
ALMOST GONE
HEATHER SMYTH

Almost Gone

by Heather Smyth©

The dappled sunlight crept slowly across the room eventually reaching the bed then, as if gathering itself, made the effort to rise from the floor, up the side of the bed and onto the face of the beautiful woman who had been watching it so intently. Gently, not wishing to disturb the man who slept beside her, she reached up and brushed aside a ringlet of stunning red hair. The urge to stretch, something she had been wanting to do for some time now, became too much to bear. Slowly, languidly, she raised her arms, arched her back and stretched her legs to the very toes with a delightful cat-like sensuousness that brought a growl of appreciation from her bedmate.

"I love it when you do that." As he spoke, his arms encircled her and he began to nuzzle her neck.

Sighing with pleasure, she turned in his embrace and looked lovingly into his eyes. "Jean-Luc...is there anything I do that you don't love?"

The Captain lifted his head from where it had been; placing small kisses along Beverly's neck to her collarbone. "Let me think...no, my love. I delight in anything...everything you do."

Beverly allowed him to ease her onto her back. "You know, if I were very unscrupulous, I could make you pay for that sentiment."

Raising himself on his elbows, Jean-Luc scowled down at Beverly in mock seriousness. "You wouldn't dare..."

Beverly reached up and took the Captain's face in her hands. With a wry chuckle she said: "You ought to know better than to dare me Captain...who knows what I might do?"

A wicked grin alighted on Jean-Luc's handsome face. "I can think of one or two things to keep you out of mischief...like this...and this..."

As Beverly's eyes drifted shut, she gave herself to her attentive lover as he began the foreplay she knew would culminate in joyful, satisfying bonelessness.

Some time later the couple were seated on the balcony of their room, enjoying a late breakfast.

"This is wonderful Jean-Luc. Look over there, on the lake; those birds are diving for food. Watch how high they dive."

Jean-Luc glanced briefly over to the birds, but took the opportunity to watch the woman he loved so dearly.

Without looking at him, Beverly said: "Jean-Luc...you're supposed to be looking at the birds."

Not taking his eyes from her, Jean-Luc smiled. "Hmmm. I think I found something eminently more interesting...and beautiful."

"You're incorrigible!"

Reaching for her hand, the Captain lifted it and kissed her fingers. "Terminally."

Laughing, Beverly shook her head. "So, tell me...who told you about this planet?"

Sitting up straight and only just curtailing the urge to tug his shirt into place, the Captain lifted his chin. "That would be breaking a confidence."

Beverly narrowed her eyes and tilted her head. "Jean-Luc, it's not as if it's a top secret Federation training facility...it's a holiday planet for goodness sake!"

Rising gracefully from her chair, she rounded the table and perched herself on Jean-Luc's lap. "You forget...I know where you're ticklish..."

"Now Beverly...no don't...stop that at once...Argh!...All right! Enough...please!"

They both laughed, Beverly surprised yet again at how happy Jean-Luc had become, how easily he embraced their changed relationship and how much she loved him.

When the chuckles subsided, Jean-Luc reached up and ran a gentle finger from Beverly's eyebrow to her chin. "You don't fight fair."

Beverly leaned down and kissed him tenderly. "I have to use all my feminine wiles to break the gallant, heroic Captain."

"That wasn't feminine wiles, that was out and out premeditated tickling!"

Tapping him gently on the nose Beverly whispered:

"It worked didn't it?"

Jean-Luc sighed in resignation. "My God, brought undone by a beautiful red head who knows how to tickle...it's a sad thing..."

"Yeah, yeah, so who was it?"

"Vash."

That caught Beverly's attention.

"Vash? You're not telling me you..."

"No, of course not. She told me about this place some time ago...before you and I...you know...and I thought it would be, well, fun to spend a few weeks in the early 2000 era. You have to admit, driving the car is exhilarating and these bed and breakfast places have been wonderful. I must tell you though; I didn't know exactly how it would be. I suppose I took a chance...do you want to go someplace else?"

Rising from Jean-Luc's lap, Beverly poured another cup of coffee. Looking again out over the lake, she seemed to be lost in thought. Jean-Luc knew better than to interrupt, so he sat patiently waiting. Eventually she sighed and smiled. "No my love. I'm happy here. I think anywhere would do, as long as we were together."

Sighing with contentment Jean-Luc asked:

"So...where to today?"

Without a word, Beverly slipped inside and retrieved the map. Moving the breakfast things aside she traced their travels with her finger.

The couple had been on Ferrid V for ten days. The planet was divided into several zones, allowing guests to experience holidays in an era of their choosing. The Ferrid system boasted seven planets, each planet modelled on a different culture. Ferrid V was Earth's model and Jean-Luc had considered opting for a more "Dixon Hill" era, but eventually settled on the turn of the year 2000 for it's innovation and ease. The three weeks he had arranged for them both was a surprise for Beverly. She had been working particularly hard on research lately and the Captain had also been very busy with a recent upgrade of the Enterprise's sensor arrays, so a holiday was a heartfelt, welcome event. Jean-Luc's only regret was not capturing Will Riker's reaction on holovid when he told him of his intention to take leave. The Captain wondered if a new record had been created as to how fast the news took to reach Deanna Troi.

He was still smiling at the memory when he realized Beverly had spoken. "What? Sorry ma cheri, I was thinking of something else. What did you say?"

Beverly let the glitch pass. “Well, we’ve been following the coast from down here at Alsted, where we started, and it’s taken ten days to reach here...if we take the main highway, we can be in Bellin by nightfall...but...it would be nicer if we took the mountain road and stayed near the coast.”

Jean-Luc followed Beverly’s finger. “So it’s what...250kms on the main highway and...320kms by the mountains. Hmmm, a long way...”

“But we could stop for a picnic...and we could call ahead to the homestead we were recommended. In fact, we could get some camping gear, just the bare minimum, and maybe camp overnight on the way...what do you think?”

There were several objections forming in the Captain’s mind, but one look at his beautiful soul mate evaporated any doubts. “All right. I’ll go and see

Mrs. Adams and inquire about the camping gear then I’ll ring through to the Bellin bed and breakfast letting them know our plans. It shouldn’t be a problem...the season is nearly over, in fact that’s why I chose this time...no crowds.”

“My clever Captain.”

“Hmmm. Well, I’ll be back in a minute.”

Beverly moved to the balcony and sipped her cooling coffee. She cast her mind back over what happened to change everything six months ago. Everything was as it usually had been. Breakfast together in the morning, dinner together almost every night...always ending in a polite “goodnight” and a chaste kiss on the cheek. Then one night everything changed. It was about 3am when Beverly was awakened by her door announcer. As the door opened on her command, she was astounded to see a visibly upset Jean-Luc. He stepped into her quarters and cast about, trying to gain some control, ultimately failing. Suddenly he stood still, a sob escaping his heaving chest and tears streaming down his face.

“Jean-Luc! What is it...what’s wrong?”

Unable to speak, all Jean-Luc could do was shake his head. Moving to him, Beverly took his hand and led him to the sofa, taking him into her arms when they were seated. Trembling, Jean-Luc

lowered his head to her shoulder and wrapped his arms about her in a desperate embrace.

"Shh, it's all right...hush Jean-Luc...shh..."

Beverly's door announcer chimed again, opening to her soft command, revealing a sleep tousled Deanna. To her silent enquiry Beverly very gently shook her head.

Nodding in understanding, Deanna left. Jean-Luc was unaware of the exchange.

They stayed in each other's arms for several long minutes and as Jean-Luc began to calm, Beverly again asked what had happened. "What is it Jean-Luc? Tell me what's wrong."

Jean-Luc released his tight grip and took a shuddering deep breath. "Oh, Beverly...I had a dream...a dreadful nightmare...the Borg were...I couldn't...I remembered the pain, the helplessness and, oh dear God, they took you and I couldn't...I couldn't stop...I..."

"Oh my poor Jean-Luc...shh... it's over my love, it didn't happen. I'm safe, you're safe...it's over now."

Fresh tears coursed down the Captain's face. "Will it never stop? Will I ever go to bed again without the fear of another nightmare? It was so bad Beverly...when they took you it was worse...the worst yet and I couldn't stop them...I offered myself...anything... so they wouldn't hurt you, but I couldn't...I couldn't..."

"Shh, Jean-Luc, come here."

Again Beverly took her friend in her arms and rocked him gently, one hand rubbing his back. After some time she leaned back and swivelled sideways, bringing them both to lie on the sofa and not long after that, Jean-Luc's rhythmic breathing told her he had fallen into an exhausted sleep.

Beverly gently rubbed her cheek on the top of his head. "My poor Jean-Luc," she whispered. "It's so unfair, my poor love."

Beverly knew her feelings for him were changing, deepening. She had been intending to tell him that she wasn't afraid anymore, and what had happened that night only re-enforced what she already knew about how JeanLuc felt about her. He loved her unreservedly and it was about time she reciprocated.

Sometime later, Beverly awoke and for a moment was disorientated. Quickly she realised where she was and what had happened. Turning her head she found Jean-Luc awake, quietly looking at her. "Well, hello there," she asked. "How do you feel"?

Jean-Luc frowned and momentarily lowered his eyes.

"Tired, embarrassed...I'm sorry Beverly."

Beverly gently placed her hand on Jean-Luc's face. "What for? We've always been here for each other...I'm just so sorry it happened."

A warm silence fell between them, each lost in their own thoughts, until Jean-Luc quietly whispered: "Did you mean it?"

"What?"

"Beverly...you called me... "my love". Did you mean it?"

Beverly looked deeply into Jean-Luc's hazel eyes. She felt her mouth go dry, her heart began to pound rapidly and a flock of butterflies took flight in her stomach. *This is it. Oh my God...give me strength,* she thought.

Taking a deep breath, Beverly steadied her nerves. "Yes Jean-Luc...my love...I'm not afraid anymore. If you'll have me...I...I love you...very much."

Jean-Luc was so still, his expression closed...until his eyes began to brim with tears. "Oh Beverly...mon Dieu ma cherie...do you have any idea how long, how much, I've wanted to hear you say that?"

"I've a fair idea..."

Taking Beverly in his arms Jean-Luc kissed her gently, tasting her, again and again, each kiss growing more passionate, more urgent...he had not intended to make love to Beverly there on the sofa...his fantasies had been much more elaborate, romantic, but that's what happened and neither of them could've been happier with the outcome. They were in love and deliriously happy.

Beverly's coffee was cold but the smile on her face showed she didn't care. As she turned to take her seat, Jean-Luc returned and she immediately went to him and wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him with all the love she felt...astonishing and delighting her Captain in one fell swoop.

When the kiss ended she stood back and smiled at Jean-Luc's heated expression.

"What was that for?"

Running one finger down his chest Beverly said huskily: "Just letting you know how much I love you."

"And I love you cherie...in fact, I've got a better way to show it..."

"Jean-Luc! You're insatiable!...and sexy...and lusty..."

Another kiss ensued, this time initiated by Jean-Luc. They were both panting somewhat when it ended. Beverly stepped back and took a deep, calming breath.

"Jean-Luc, darling, we don't have time for this. We have to finish packing and vacate the suite by ten o'clock." A deep growl was her only reply.

"Now you stop that. Go...go and finish packing."

"All right, but I hasten to add, you started this."

Beverly looked down Jean-Luc's front and reddened somewhat. "Oh my, is that the result of my handiwork? Such power I have over you...it makes me giddy with delusions of grandeur."

They both dissolved into laughter and made their way into the suite to continue packing.

Putting the last of their bags and camping gear into the boot, Beverly shut the lid and joined Jean-Luc in thanking Mrs. Adams for a lovely stay.

Jean-Luc tossed the car keys to Beverly. "Your turn today...you are qualified to drive a Starship, although your last efforts in the car were a little hair raising."

"Not that you'd notice then!"

Jean-Luc thought of a reply then decided not to spar with Beverly this morning. She usually won anyway; instead he sat in the car and spent a good five minutes trying, and finally succeeding in folding the map to the appropriate section.

"And you're qualified to drive a Starship...God help us..."

Displaying mock outrage, Jean-Luc turned to his lover.

"Insubordinate wench! I'll have you know paper maps are notoriously hard to fold. That's why they don't exist on the Enterprise."

Shaking her head and lifting her chin, Beverly looked haughtily at her Captain. "Humph! Just as well, or we'd never get anywhere."

The Captain lowered his head and chuckled. *She got me...again,* he admitted in his thoughts. “Enough! You querulous female...drive on.”

In the mountains two hundred kilometres to the north, the weather wasn’t as kind as that experienced by the happy couple. Heavy rain had been falling for two days and on the Murrindindi River, a natural dam had formed. Fallen trees, broken pieces of vegetation, silt and bark had jammed and interwoven at a narrowing of the river about one kilometre above a gorge over which a road bridge spanned. The river had swollen to dangerous proportions and on the same morning that Beverly and Jean-Luc left, the dam finally broke. A huge torrent of water surged down river with such strength, it tore more trees loose and rolled large boulders along with ease. As it came roaring around the bend, it smashed into the bridge pylons, making them groan with stress. The bridge was not designed to take the forces now being exerted on it. Within a few minutes, the bridge reached breaking point, the last blow coming from a boulder the size of a small car. With a sickening shriek the base of the pylons was wrenched free and carried downstream leaving the metal girders with no support.

After the wave front had passed, the river began to drop, but it was too late for the bridge. For half an hour nothing happened then suddenly, with a loud bang, a thirty metre stretch, the last section of the bridge before solid ground on the far side, dropped ten centimetres, then caught, swayed a little and settled. The bridge was hanging extremely precariously...it would take very little to make it fall. Perhaps just the weight of car.

The lovers were having a wonderful time. They had made their way down to the ocean and motored along leisurely, stopping wherever they wanted, collecting shells and marvelling at the beautiful scenery. They had lunch in a charming seaside restaurant, dining sumptuously on local seafood. Beverly took the proffered map and frowned in thought.

“Hmmm, you’re right. If we take the inland road we will get to Bellin quicker, but I’d really like to stay as close to the coast if we can. Did you ring ahead?”

Nodding, Jean-Luc said: “Yes. I told them we may camp along the way...we’ve got a three day leeway, so we can do as we please. If we take this road, it will take us to a headland where...see here? There’s a lighthouse and, if

I’m not mistaken, a small camping ground.”

“Brilliant Jean-Luc! It’s all rocky and cliffs along there isn’t it, and this area...national park? Do you think there’ll be anybody there? We’ve hardly seen anybody so far. Wouldn’t it be great if we had the park to ourselves?

We could go skinny dipping!”

Jean-Luc groaned. “Beverly I am *not* going skinny dipping!”

Taking her lover’s hand she purred seductively: “I’ll make it worth it...”

The Captain shook his head and laughed softly. “What am I to do with you?”

“Oh, I don’t know...I’m sure we could think of something...”

Beverly stood, and using the most overtly sexual walk she could muster, sashayed her way out of the restaurant, leaving Jean-Luc gaping in her wake.

When he arrived at the car, Beverly smiled sweetly and said wryly: “Engage, Captain?”

Laughing and taking her hand, he chuckled: “Make it so.”

They drove for a few hours along winding mountain roads, the grasses growing high on the shoulders and the trees of both sides meeting overhead, affording a tunnel effect. Occasionally small animals darted across the road in front of the car and every so often they would stop to enjoy the glimpses of ocean that appeared.

It was quite late in the afternoon as they rounded a bend to see the long bridge over the Murrindindi River.

“Oh, Jean-Luc look. That’s the big river on the map. What say we cross to that shoulder over the other side and see if we can get a view back up the gorge.”

Jean-Luc quickly checked the map. “Yes that’s a good idea. From that rise we should get an uninterrupted view of the gorge and a good distance upstream.”

Beverly was slowly accelerating as the approached the middle of the bridge. They were paying little attention to the road when suddenly the car dropped down onto the defective roadway with a bang.

Beverly immediately looked at her instruments, and said loudly: “What the hell was that?”

The Captain was about to tell her to stop when the bridge lurched sideways, balanced for a mere second then dropped with sickening speed to the river gorge twentytwo metres below.

The drop was silent and quick, giving the stunned passengers no time to react. As the section of bridge hit the rocky bottom of the gorge, the car bounced high in the air on an angle. It executed a complete roll at the apex of its flight and on the way down, struck an outcrop of rock, flipping it again. It finally came to rest on its side at the base of a cliff some ten metres from the river. After the scree and light pebbles stopped their downward journey there was silence save for the swiftly flowing river. The car was jammed, passenger side down, the roof stove in and a huge boulder sitting on the boot. Minutes passed in silence then gently at first a groaning started to come from the car.

Beverly was in pain. There didn’t seem to be anywhere that didn’t hurt. Her right arm wouldn’t move and her left arm, though free, hurt like the very devil. Nevertheless, gritting her teeth and quelling the moan that nearly escaped, she lifted her left hand to her face and head. A suspicious stickiness covered her face and both eyes were closed, the left by blood, the right due to a large swelling. Feeling further up her face, she discovered a laceration at the hairline, and higher, on the top of her head, a deep cut, both injuries bleeding freely. Gingerly at first, then with more strength, Beverly tried to move; all that she achieved was a burst of pain from various parts of her body. Her legs were trapped; the dashboard had collapsed completely, pressing her legs in a vice-like grip. Taking a few minutes to recover, Beverly began to work on her left eye, using saliva and fingers to clean as much blood from it as she could, a difficult job as she soon realised she was bleeding from a cut lip as well.

Eventually, she was able to open the eye and in a few moments was able to look around. She had been growing increasingly concerned

about Jean-Luc's silence, fearing he was unconscious, but she was not prepared for what she saw.

He was gone. The left side of the car was crushed, the front door missing.

"Jean-Luc!"

The call caused a sharp pain in her chest Beverly recognized as broken ribs. Heedless of the pain she called again...and again.

Oh dear God where are you.

She waited, alone and in pain, as darkness started to gather.

Something was definitely wrong, but he couldn't work it out. He was dreaming...he knew that, yet somehow he was different. He was cold and everything he tried to do, hurt...a lot. It even hurt to breathe...there was a wetness in his lungs, and he was upside down, at least he thought so...it was a really weird dream.

I don't like this very much...I'd better wake up.

At first, when Jean-Luc opened his eyes, he thought he'd failed. It seemed to be just as dark with his eyes open, as it was with them closed. Trying to move, he cried out in pain.

*I wasn't dreaming...this is real. Where the hell am

I...what happened?*

The pounding in his head and his congested eyes proved that he was indeed upside down. Gingerly, he tried moving his right arm. It hurt, but not too badly, and he was able to reach tentatively forward. Feeling rock, he searched for a hold that he could push against to extricate himself from his position. His left arm was jammed somehow...it hurt too much to move anyway, so when he finally found purchase for his right hand, he knew he was in for quite a struggle.

Testing at first, he began to exert more pressure, at the same time, twisting his shoulders. It was a manoeuvre he was sorry he attempted, and yet he persevered. With a burst of intense pain, he managed to wriggle backwards until he was lying over a large boulder, gasping for breath and almost sobbing with agony.

Many minutes passed until the pain became tolerable.

Jean-Luc lay quietly, trying to remember what had happened, for him to find himself in this predicament. He remembered the car and Beverly...

My God! Beverly!

He tried to shout her name, but it was quite impossible. He had most certainly broken some ribs, but more than that, there was an unpleasant and debilitating wetness in his lungs. He didn't seem to be able to take a big breath, and his throat hurt to speak. As he lay there on the rock, he mentally ran a check on his body. Along with his head, arm, chest and throat, he had pain in his stomach and the left side of his back and his right ankle flared in agony when he tried to move it.

Probably broken.

That, coupled with a badly twisted right knee, made his right leg useless.

He had gently explored his head with his right hand and found a laceration over his right eyebrow and a rather large lump and cut at the back of his head. Now he was upright, the bleeding had slowed markedly. He was cold and in considerable pain, yet all he could think about was Beverly and not being able to search for her in the dark. He decided to try and rest to gain some strength to look for her at first light.

The first thing Beverly thought when she awoke was that she was glad her dream was over. That was until she tried to stretch. Crying out in pain, she realised her predicament and stilled herself immediately.

Dammit, that hurt!

In the dim light in the car, Beverly could begin to make out how she was trapped. The right side of the car was badly battered, the left completely smashed, the front door missing. The windscreens, front and rear were missing, the side windows smashed. The car was perched nose down and leaning down to the left, the bonnet stuck under a rock ledge. The boot, although stuck up in the air, had a large boulder on it and the roof had a large crease in it, almost touching Beverly's head.

The dashboard had collapsed, trapping her legs; the steering wheel pressed painfully down onto her lower torso and her right arm was wedged in tightly between the door and the side of her seat, completely immobile.

Carefully taking a breath, she called for her lover. “Jean-Luc! Jean-Luc, can you hear me?”

Jean-Luc was dozing. His dreams were a jumble, a mixture of pain and violent images, interspersed with visions of Beverly and the happy day they had shared on their drive. Suddenly his eyes snapped open.

“What was that?”

He lay silently, willing the sound that woke him to be repeated. Then faintly...

“Jean-Luc...Jean-Luc.”

Without thinking he cried out: “Beverly!”

The blast of pain made him roll onto his side, coughing uncontrollably. Each cough brought flashes of agony, in both his back and his chest, the blood he retched up from his lungs only adding to his misery. With a huge effort, he quelled his coughing and curled on his side gasping for breath.

It took many minutes for the pain to ease enough for him to try moving again. Using his good arm, he raised himself and became as quiet as he could, listening intently.

The call came again and he turned downstream in the direction of the call and squinted his eyes against the early morning sun.

Nothing. He could see nothing of Beverly or the car. The call came again. He couldn’t answer but he knew he had to get to Beverly, her calls were getting weaker. Slowly, and with infinite care, he started to drag himself over the boulders that littered the sides of the river. Using his good arm and leg he made slow progress, stopping frequently to allow the pain to subside. After an agonising half hour he rested, continually listening for Beverly’s call. When he had sufficiently recovered, he started moving again. Sliding around a particularly large rock, he came across a door from the car, and a little farther on, a windscreen.

Well, it would seem I’m on the right track.

He was eventually stopped by a jumble of boulders that were too big for him to traverse. His only option was to make his way down to the river and use the current to carry him beyond the obstruction. The going to the river was made easier by the downward slant of the terrain,

and when he reached the river he stopped to rest. The coughing that started was painful and uncontrolled. When he opened his tear filled eyes, he was worried to again find a small puddle of blood.

Lung damage, he thought. *I wonder how Beverly is...she must be hurt too...*

With those thoughts in his mind, he dragged himself into the cold, fast flowing river.

It was very difficult. With only one leg and arm to guide him, he found it almost impossible to keep contact with the rocks. The haphazard boulders reached out into the river, forcing him further away from the bank. The current was pulling at him and he was tiring fast. He saw a place to exit the water and plunged his arm out to grab the rock, but his grip was weak and his hand slid from the rock, tearing his nails in the process. Trying to turn in the water, he didn't see the tree trunk stuck out from the bank. He slammed into it with terrible force.

The agony caused him to lose consciousness. If not for his bad arm tangling in the branches and the force of the water pressing him against the tree, he would've been swept away and drowned.

He came to coughing and in terrible pain. Using his good arm, he extricated his damaged arm from the branch...he was unable to stop the yell of pain...and pushed across the current until he could get some purchase with his foot. Still coughing and bringing up more blood, he managed to drag himself out of the water. He lay shivering and retching, coughing until he thought he would pass out again. Eventually he quietened, though still shivering, and looked about to see how he was going to climb up from the bank. Jean-Luc knew he wouldn't be able to hear Beverly over the noise of the rushing river and he also knew he couldn't go on much longer. It took him nearly an hour to reach the top of the boulders, but it was worth it. He spotted the car...or what was left of it. As he began his journey across the remaining rocks, he heard Beverly calling him. Very carefully he took the biggest breath he could and called back.

"I'm coming Beverly! Hang on!"

Beverly kept drifting off to sleep. As a doctor, she knew this wasn't good, yet she didn't know how to stop it. It happened at the

most peculiar times...as she was studying her injured right arm, and just now, in the middle of calling for Jean-Luc. She was overcome with worry for him and more than once descended into uncontrollable tears at the thought of him being injured...or worse. She knew she was subjected to the vagaries of shock, that and the head injury were making it difficult for rational thought, yet she despaired the thought of losing him. Again she felt the encroaching dizziness, and just as her eyes were closing, she heard his voice.

Suddenly awake, she listened intently.

"Beverly..."

Overcome with joy, she called with all the strength she could muster. "Jean-Luc! Jean-Luc I'm here...in the car! Can you see it?"

She waited...and waited...then closer, but strangely quiet: "I'm coming Beverly, hang on..."

Then he was there. He appeared on the bonnet, squeezing between the rock ledge and what was left of the windscreen.

"Oh, my God it's good to see you Jean-Luc! Where have you been? What happened to..?"

The Captain started to cough, a wet deep wracking cough that obviously caused him great pain and only subsided when he expectorated a quantity of bright blood.

Beverly was instantly alarmed. "Jean-Luc! You've lacerated a lung. How often do you bring up blood?"

Not yet able to answer the doctor, all he could do was shake his head and pant shallowly. Eventually he lifted his head and looked wearily at Beverly. "Not that often. It's worse when I exert myself. It sort of settles down, but it won't stop all together."

"No and it won't until we get you to hospital. What other injuries do you have?"

Jean-Luc tried to sigh, but with a grimace, failed. "Never mind about me...I take it you're trapped in the car?"

"Jean-Luc..."

"Beverly...how are you stuck?"

With an annoyed look, Beverly told him how she was snared.

“My right arm is jammed between the door and the seat...I think it’s broken...and my legs are squashed under the dashboard. Oh, and I can’t move my head about too much...the roof’s bent.

Jean-Luc moved his chest over the sill of the windscreen.

“Do you think there’s room for me in there?” Looking around, Beverly frowned.

“I don’t think so, Jean-Luc. The passenger seat is on its side and the car has been crushed all down the left side.

“Ok, I’ll see if I can look at the right side.”

“Jean-Luc...please, before you go, tell me about your injuries.”

A sort silence followed, then he started to speak.

“I have two cuts on my head, one over my eyebrow, the other at the back of my head...there’s also a large lump there. My throat hurts and I’ve broken some ribs, that’ll be why my lung is damaged. I have pain and tenderness in my stomach and back, my left arm is...damaged, the right knee has been badly twisted and my right ankle is broken. Apart from that...I’m fine.”

His attempt at humour failed. Beverly was appalled with what she heard. “Jean-Luc, you shouldn’t be moving. Find a comfortable rock and sit in a reclining position, that will...”

Raising his left hand, the Captain silenced the doctor.

“Beverly, I will have a look at the right side of the car, then I will see if I can get you out.”

“But Jean-Luc, any exertion on your part may well...”

“I know Beverly. Look at it this way. Wouldn’t you be better able to help me if I could get you out?”

That got her. He was right, of course, but so was she. Exertion could cause further damage and she could tell he was already quite weak. Unable to dissuade him, she bit her tongue and let him have his way.

It only took a few minutes for the Captain to find he couldn’t get Beverly out. The right side of the car was at the edge of a five-metre drop, it was also badly damaged and he was sure he wouldn’t have been able to open the doors, so he dragged himself back to his perch on the bonnet.

“Beverly, I could go and look for a branch or something to try and lever up the dashboard, but in all honesty, I don’t think I could do it...I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right my love. Really, I’m not that banged up. I’ve got a concussion...some blood loss, but compared to you I’m in tip-top condition”

The snort that escaped from Jean-Luc caused another round of dreadful coughing, culminating in another small gout of blood.

“Jean-Luc! Sit back...that’s it...lean back and get control of your breathing. That’s the way...gently, gently...yes, that’s it. No more laughing mister. Jokes are now off the menu. Ok, how do you feel now?”

Still softly puffing, Jean-Luc nodded his head, raising his left thumb in an “ok” sign.

The injured pair sat in silence for a long time. There was little to talk about and they were both too tired to indulge in small talk. As the morning wore on the temperature started to rise. It was going to be a hot day. “Jean-Luc! Hey, Jean-Luc...wake up!”

Rousing himself slowly, the Captain muttered: “I am awake.”

“Good. You’re going to burn if you don’t cover yourself, especially your head.”

Jean-Lifted his head and smiled tiredly. “And just what do you think I should use? I seem to be without my parasol.”

Beverly closed her eyes. “Hmmm, now that paints an unusual picture. What would you have on...satin, or lace?”

Raising his eyebrows, Jean-Luc said dryly: “I thought jokes were off the menu.”

“Well, you started it. Seriously though, can you use your shirt?”

Looking down at his short-sleeved shirt, the Captain decided he could remove it without too much difficulty. Undoing the second button, he leaned forward slowly, and with his good right hand, grabbed the collar at the back and gently raised it over his head. All went well until he inadvertently moved his left arm. The sharp stab of pain made him cry out, bringing on another bout of agonizing coughing, sending a small quantity of blood over his shirt.

“Jean-Luc! What happened? Are you all right?”

After a moment or two, he replied,

"Yes. I moved my bad arm...it caught me unawares, that's all."

Bending as low as she could, Beverly said,

"Can you move closer, so I can see your arm?"

Moving with great care, Jean-Luc positioned himself so Beverly could study his bad arm.

"You can't move it at all?"

"Not without very strong pain."

"Lean forward a little more, that's it. Oh Jean-Luc, it's dislocated!, and judging by the swelling of your wrist,

I'd lay odds it's broken. What happened to you?" Sitting back upright, Jean-Luc shook his head.

"I can't remember. I was thrown free of the car, that much is certain...I ended up upside down, wedged between two large rocks, some distance up stream. By sheer luck, I heard you calling and I made my way here."

"You were very lucky. Have you put your shirt over your head yet? Make sure you cover your shoulders too.

At least you can avoid the worst of the sun."

Jean-Luc arranged his shirt as Beverly suggested and leaned back to rest. "What about you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Beverly, it's going to get very hot in that car...is the sun on you?"

Hearing her sigh, Jean-Luc became concerned.

"Beverly?"

"Jean-Luc...how far is the river?"

"About ten metres, why?"

Another silence ensued, ending when Beverly said: "I'm thirsty and we're both going to need water before the day is out."

"Then I'll go and get some."

"Wait!...wasn't there some water with the camping gear? We could use the sleeping bags and all the other gear too!"

Getting slowly to his feet and leaning heavily on the car, Jean-Luc made his way to the boot, only to find it jammed closed under the weight of a large boulder. With his good hand he gave it a push with

all the strength he could muster. The rock didn't budge. He regained his seat with Beverly.

"No good," he panted. "There's a bloody great rock on the boot. I can't move it."

"Is there anything around that we could use to carry water?"

Looking around, Jean-Luc was about to say "no" when he spotted a hub cap.

"We may be in luck. Somehow, one of the hubcaps has stayed on. I could use that if I can get it off."

Hopping and scooting along, the Captain took up position next to the left rear tyre. At first he tried using his fingers, already injured by the rock in the river, and when it wouldn't budge, he tried kicking it. That proved just as ineffective. He needed something to lever the hubcap off. He thought about it for a while, asking the doctor if she could see anything in the car, and when she answered in the negative, he decided to go down to the river and search for something to do the job.

It was a slow, painful journey, gingerly inching along on his backside, his bad arm wrapped around his chest, his bad leg held out in front. He finally reached the water and his first action was to gulp down several hands full of water. The pain in his stomach had grown slowly worse but he paid it no heed. He found what he sought; a good-sized stick with a tapered end, then he began his laborious return to the car.

Beverly heard him coming, his wheezing giving him away. She was just about to tell him to stop, when he was overtaken by a fit of coughing. Had she been able to see him, she would've been alarmed, for as well as coughing up more blood, he also vomited up the water...and it was bloodstained.

"Captain!...Jean-Luc! Can you hear me?" "Yes"...a weak reply.

"Can you come here so I can see you?"

A pause...then: "Look Beverly...I think it would be better if I just got the hub cap off and went for the water. I'm tired and I want to limit my movements. Ok?"

"But Jean-Luc I...oh all right, but you let me see you when you get back!"

Approaching the hub cap, Jean-Luc muttered to himself: “If you know what’s good for you, you’ll just be a good little hubcap and come off first go.”

It wasn’t the first try, but on the third, Picard was gratified to hear the recalcitrant piece of metal let go its grip of the wheel hub.

Nodding in satisfaction, the Captain turned to face what would be a very uncomfortable trip to the water.

It took a long time and when he reached the river all he could do was sit against a rock and pant, trying not to cough. He had carried the hubcap on his lap, he was happy to move it...the metal had become very hot and was quite uncomfortable on his thighs. Needing to relieve himself, he scooted to the riverbank and managed to kneel. As the stream began, he groaned in pain. As he urinated, the pain in his back became almost unbearable and as he looked down, he was dismayed to find his urine was bloodstained. When he finished, he went back to his rock, retrieved the hub cap and began to wash it. Having cleaned it to his satisfaction, he filled it and, after drinking a little water, made his way to his resting place.

He was feeling dreadful. The pain from various parts of his body was now constant, sapping his strength and filling him with dread. He knew he had to keep going...in these temperatures, Beverly could easily dehydrate. She needed him and he was determined to care for her. It was quite simple...he loved her and he would die to protect her.

It took a huge effort to get back to the car, a task made all the more difficult by the water he was carrying. Twice he stopped and on the second occasion, a coughing fit almost spilled the precious cargo. When he finally arrived at the car, he had blood drying on his chin and chest.

“Can you reach the hubcap, Beverly?” Beverly stretched out her left arm.

“Just a little more, Jean-Luc.”

Making the effort, Jean-Luc was pleased to feel Beverly take possession of the water. After she had a small drink, a silence descended as each person retreated into their own thoughts. After a while, Beverly bobbed her head down as far as she could to look at Jean-Luc. He was dozing and she was alarmed to see the blood on his

face and chest. She could also see livid bruises that had formed over his left ribs and face. He was cradling his damaged arm with his good arm and Beverly winced at the sight of his grotesquely misshapen shoulder.

Oh, Jean-Luc, my poor love...look at you.

Silent tears slowly ran down her face as she felt the depth of her love for this man...and the terrible frustration of not being able to help him. She knew he would put her well-being above his own and she was desperately afraid it could kill him.

Her musings were interrupted by Jean-Luc's sudden vomiting. Beverly looked on in shock as Jean-Luc clasped his stomach and brought up bloodstained water and bile. His exertions caused a fit of wet coughing, more blood spilling over his torso. He collapsed sideways and lay trembling with pain, groaning softly.

Beverly bit her lip and remained silent. It would not help to make any alarmed comments, they both knew he was seriously injured and nothing would be gained by panicking over it.

When he seemed to be a little recovered, she said softly: "Has the pain settled?"

Still unable to speak, Jean-Luc nodded.

"See if you can sit up, it will help your breathing."

Slowly, and with obvious pain, the Captain got himself upright and leaning back on the boulder. "Jean-Luc...How long have you been vomiting?"

Gently panting, he replied in a roughened voice: "That's the second time. Why is there blood?"

"That could be coming from your damaged lung. You could be swallowing the blood and that could bring about the vomiting and if your stomach is badly bruised, that would exacerbate matters. But there's more, isn't there?"

Nodding tiredly, Jean-Luc shifted slightly. "When I urinate there's terrible pain in my back...here...and the urine has blood in it."

"You've damaged the kidney. If we're lucky, it's just bruised."

"And if we're not lucky?"

"Let's not cross our bridges till we come to them, eh? Jean-Luc, I know you don't want to, but you must keep drinking. Just small

amounts...even if you bring it up, at least you will be getting a little. In this temperature it's very important."

Jean-Luc tried to sigh and only succeeded in causing a grimace of pain. "I know Beverly...but I don't feel very well...I think I'll just rest a while."

Nodding, Beverly agreed. "That's probably a good idea. I'll keep an eye on you."

Jean-Luc closed his weary eyes and soon drifted off into a fitful doze.

Beverly tried yet again to free her arm and legs; the steering wheel was becoming very painful as it pressed down on her lower torso. She had wet herself, having no choice in the matter, and she was feeling absolutely miserable...in pain and desperately worried about JeanLuc. No matter how hard she struggled, she couldn't free herself. After checking the Captain yet again, she leaned her head back and slipped into a troubled sleep.

It was the heat that woke her. It had become stifling in the car, all the surfaces becoming too hot to touch. As she woke, she became aware of Jean-Luc's wheezing. Ducking her head down she was shocked with what she saw.

Jean-Luc had slumped over onto his side; sweat coursing down his face and body. He was deathly pale and was struggling to breathe.

"Jean-Luc! Jean-Luc wake up!"

He didn't stir. Beverly went from worried to frantic.

"JEAN-LUC!"

Still nothing.

Oh my God what can I do!

Without conscious thought, Beverly pressed the car horn. It made an odd, strangled sound, but it was loud and it did the trick. With a start, Jean-Luc opened his eyes and began coughing. When the fit passed and the ubiquitous blood had been expelled, the Captain inched himself upright and battled to regain his composure.

"What the hell was that?"

"What was what?"

"That bloody noise! It scared six months growth out of me!"

Beverly felt a twinge of annoyance. "Scared you!? I was beside myself with fear Jean-Luc! You wouldn't wake up. I thought...I thought you..."

"I'm sorry Beverly...I was a little startled...please, I'm sorry."

"Let's forget it, ok? I think we were both a little startled."

Warm looks were exchanged, the Captain even managing a small smile.

"That could come in handy, you know."

Frowning, Beverly asked: "What would?"

"The horn. We could sound it every now and then...maybe some one will hear it. At least until the battery wears out."

A smirk appeared on Beverly's face. "How do you know so much about these old autos?"

"Ah. Dixon Hill does his own repairs...cheaper that way. You've no idea how much trouble can be had when your car breaks down and you don't know how to fix it."

"Hmmm. Good thing the Enterprise doesn't need servicing."

"Hey, no jokes, remember?"

"Sorry, just slipped out. We should have some more water."

Beverly carefully picked up the hubcap and had a few sips.

"Yuck! The water's hot."

She passed the vessel out to the Captain and he too took some sips of the distastefully hot water. "How long will the water last?"

Jean-Luc looked down at the hubcap.

"We'll need more by this afternoon. I'll put this in the shade for now. Why don't you give the horn a press?"

The strangely odd noise reverberated around the gorge, startling some birds that had come down to the river for a drink.

"That's enough, Beverly. We'll do it again later."

The two friends again lapsed into a gentle silence. After a while Beverly asked: "Jean-Luc, what happened that night? You know, when we..."

"I had a nightmare...I told you...the Borg were hurting you and I couldn't...I couldn't stop them."

"Do you have that nightmare often?"

"Often enough. I found the more I loved you, the worse the nightmares became. The worst of it was I couldn't tell you."

Reaching her hand out to him, Beverly said gently:

"Why?"

Taking the tips of her fingers with his, Jean-Luc managed a lopsided grin. "I would've had to tell you how much I loved you."

"You were scared?"

"Yes. After Kesprit I was determined not to push the issue. You knew how I felt, it was pointless trying to

pressure you into something you didn't want."

They sat quietly for a while, each absorbed with their own thoughts.

"Beverly...what changed?"

"Jean-Luc, I have loved you for a long time...I think you knew that."

The Captain nodded gently.

"It was odd in a way. There was no dramatic change...I didn't wake up one day to find my feelings had altered overnight, but it slowly dawned on me that I was *in* love with you. There's a difference. The more I thought about it, the more I realised the depth of my feelings for you."

"Were you going to tell me?"

"Yes. I was working up to it. I was still afraid, but more for the unknown than for my feelings for you."

Jean-Luc moved closer and took a firmer grip on Beverly's hand.

"I'm so glad I came to you that night. My whole life has changed...I never knew I could be so happy...so contented. When we made love that first time...it was incredible. I had had all these romantic fantasies about how it would be to make love to you, all very contrived and sentimental, but nothing...nothing, could've compared to that first time. It was so...beautiful."

Beverly closed her eyes, lost in the memory of that first time.

"I wish I could hold you Jean-Luc."

"I know Cherie. I love you."

Beverly felt the lump form in her throat and, barely able to speak, she uttered: "And I you, Jean-Luc."

They stayed like that for some time, only connected by their hands, yet each sharing the same memory.

They settled down to a system of sorts. Quiet rest was interspersed with sips of water and blasts of the horn, until Jean-Luc voiced what they had both been thinking.

"We need more water."

It was a statement of fact. Beverly knew it was useless to say otherwise. "I wish I could go for you...please...take care."

Jean-Luc took her proffered hand and squeezed it gently. "Hey...I've got you to come back to. I'll be careful."

The arduous journey to the river was as difficult and painful as before. Jean-Luc found he had to rest more and more and by the time he returned, he'd suffered two coughing fits and was dangerously exhausted. With Beverly's gentle insistence, he drank a little water and quickly sank into an uncomfortable sleep. As the sun went down, Beverly too drifted off, grateful for the falling temperature.

Sometime during the long night she was woken by the Captain vomiting and coughing. When he recovered, he answered her soft enquiry by saying he was all right. He seemed to sleep again, but Beverly couldn't find the escape of sleep. She napped fitfully and was trying to find a more comfortable position when a noise stilled her movements.

Listening intently, she heard a gruff snuffling, closer than she had first detected it.

Keeping her voice low, she called to the Captain.

"Jean-Luc!...come on my love...wake up...please..."

It was the tension in Beverly's voice that cut through his sleep.

"What is it?"

"Listen."

In the ensuing silence more of the snuffling was heard. There were animals nearby.

"Do you know what they are, Jean-Luc?"

It was very disconcerting talking to him in the blindness of the night. His voice was a welcome comfort.

"I've no idea."

"Do you have anything... anything to protect yourself?

“I have the stick I used to pry the hubcap off.”

“Oh.”

Beverly could hear the Captain moving about.

“What are you doing?”

“The moon will come out from behind the clouds soon. I want to have a better view of the surroundings.”

Suddenly there was a sinister low growling, answered by another, and another, some metres away. There seemed to be at least three largish animals circling the car...and they didn’t sound friendly.

“I’m back. It’s better I stay here. They can only come at us from one direction, the drop on the other side is too great.”

They sat in silence for a time, listening to the noises of the animals, then abruptly, there was silence.

“Jean-Luc...”

In a blur of movement, two of the creatures rushed in and as they did, the moon broke cover.

“Get out!”, shouted Jean-Luc, swinging the stick.

He whacked one of the assailants across the muzzle and on the return stroke, caught the other about the ears. He was satisfied with the yelp of pain, but as he swung again, he was overcome with a stab of agony from his chest. He fell backwards, the beasts taking the opportunity to rush in for the attack. One snapped at his face, while the other sank its teeth into his already broken ankle. He screamed in pain as Beverly screamed in fear... and pressed the car horn.

The combined noise shattered the night but more importantly, terrified the aggressive animals. They took flight and, as suddenly as it began, the attack was over.

Silence returned, the only sound being Jean-Luc’s groans of pain.

“Jean-Luc!...What happened...what did they do?”

“Oh God Beverly, my ankle, one bit my ankle...the bad one...Oh God it hurts!”

“Oh, Jean-Luc...I can’t help you!... Dammit! Can you put you foot through to me?”

“No point...you can’t see...”

“Wait! The interior light...”

Jean-Luc could hear Beverly scrabbling about in the car.

“I can’t reach the bloody thing! Can you? The roof is bent...it’s on the roof’s far side.”

“I’ll try.”

Jean-Luc moved slowly, lifting his body through the smashed windscreen. Balancing on his hips, he reached with his good hand and found he could just brush his fingers on the light fitting.

“Is there a switch?”

“Yes! I used it a few days ago.” *Think Beverly! Which side?* “Left! It’s on the left side!”

Again, stretching his arm, Jean-Luc was relieved when his questing fingers encountered the switch. Saying a silent prayer, he slid the switch. Blessedly, the light came on. Although dim, they both squinted their eyes.

“Ok, Jean-Luc, let’s see that ankle.”

It took some moments for the Captain to manoeuvre himself into position...he was rapidly losing his strength.

“Oh, God Jean-Luc...what a mess.”

Dipping her fingers into their water, she gently cleaned the gaping tears, holding his leg at the calf.

“When the sun comes up, you’ll have to go down to the river and wash it properly. The cold will help with the pain too.”

She was greeted with silence.

“Jean-Luc?”

Shading her eyes she peered into the dark. Jean-Luc was lying on his back, his good hand covering his face. She could tell by his trembling, that he was weeping.

There was nothing she could do. She couldn’t ease his pain or cure his injuries. She had never felt so wretchedly frustrated in her life. Beverly kept gently running water over the mutilated ankle until Jean-Luc regained his composure.

“It’s ok now Beverly. I need to get off my back...it hurts...everything hurts...”

“I know my love...I’m sure someone will come soon. That bridge will get their attention and they’ll find us and we’ll be rescued and in a few days we’ll be as right as rain.”

“Yes... I know...it’s just the pain...it gets too much sometimes...I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologies Jean-Luc, it’s perfectly understandable.”

“I’d better turn off the light now.”

It took a long time for Jean-Luc to settle himself. They stayed in miserable silence until the sun came up.

Beverly could tell he’d got no sleep and neither had she. He lifted his head wearily and picked up the hub cap, tossing away the dirty water.

“I better get some water.”

Beverly wanted so much to protest; yet she couldn’t. Without water they would both perish and she couldn’t get out of the car. The overwhelming feelings of frustration returned, although she said nothing of that to Jean-Luc.

“Make sure you bathe that ankle thoroughly...it’s quite swollen.”

He didn’t reply, just moved off with painful slowness.

Although it was only ten metres to the river, the boulders made it a difficult trek. He stopped frequently, to rest, to cough and to relieve himself...painfully...before he made it to the water. He took a good fifteen minutes to remove his sandal, a very unpleasant exercise, and then hesitatingly, lowered his foot into the running river. As the cold water flowed over his hot, swollen joint, he felt lightheaded with pain. It would be so easy...just lay down in the water...it would be quick...Beverly! He was jolted out of his misery by the sound of the car horn. There was no point in hurrying...it was impossible...he filled the hubcap and began his tortuous return journey. By the time he got back, Beverly was calling for him.

“I’m here, what’s wrong?”

“I saw a shadow on the rock wall over there!”

“A shadow?”

“The shadow of a person! If you look over there, you can see the shadow of the bridge. I saw a person on the bridge, near where it broke!”

“Do you think they heard the horn?”

“I don’t know...but in any case, someone will be coming to fix the bridge...won’t they?”

Jean-Luc began to feel Beverly's excitement.

"Yes! Even if they don't fix it, they will erect a barrier...surely?"

"You bet! And we will get their attention!"

It was a much happier couple that settled down to wait.

Towards the afternoon, Beverly remarked: "Is it my imagination, or is it getting a little chilly. The sun has been in for hours now."

"Hmmm? Sorry...must've dozed off."

"I said, I think it's getting cold."

"You're right. Mountain weather is notoriously unstable. Actually, it looks as if it might rain."

"We've hardly used any water...the temperature must've been dropping all day. You'd better put on your shirt Jean-Luc."

The Captain looked at his arm.

"Umm...I think I'll give that a miss Beverly. I really don't want to move my arm."

"Look, just slide on that sleeve, then sort of wriggle the other arm in."

"But I..."

"Jean-Luc...you know as well as I do that hypothermia can be just as deadly as dehydration and heat exhaustion."

"Yes but..."

"No buts, Captain, just do it!"

Although he dreaded the pain he knew it would cause, he also knew Beverly was right. Doing as she said, he carefully fed the sleeve onto his injured arm, until it reached his shoulder, then gently ran his other arm through it's sleeve. Then, taking as big a breath as he dared, rotated his good arm and popped the shirt over his head. The distress that ripped through him took his breath away and started a bout of vomiting and coughing. His recovery was slow and tortuous. Beverly watched, her hand flexing in vexation.

"Are you all right?"

The Captain shook his head. Beverly waited impatiently for Jean-Luc to speak.

"Jean-Luc...what is it?"

Jean-Luc leaned back his head, wincing when the rock made contact with his injured head. Sweat streamed off his face, and Beverly

suspected there were tears mingled as well. He raised his good hand and hovered it over his ribs.

"It hurts more and more...I can't touch here now. My back is on fire, I dread having to relieve myself...my stomach...leg...there's pain everywhere Beverly, I don't know how much more I can take."

Beverly had expected a wry comment, perhaps an admission of pain, but not this. She was nonplussed, confused. He was always her rock, her anchor...the safe place in the storm...he was the Captain, invincible...he was indomitable...wasn't he? With sudden shame, Beverly realised what she had permitted. Above all others she, and she alone, should have known the man...Jean-Luc...who lived within the Captain persona. She had allowed herself to expect he would be there...make things so...but this time he couldn't. Of the two of them, he was by far the more seriously injured, her major concern was that she was trapped in the car...an inconvenience at most. Her contrition was heartfelt.

"Listen to me Jean-Luc. We WILL get out of this. That person I saw will bring more people. They can't leave a bridge like that...even on an unimportant road like that one. All you have to do is hold on; you can do that can't you? For me?"

Jean-Luc was silent for a long time. All Beverly could hear was his strained breathing. Eventually he spoke.

"For you my cherie, but if I don't make it there's someth..."

"NO! I won't hear it! We will..."

"Hear me Beverly, it's getting too hard to

talk...please."

Her silence was his signal to continue.

"Take me to LaBarre. There's an oak tree...Robert and Rene are there..."

"Jean-Luc please don't..."

"Promise Beverly...please."

In a voice just above a whisper, Beverly acquiesced.

"I promise."

"Thank you, my love."

A sad silence engulfed them. Beverly's emotions surged from utter desolation to smouldering anger, and all the time, her frustration grew.

His words startled her. "Night is falling. Are you warm enough?"

"Yes...and you?"

"There is a lot of stored warmth in these rocks. I'll be alright."

Beverly sighed.

"I thought they'd come before now."

"Me too. Well, we'll just have to be patient, apparently fallen bridges aren't very high on the fix it list."

Beverly smiled to herself. He still possessed a sense of humour...all was not lost.

"Wouldn't do on the Enterprise, I know the

Captain...a terrible tyrant...he'd have their guts for garters if they didn't ha..."

"Beverly! What a perfectly ghastly saying. Where did you get that?"

"Actually, it was Will. He was watching some old holovid...something swashbuckling, you know...Rikerish."

"Swashbuckling. I always rather fancied that term.

Could you imagine me...?"

"It's the tights...definitely."

"Careful, I almost laughed...and that should be avoided at all costs."

"Understood, Sir!"

"Jean-Luc...Do you think those animals will return tonight?"

Beverly heard Jean-Luc pick up the stick.

"I hope not Beverly...I hope not."

Darkness descended and with it, the fear.

"Are you warm, Beverly?"

"Ha! Not really. I'm wet from the waist

down...actually I'm an unholy mess. I pity our rescuers...I stink!"

"So genteel! Quite the lady, aren't you?"

"Yeah, well, it's not as if I can excuse myself and go to the bathroom."

“Sorry, Beverly. I was just trying to...you know...lighten the mood.”

Beverly chuckled lightly.

“So was I!”

“I suppose we should try and sleep.”

“Yes...I suppose we should.”

Several minutes passed in tension, yet Beverly was surprised to hear Jean-Luc’s shallow breathing even out in sleep.

Good. Tonight I will watch over you.

The night was long and Beverly grew quite cold. She kept alert all night, every noise making her heart miss a beat, but the marauding animals didn’t return. She also monitored Jean-Luc’s breathing. At one stage, he began coughing, however, his exhaustion was such that he managed to regain sleep soon after the coughing ceased. The doctor doubted that he actually woke.

By sunrise, Beverly was in a light doze when she heard Jean-Luc stir. He rose very slowly and made his way a few metres away from the car. As Beverly heard the liquid splashing, she also heard the gasp of pain, quickly turning into a sob. It was some time before he was able to rejoin her.

“Bad?”

“Worse. Beverly, what will happen when I can’t..?”

“Jean-Luc! Listen.”

With instant silence, the friends devoted every fibre of their being to listening...then they heard it. The rumble of approaching machinery. Beverly shrieked: “They’re coming!”

“Sound the horn!”

Pushing the horn again and again, they were dismayed when the road gang arrived, making too much noise to hear them.

“Dammit! Why won’t they shut up and listen! We have to get their attention.”

“I’ll get on the roof, they should see me.”

“Jean-Luc I don’t think that’s a good idea, you’re tired and it will cause you considerable pain...”

“Worth it if they see me.”

“And if they don’t...”

“They will. Come on...where’s your sense of adventure?”

With her mouth open in protest, she watched as JeanLuc gingerly stood and slowly climbed onto the battered roof of the car.

Raising her voice she counselled: “Don’t try shouting...wave your arm...gently.”

Jean-Luc found it almost impossible to stand fully upright, so, in his somewhat stooped position; he raised his good arm above his head.

Not bad...so far, so good, he thought.

He waved his arm in a small arc, knowing it was not enough. He straightened a little more and swept his arm above his head...then it happened. A blast of indescribable agony lanced through his body. He cried out once and toppled backwards off the roof, plummeting out of sight like a limp doll, past a horrified Beverly, who could do nothing but scream his name. In anguish she screamed over and over, frantically clawing at the metal that held her so implacably. Completely out of control, she struck the metal repeatedly, tearing at the steering wheel, punching and ripping at anything within reach. In her frenzy she struck the horn several times, not seeing one of the workers suddenly straightening and stilling his workmates. Moving with alacrity, the road gang downed tools and swarmed down the steep side of the gorge, stopping only when they met the river. Joining hands they slowed enough to make the crossing a safe one and were soon approaching the wrecked car. The banshee wailing coming from the mangled car stalled the men momentarily, but they quickly moved forward when they realised the maker of the noise was trapped in the car. The first worker to arrive stuck his head through the windscreen and was deeply shocked by what he saw. A woman, obviously trapped, was battering the dashboard with her ruined left hand, the blood splattering over the instruments and ultimately over him too.

“Hey! Stop that...it’s ok, we’re here to help you!”

It was as if he’d not spoken. The woman continued the destruction of her hand in her relentless quest to kill the car.

Lunging forward the worker grabbed her hand, astonished with the strength she possessed.

“Stop! Stop it!”

Suddenly she stilled, the silence making his ears ring.

"You're all right. We'll get you out."

With a vacant expression she turned and looked at the man, tears flowing freely down her face.

"What?"

"It's ok, we'll have you out in no time."

As the worker turned to summon his mates, Beverly let out an ear-piercing shriek, thoroughly unnerving the man.

"Jean-Luc! You must help him...he's... he's...Oh dear God help him!"

"There's someone else? Where...where is he?" Beverly's head jerked around.

"Down there...he fell...he's so sick...help him, oh please help him."

Extricating himself from the car, the worker turned to a fellow gang man.

"Merrut, go see if there's someone else on the other side...be careful, there's quite a drop."

It took short minutes for the worker to clamber into a position from where he had an uninterrupted view. Quietly, with great tension, he muttered: "Oh, shit, Jav. There's a body down there...he's not moving and there's blood flowing down the rock. I think he's dead."

"Can we get him out?"

Shaking his head Merrut said sadly: "Nope, I don't think so."

"Radio Arrul and tell him we need an airvac...pronto. Then get some more people down here, with some tools...a pinch bar especially."

To Beverly everything seemed to happen in slow motion. Though the worker had kept his voice low when describing Jean-Luc's condition, she had heard him. She was slowly going numb. The workers, after heavy effort, jemmied up the dashboard. The flood of pain as feeling returned was excruciating, but she ignored it. When her arm was freed, she was barely aware of it, the pain passed unnoticed. She didn't even hear the airvac when it came for her. As she was being lifted from the wreck, she suddenly started to struggle and shout. Almost incoherent with the sedative she had been given, she called for Jean-Luc again and again, until another hypospray brought sweet oblivion.

Medical staff were lowered to the prostrate man who lay unmoving in the sunshine. It was with some surprise that one of the medicos found Jean-Luc alive...just.

He was stabilised at the scene and was lifted to the airvac in a stasis unit. The workers watched the entire procedure from the car. Merrut turned to Jav and opined:

"Odds are he won't make it...too banged up."

After the airvac had left, the workers climbed back up to the bridge and in no time had erected barriers, just as the couple said they would.

Beverly woke in a bright room, warm, clean and pain free. She devoted some sleepy thought to remember why she was there, eventually giving up. It was all too hard.

Jean-Luc's fall had indeed nearly killed him. He was in surgery for some hours, then moved to intensive care, connected to a life support computer, deeply unconscious.

Beverly stirred and tried to turn over. She felt a hand on her shoulder and forced her eyes to open.

"Well, hello there. I'm Doctor Harrum. How do you feel?"

Beverly stretched, detecting small pains throughout her body. "Where am I?"

The man smiled down at her. "You're in a hospital on Ferrid V. You had an accident in your car."

"Hmmm, did I? I don't remember. What's wrong with my hand?"

"You...ah...damaged it. We have your companion here too. I must tell you...he's been seriously injured. He's in intensive care."

Beverly frowned. "My companion? Who?"

"We were rather hoping you could tell us."

"Nope...haven't a clue. I think I'll sleep now.

G'night."

A very puzzled doctor looked down at his patient.

"But surely you..."

"G'night."

He watched as Beverly crept back into her nice, safe, cosy sleep.

How odd, he thought. "Nurse Eln, would you call doctor Pravern please. Ask him to meet me in my office in, say, thirty minutes."

With a final check of the readouts, the perplexed doctor left and made his was to intensive care.

The man in the life support shell was unaware of the activity of those around him. The technology of the twenty fourth century had taken much of the "humanity" out of medicine, but those who worked in the field never lost the need to interact with their patients, adopt a "hands on" approach. To that end, several med techs hovered about the biobed, taking readings, noting bio outputs and most of these dedicated people briefly touched the hand of the man under their care.

Dr. Harrum stood quietly beside the biobed. "How is he doing?"

The head nurse gently touched Jean-Luc's hand. "Quite well, actually. He's improving slowly, but steadily.

Remarkable, considering."

The Doctor placed the back of his hand against the Captain's face. "His colour's not that good and he's a little warm..."

"Yes, he has a nasty infection in the wounds about his right ankle. It looks like an animal bite; we're still identifying the bacteria. We should have it within the hour and once we do, our therapy will be a little more aggressive. Do we know who he is yet?"

Shaking his head, the Dr. replied: "No, not yet. The workers who discovered them are retrieving the car; apparently the boot is jammed somehow. Once they locate their luggage, we'll know who both of them are.

"Hasn't the woman regained consciousness?"

"Yes...but she wasn't... forthcoming. I'm going to have Dr.Pravern talk to her."

The nurse lowered her head. "I see."

"Keep me posted, I want to know the minute he regains consciousness."

"Yes Doctor."

Ten minutes later, Dr. Harrum was in his office when there was a knock at the door.

"Come in."

Dr. Pravern entered. A large man, he had a kind face and a clipped red beard, setting off his deep blue eyes. In many ways, he was

the physical opposite of Dr. Harrum. The smaller man stood and gestured to a comfortable pair of chairs near the window.

"What have you got for me, Dannus?"

Smiling, Dannus Harrum cocked his head to one side. "You always know, don't you Art?"

"The grapevine works just as well now as it did a century ago. Is it the car crash patient?"

"Yes. When I mentioned to her that her companion was in intensive care, she acted as if she was alone in the crash, yet the report states that it was she who alerted the road gang to the existence of the badly injured man who was found nearby. She denied any knowledge him, dismissed me and went back to sleep!"

The big man rubbed his beard. "How is she, physically?"

Reaching for a PADD and passing it to his colleague, Dr. Harrum said: "Good. She's recovering well from her injuries...her hand will take some more treatments, but all in all, she's doing fine."

"How did she injure her hand?"

"Hang on a minute..."

Walking a short distance to his desk, the doctor retrieved the airvac report.

"Where is it?...Ah, here we are. When the first road gang worker arrived at the scene, the patient was screaming incoherently and attacking her surroundings with her bare left hand. Her right one was pinned to the seat. She was clawing...punching...slapping...completely out of control. It took considerable strength by the rescuer to calm her down."

"Do we know why?"

"Not exactly...although she did come around enough to tell the workers about the man, then she became

hysterical again and was sedated shortly thereafter."

"Hmmm, a mystery. Ok if I go and see her now?"

"Be my guest...oh, and see if she will tell you who she is...and her companion."

Beverly was quite calm. It was a curious

feeling...calm, in control, separated from everything. Nothing could trouble her, touch her. She decided she would stay here...it was safe.

Doctor Pravern stood next to Beverly's bed, looking down at her with a frown on his expressive face. Reaching down, he gently brushed the soft red hair from her face, causing her to stir and frown in her rest. Clasping her shoulder carefully, the doctor gave it a shake.

"Hey, time to wake up."

Beverly became very still, the only sign that she was aware.

"Come on, you can't hide in there."

One eye opened, then the other. Beverly lay quietly, saying nothing.

"Hello, my name is Art Pravern, and you are...?"

Nothing. Other than the rise and fall of her chest, Beverly was absolutely still.

"Ok...you know where you are?" Nothing.

"Do you know what happened?...I can tell you if you like."

"NO!"

"So, you can speak. We need to know who you are...is there anyone you wish us to contact?"

Beverly's heart started to pound, her mouth went dry.

"Go away. I'm tired."

The doctor reached for a chair and sat down.

"I won't tax you. Just tell me your name...just your first name, and we can take it from there." Panic started to take hold.

"I said, GO AWAY! NURSE! Get this man out of here!"

Quickly standing, the doctor waved away the hurrying nurse.

"That won't be necessary. I'll go, perhaps I will come back later... when you're feeling better."

Beverly glared up at him fearfully, willing him to disappear.

Jean-Luc was worried. There was something wrong, but he couldn't figure out what it was. His body felt odd and things weren't functioning properly. Just now, he got up and fetched a cup of Earl Grey, but he couldn't find it. It was very distressing, yet he didn't seem to care. Odd, most odd, yet he really didn't care...not at all.

The med tech checked the temperature readout again. "Microbiology identified the bacteria, didn't they?"

His companion referred to her PADD. "Yes, they recommended Amorstine...two micrograms every three hours."

"Then why is his temperature going up? The wound's looking good, the infiltration of infection in the bone is receding, yet his symptoms suggest an infection. I'm calling Dr. Harrum. This is weird."

Dr. Harrum received the call and was about to leave his office when his desk communicator trilled. Hesitating momentarily, he went to the unit and depressed the answer button, taking the call. Immediately after finishing the call, he contacted Dr. Pravern, asking him to meet in intensive care as soon as possible.

Doctor Harrum was frowning over Jean-Luc's readouts when Dr. Pravern arrived.

"You wanted to see me?"

Motioning to his colleague, the doctors moved away from the medical staff.

"I just received a call from the police," said Dr. Harrum quietly. "Our crash victims are Starfleet personnel. That man over there is none other than Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the Enterprise, and the woman is Doctor Beverly Crusher, his CMO."

Dr. Pravern emitted a low whistle. "Illustrious company indeed."

"Their ship has been contacted, it should be here in about three days. In the meantime, we're to continue as we are and we are requested to file reports with Starfleet at our earliest convenience."

Raising his eyebrows, Dr. Pravern shook his head.

"They don't muck around, do they?"

"No, and we have a problem here. The Captain is being treated for an animal borne infection and was responding well, yet his body is now reacting as if there if purulent infection present. It doesn't make sense. His white cell count is rising, as is his temperature. We need to know more about the crash. How are you going with Dr.

Crusher?"

With a snort of frustration, Dr. Pravern lowered his head. "Not very well. In fact, she ordered me from her room."

"She chucked you out?"

"Yep."

Now it was Dr. Harrum's turn to whistle. "Feisty..."

"Hmmm. I'll get back to you as soon as I know anything."

This time when Dr. Pravern approached, Beverly was awake. She hadn't been able to retreat to the comfort of sleep. She was restless and frightened and she certainly didn't want visitors.

"I thought I told you to get out!"

Dr. Pravern pursed his lips and plunged his hands in his pockets.

"Dr. Crusher, we need to talk."

Beverly was momentarily thrown. "You know who I am?"

"Yes. I need to tell you Captain Picard is..."

Throwing her hands up in front of her face, she moaned: "Don't say it! I don't want to hear it! Please, I couldn't ..."

Laying a gentle hand on her shoulder, Dr. Pravern sat down. "It's all right. He's..."

Sitting up abruptly, Beverly hissed: "Will you shut up! I don't want to know!"

Placing both hands on her shoulders, he said: "Please Dr. Crusher...it's very import...

Beverly drew back her hand to strike the man in front of her, but he was too fast for her.

"Look! I know there's something desperately wrong here and you need help, but so does the Captain! He has an infection we can't isolate or control. You are a Doctor...help us!"

Panting in anger, Beverly glared at Dr. Pravern.

"What do you want to know?"

Removing his hands, the man sat back and took a large breath. "When you were found, you were trapped in the car, the Captain was lying in a gully, some five metres below the car. We assume he fell."

"Yes."

"How long was he there?"

Beverly lowered her head, tears forming in her eyes. "Not long. He had climbed onto the roof to catch the attention of the road gang. He'd only been there a few minutes when he fell."

"I see. So he had been with you in the car since the crash?"

Beverly shook her head.

"No, he'd been thrown from the car during the crash. It was some time before he woke up, some distance away. He heard me calling and made his way to me. It was very difficult for him, considering his injuries."

Looking sharply at Beverly, Dr. Pravern asked: "Did he go near the river?"

"Yes, several times. He entered the river to get past some boulders that were too big for him to climb...he retrieved water for us several times and he bathed his leg, after the animals attacked him."

Standing suddenly, the doctor moved quickly to the wall comm. unit and contacted intensive care. "Pravern here, get me Dr. Hassum!"

"Dannus, scan for Serraf! The pods should be infesting behind the liver...yes, I'll wait...I know, it must be their physiology...ah! He should respond quickly...yes, I'll tell her."

Beverly watched as Dr.Pravern returned to her bed.

"It would seem the Captain was infested by a rather elusive water borne parasite from the river. I'm surprised you didn't take the inoculation."

"We did."

The doctor frowned, deep in thought. Beverly watched him intently, eventually offering: "The Captain had a nasty bout of Azzinin flu recently...perhaps..."

"Ah, yes! His cardiac implant! His immune system was compromised and the cells couldn't bond effectively with the inoculant. Yes! We'll have to advertise that...we wouldn't want to imperil any more of our guests now, would we?"

The wink was priceless and Beverly, despite her reservations, found herself warming to this large, friendly man.

"Now Dr. Crusher, would you like to talk?"

"Not really...I know, I know...give me a minute, will you...please?"

With a decisive nod, Dr. Pravern took his leave. "I'll go check on the Captain, then I'll return...and we'll have that talk."

Dr. Hassum was just passing a PADD to a med tech when Dr. Pravern entered intensive care.

"How's he doing?" Pravern asked.

With a wide smile...and not a little relief, Dr. Hassum sighed. “Much better. We’ve administered the purge and his temperature is dropping already. He should be completely free of infestation in two hours. His prognosis is excellent.”

“Starfleet will be pleased.” Dr. Pravern muttered wryly.

“Dr.Crusher?”

“I think she’ll be all right. She has some issues I intend to discuss with her, but, all in all...a recovery is within reach.”

“Good work, Art.”

Beverly had removed herself from the bed and was sitting in a chair beside a window, enjoying the afternoon sun.

Dr. Pravern clasped a chair in one large hand and joined her.

Not turning to him, Beverly sighed. “It’s a beautiful planet, Doctor.”

“Yes it is, and it’s Art...Beverly.”

“Art?...Arthur?”

“Artizz”

“Oh.”

Nothing further was said for some minutes then, almost in a whisper, Beverly started to speak.

“A long time ago, I fell in love with a man called Jack. We married and we had a son. Then one day, I was told Jack had died. A part of me ceased to exist that day. He was Captain Picard’s first officer and it was the Captain who brought Jack’s body home. I promised myself that day that I would never love anybody like that again. It’s just too painful when they’re...lost. But I was deceiving myself. There was a man who loved me, loved me for a very long time, but never said anything, never let me know. Then something happened to change all that. We were on a mission and we were abducted and linked telepathically through devices integrated directly into our brains. In effect, we “heard” each other’s thoughts, and I felt the depth of his love for me. He did try to deny it, but I was privy to his dreams, dreams that belied his words. When we were freed and disconnected from the devices, he invited me for dinner in his quarters and after the meal, he asked me to consider taking our relationship to a more...intimate level. We had been friends...best friends for a very long time...and I did love

him, but I was terrified a relationship like that could destroy our beautiful friendship...so I turned him down. I hurt him dreadfully that night. He had been at his most vulnerable and I coolly stabbed him in the heart.

"I was afraid in other ways too. Being a Captain in Starfleet is a dangerous and consuming position. What if I took the step and loved him the way he wanted and one day he is brought to my sickbay and I was unable to save him? It would destroy me...my penance for giving myself entirely to another. But it would seem that sometimes the heart overrides the brain and we took that step...together. I finally admitted I loved him... that I was *in* love with him. Do you know what I mean? It was only recently...this was our first holiday on our own.

"As you know, he was badly injured in the crash and I had convinced myself that he was dead after his fall from the car. When you told me he was in intensive care, I was sure he would die...and I would be in pain again. I just couldn't cope.

"I know I "lost it" in the car, I also know how I tried to retreat from the world...hiding in sleep, ordering doctors from my room... I was frightened."

"And now?"

"Scared witless."

"But..."

"But I know now the time we have together is priceless. There is no insurance in matters of the heart, but there are assurances, and they come from him."

Proffering his hand, Dr. Pravern asked: "Would you let me escort you to intensive care?

Gathering her courage like a cloak around her, Beverly lifted her chin.

"Lead on."

Jean-Luc was becoming irritated. He was in a box and couldn't find his way out...and, somehow, people kept touching him. Hands brushed his face, his shoulders and his hands. He heard murmuring, but he couldn't make sense of it.

Every lock has a key, every puzzle a solution.

He lay there, feeling somewhat unwell and confused, rapidly tiring of this bizarre game.

Then he felt it. A familiar touch.

Beverly! Help me, I'm trapped!

"The brain activity just increased...when you touched him! Keep it up, talk to him."

Leaning close to her lover she said quietly: "JeanLuc, I'm here...you were in an accident, but you're going to be all right. Jean-Luc, we need you wake up. It's time you took over some of the life support functions. How about a big breath...it won't hurt, I promise."

Several minutes passed then Jean-Luc's chest started to expand.

"That's it Jean-Luc! Come more...For me, you can do it."

Suddenly a med tech said tightly: "He's challenged the autobreather, he's got five seconds before it cuts in again."

Jean-Luc's efforts brought another big breath.

"He's done it. He is establishing a strong breathing pattern. Take the autobreather off line...be ready for a cessation..."

A gentle hand on her shoulder announced Art Pravern.

"Pretty spectacular, Beverly. You touch him and he responds. I'm impressed." His eyes sparkled with amusement. "That's quite a touch. I'll get you a chair."

Beverly smiled in gratitude. As she sat down, she noticed Jean-Luc had begun to sweat profusely. "Um, is that normal?"

Dr. Pravern nodded. "Yes it's only a reaction to the purge. Nothing to worry about. Would you like some privacy?"

"That would be nice. I take it the biobed's readout can be viewed elsewhere?"

"Don't concern yourself. The staff will watch him like a exxorrup."

"Is that good?"

"That's excellent. Goodnight, Beverly. Call me if you need me."

"Art, you remind me of some of my friends on the

Enterprise."

"They're outstanding, I hope."

Beverly giggled. "One is a councillor. The other, the ship's first officer."

"Interesting combination."

As they spoke, the med techs were disconnecting some of the life support systems; the Captain was winning the battle with unconsciousness.

Beverly sat quietly, holding Jean-Luc's hand and talking to him in a soft voice.

She devoted some time over the next few hours, during periods of quiet, to analyse what had happened to her. All she had told Dr. Pravern was true, but there was more. When she had thought Jean-Luc was dead, she had withdrawn...not a good sign, but she had re-emerged and felt stronger for it. It was as if she had been through some sort of test...a trial... that she had managed to pass...eventually. So, what of the future? She now knew she was ready to face and accept the job they did and the dangers that entailed. It was a double edged sword, her job could be just as fraught with disaster as that of the Captain, although this was the first time she was aware of her actions having an effect on anybody except Wesley. It was a major shift in attitude and she was determined to speak to Jean-Luc about it. But first, he had to wake up.

It was late in the morning that a change overtook the Captain. One moment he was lying peacefully, the next, his entire body became rigid, his hands gripping the sides of the biobed in a vice like grip. His mouth opened and he took a large breath, holding it for some seconds, until he began to tremble.

Without hesitation, Beverly swung the shell out of the way and placed her hands on his chest, at the same time saying firmly: "Jean-Luc! You're all right. Open your eyes!"

The Captain's eyes snapped open, moving rapidly from side to side, unseeing. Whatever had gripped him was still exerting its influence. Beverly knew she had to wake him, before he did himself some damage.

"Look at me! Jean-Luc, look at me!"

He seemed to hear her; his eyes began to search for her. Beverly moved her hands from his chest until she was holding his head.

"Here I am! Come on Jean-Luc, I'm here."

Suddenly, Jean-Luc's eyes stopped and Beverly saw recognition in them. The breath he had been holding was expelled with force and tears welled in his eyes. His body, still rigid, trembled and his hands continued their crushing grip of the biobed.

Panting, he whispered harshly: "Beverly...are they gone?"

Stroking her hand over his face, Beverly tried to stem his tears. "What, Jean-Luc? Has what gone?"

Without warning, his right hand released its grip of the bed and grabbed Beverly's arm in a painful hold.

"The animals! They're hurting me Beverly, please make them stop...no more...please?"

Still stroking his head, Beverly raised her voice. "They're gone Jean-Luc, you're safe...look at me, you're safe."

Three med techs stood by, watching the readouts and waiting to see if Beverly needed any help. They had previously come to an agreement with Beverly and would not act unless she asked for assistance.

Slowly, the tension began to leave the Captain's body. As Beverly's words registered in his mind, his hands relaxed their grip and his breathing evened out.

"Safe? They're gone?" he asked piteously.

"All gone Jean-Luc, you're safe now."

Taking his hands in her own, Beverly said gently,

"It's all right now, Jean-Luc. I'll stay with you. Rest now, my love."

"You'll stay with me?"

"Yes."

Within moments, his body relaxed completely and his eyes drifted shut, sleep claiming him. Beverly held his hand and whispered: "Sleep well my love."

Jean-Luc knew she was there. He had just wakened; his eyes were still closed; yet he knew. It was her breathing, her scent, the calmness she gave him. He felt all these things and rejoiced in them.

Without opening his eyes, in a roughened voice, he muttered: "How long have I been here?"

As Jean-Luc knew of Beverly's presence, she was aware he had woken. More a matter of medical experience, there was, however a change she felt...the strength of his inner self perhaps. Whatever it was, she was waiting for

the question. "All told?...nearly three days."

"And my condition?"

Stifling a giggle, Beverly couldn't resist.

"Stunning...as always."

"Beverly!...I'm serious."

"Of course...sorry...it just..."

"...Slipped out...I know. Now if you would be so kind..."

"As your personal physician...off duty, of course, I can tell you that your injuries are healing rapidly and you will suffer no permanent damage because of them. Your treatment has been exemplary and, if you care to open your eyes, I will introduce you to your... "other"...doctor."

Beverly felt a thrill, as she always did, when his eyes opened and his warm hazel gaze fell upon her. Feeling herself flush, she quickly deflected his attention to the introduction. "Captain Jean-Luc Picard, Doctor Dannuss Harrum."

The men shook hands, an awkward silence avoided by Beverly's intuition.

"The Captain wishes to know when he can get out of bed, get dressed and be discharged, in that order." Dr. Harrum laughed, Jean-Luc scowled.

"I see you're familiar with his habits."

"When it comes to getting out of sickbay, I'm an expert."

"If you will excuse me, Beverly, I would like to ask my doctor some questions."

Thinking he had insulted the Captain, Dr. Harrum straightened and hid his smile.

"I'm sorry, Captain. What would you like to know?"

Putting on his best "Captain's" visage, Jean-Luc said firmly: "Like she said, when do I get out?"

There was a moment of suspended time when all three remained immobile, then a rare full grin crept across Jean-Luc's face. Beverly laughed out loud and, eventually, Dr.Harrum realised he'd been set up.

"Well, Captain, on the strength of that, I would say you can get up this afternoon and if all goes well, you may be discharged tomorrow. We'll move you to a ward in the east wing...it's very pleasant there. You definitely don't belong here...this is for sick people."

After that, things moved quickly. As promised, JeanLuc was moved to another room, but not before a protracted...discussion...on the reasons why he couldn't walk there and why it was hospital policy to require patients to be wheeled about. In any case, it made for a silent journey, the poor orderly thoroughly terrified of the Captain.

When the unfortunate young man had left, Beverly rounded on Jean-Luc.

"You really can be a pain in the a..."

"Beverly! That is not necessary, thank you. That lad should've listened to me. I was quite capable of walking here. Why tie up a piece of equipment that could've been better employed by a sick person?"

"That *lad* as you call him, was following the policy of his employer, just as you expect your crew to follow your orders. Why is it that you think rules don't apply to you? Talk about holier than thou..."

They stood toe to toe, the sparks evident in their eyes. Jean-Luc raised his hands, one going to Beverly's back, the other into her hair. He approached very slowly, his lips softly brushing hers, again, then with more pressure. Beverly's arms encircled his head and they descended into a languid, lengthy kiss.

Placing his lips near her ear, Jean-Luc whispered: "I *order* you to sleep with me...now."

Beverly gasped as he nibbled her neck. "Jean-Luc...we can't...this is a hospital for God's sake..."

"I didn't mean *that!* To be truthful I don't think that, at this moment, I could...well, you know...but I do want to sleep with you...in my arms...Please?"

Gently stepping from his embrace, she held her hand out and led him to the bed. Removing their hospital issue robes and pulling the covers back, they settled under the covers and were soon asleep.

Towards the evening, Dr. Pravern stuck his head around the door and, after his surprise abated, left with a huge grin on his face.

In the morning, the couple shared a reasonable breakfast and were lingering over coffee when Beverly reached over and took Jean-Luc's hand.

"We need to talk my love."

Jean-Luc frowned slightly and tilted his head.

"We do?"

"Uh huh."

The Captain gently placed the cup in its saucer, becoming attentive. "Go on."

"Do you remember anything about the rescue?"

Pursing his lips, the Captain shook his head. "Not really, in fact I have only a hazy recollection of being on the car roof."

Beverly frowned and lowered her head and began wringing her hands.

"Jean-Luc, when you fell from the car...I...well, I

...lost control."

Beverly raised her hand to forestall Jean-Luc.

"Please, let me finish. I had been feeling so frustrated...increasingly so, of the two of us, by far, you were the more seriously injured. Yet, you had to do everything...you even fought off those damn animals, while I sat, useless, in the car. When you fell, it was like a dam breaking. I attacked everything within reach. That's how I did this..."

Beverly proffered him her left hand which was still bandaged.

"When the road gang reached us I was incoherent. The worker had to grab me and yell to get my attention. Even then I didn't tell them about you. It wasn't till they were freeing my legs that I suddenly remembered you. I can't understand that part...you're the most precious thing I..." Beverly had to stop and wipe away the tears that fell. Jean-Luc remained silent, watching her intently.

Taking a big breath, she continued. "Just before the airvac arrived, one of the men went and checked where I told them you had fell. The last thing I heard was that he thought you were dead."

"Beverly..."

"No, it's all right...I'm all right."

She continued. "I became hysterical again and had to be sedated. My next memory was waking up here. When Dr. Pravern came in and told me about you, I denied your existence. I didn't want to know...I was so afraid Jean-Luc. The old fear...loving you, only to lose you...I thought it was happening. I was convincing myself that you would die...despite their efforts, and I couldn't handle it. I refused to see Dr. Pravern...at one stage I kicked him out of my room, and all he was doing was trying to help me...and you. It wasn't until you became so sick with the parasite infection that the doctor shook some sense into me...literally. They couldn't identify the problem and you were getting sicker and sicker. By this time, they knew who we were...and I couldn't hide in anonymity anymore. He confronted me and I capitulated. I faced my fear, JeanLuc...and I think I won. I told Dr. Pravern there was no insurance in love...but...there are assurances...and you give them to me my love. It will take time, but I will leave my baggage behind. I love you unreservedly...and without fear. I always will."

Jean-Luc rose and took Beverly in his arms. "Those last words are the sweetest I've ever heard. I'm so sorry you had to face all this, but if we come out of this stronger, it was worth it. And, for the record, my love for you is also without bounds. I love you, I adore you...and I always will."

They closed the distance between them and kissed slowly, lovingly. The visitor had to clear his throat twice before his presence was realised. They parted, straightening their robes, a gentle smile on their faces.

"Art, how lovely. Come in."

"Is this all you two ever do?"

"Pardon?"

"Never mind. So, I take it this is the illustrious
Captain Picard."

Jean-Luc's eyebrows went up a notch, Beverly noted the change.

"Jean-Luc, take no notice...he's joking. This is Dr.
Art Pravern. Art, Jean-Luc Picard."

The men shook hands and before Jean-Luc could say anything, Art informed them: “Your ship is in orbit and a fellow called Riker is downstairs waiting, rather impatiently, to see you. Shall I send him up?”

Beverly and Jean-Luc looked at each other and laughed, bemusing Art. The Captain recovered first.

“Of course, by all means, send him up. Somebody should.”

The couple descended into chuckles again...Dr. Pravern shrugged and used the comm unit to give permission for Will to be allowed up.

They were still laughing when Will arrived, a sight he was very happy to see.

“Will! Come in.”

“Hello, Sir, Beverly. How are you both?”

In unison they said: “Fine, Will,” and burst out laughing again.

Shaking his head, Dr. Pravern bid them farewell and made his exit.

“Well, are you ready to come home?”

“Err...yes...Will, could you organise a uniform...I really don’t want to appear in my ...night attire.”

“Will, beam him directly to his quarters, he...”

“Beverly, I want to visit the bridge, and there’s...”

Placing her hand on her hip, Beverly extended her finger and waved it at the astonished Captain. “Look here, you. I’m still the CMO around here and I say you’re going to your quarters to rest and *I'm* going with you to make sure you do! Ok?”

“Quite.”

“When you’re ready, Will.”

“Yes, Ma’am!”

The men stood quietly as Beverly fussed about the Captain.

“Now I’m just going to freshen up...you two behave yourselves.”

They watched her disappear into Jean-Luc’s bathroom.

“Phew! Better you than me...Sir.”

“Hmmm.”

“Captain...can I ask you something?”

“Of course, Will.”

“Who was driving, you know, when you had the accident?”

Squinting his eyes thoughtfully, Jean-Luc answered. “Beverly...why?”

Looking at his feet, Will tried hard to hide his amusement. “Oh nothing really, it’s just I’m a little surprised...you know, after what Deanna did to the old

Enterprise when she drove...”

“My God, Will, don’t you EVER let Beverly hear you say anything even remotely like that...” “Like what?”... “Oh, Beverly...”

The End.