep walking Deanna, we should be out of here within a couple of hours, it' ll be night time so we'll be able to sneak back into town without anyone seeing us...hey, we can even spend the rest of the night tucked up in a big, soft, warm bed, how does that sound sweetheart?"

He felt her moan against his chest,

"Mmm, wonderful...just give me a minute okay, just a minute..."

Her voice trailed off and Will felt her begin to slide down his body, intent on sitting down for those few precious minutes that she badly craved. Will automatically followed her down, and finding a reasonably comfortable position, which was decidedly difficult in his naked state, he shuffled Deanna around between his thighs so that he could continue to hold her and keep her warm.

Deanna snuggled closer within Will's arms, oblivious to the close proximity of his masculine form, and within seconds they were both fast asleep.

+++They were back in the pool, swimming side by side, the sound of laughter filled their souls, Will pulled her through the water swinging her into his arms, kissing her fervently, igniting the flame that burned from deep within.

Deanna wrapped her limbs around Will's torso, skin upon skin, heartbeat to heartbeat. Her breath became his, together they were one.

She slowly slipped down his body onto his waiting hardness. A deep guttural groan made its way up from her core as he filled her in one, slow luxurious movement, and together, they became oblivious to the lapping sounds of the water that rippled around them, cooling their already heated skin, the chill highlighting the burning fever that scorched their souls++++

The initial shock woke Will from a delectable dream of Deanna, searing sex and water. It was then that he felt the icy water seeping around his buttocks making him jerk. It barely registered with the still sleeping woman in his arms.

Will shook her gently, Deanna groaned sleepily,

"Just a few minutes more Will please!"

And then the water touched her.

"Urgh! Water! Where did water come from? Oh Will, we haven't stumbled on another water feature have we?"

They both rose to a stand simultaneously, the water began to gather up steam to become a steady trickle. Will moved his feet blindly around until he found a dry spot, moving her across with him when he found a slightly higher step away from the water.

Pulling her close, Will spoke over her head,

"No, I think its rain water, otherwise it would have already been here, and that means that somewhere up ahead is an exit, a way out!"

As realization rapidly dawned, an urgency to go overwhelmed them both, and without another word, Will took Deanna's hand, and began to follow the water that now splashed around their ankles.

It was not long before Will excitedly whispered, "Do you feel it Deanna, do you feel the breeze?"

Deanna stepped around him, welcoming the cold draft to her body. She felt herself grinning widely and wished she could see Will's face because she knew he was grinning as much as her. Instead, she pulled him to her, seeking out his lips for a quick, cheery kiss.

"Come on, lets get out of here."

Will all but dragged Deanna along behind him until at last, they reached a point where they could no longer go forward.

The couple stood side by side, clinging to each other as they fought for the spent breath that they had used in their haste to get out of there.

As Will and Deanna turned their faces heaven ward, their initial glee spiralled downwards out of control as they searched their only way out. A hole in the roof, large enough to fit through, only it was about fifteen feet above their heads.

"Oh Will, what are we going to do now?"

In the dimness that filtered through the opening, Will's mind was already working out his escape route.

"I think I can do it Deanna, the walls are quite soft, I think I can dig my feet in enough to get a foothold."

Before he had even finished speaking, Will was already trying out his theory. His hands began to tug at the larger stones embedded in the soft clay-like sides, until at last, his deft

fingers pried the first one away along with a euphoric cry, "Yes!"

He reached higher until he found another stone, and began the painstaking process again, it was not long before he was able to start his ascent. Wedging his toes into the dirt, Will took his first step upwards. Inch by inch, step by step, he neared his goal.

In the murky dimness, Deanna watched the outline of Will's naked body as he painstakingly removed a stone and moved up another notch. In any other situation, the scene would have been extremely funny. Looking up at Will's naked buttocks along with the other 'dangling bits' would be sight never to be forgotten, but Deanna knew that one slip, one wrong move would be disastrous for him.

Her heartbeat pounded painfully in her ears as she silently muttered, and silently thought to the man above her, \*come on sweetheart, come on, you can do it\*. She stepped out of the way as another large stone came sailing her way after his warning cry.

Stooping, Deanna hurled the large jagged rocks further down the tunnel that they had just vacated, the last thing she wanted was for Will to fall and land on them, she shuddered as the consequences of him doing that filtered through her head.

Will's grunts brought her head back up to the man hovering mid air above her. The little light that filtered down suddenly disappeared as Will finally reached the entrance.

Will heaved himself though the damp hole, clutching at the grass until he could get a sure foothold to push himself that last, final step.

He had done it...They had done it. Will lay on his back in the damp grass, his chest heaving, his toes ripped to shreds, but he was laughing, a loud, joyous laughter that echoed through the trees and down to the woman who stood waiting patiently at the bottom of what could have quite easily been their tomb.

Will's laughter eventually trailed off, and he rose painfully to his feet. Bending over, he yelled down to the only woman he could ever love, the only woman he would ever love.

"Are you okay Deanna?"

"Yes...yes, but I'm cold, please hurry Will, please get me out!"

"Okay, give me a few minutes, I'll see what I can find!, Don't go away, don't move an inch!"

Will looked around him and automatically began heading for the trees, he was certain he would find something...anything useful to get his beloved out.

Fifteen minutes later Will made his way to the hole defeated and devastated. He had not been able to find anything even remotely usable except a fallen tree that he could not even budge, let alone drag and drop down a hole.

Kneeling, Will stared down the black abyss ready to tell her the bad news, but was silenced when he heard the gentle groans and grunts and he realized that she had decided to take the same route as he. His heart swelled with pride as he began to urge on with words.

"Come on sweetheart, only a few more feet!"

Will lay flat on his stomach and reached into the hole with his hands, his fingers outstretched, ready to grab her when she got within reach.

"Nearly there Deanna, come on, you can do it! Think of that nice hot bath, and that bed."

Deanna was exhausted. Pains shot through her feet, and she was sure she had ripped off every nail that she possessed. Her legs trembled violently with the exertion and she had come close to slipping so many times that she had nearly given up.

Whilst Will had been gone, Deanna had tried to recall the jungle that she had grown up beside, had played in. Had loved in, and knew that Will was unlikely to find anything to help her out of there, so she had taken the plunge and began the hazardous climb.

Scared senseless, Deanna dared to look up, choking on the rising sob as she realized Will's hand was barely inches away from hers. But with that relief came another emotion, terror...sheer, tormented terror.

All it would take to be safe, to be hauled out there and into Will's arms, was for her to remove one hand from the relative safety of the mud that her fingers were embedded in, but all of a sudden, she could not do it, she could not let go.

An overwhelming sense of dread washed over her, but Will felt it too and his heart went out to her. Deanna had endured so much in the last two days and with the end within sight, she had finally cracked under the strain.

Will knew that soft words were not going to do the trick and so edging his way in as far as he could, he made one last frantic reach for her hand. His heart broke when his eyes found hers, wide and moist and frightened, he steeled himself for what he had to do.

**"COME ON, SNAP OUT OF IT COMMANDER!, NOW MOVE YOUR ASS, I WANT TO GO HOME AND YOUR COMING WITH ME, LIKE IT OR NOT!"**

And with a haunting wail, Deanna finally broke her trance like state and lunged for the outstretched hand. Will grasped it so firmly that Deanna screamed with pain, but he was not going to let her go, they were so close to freedom, there was no way a little pain was going to get in his way.

Bracing himself, Will slowly pushed himself to his knees leaving Deanna dangling helplessly in mid air until with one last gut-wrenching yank, he pulled her free of the shaft.

Falling in a tangled heap, Deanna wept as though her heart would break. Will let her cry, he

knew she needed the release. He pulled her close and they lay, on the wet grass, exhausted, relieved and emotionally drained.

Eventually as Deanna lay against Will' s body, her head tucked securely against his shoulder as he lightly stroked her chilled skin, she felt his voice rumble.

"I feel a little like Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden."

Deanna chuckled drowsily,

"Well at least they had fruit to eat from the trees, we have nothing and I am starving, and you owe me a bubble bath Will Riker."

But as they came to a stand, something happened. They both stood facing each other, so close but they could have been a mile apart, the moment became awkward.

Will searched Deanna's down cast eyes, surprised at the sudden change within her, he spoke worriedly,

"Deanna, what's wrong?"

Deanna briefly sought his eyes but her embarrassment overtook her again and she looked away, her mouth closing on the words that she wanted to say. But Will knew what her words were, and he pulled her back into his arms, resting his chin upon her head.

"I know...I know sweetheart, I feel it too, I know your sorry, I'm sorry too, we BOTH made dumb mistakes, but we've come through and we're better for it. I don't need your gratitude either Deanna, you kept me alive too remember, I figure we' re even, on both counts okay...okay?"

"Tears sprang to her eyes again as she nodded against his chest. Sighing heavily, she pulled away slipping her hand down to his and turned towards home.

"Come on, lets get away from here."

Will could not argue with that and together that made their way back towards town. The dawn was just beginning to break on the horizon and barely half an hour later, Will and Deanna crept into their room, the bath forgotten, the food forgotten as they both fell into the bed and slept like babies until noon.

Chapter fourteen

=====

The crowd began to gather at the entrance, many more than the original gathering. An excited babble filtered through the variety of people assembled.

Dignitaries of Betazed' s highest order came to bear witness to the rare occurrence. Members of the Enterprise came to see their colleagues, and their best friends emerge amongst the pomp

and prestige of one of Betazoid' s oldest and revered customs.

The Caverns of Discovery.

And at the head of the ever-growing crowd was the matriarch of all of Betazed' s finest, Lwaxana Troi.

Standing in her over-flowing, over bright and slightly over tight gown in practically every hue of purple known, Lwaxana stood with her hands clasped before her voluptuous bosom, her chin outrageously high, and today, she had the family tiara perched regally amongst her russet curls.

Guinan left the Captain' s side and made her way towards Lwaxana coming to a halt within whispering distance.

"How can you be so precise to Will and Deanna' s emergence? Surely anything could go wrong, they might even decide to stay in there!"

Lwaxana grinned knowingly, stooping slightly to return the whisper to the smaller dark woman,

"Trust me, no one stays in there any longer than they have to, and I am confident that within a few minutes either side of the time limit, they will come out, make no mistake about that!"

Turning towards the crowd, Lwaxana raised her hands effectively silencing the murmur of excited voices. Three words spoken and all eyes turned expectantly towards the gaping entrance.

"It is Time.."

The minutes ticked by. The occasional urgent muttering of ' where are they?' filtered through the waiting crowd, but their eyes remained riveted on the open expanse of rock before them.

Will and Deanna stepped into the dazzling sunlight slightly perturbed at the lack of town folk. Dressed casually in a long flowing flowery dress, Deanna looked happy, no...radiant.

After sleeping solidly for four whole hours, they had risen, bathed, eaten and tended to their wounds and made love, but the intimate encounter had surpassed any other coupling that they had shared, all bar one, nothing could over ride their first joining when the word Imzadi had become engraved within their hearts, minds, their very souls along with the awareness that there would never be any other for either of them, ever.

And they had finally proved it, they had taken the challenge and had emerged victorious, even deeper in love, if that was possible, and ready for the commitment that had brought them to this point and shown them both that the time for games, for uncertainties were over, forever.

Instinct pulled the couple towards the jungle, towards the past nightmare of barely a few hours

ago. Both Will and Deanna were surprised at how quickly the bad experiences that they had endured had simply faded away leaving behind the warm feeling that enveloped and embraced them.

Will' s arm was slung casually along Deanna' s shoulders, her thumb tucked unobtrusively into the back of his waistband and for all the universe' s knowledge, they were two lovers, simply out for a stroll, but they were heading one way and nothing could have deviated them from their route.

Minutes later, they were within yards of fairly large crowd, correction, the backs of a fairly large crowd, intent of the large rock formation in front of them. Stretching up to his full height, Will craned his neck to see over the tops of the heads, shock registered as he realised that they were waiting for himself and Deanna to emerge.

Pulling Deanna closer he whispered into her ear,

"I don' t think that we came out at the right co-ordinates, it appears that the way in was also the way out!"

As realization dawned, Deanna' s eyes glittered with first surprise, then malice. Pulling back her shoulders, she hastily whispered, "Watch this."

Will saw the devilment in her eyes, the grin that she plastered on her face and he knew there and then what her intentions were. A huge grin lit up his own face, and together they took the remaining steps to put them in full view of the ignorant mass.

"Hello everyone!"

They watched with joy and thirty or more eyes flew to their location, some so stunned that they had to reach out for support, others swayed where they stood. Will and Deanna watched with amusement as the entire crowd were rendered speechless.

Without relinquishing her hold, Deanna steered Will towards the front of the crowd, to her mother who was currently being fanned by a friend as she sat in a heap on the floor, her pallor evident.

For a brief moment, Deanna felt almost contrite, almost, but not quite when her mind briefly flashed back to her most horrific moment inside the caverns.

"Hello mother, aren' t you pleased to see us?"

As two male friends ungainly heaved the woman to her feet, Lwaxana found her equilibrium, and in a style that only Lwaxana Troi could get away with, she launched herself into Deanna' s arms, but before she began her congratulatory outburst, she hastily whispered to her, \*play along with me darling\*.

"Oh, my precious baby! My baby made it through! The true daughter of Betazed and her

Imzadi conquered the perils of the caverns and made it in record time! It is indeed a time to rejoice."

Deanna forcibly pushed Lwaxana away from her body, her smile, although not quite reaching her eyes, held an inner laughter, an inner ridicule that held the threat of a further conversation, in private.

"Yes mother, let's rejoice, after all, it's not often that a couple can come back from the brink of death on so many occasions that one can lose count. But we had our love, our bond to get us through the traumatic time, so yes, let's rejoice that."

And then without another word to the stunned woman, Deanna turned, took Will's hand and as they walked away she spoke loud enough for everyone to hear,

"Come on Imzadi, let's go home."

~~~~~

Back in the Troi household, Will, Deanna, and her mother gathered in the huge ornate study. To any other it appeared to be a trial with Deanna firing the questions at her mother, full force, but it was a time that was beyond Lwaxana's understanding, she was clearly perplexed.

"Have you any idea what you put us through mother? Will and I could have died!"

Lwaxana hung her head with guilty shame, her highly manicured hands wrung restlessly on her lap, Deanna watched the movement, briefly glancing at her own practically nail-less finger tips, she looked at her mother with renewed venom.

"I'm sorry little one, I would never have agreed for you to have undertaken the challenge if I thought for one minute that your life was in any danger. The caverns were supposed to be a challenge of the heart, a test to see if your love would endure the various challenges that arose..."

Will found Deanna's eyes across the room as they realized that his initial assumption had been right all along, it was a challenge, a challenge that had gone horribly wrong.

Will stepped in, his huge frame hovered over the seated woman, Lwaxana knew there was no threat with his stance, just a furious curiosity.

"We could have died!, no...we nearly did die Lwaxana!"

His last word almost echoed around the confines of the room. A silence followed it, until finally, a pitiful apology fell from Lwaxana's lips.

"I'm sorry."

A heavy sigh reverberated throughout the room until suddenly out of the silence, Lwaxana's voice spoke again.

"By the way, how did you come to get out of there so early?"

Will looked puzzled by the question,

"We didn' t come out that way."

Lwaxana' s eyebrows knitted together as her own puzzlement became apparent.

"But...there is no other way."

Will snorted derisively as he answered her.

"Oh...yes there is I can assure you!"

And it was then, and only then, that the full impact of what the Imzadi couple had gone through surged through her body, they had done the impossible. They had taken the route never taken.

They had taken the wrong turn.

"But...but, that way has been impassable for more than a century! You should have reached a dead end and turned back...taken the other fork!"

Deanna came to a stand before her mother, her arms crossed agitatedly across her chest.

"We DID come to a dead end mother, a huge cliff, we just scaled down it, it wasn' t a tremendous challenge to us, certainly not enough to turn back from, we assumed it was part of the course, are you telling me it wasn' t, that we have risked our lives unnecessarily?"

Lwaxana paled under the scrutiny along with the sickening thought of her cherished daughter scaling the 50 foot drop. And as her blood run cold, she could only nod speechlessly.

Deanna felt Will touch her arm and she broke the accusing lock that she still held with her mother.

"I think that' s enough Deanna, it was obviously a misjudgement, but we' re okay, we came through it with flying colours. I think we' ve shown everyone, and ourselves what we truly mean to each other and for that alone, I' m glad we did it...Come on, lets get out of here."

And taking the same casual stance as before, Will casually slung his arm around the woman he adored and together they looked towards the future, a future no longer filled with doubts or uncertainties.

The future of a true Imzadi couple.

~~~end~~~

