



"SINKHOLE"

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Q's Christmas Story

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INTRODUCTION:

In Jean-Luc Picard's darkest hour, a friend forces him to face visitations from his past, present, and future to come to terms with the loss he feels after Data's death. Will he regain the convictions that his life is to "make a difference," or will he succumb to the emptiness of his regrets? "Jean-Luc, time to wake up!" Yvette called from the kitchen. "The goose is almost done!"

Jean-Luc stirred in bed. The mattress was so soft and warm. The smells of the roasting bird and chestnuts filled the house. He thought he could even smell the fragrant aroma of the Balsam Fir set up in the tallest parlor of the Chateau.

"Coming, mother!" he called weakly. He opened his eyes and stared in surprise. This was not his room! The light was cold and the walls were dark. Jean-Luc rose slowly in his bed and then he realized he was not a boy of sixteen at home on his parent's vineyard in La Barre, France – he was an old man in his quarters on the *Enterprise E*, which was cruising past the Tellerite Star System at warp 6, en route to a memorial service in the Chin'toka star system for the 4 year anniversary of the conclusion of the Dominion War – an event dedicated to the lives lost in that catastrophic war. Picard was scheduled to deliver the keynote speech, in lieu of Captain Benjamin Sisko, unless he were to turn up, and he still had no idea what he was going to say. All the words he'd written down seemed politic and trite – empty.

Empty, Picard repeated in his thoughts.

And then, the haunting sense of loss hit him as he suddenly felt anew the emptiness of Data's permanent absence sink back in. His death was only a few months past, but it was raw as a deep, abiding wound refusing to heal. Data had died saving Picard's life from Shinzon's vendetta, but it all felt like such a terrible waste – a bleak bereavement that left an almost sterile world behind.

Adding to this was the recent departure of his dear friends Will and Deanna Riker to take possession of the *U.S.S. Titan*. The *Enterprise* felt hollow, somehow, without these three – so much so that he felt small comfort in those that remained: Beverly, Geordi, and sometimes Worf, who was dividing his time between Martok's chancellery and the Federation these days.

He and Beverly had grown distant these last years and now, after Data's death, a gulf had seemed to emerge between them.

"Empty," Picard muttered aloud, thinking about this ship he called home.

It feels like a house where all the children are grown up and some are gone, he mused, wondering if this was how his mother felt when he had left home for the stars. How cruel he had been to her!

"But why the...dream," he wondered aloud, pressing his hands into his eyes, and then it dawned on him. By earth's calendar, today was December 23 – The day before Christmas Eve on the traditional French calendar. Ah, Christmas – a holiday that had a special place in his earliest memories. The Picard household made it a huge affair with the largest tree they could drag into the house. Lights and tinsel and family heirlooms adorned its

branches – and tucked beneath it, presents neatly wrapped with beautiful bows of red and green.

He tried to stop his memories before they drifted to the smells of homemade food – what torture for someone tied to a replicator for his meals! His attempt failed. He could almost taste his mother's famous pudding.

"Oh, for pity's sake," he groaned, collapsing back into bed. "I'll sleep it off," he grumbled.

He sank into his pillow. It felt so soft – softer than he remembered. Rather than the smell of chestnuts abating, it seemed to grow stronger. Picard buried his head beneath the sheets. The light seemed to grow in the room. Suddenly, he heard his mother's voice again.

"Jean-Luc, I mean it!" she cried from what sounded like downstairs. "It is time to wash up! Where is your brother?" Picard threw his covers off and sat up. He blinked in the bright morning light that bathed his old room at the Picard Estate.

"What is happening here?" he gasped, gazing over his toy starship models on his desk and his school fencing uniform at the foot of his bed. He stood up slowly.

"Computer, end program!" he called out. If there was a computer anywhere, it did not reply. "Picard to the bridge!" he ordered the com system. Again, nothing.

"Jean-Luc! Who are you talking to up there?" Yvette called.

"Uh, no one, Mother!" he called down, subconsciously unable to resist his mother's demands.

"Then for heaven's sake, come down!" she replied.

“Uh, I’m not feeling the best,” he tried. “Perhaps I should stay in bed?”

“Nonsense!” she laughed. “Do I have to come up there?”

“No!...no, I’m fine,” he replied. “I’ll be down in a minute.”

He found a mirror and looked into it. He almost felt disappointed when the same old “him” stared back at him. He glanced around at the amazing detail to his memories. Was this his Irumodic Syndrome making its ugly appearance again as it had in that alternate timeline? Picard stepped back from the mirror, subconsciously straightening his Starfleet issue pajamas. If it was the dreaded disease, he knew he’d have to play out the hallucination for Dr. Crusher’s to diagnose later.

With a sigh, he went to the door and stepped out onto the landing. The ancient oak floorboards creaked loudly, announcing his approach, and he gingerly made his way down the steps. Without realizing it, he instinctively found his way to the dining room.

There, sitting at the table was a beautiful young woman, her face framed between the steaming goose and the pudding. She smiled when he appeared.

“Hello, Jean-Luc,” she said with a gentleness that washed over him.

“Claire!” he spoke her name easily from the depths of his memory. “But...what are you doing here?” Her smile faded for a moment.

“Your mother was kind enough to invite me,” she said. “Father’s not doing well after the accident and mother is with him at the hospital.”

"I'm...sorry, Claire," Picard sighed. He remembered now. Claire's father, Richard, had been run over by a malfunctioning autonomous watering drone while working on the family estate. His own father, Maurice, was providing for his recovery.

He suddenly felt a deep compassion for her.

"Oh, Claire, I wish I..." at that moment, laughter came bouncing down the stairs and a young blond woman skipped into the dining room and stopped short when she saw him.

"Oh, hello, Jean-Luc," she winked. "Will you help me find my seat?" Picard pointed at her as her name rose up from his memory.

"Marie," he almost gasped.

"It *is* my name," she said playfully.

Picard took a sharp breath. He remembered now. This was the day he had been beastly to both of these girls and never seen them pleasantly again. He'd been spending more and more time studying for Starfleet's entrance exams and his head filled with stars had begun to overflow into his heart. Space, it seemed, had made him cold.

He took a sharp, painful breath as the memory of Claire's tears later that day, burned like drops of Nausican acid through his conscience. He had told her that his only true love was the cosmos and that she was a foolish, ignorant girl to be thinking of love and of family. In his most patronizing tone, he had told her that he was going to live for his dreams, even if it meant throwing off all the deadweights in his life so he could soar – cutting all the anchors tying him to everything he hated in the provincial old place. She was one of those anchors.

His words stung like knife blades. He had pushed away all these people who loved him to escape into the stars from the anger and bitterness he felt from his family's expectations of him. At warp speed, it had been easy to keep ahead of his conscience. But as he had learned, you can't run forever.

Why this place, of all places? He thought, fearing the future punishment his Irumodic Syndrome might inflict, if this was an early symptom! But something seemed out of place in it all – he sensed a conspiracy behind this scene being played out in front of him – of all the memories that could be visited upon him – it couldn't be a coincidence. It was too poignant a moment in his youth – one he had always regretted and which had recently been on his mind.

Just then, the figure of a gardener walked by the low windows to the side of the dining room, belting out “*Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien*” rather too loudly.

Picard listened to the haunting melody and the words:

“No, absolutely nothing

No, I regret nothing

Not the good things that have happened

Nor the bad, it's all the same to me

No, absolutely nothing

No, I regret nothing

It's paid, swept away, forgotten

I don't care about the past!

I set fire

To my memories

My troubles, my pleasures
I don't need them anymore
I've swept away past loves
With their trembling
Swept away forever
I'm starting over
No, absolutely nothing
No, I regret nothing
Not the good things that have happened
Nor the bad, it's all the same to me
No, absolutely nothing
No, I regret nothing
Because my life, because my joy
Today... it begins with you!
The gardener's voice sounded oddly familiar.

"If you'll...excuse me a moment...ah, ladies," Picard said stepping back from the table. "I think I need a little fresh air." He retreated quickly from the table, ignoring the giggles that followed his awkward exit. He found the front door and quietly opened it, remembering to lift the heavy, oak door so the hinges didn't squeak – a trick he'd used countless times as a youth, sneaking in and out of the house undetected.

Outside on the stoop, he took a deep quivering breath, watching the vapor condense in the cold air. Large snowflakes gently

filtered down through the gray clouds. Picard looked up at the sky.

"Q?" he called. "I know this is your doing." Nothing happened. Picard set his jaw. "I'm not going back inside again until you show yourself!"

To his left he heard an audible sigh coming from thin air. And then, a little further away, Q's head rose from behind the nearby garden hedge where he'd been crouching. He was wearing a ridiculous burette, clutching grass clippers with those awkward gardening gloves. He appeared to be wrestling with a weed, but then feigned to catch sight of Picard for the first time.

"Why, Jean-Luc!" he cried. "What a pleasant surprise! Fancy bumping into you in this backward parish of the universe!"

"You're not fooling anyone, Q," Picard growled. "We never had a gardener, and besides, even if we had, he wouldn't have been trimming the grounds in December! Now, what is the meaning of this?" Q absently tried to shake off the weed with disgust as it clung desperately to his glove.

"I don't know what you mean," he said defensively. "It's coincidence surely! I'll have you know I regularly visit moments in your life-story – you, know, 'to get away from it all.' It's all so parochial and slow here that to atone for my latest galactic indiscretions, I might spend only a few minutes and I'm back to my normal mischievous self for millennia."

"I'm not amused, Q," Picard said. "Take me back to the *Enterprise* this instant!"

"Back? But we've only just arrived," Q smiled. "And it would hardly do to walk out on Christmas dinner now, especially with the lovely Claire and Marie in attendance!"

“Yes, thank you for bringing them into this,” Picard said, in his least thankful voice, and stepping into Q’s face. “What is the meaning of bringing me back to this day, this moment?”

“I don’t follow your meaning?” Q said, brushing at his gloves distractedly.

“Very well,” Picard said, finding his lowest gravel. “Then I’ll tell you why you brought me here. You brought me here to relive a decision I’ve regretted all my life, to torment me with my past indiscretions, isn’t that right?” Q touched his forehead dramatically.

“What do you take me for, Jean-Luc?” he groaned. “I’m not this sadist you’ve fancifully concocted in your mind!”

“Yet, here you are!” Picard exclaimed bitterly, “The spirit that haunts my every step.”

Q failed to hide his amusement at the description and a smile crept into his face. He shrugged his shoulders.

“Guilty as charged,” he grinned playfully.

“Tell me why have you brought me here?” Picard asked angrily. Q turned suddenly serious.

“This is your life, Jean-Luc,” he said gesturing around. “I thought you’d come to terms with that?”

“I have!” Picard raised his voice, but instantly sensed it wasn’t true.

“Then why, when I offered your mind anywhere to go, this is where you brought me?” Q asked evenly. “No, Jean-Luc, as clearly as Beta Prime is a sentient being disguised as a red dwarf, there is something here and now that you know you need

to face.” Picard shook off his curiosity at the obvious red herring of the red dwarf to keep Q on point.

“Oh, so you’re going to make me face my choices, is that it?” he asked dangerously. Q stood taller.

“Think of it as exploring alternative trajectories your dull, little life could have plodded,” he smiled. “We’re on assignment.”

“To what...change history?” Picard demanded.

“If only,” Q said with disappointment. “I think we’d both agree that tampering with your timeline is the only way we’d remedy your sad, little legacy and give it a much needed ‘*étincelle de vie*’ – a spark of life – eh, *mon amie*?”

Picard was too frustrated to speak. Q hung his arm over Jean-Luc’s shoulder.

“Sadly,” he sighed, “the fates do hinder me in this enterprise, so instead of rebirth or resurrection, you would do well to think of what follows as...Oh, I don’t know, remedial treatment or better yet, a therapy session.”

“Therapy?” Picard exclaimed with scorn. Q held out his arms.

“My hands are tied, Jean-Luc,” he said. “What do you want me to say?”

Picard paced away and then paced back.

“What could you, of all people, possibly know about helping anyone?” Picard asked bitterly.

“Don’t be so melodramatic, Jean-Luc!” Q exclaimed gleefully, manifesting an old-fashioned, printed schedule. “I’ve got the regiment right here. First, we’ll begin as we have with regrets, then we’ll move on to what might have been, and finally, we’ll

finish off with what actually is and what will be in the future.” He tossed the paper away and peered wistfully through the front window of the house at the splendid spread on the table.

“Think of the possibilities, Jean-Luc,” he smiled. “Right now, right here – your whole life lies ahead of you! You could be anything, do anything! You might paint the Rhine or teach mathematics at the University of Paris. Or better yet, how about marry the lovely Maria or graceful Claire and produce a wine to die for. After all, is there anything quite as intoxicating in life as wine and women?”

“Enough of this, Q!” Picard bellowed.

“Oh, Jean-Luc, don’t be such an infant,” Q chided. “This is all for your own good!”

“I think I’ll be the judge of that,” Picard said dangerously. “You only ever try the very boundaries of what is good, just as you try my patience!”

“*C’est Moi?*” Q said in mock pain, raising his hand over his chest. “You strike me to the heart, Jean-Luc!” But then he straightened and bent over Picard. “If only I could take responsibility for this, but this isn’t my idea, *mon capitain*. I’m sorry, Jean-Luc, but doctor’s orders are doctor’s orders!” Something about how Q stressed the last part, gave Picard pause. He leaned in towards Q.

“What doctor’s orders could you possibly be referring to?” he asked. Q looked uncomfortable, like he always did when caught out in his scheming.

“Did I say doctor?” he smiled, “I meant proctor – after all, life’s a test!”

“Seriously, Q!” Jean-Luc demanded.

“Oh, very well,” Q crossed his arms in defeat. “I may have heard the unspoken wish of a certain someone in your immediate acquaintance,” he said defensively, “and I may have felt like granting wishes just then, so here I am!” Picard leaned back and set his jaw.

Beverly, he thought. She was the only one he could think of who fit Q’s description. And Picard knew she had been worried about him, especially since Data’s death.

“I appreciate her concern,” Picard said indignantly, “but she doesn’t understand – she can’t understand!”

“Actually, she does understand, Jean-Luc,” Q said, suddenly very serious, bending down to Picard’s ear. “She understands you perfectly. She always has. And right now, right here, you, my dear Captain are not yourself, and I’m sorry if this isn’t pleasant and its painful and you’d rather be anywhere but here, but you are going to have to take your medicine, whether you want to or not.”

He vanished in a flash of light and Picard found himself sitting on his bed, back on the *Enterprise*. The gentle hum of the ship was no longer reassuring. He gazed out on the stars, warping past the windows.

“Claire and Marie,” he whispered, wistfully recalling them to mind. Why them? Picard knew in his heart it was because they were symbolic of what he was craving now – family. All the women he’d fancied since those days were career-minded, like himself then, and there was simply no opportunity for their relationships to develop naturally. Claire and Marie, on the other hand, were the type of women who desired the equally noble role of raising families.

He'd truly loved Claire, just as he'd deeply desired Marie. There was a time he fancied marrying one or the other of them. Claire was so gentle and intelligent – and Marie! – She so full of life and energy. He wondered where they were now – probably surrounded by the love and warmth and life of grandchildren in stately homes back in the old country.

“And what do I have to show for my choice?” he asked himself bitterly. “Nothing...but memories of dear friends now dead and a legacy soon to be forgotten.” Years ago, when he'd been forced into the Nexus, he thought he'd faced these demons, but it now seemed the death of his brother Robert and nephew René was only the first bitter step in coming to terms with the road he'd taken.

What was it he had told James T. Kirk about the higher calling of starship captains?

“To make a difference,” he whispered, recalling the words spoken so forcefully then. How hollow they sounded now. He'd made a difference a thousand times over and look where it had gotten him – an empty room on a starship that wasn't even his and which would be assigned a new Captain sooner than later.

He thought about those other threads in his timeline – those other lives he might have led – the quiet life with Claire, not seeking adventure or glory, but a life surrounded by her infinite gentleness and love and family, deeper than the furthest starless scapes he'd seen in the heavens. Then there was the tireless energy that Marie would have brought him – contenting his lust for adventure with the universe of wonder in her smile.

These past possibilities were no more.

“Ashes,” he sighed and climbed into bed. The faint, reassuring throb of the warp core in the deck gently lulled his senses. He closed his eyes. Sleep had almost claimed him when he heard the sound of a bell being struck. It sifted down through his consciousness. He opened an eye and noticed an orange glow reflecting on the ceiling, flickering like the glare of a traditional wood blaze. He propped himself up slowly and shielded his eyes against the warmth of a fireplace that had magically materialized in his room.

To the side of the marble mantelpiece, a large plump figure stood up from a chair by the fire, stroking its long beard dragging up from the floor. It stood tall and struck a bell again in its left hand dramatically. “Come!” the figure chortled. “And know me better man! I am the ghost of your present life, and tonight...”

“Q!” Picard bellowed. “Get out of my bedroom! This isn’t the *merde* Christmas Carol!” The figure pulled its fake beard down theatrically.

“I would have thought you of all people, Jean-Luc, would appreciate a classical performance!” Q said. Reluctantly, he snapped his fingers and everything vanished from the room, save for the trickster himself.

Picard collapsed back into his pillow.

“And here, I thought you were going too,” he sighed.

“Sorry, to disappoint you, Jean-Luc,” Q answered with a mischievous grin. “But I’m on the clock, and so are you.” He waved his hand and vanished. The room returned to normal. Picard waited, but nothing seemed to happen.

“Maybe he finally broke himself,” he said, breaking a slight smile. He fell asleep, deep and dreamlessly.

He woke in the morning, feeling more worn out and old. It was Christmas Eve back in the Old Country, and he fought to suppress the firm hold these memories seemed to have over him. But it was some comfort that the “dreams” of the last night were rapidly fading from his mind. He dressed quickly and left his room, making his way to the bridge in a lonely ride through the turbolift. He found his chair where he’d left it and a steaming cup of Earl Grey from Ensign Clevis.

“Thank you, Amanda,” he said, gently lifting the cup to his lips. It was refreshing, but not quite as good as his mother Yvette used to make it. The thought nagged at him, but he shook it off.

“Status?” he asked Lt. Andrew Belvers. A blond man in his mid-twenties turned from the Con. He had an assured swagger that rubbed Picard backwards – probably because it was almost exactly how he was at that age.

“Morning, Captain,” Belvers said, as if he was tolerating the old man. “We’re ahead of schedule and should be arriving at the Chin’toka system in twelve hours.” Picard wished it was sooner – he hated being alone with his thoughts right now. He needed a distraction.

“Very well,” he said. An awkward silence fell from the uneventful report. Picard was preparing to retreat to his ready room when the Con beeped. Lt. Belvers took in the alert.

“Sir we’re detecting a graviton spike a quarter of a light year from our location,” he reported.

Suddenly, the comms lit up.

“Captain, we are receiving a distress call!” Ensign Durst announced. “It is the passenger ship *But De La Vie*, two days out from Deltan IV, headed for Earth.”

“Crew compliment?” he asked. Durst reviewed the ship’s call stats.

“The registry says 20 crewmembers and...1,000 passengers,” she answered.

“Open a channel,” Picard ordered, sitting up stiffly in his seat and handing his tea back to Amanda.

“This is Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the Federation starship *Enterprise*, can we be of assistance?” he asked. A garbled sea of static filled the bridge. Slowly words materialized through it.

“Caught...in gravity well...losing...attitude...Please assist...” The transmission cut off. Picard stood rapidly and joined Durst at the helm.

“Can you raise them again?” he asked. Durst shook her head as she plied her fingers across her console.

“Sorry, Sir,” she said, “but they’re no longer receiving. Their signal was cut off at the source.” Picard turned to Belvers’ station, and bit off the name that was forming on his tongue. He let it echo in his mind as a sort of memorial to his friend.

Data?

In the silence, Belvers glanced up.

“Captain?” he asked. “Is everything alright?” Picard stood and straightened his jacket.

“Yes, Lieutenant,” he replied a little forcedly. “Are you able to locate the *But De La Vie*?”

“Yes, Sir,” Belvers reported. “It appears to be at the site of the graviton spike we detected.” Picard nodded.

“Put it on screen, maximum magnification!” he ordered.

Suddenly, on the viewer a massive spatial distortion filled the bridge – a pitch-black, central eye, surrounded by a swirling ring of fluctuating, distorting radiation.

“A sinkhole,” Picard muttered gravely, referring to a mysterious gravitational phenomenon that sometimes randomly appeared in space, usually triggered by the passing of a starship’s warp field. They were as dangerous as class 6 singularities and had never failed to swallow every single starship that had ever encountered one. Without hesitating a moment, Picard turned on Durst.

“Helm, lay in a course, maximum warp!” he commanded, tapping his comm badge and returning to his seat.

“Dr. Crusher, please be prepared to receive casualties,” he called.

“Jean-Luc, what’s happened?” she answered worriedly from sickbay.

“It’s a gravitational anomaly, Beverly,” he said shortly. “That’s all.” He turned off his badge and felt angry at himself for his shortness with her. He hadn’t forgiven her for being the cause of his “visitation” last night, but he knew his attitude was the furthest thing from fair. He was behaving like his younger self – pushing the people he loved away to get away from his own feelings.

“For every action, there is an opposite and equal reaction,” he mused, thinking about how he’d launched himself into the cosmos by shoving off his friends and family.

As if to punctuate the sentiment, the *Enterprise* leapt to warp like a thoroughbred at the races, intent on eating up the horizon and claiming first place.

Picard noted, as if for the first time, that his new First Officer, Commander Martin Madden was missing from the bridge, still away at a leadership training conference. Picard sighed through his misgivings. They'd never had such things when he was coming up! If only Will was still here.

Outside, the sleek lines of the *Enterprise E* caught the light of passing stars, stretched thin by the powerful warp bubble of the Federation flagship – still unparalleled for power and speed. And then, as quickly as it had begun, the elegant starship dropped out of warp 1,000 kilometers from the terrifying anomaly.

The evil eye of energy foamed and frothed like an angry whirlpool sucking at the fabric of space and time. There, on the outer edge of the phenomenon, a long dark speck orbited down into the abyss, caught in the swirling vortex of gravity.

“The transport?” Picard asked.

“Aye, Sir...their shields are failing,” Belvers reported, “And their structural integrity field is down to 50%.”

“Begin beaming the survivors out,” Picard ordered. Belvers shook his head.

“Sorry, Sir,” he said, “but the gravitational distortions are making it impossible to achieve transporter locks.”

“Tractor beam? Picard asked.

“Negative, Captain, again too much interference.”

“What about an antimatter explosion, would it be enough to push the ship free?”

“It is worth a try, Sir!”

Picard turned to tactical and paused ever so slightly as Worf was not standing there. He struggled to locate the name of the substitute officer. He settled on pointing at the young man.

“Target just beyond the ship,” he ordered. “Fire a photon torpedo...now!”

A ball of intense red light shot out from the *Enterprise*. It passed just beneath the transport vessel and detonated between it and the anomaly. The *But De La Vie* rode the shock wave up a few hundred meters, but then, almost immediately, it began sinking back down, establishing an even worse decaying orbit around the phenomenon.

Picard grimaced. He realized in that moment, that he was going to lose these lives.

“Not on my watch,” he whispered. “Not if there is anything I can do!”

“Helm, bring us to 200 meters beneath the transport,” he ordered. Durst glanced up in surprise.

“I’m sorry, Sir, did you say, ‘beneath’ the *But De La Vie*?”

“I did indeed, Ensign!” Picard snapped. “We’re going to push it to safety like a Bolian whale bringing her calf to the water’s surface.”

“But...Sir, we’ll be pulled into the anomaly also!” Belvers cried.

“Will we?” Picard asked flippantly. “We’ll just have to see!” Belvers stood from his post.

"Sir," he insisted hotly. "...Captain, I fail to see the point of such a suicidal stunt!" He immediately softened his tone fearing in his youthful inexperience that the legendary captain had gone senile. "That ship out there – Its gone! There is nothing we can do! Those people died the moment they were caught in that sinkhole."

"Lt. Belvers!" Picard bellowed. "Contain your outburst! What do you take me for – a first year cadet?"

He lowered his voice and held the Lieutenant firmly in his gaze, speaking more to his younger self than the man who stood before him.

"You and I, and every Starfleet officer here, swore an oath to serve and protect the innocent – even if that service requires us to risk sacrificing our lives to try and save theirs! Do your duty to that oath and do not question me again! Return to your post."

Belvers paled in the face of his Captain's anger. "Aye, Sir!" he said thickly, exchanging worried glances with Ensign Durst who tepidly engaged the impulse engines.

The *Enterprise* slipped ahead as Durst brought them into range of the anomaly. The deck began noticeably shaking.

"Shields and deflectors to maximum!" Picard ordered. He took his seat as the hull quivered around him in the out-welling gravitational waves.

"100 km and closing!" Durst announced.

From his command console, Picard sent an alert to the forward dorsal decks, ordering them to evacuate immediately. "Déjà vu," he muttered, recalling that he'd done the same thing only 3 months before. He hoped this wasn't going to become a tradition as he glanced ahead.

“Ensign Durst, please vacate the helm,” he said.

“Sorry, Sir...did you say...”

“Step aside!” Picard told her, rising from his seat and stumbling forward to the ship’s controls. Durst quickly rose and clutched at a bulkhead for support as Picard took her place. “Belvers, I want you to keep a close eye on our energy reserves,” he said.

Ahead, he could see the *But De La Vie*, a standard Federation transport vessel, buffeting in the waves, desperately trying to keep its attitude as it continued to sink closer to the horizon. Gingerly, Picard plied the helm controls and the Sovereign class slipped down under the *But De La Vie*, whose engines were no match for the forces that gripped it. The *Enterprise* was a different story, but against the freak forces of nature, a ship was a ship and it rocked to port from a swell as the inertial dampeners struggled to keep the bridge from shaking apart. Picard paused to ensure they made the mark, before tapping alive his Communicator.

“This is the Captain speaking!” he raised his voice. “All hands, brace for impact!” He turned to Belvers. “Give me everything from the reactors – I need them tapped into the impulse engines,” he ordered. “No, belay that – give me 50% over the safeties!”

“But, Sir, they’ll burn out!” Belvers cried in alarm.

“Just do it!” Picard bellowed over the whining metal of the ship. He checked the structural integrity field. It was maxed out and still they sank.

“Full power to you, Sir!” Belvers announced.

Picard fired the impulse engines, vectoring the field’s thrust perpendicular to the gravity field. Gingerly, like stroking a

Grisnak cat, he gradually adjusted their output to slow their descent. The *Enterprise* tilted down briefly under the new forces and then righted itself. Outside, the *But De La Vie* sank down atop them, nearing collision with the *Enterprise* every passing second. Picard hardly dared to breathe. Contact with the passenger-liner was imminent. “50m...20m...10m...” he muttered, watching the distances closely. Just before impact, Picard shut off the engines, abandoning the ship to the gravity well for a few seconds. The transport and the *Enterprise* nearly matched speed. And then they touched. The *Enterprise* shuddered at from the joining.

“We have a hull breach on deck five, section two!” Belvers reported. “Forcefields in place and holding!”

“Could have been worse,” Picard muttered.

It will get worse, he thought. Just ahead of the Bridge, the *But De La Vie* rested on the hull of the forward section of the ship, crossways. Without further ado, Picard throttled the impulse engines up to maximum. The *Enterprise* groaned in protest as it strained against the mighty gravitational pull below it and the pressing weight of the transport’s belly above.

The deck bucked.

“New hull breaches on Decks three and four!” Belvers announced. “Fields in place and holding!”

Picard set his jaw. “Do me a favor, Lieutenant,” he growled, “From here on out, only announce hull breaches if the fields aren’t holding!”

“Aye...Sir,” Belvers replied diffidently.

Picard only hoped the *But De La Vie* was containing its own damage also. The good news was that these modern civilian

transports always kept their passenger coaches on the dorsal side.

An alert on the Con caught Picard's attention, but Belvers was on it.

"Captain, our reactors are losing structural containment!" he cried. "They're burning out!" Picard ignored him, staring intently at their rising altitude.

"Just a few more kilometers," he whispered, keeping the impulse throttle redlined. "Just a few more!" Suddenly, the ship rocked. Picard could feel an explosion reverberating through the hull beneath him. The ship began listing to Starboard.

"We've lost our starboard impulse engine!" Delvers reported. Picard adjusted the attitude controls for the remaining impulse engine.

"Almost there!" he cried, kicking in every available thruster for good measure. Suddenly, the bridge bucked as another explosion rippled through the ship.

"The port impulse engine is gone!" Delvers announced. Through gritted teeth, Picard could see their momentum would carry them free from the gravitational field, which fell away at a cubic rate. They had made it!

"Captain," Belvers panted. "I don't...I don't believe it...but you did it!"

Free from the gravitational interference, the comm systems on the *But De La Vie* appeared to be working again. Picard saw the incoming hail on his console. He stood and gestured for Ensign Durst to regain her post. As she did so, Picard asked his dreaded question.

“Casualties?”

“Twelve people injured, Sir,” Belvers replied, glancing up with admiration. “But nothing life threatening.” That was a relief. Hopefully the transport had suffered so well!

“Put the *But De La Vie* onscreen,” Picard ordered.

The screen flickered and a pale-faced, middle-aged man mopped away perspiration as he gazed in awe at Captain Picard. “Captain!” he said, breathlessly. “We owe you our lives.”

“What is your status, Mr...?” Picard asked, ignoring the praise, and fishing for his name.

“Oh, its McTavish, Sir, Captain McTavish,” he sputtered, pausing to pull up his ship-wide reports. “Uh...we have 100 passengers with minor injuries that could use a good Federation doctor, if you have one. No casualties, thank God!”

“Our Chief medical officer, Doctor Crusher, will be happy to assist you,” Picard smiled weakly. “She is the best in the Fleet. In the meantime, let me know if you need any help with repairs.”

“Aye, with a little help, I think our engines will be back online by the end of the day,” McTavish replied, checking his warp coil readings.

“We’ll send a repair team over,” Picard nodded.

“Will do, Captain,” McTavish replied, wiping his brow anew. “And for the love of God, thank you again!” The screen flicked off.

“I think we’re going to need help with our own repairs,” Belvers sighed, looking over the *Enterprise’s* injuries. “We can patch up

most of the minor damage ourselves, Sir,” he reported, “But the impulse engines are shot.”

Picard winced at the new scars he'd given his ship. They'd just come out of extensive repairs from their bitter scrap with the Scimitar less than 3 months ago and already he'd be taking her back to the shop! But it was a worthy exchange by every weight and measure.

“I wouldn't look quite so down, Lieutenant,” he smiled. “As long as we have thrusters and warp capability, we'll still be able to get under way.”

“I...suppose so...Sir,” Belvers replied, hesitantly, realizing with dismay that the Captain wasn't going to do the sensible thing and wait for a repair ship to swing by and tow them to spacedock.

By that evening, the *But De La Vie*'s repairs were finished and it and its passengers were safely back on their way to Earth. After mooring a hazard buoy near the anomaly and logging it with Starfleet, Picard turned to the helm.

“Ensign, get us back on track, will you?” he asked. “We'll need to make up for lost time.”

“Aye, Sir,” she replied uneasily, firing up the thrusters to adjust the *Enterprise's* heading. She hadn't used the thrusters to position a ship in preparation for a warp jump since her Academy training days a few years ago. Thankfully for her nerves and everyone else's, it came back to her quickly.

The thrusters fired and the *Enterprise* banked on its port nacelle to search out its destination.

“Coordinates for the Chin’toka system locked in, Sir,” Durst reported.

“Warp eight,” Picard smiled. “Engage!” The graceful Sovereign leapt into the black cosmos, back on the road to whatever destiny lay before it.

Picard watched the stars slip by on the viewscreen for a few minutes, before rising from his seat.

“Well, I think I’ll retire for the evening,” he announced. It was only twenty minutes earlier than the watch ended, but he still felt guilty doing so. Pausing at the tubolift, he turned back to address the Bridge. “Oh, and...you all did exceptionally well today,” he said softly. “Job well done!”

He rode the empty turbolift away from the Bridge.

Back in his quarters, he sat at his lonely table and finished his French Onion Soup in silence. He hadn’t asked for Beverly’s company that evening as he knew she was behind schedule now on her roster, especially after the events of the day. Besides, he’d had to spend an hour setting his quarters right after the rough ride the ship had taken. It was just as well that she was probably also busy sorting things out. But in his heart, he knew he wasn’t ready to see her – not quite yet. He climbed into bed slowly and listened to the hum of the ship. It had always been a source of comfort to him, but not tonight.

“Computer, lights!” he called and then sank down in the darkness. The exhaustion of the day began to seep into his eyes and he’d just closed them when he heard a voice pull him back from oblivion.

“Time to get up, darling,” it called softly. Picard opened his eyes to see an immensely beautiful woman sitting down on the bed

beside him. He glanced sharply around. He was no longer on the *Enterprise* – this was a traditionally decorated French bedroom and the sunlight through the windows was warm and early. He could sense he was in La Barre, France, again. He glanced at the woman and her face seemed incredibly familiar.

“Claire?” he asked in a whisper.

“Who else would I be?” she replied, brushing her elegant hair from her eyes, which was just beginning to show signs of graying. “Come, love...the children are waiting!” She got up and tugged playfully at his arm. “Would you like some tea?”

“Oh, tea would be perfect,” he smiled, surrendering to the vision.

“Your favorite?” she asked, mischievously. “Lapsang Sushang?” Picard wrinkled his nose. Of all teas, the smoked eastern delicacy was perhaps his least favorite of all.

He recalled a new memory from this place - that he'd once joked he'd rather drink the ashes of the Picard estate than drink that sap of smoked shingles.

“You know me so well!” he gagged payfully.

“Earl Grey it is, then,” she grinned and pausing at the doorway, giving her best imitation of a very severe look. “Don’t be long!”

She retreated, leaving Picard to take in his room. It was exactly the way he’d always pictured his bedroom might have been, except for little surprising touches scattered around – clearly Claire’s doing, which perfectly married into what made the room his. It reminded him that this was their room – a shared life that was so well dissolved into each other that it was impossible to know where he ended and she began.

He knew this was all Q's doing, but he couldn't help it if he was overwhelmed with curiosity about the life he'd given up so savagely that distant Christmas morning in his youth. He rose from bed and found a pair of the most comfortable slippers imaginable before making his way to the old creaking steps leading down from the upstairs of the old Picard chateau.

"Merry Christmas, Uncle!" René called from the foot of the stairs. Picard nearly missed a step. The boy was no longer - a young man stood in his place. Into his thoughts, Picard suddenly remembered René was in college now, studying engineering to support his remarkable gift for invention.

Picard stood in his tracks like he'd been struck by a shuttlecraft. He realized the cruel twist that Q was showing him - if only Jean-Luc had chosen a different life, Renee would never have died in that accident - butterflies in a forest and all that! He fought the tears back from his eyes just in time as Robert teetered around the corner of the stairs and looked up.

"Why, Jean-Luc!" he smiled, raising a glass of the darkest red wine. "Your beautiful bride was kind enough to let me sample your latest vintage ahead of the party - I hope you won't begrudge me an advanced review!" He took a long, swirling sip - a little too long.

"And?" René asked his father, raising his eyebrows impatiently. Robert played up a frown with difficulty.

"Well," he said, slowly, pretending to struggle for a compliment, "I have to admit it is the closest you've come to Father's best table wine!" He winked in jest as he pretended to detect a new note in the wine. "But what is this salty finish I'm detecting?" he grinned. "Could they be tears of shame from our dear old man?"

"Now, father," Renee interrupted, playfully punching Robert's shoulder. "If anything, they're grandfather's tears of joy at uncle's forte for making Cabernet!"

"Oh, is that what it is?" Robert swished his glass with a grimace. He grinned up at his brother. "In all honesty, it truly is a fine vintage, Jean-Luc. Father would have been proud to taste it."

Without a word, Picard stepped down beside his brother and embraced him.

"Steady, there!" Robert laughed, raising his glass high over their heads to keep it from spilling. "Careful with the wine!"

"It is good to see you, Robert," Picard laughed.

"Oh, what a relief!" Robert grinned. "Here I thought you were tiring of me shading you in the fields every day!" Jean-Luc was filled with a euphoric joy. He truly felt surrounded by friendship and family. There was tangible love and joy here and it felt more infinite than the unending horizon of the cosmos.

Robert and René led into the dining room where Claire intercepted Picard with his tea, distracting him with an unsubtle kiss. He watched her retreat to the kitchen before raising his glass to his lips. It was the best cup of Earl Grey he'd had since his mother passed, and perhaps even better!

"Sorry, Mère," he whispered and let his eyes drift over the magnificent tree in the adjoining parlor, dusted with softly twinkling lights like new-fallen snow and covered with tinsel and ancient family heirlooms - ornaments that had dressed the Picard tree for generations - and beneath its heavily laden branches nestled more than three dozen presents of all shapes and sizes, wrapped in the most beautiful of traditional papers with ribbons and bows demonstrating the love and care that

went into them. He knew that there, among them, a present waited for him, but more importantly, there were more than a few that were from him to his loved ones. He smiled as the sight filled him with nostalgia and happiness.

Outside, the sky was overcast with large fluffy snowflakes gently settling through the air - the sort of scene that had always made him want to curl up next to a fire with a good book - and as if in answer to his thoughts, he suddenly realized the parlor fireplace burned with a warm blaze of oak logs, casting a throbbing orange glow over the inviting chairs and sofas that it serviced with its cheer. He spied a few antique, bound first-edition books lying seductively on the end table and fought the urge to explore their pages.

"Later," he whispered.

Reluctantly, he took his eyes away from the restful scene and turned to take in the dining room, which was loud and boisterous with people's merry voices. The table had been greatly extended to accommodate all the young people sitting around it, chatting and laughing carelessly over the incredible spread of a golden goose, thick pudding, rich stuffing, pickled beets, freshly blanched asparagus, wine-filled glasses and more - the wonderful smells were intoxicating - and what a pleasant hubbub of life! He settled his eyes on the people responsible for such a merry babble and lowered his cup in surprise. The moment he'd turned, he recognized in them the faces of his loved ones. Recognition seeped down into his mind.

"Maurice!" he gasped, passing his eyes over a strikingly handsome younger picture of himself. Yes, it was his son, named in honor of his own father. Picard gaped. This was *his* son! The young man was too busily staring deeply into the deep

blue eyes of a beautiful young lady sitting beside him to notice his father's entrance. It was his fiancé, Marta. You might have supposed no two people in the world had ever been so much in love – they were to be married in the Spring and live just a few fields over from the estate to be near family. Picard was so thrilled they hadn't wanted to leave.

And beside the lovebirds, Picard suddenly recognized his daughter Kathrine. Her quivering blond curls lit up the table from the soft chandelier above. She had just told a joke that set the whole table alight and she shook with laughter at her own words. He sensed in her the same mischievous spirit that had gotten him into so much trouble at her age. How old was she now? Eighteen? She was a watercolor painter, rapidly making her presence felt in the Parisian art community, but she spent most her days walking the fields here in La Barre with her father, waiting for nature to reveal magical moments for her to capture. Her magnificent landscapes hung in every room of the Chateau and in many homes for miles around.

Picard was overwhelmed. These were his children! And they had chosen to live near him – to be with him – to make their lives with him and enlarge that fellowship with their own families, which soon would fill this house again with laughter and song.

Picard stumbled back. He thought he was having a heart attack – the way his heart felt like it would burst with the emotions that welled up inside him.

I suppose this is what unguarded joy feels like! he thought, covering his eyes with his hands to hide the tears.

And at that moment, the sounds faded and the light vanished and Picard found himself alone again in his quarters, mopping at the tears that flowed down his face.

“Why?” he whispered and then it rose in an angry growl. “Why, Q? What have I ever done to you to deserve this cruelty?” He crumpled into his bed and wept himself into a dreamless sleep of blessed oblivion.

But at zero hundred hours, Picard woke suddenly to sunlight in his eyes. He groaned, feeling stiff and sore, and as he rolled over, he realized he was lying on firm pavement.

But before he could sit up, he felt a gentle kick to his back and someone was yelling at him.

“Squatting is not permissible!” it said in a familiar voice, “Get thee up, thou vagabond!” Picard struggled upright and was shortly sitting next to the last person in the universe he wanted to see.

“I resent that, Jean-Luc,” Q chided, reading his thoughts. “I would have thought there was at least one mass-murdering psychopath of your acquaintance you’d want to avoid over my company.” He gleefully considered the possibilities for a moment.

“What about Professor James Moriarty?...No? Very well, perhaps that twisted twin, Lore?” he paused without eliciting a reply, and then smiled wickedly. “Or maybe that old flame of yours, the Queen of the Borg?”

“Sorry to disappoint you, Q” Picard sighed, “but having her inside my head was more tolerable.” Q brushed off the riposte and bent down.

“What about...Dr. Tolian Soren?” he asked knowingly and then made like Picard didn’t remember. “You know, that old ‘death is a predator stalking you’ chap? Now there was an optimist who knew how to enjoy life!”

Q had said the name so deliberately that Picard stood up. Was it a clue about where they were or was it an allusion to regret and death? That’s when he fully took in Q’s ridiculous appearance for the first time. He was dressed in a ragged sort of black robe with oversized sleeves hiding his hands. A large, heavy hood mostly obscured his face. His robe rested on the ground, but he appeared to be floating a few inches off the pavement – surely all an allusion to Dicken’s Ghost of Christmas Future.

“You can leave out your tawdry attempts at literary reference,” Picard grumbled.

“I resent that!” Q exclaimed, throwing off his hood. “I’ll have you know this costume took great effort to procure! Its authentic – right off the back of a 19th century performer in London’s Old Vic Theater – mid performance, I might add! Feel it, it’s still warm.”

Picard ignored him, glancing around to see an unfamiliar setting in a magnificent courtyard of stone monuments and columns. Hundreds of people were bustling about in the marketplace filled with vendors offering up their magnificent foodstuffs and wares. Spices and herbs filled the air with an intoxicating “old-world” charm. They appeared to be on a wharf of some sort – tall triangular sails made of large fish-scales sewn together rose into view above the stone pillars a few hundred meters away, gleaming twenty or thirty stories up into the morning air. Picard studied the people around him closely. They weren’t human, but they bore enough of a resemblance to warrant some momentary

confusion. Someone was playing a stringed instrument and it sounded soulful, echoing in the bustling atmosphere of the marketplace.

Picard squeezed at the bridge of his nose and rubbed at a headache. It was too much of a puzzle for his aching head.

“Come on, Jean-Luc,” Q huffed. “Concentrate!” He tapped Picard on the temple and instantly he was awake and alert.

“That’s better,” Q said, pleasantly. “You’d recommend tea for the hypersomniac and Katrine would offer coffee, but there’s nothing like the effects of omnipotence to stimulate the weakened mortal frame.” Picard had never felt so upright in all his life, and he fought to keep the renewed energy out of his voice.

“When are you going to get on with it?” he asked.

Q smiled snarkily. “Patience, *mon Capitan*, please!” he sighed dramatically. “You really have the endurance of a five-year-old! But...since you’ve been good today...” he lifted his long, drooping black sleeve to point dramatically somewhere across the courtyard. “We are going to follow that insignificant young woman over there to her early morning practice session. Do you see her? She’s wearing the dreary lilac tunic.”

On the other side of the courtyard, Picard made out a girl about 7-years-old, dancing along the stones to the playing of four or five old musicians, which Picard could see now, huddled as they were in a small group plying their unfamiliar looking instruments that had picked up to a livelier tune to celebrate the hopefulness of youth. The girl’s skin was a light coffee color and her hair was jet black, but it seemed to have an obvious reddish sheen in the sunlight. Her ears were pointed and she

wore a little circlet of gold that came together around a gleaming stone resting on her forehead. Her laughter was infectious and her smile broke Picard's heart. She was beautiful and innocent.

Picard was suddenly aware that Q was smugly considering his assessment.

"And...why are we following her?" Picard cleared his throat.

"I've shown you some of your deepest past regrets, Jean-Luc," Q said. "And then we saw what might have been, had you chosen a different path. Now, all that remains is to show you what is and then what will be because of the path you did choose." Picard stopped in his tracks. He didn't think he could take any more.

"Please, Q...I'm begging you," Picard said desperately. "No more!"

"Just a little longer, Jean-Luc," Q replied, insistently. "Your session is almost done."

He beckoned Picard to follow along after the young girl through the street. She had left the musicians, but still pranced to their music as she danced down the street.

"Her name...is Kalee," Q whispered secretively as they followed her. "Daughter to one Abulsee and her husband Dradne. Kalee is learning dance and loves a hot drink called Spinsa, which is not unlike your detestable Earl Grey. She dreams of becoming a mother one day and is sweet on a boy named Rikardo who likes to take her boating along the Bethesli canal." Picard wondered why Q was telling him all this. He was fairly certain he'd never been to this world or even seen this race before, so why were they here?

They followed Kalee into a magnificent hall of carved stonework where the girl joined a group of other children her age and began to practice an elegant dance form that vaguely reminded Picard of a blend between Russian ballet and Olympic gymnastics. He was mesmerized by the range and grace of her movements. For someone so young, she was already more adept than the most seasoned ballet prodigy back on earth.

As they watched, Q leaned in towards Picard and continued. "Although Kalee does not know it, someone tried to take her life when she was still in her mother's womb. Her loving parents were just newlyweds at the time and all they wanted was to give their daughter the world – a world you saved, Jean-Luc." Picard glanced sharply into Q's amused face.

"Yes," Q answered the Captain's questioning gaze, "Abulsee, Dradne, and the unborn Kalee were among the 230 million inhabitants of Veridian IV that you saved from Dr. Tolian Soren's tragic, but overrated, third act. Abulsee gave birth to Kalee in the month following the now Mrs. Riker's graceful landing of the *Enterprise* on their neighboring planet of Veridian III. And while you were back at Starfleet headquarters waiting to be assigned a new ship, Dradne welcomed home his wife into the new house he had built for her and their precious newborn daughter who had just been released from the local midwives' watchful care for the first time."

Picard opened his mouth in surprise. Never in his wildest dreams had he imagined meeting someone from Veridian IV. He had only thought in passing about the people he had given everything up to save. In his mind, it had been his duty to save a fledgling civilization, nothing more. But now, in the face of seeing Kalee, it meant far, far more to him.

Q broke into his thoughts. “Last night, Kalee went to sleep staring up in wonder at the stars during her first camping trip into the Eternal Woods that surround her city – never in her darkest nightmares could she know how closely her life came to termination and her world to annihilation. She wouldn’t understand if you told her – the Veridians, after all, are still a pre-industrial civilization that believe their sun is a fish-oil lantern in the sky.” The amusement in Q’s voice was palpable. “And so,” he continued, “Kalee can never know how you risked your life to save her – how you gave up paradise for her – the ideal life you wanted with a wife and children just so she could stare at the sky in innocent wonder and experience her life as she was made to live it. She never had the chance to thank you, and she never will.”

Suddenly the scene began twisting away like it was stirring into a wormhole. Picard gasped.

“Wait...not yet! I want to see more of her,” he whispered, straining his eyes to keep Kalee before him for as long as he could before she vanished, but at last she, too, was swallowed by the blackness.

“Sorry, Jean-Luc,” Q said, genuinely, “But my time is short and there is still so much for you to see.”

Suddenly a new scene approached and everything swirled into focus. Q and Picard were sitting on a bench in a commons area outside under a pleasant spring evening. In an instant, Jean-Luc recognized it as the Starfleet Academy grounds. But a frown threatened to strip away his delight. Something wasn’t right. The uniforms of the officers walking around him looked a little different. Everything looked a little different. Was this the future?

Q nodded to his unspoken question.

In front of them, a young man was encouraging a despondent young Andorian cadet.

"I'm here for you, Shrat," he said. "Don't give up. We care about you! I care about you! You're going to spend the night at my parent's place – I insist! And if your father won't understand, you are welcome to stay with us indefinitely. We'll figure this out, Shrat – we'll figure this out, together!" Picard stared curiously at the young man. There was something familiar in his features and demeanor that immediately set him at ease. He tried to rest a mental finger on his thoughts when Q leaned over urgently and interrupted Picard's concentration.

"Oh, this part is really good," he said. "Paul here has just intervened in Shrat's attempted suicide," Q explained. "The luckless chap was going to throw himself off the Golden Gate Bridge – a result of failing his first year final examinations in all his classes – a noteworthy feat. It seems he couldn't bear the shame of returning home to tell his father – Shrat Senior is a very proud and unforgiving man and a little too partial to Romulan Ale in my humble opinion, but then again, who isn't?" Q stopped and backed away from Picard's unamused expression. "Sorry, just thought a little backstory might help – probably should have started this one a bit earlier."

He cleared his throat and started fresh. "Meet Paul," he beckoned. "This strapping young man studies medicine at Starfleet Academy. He's only a year into the program and is already at the top of his class. Last semester, while on a training mission, he saved a student's life from a rare allergic reaction to space itself. Yes, he'll make a fine doctor one day, despite his insufferable charity." Q considered Paul closely for a moment

with a disapproving scowl before continuing. "When Paul isn't busy studying himself to death or haplessly saving lives, he dedicates all his attentions to a gorgeous young cadet named Amelie who is just as sickeningly charitable as him. In their spare time they like volunteering in healthcare outreach groups and off-world humanitarian programs." Q paused for so long that Picard turned to see he was scanning down a copy of their academic records with distaste, which had mysteriously materialized in his hand. With a cry of disgust, he threw the pages to the wind.

"I'm afraid they're both incurable do-gooders," he sighed.

"And?" Picard asked.

"And...it's my medical opinion that in order to save these two from a perfectly good and ordinary life, someone ought to jump into their ideal little world and rough up those perfectly square edges with a little excitement. Let's say we start on him with a luscious temptress, followed up by a..."

"Q," Picard said dangerously. "Don't you dare so much as tamper with the breeze! Now, if you don't mind getting to the punchline?" Q broke away from his machinations with difficulty.

"Right...well, the salient point here, Jean-Luc, is that Paul wasn't even a twinkle in his father's eye when you spared his future by advocating for his life with a certain handsome and omnipotent rogue." Q pointed dramatically to his own temple. "Moi. Yes, you saved his life and trillions of other human lives like his by putting yourself on the line with that little mystery at Farpoint Station and the attached judgement of all mankind."

Picard couldn't help but smile. He hadn't really thought about Farpoint in years, much less about who specifically was on trial during that whole affair – it had all seemed so abstract at the time. Saving the entire human race didn't exactly conjure up the beautiful particulars of each precious life, such as Paul's.

"I still say the universe would be better off without you all," Q provoked.

"And I say you protest too much," Picard countered. "Tell me more about Paul."

"Well," Q answered in his most disinterested voice, "about nine years after Farpoint, Paul was only newly conceived in his mother's womb when you saved his life again. Do you recall it?"

"First Contact," Picard whispered, staring at the young man, who was still comforting his friend, "when the Borg tried to erase our timeline."

"That's right, Jean-Luc!" Q said in mock surprise. "Very good! Gold star and all!"

Just then, an upperclassman walked by and shouted to Paul.

"Hey, Boothby!" he yelled, "See you on the fencing mat!"

"Sure thing, Wells!" Paul grinned.

"Boothby?" Picard gasped.

"Spoiler!" Q exclaimed. "Yes, Jean-Luc, you can do this...this young man is?...Paul Boothby, who is?...the great-grandson of your Mr. Boothby himself!"

"I never knew he was married?" Picard whispered breathlessly.

“She died young,” Q said shortly. “And his only son Philip grew up with her family in France, but then he came into the age of love and married a vivacious young girl named...Marie.”

“My Marie?” Picard asked.

“Honestly, Jean-Luc, I’m surprised at you,” he said with mock censure. “Your Marie! – she was as much yours as the sun!”

“And...they had a son – Paul?” Picard continued, ignoring him. Q slapped his pajamas.

“See, I knew you weren’t as thick as everyone says!” he exclaimed.

Picard collapsed into the back of his bench.

“Why...why are you showing me all this, Q?” he asked quietly. He was deeply affected and his mind a seething turbid mess.

“I’m showing you what you don’t know about your ‘pointless’ little life, Jean-Luc,” Q whispered. “Your life made all this possible, right down to Marie’s little life of motherhood and pride in her irredeemably irreproachable son. Yes, and you chose to sacrifice yourself to a life of service and duty for her and for Abulsee so that Kalee and Paul and millions more could experience their pitiful little lives of happy innocence. What does the Good Book say, Captain? Something like, “Your eyes saw me when I was still an unborn child. Every day of my life was seen before one of them had taken place.” Do you understand yet? All these children were yet unborn when your sacrifice gave them life. You looked ahead and you saw them – you saw them before they were born and you acted for them to ensure their life. That boy’s life right there was saved by the road you walk, long before he was even conceived. Do you see it now as one great truth? The past, present, and the future?”

Picard remained silent.

"I know, I know," Q sighed sympathetically. "I too find your role in all this revoltingly self-righteous, but sadly it is the truth, Jean-Luc. You ensured their future through your service to your duty. And do you know what that sounds like? Fatherhood."

Picard glanced up incredulously.

"Hear me out, Jean-Luc," Q said holding up his sleeve dramatically, "we're on the threshold of the last act!" He glanced back to Paul Boothby.

"Paul here wouldn't have been born if it hadn't been for you, just as my own Q Junior wouldn't have come along without me," he began, but then saw the confusion in Picard's eyes.

"Did I forget to tell you that I have a son, Jean-Luc?" he exclaimed with dismay. "Mrs. Q and I couldn't have forgotten you in the announcement!"

Picard could only sigh inwardly. He'd read the reports from Admiral Janeway's experiences with Q in the Delta Quadrant, and although he'd had serious misgivings about Q parenting a child, he'd never planned to tell him. But at that moment, Q was pressing his finger to his lips in perturbed thought.

"Oh!" he exclaimed. "I remember now! I was on my way to tell you the news when I was distracted by a charming little quasar and I decided to introduce it to a black hole – honestly, Jean-Luc, since I've found the love of my life, I must confess that I've developed into something of a matchmaker, initiating romance in the most unseemly of places – humbly sharing my own good fortune with the universe. And I flatter myself that a few of my interventions actually seem to have worked out!" He cleared his throat.

“Anyways, I’d love to introduce you to your godson sometime – little Q Junior isn’t so little anymore – but perhaps another time! At any rate, it was through raising him that I learned this parenthood thing is a highly inconvenient enterprise. And for mortals – my word! – your children consume not only your time and space, but your energy as well – the very essence of your mortal life – the very substance of your being! They are cannibals of the highest order – and yet fathers and mothers willingly sacrifice the essence of their lives so that their children can live, and live the best possible lives they can. Parenthood is sacrifice of oneself so that those who come after us may live.” Q leaned forward importantly. “And what’s more, the noblest aspect of a father’s role, in the traditional parlance of your homeland, is to sacrifice his life to protect his children until they come of age and inherit their futures as their own.”

“Your point?” Picard asked.

“By that definition, Jean-Luc, you are a father...to billions of children.”

Picard glanced up to watch Paul walk back to his dorm, drawing Shrat with him attentively. In that moment, he could feel himself weakening to Q’s words. It was hard to argue with the truth that his life could be read in the molecular forces that bound together the lives of all the people he’d saved in pursuit of his duty.

But still an emptiness lingered near the doorway of his mind, held up by the bitterness of all those past regrets and his deep desire to have the things he wanted, the way he wanted them. Could he give up his pain? He looked up sharply from his palms and gave way to what gall remained.

“Is that supposed to make me feel all better now, Q?” he said angrily. “Did you really think your parlor tricks could absolve

my regrets? How could my guilt for my past and the emptiness of my future be remedied by your childish make-believe?" His bitterness was on his tongue, and he was surprised to find it tasted palatable. Had he really become so familiar and accustomed to his pain that the thought of being freed from its custody frightened him?

"Is this really the best you can do, Q?" he continued weakly. "Because if this is it, you might want to try a different hobby." Deep down, he knew he didn't mean what he was saying - but at the surface of his thoughts, the emotions churned his mind like a wind whips up the sea. The ancient words of the long-suffering Job came to his mind: *"the words of one in despair belong to the wind."*

Q sat up with a dangerous fire in his eyes, cutting Picard's self-pity short.

"Oh, my dear Captain," he smiled, "I'm just getting started...Checkmate."

Suddenly, Picard found himself sitting in the front row at a play recital, pressed on either side by a full house. His mind was still reeling from the revelations he'd been subjected to and a few minutes passed before he noted that Q was nowhere to be seen.

Where has the old quack gone now? he wondered sullenly, glancing around to catch a glimpse of him. As he did so, his eyes flashed with recognition. This auditorium was in his old primary school in La Barre!

Why had Q brought him here?

"Good evening, Madame, et Messieurs," a teacher addressed the auditorium as she stepped onto the stage. She was the perfect picture of an old pedagogue – her white hair was done up in a

bun and she had a sort of warm and welcoming sense of business about her.

“My name is Mrs. Audrey,” she continued. “I’m the arts and crafts teacher here at ‘La Lumière Academy’ and we have a special evening planned for you.” She took a deep breath and laughed her nerves away. “Well, as you know...we are preparing to welcome 2380,” she continued breathlessly. “And tonight we want to commemorate the 300-year anniversary of our school’s founding with a special twist on our traditional second grade class rendition of the Nativity Play. As many of you know, this school was founded at the end of the horrors of World War III and it was then that we first celebrated the Christmas season with this play – which reminds us today of the hope of light coming from darkness, and living a life of sacrifice and love for others, just as it did in those first dark days of our founding. Please, enjoy the evening.”

As the teacher left the stage, Picard wondered why Q was showing him something only one year ahead in the future and in his hometown – the last time he’d checked, it was still 2379 back in the real world. The curtain rose and Picard’s heart reluctantly warmed to his own memories of participating in the play as a young child. Even the traditionally made paper-mâché camels and sheep were an especially amusing draw on his memory. He recalled making them in art and crafts when he was six years old.

At last, when the birth was unveiled, everyone in the auditorium “oohed” with amazement when they realized that the *enfant Christ* was actually a genuine toddler lying in the manger.

Picard was unaware of the significance and as the play came to a close, he lapsed back into his misgivings. The curtain dropped to

a resounding applause and Mrs. Audrey stepped back onto the stage, leading out the procession of 2nd graders. They took a bow and she calmed the auditorium to speak.

“Thank you!” she smiled. “Thank you...yes, thank you...well, as part of this year’s special event, we want to celebrate our main star, Jean-Luc Bueadrou,” she smiled, leading the audience’s applause. Picard startled at his name, but it wasn’t exactly uncommon – that and the surname also meant something to him, but he couldn’t quite place it.

A young woman stepped onto the stage shyly, carrying the infant boy from the play. The applause was deafening for the mother and her child.

“Yes, I think we can all agree that his performance was captivating,” Mrs. Audrey laughed once the auditorium had died down enough for her to speak. “Perhaps he’ll take the stage when he’s all grown up!”

She reached out and put her arm around the young mother.

“As most of you know,” she said, somberly, “little Jean-Luc and his mother were almost lost to us last year. Mary, here, went into labor at the worst possible time imaginable. She was coming home from visiting her brother who is studying Deltan wine-craft on Delta IV when her transport was caught in a terrible storm – something they call a “spatial sinkhole.””

The audience gasped.

“I know!” she laughed. “As if we needed another reason to never set sail into the stars! At any rate, I’m told by Mr Normandy, our science teacher here, that no ship has ever escaped a spatial sinkhole once caught in its pull. To be caught in one is a sentence of death. And so, while facing this certainty,

Mary here was in her own struggle to give life to her son – a son she had already named Jean-Luc at her mother's request 6 months earlier. She struggled for his life, even though she knew they were both going to die. But she didn't give up, because she knew she couldn't. She had dedicated her life to little Jean-Luc and she was going to see him enter the world and live his life. And she knew that somehow, someone had heard their call for help and they were on the way."

The auditorium was so hushed that when someone four rows back dropped their program it sounded like a brick of latinum on the floor. Picard sat petrified to his seat, staring with disbelief at the young mother and her little boy, Jean-Luc. Mrs. Audrey continued.

"Unknown to Mary, an angel was on the way. A Federation starship bearing the registry *U.S.S. Enterprise* had picked up their distress call while passing by. But when it arrived, there was nothing they could do to help them – at least that is what everyone told the captain of this starship – 'It is too risky!' ; 'We'll get pulled in too!' ; 'They are already dead!' they told him. But this captain did not value his life more than little Jean-Luc here – no, he valued it less than nothing in the face of that storm. That is what a life of service means – to lay your life down for those you live to serve – those are his words, by the way, not mine, from what he shared at the Dominion War Memorial Service last year. This captain...he took his ship into the mouth of that terrible storm, which no ship ever escapes – he risked his life and his ship and he saved Mary and her baby and a thousand other men, women, and children just like them."

Mrs. Audrey paused for her words to fall through the minds of her audience, but she need not have done so – Picard sat dazed

by the crashing force of each colossal syllable, demolishing him piece by piece down though his soul.

Into his gaze, Mrs. Audrey suddenly looked.

“This Captain’s name,” she began, “is Jean-Luc Picard.” The audience stirred with murmur. Mrs. Audrey raised her hand. “And...and what is more astounding, he was born right here in La Barre to Maurice and Yvette Picard who were close family friends to Mary’s grandmother’s family.” Gasps rippled through the auditorium. Mrs. Audrey silenced the audience again before continuing.

“Madame, et Messieurs, it is with the utmost honor and gratitude that we welcome home on this very special night, Captain Jean-Luc Picard. Captain, if you would please rise?” The auditorium light fell on Picard and he stood reluctantly in a daze to the rising roar of drowning applause. He didn’t know what to say or do. He was in shock.

“Thank you...” he said, waving the applause down, “thank you!” He tried in vain to sit several times, but the audience would not let him. When it had finally subsided some, Mrs. Audrey raised her voice.

“Captain Picard, would you please join us on the stage and say a few words?”

“Oh, no, I’d better not,” Picard began, but Mrs. Audrey had a lifetime behind her of cajoling intransigent pupils to do her bidding and in the end, he hesitantly climbed up to the stage.

Picard took a deep breath.

“I don’t know what to say,” he began, but then he saw Q drifting through the back of the auditorium, and the words seemed to congeal from the past two nights.

"You know," he said with conviction, "I was reminded recently by...a friend – a dear friend – that a life of sacrifice is no small thing. But really the purpose of life is to give our lives to the ones we love, as any of us here would do." He gestured from the folks in the front row to those in the back. "You all give your lives to each other in small and large ways every day. We live for one another. Sometimes, we are called to lay everything on the line. For me, it was a conscious decision many...many years ago that I wanted to lay my life on the line every single day if it meant saving just one life endangered by a bully, gripped by injury or disease, or hanging in the peril of vulnerability and exploitation. It was worth it – even if it meant I might die trying. That is the conviction of a life of duty to others – putting their welfare above your own, considering even the outcast and pariah as more valuable than yourself. And I would happily do it all over again...for you, Mary, and you Gabriel, and you, little Jean-Luc. It is my greatest pleasure!" He bowed to them and left the stage to wild, saluting cheers.

As he stepped down into the crowd, a woman stepped into his path and Picard stopped in his tracks.

"Claire?" he gasped. Picard's heart almost stopped. She looked exactly as she had in Q's vision. "Claire...I" he gasped anew. "But...what are you doing here?" She came forward and placed a fond hand on his arm.

"I want to thank you, Jean-Luc," she said. "Thank you, for saving my daughter and grandchild." Picard glanced confusedly to Mary, Gabriel, and little Jean-Luc who had followed him off the stage.

"Mary is...your daughter?" he asked breathlessly.

"Yes, Jean-Luc," she answered, fighting her tears back.

Picard stood dumbfounded by the revelation.

“Don’t look so surprised,” Claire smiled, dabbing her eyes. “It is a small world after all.”

“Smaller than you know,” Picard said with a heart-melting chuckle. He wiped at his own dewing eyes. “If I had known I was rescuing...your daughter...I’d have tried even harder!”

“The fact you tried at all means you tried your hardest, my old friend,” she said, stepping back and sizing him up. “I have thought of you often, Jean-Luc, out there saving the galaxy. But until you saved my Mary, I did not understand your decision to leave us – your decision to leave me. Now, I do.”

“Dear, dear...Claire,” he said, as if as much to her as to himself, and then realized he had not made “Mr.” Claire’s acquaintance.

“Where is the lucky man?” he asked at his most daring. Claire smiled fondly through a streak of pain.

“My husband Andre passed shortly after Mary was born,” she said, nodding the pang away. “But I still miss him.”

“Andre!” Picard exclaimed. “You married that old scoundrel?”

“Well, there weren’t many good men left to choose from,” she answered in protest. “They’d all run off and left for the stars. We poor girls had to go on with our lives!”

“And has life been good to you?” Picard asked, anxiously. She nodded.

“I have no complaints...and many joys,” she smiled knowingly. “And only a few regrets.” Picard nodded to little Jean-Luc, rocking nearby in his mother’s arms.

“I hear you, uh...insisted on the name?” he asked playfully.

"I wanted to have a Jean-Luc in my life again," she replied. "Something to honor your memory to me."

"I am the one honored," he said. "More than you can know." Mary slid gently beside them with little Jean-Luc.

"Mr. Picard," she began, "I know this may seem forward, but owing to our family's connection and your saving little Jean-Luc, my husband and I were wondering if you would privilege us by becoming his Great-godfather?" Picard felt unbelievably uncomfortable, but also incredibly flattered. There was no way to turn the young parents down.

"I am...completely inadequate," he replied honestly, "but...it would be the greatest honor of my life."

"Then may he grow up to be a tenth the man you are," Mary whispered.

In that moment, Picard was renewed. It seemed the last of the bitterness had fallen away from his soul as he gave up his past for his future. He felt warmth spreading up from his chest. And he laughed, a good-natured laugh of joy, which hurt a little against his stiff and aching heart.

But at that moment, darkness began creeping in around them. The bustling crowds faded slowly away. Picard knew his time was short.

"Claire...I," he began earnestly. "I...wish I hadn't said those things to you so many years ago. I wish things had been different."

"We both said things, Jean-Luc," she replied gently. "And the lives we've lived brought us to this moment, just as it also brought to me the lives of those I love into existence, like little Jean-Luc here. I wouldn't have had it any other way." She

stepped back slowly out of the circle of light surrounding Picard and vanished into the darkness. “Goodbye, my friend.”

And with that, much more quickly than Picard had hoped, Claire and Mary and little Jean-Luc were gone. But Picard knew they were not truly gone – they were in his present and also lay ahead in his future.

He stood for a few minutes alone in the darkness – well, not quite alone.

“And so, the curtain drops on this gaudy little affair,” Q announced painfully, floating into the light around Picard. “It has been nauseatingly good to guide you through these moments, Jean-Luc – I can’t imagine how I shall live without them!”

He floated somberly around him, slowly encircling Picard until he leaned in beside his ear from behind.

“I was touched, however, to hear how much you esteem me as a dear friend, Jean-Luc!” he said brushing at his face dramatically. “It brought a tear to my eye.”

“Well, don’t let it fill your head,” Picard scolded, suppressing a grin. He took a deep breath, symbolic of the cathartic baptism that had washed over his soul.

“Thank you, Q,” he said quietly.

“Oh, don’t thank me, *mon Capitain*,” he chided playfully. “Thank the good doctor – thank her for me!”

Suddenly, Picard woke in his bed, back on the *Enterprise*. He hesitated, taking in the assuring throb of the ship before throwing off his covers. He headed straight out the door into the quiet passages of midnight.

Short of dashing along the corridor, he strode rapidly past the doors of the ship's many crew quarters, keenly watching for the one he knew so well – in his bathrobe and barefoot, hardly nodding to the one crew member who amusedly nodded back her salute to him.

At last, he found what he was looking for. He pressed the chime on the door and waited. Nothing happened.

"I know you aren't asleep," he muttered. "How could you be asleep?" He pressed it again. In the clarity of his mind, Picard could see Beverly before him – her love and patience and compassion. She had always been here for him, through every up and down in his life – she had been constant and he had gotten so used to it that he had stopped valuing it.

He pressed the chime again impatiently, and suddenly, Beverly stood quizzically before him as the doors opened without warning. Her bright red hair still bouncing from her sprint to the door.

It took him a bit by surprise, but no prepared pleasantries or formalities were needed with his dear friend, and the words just poured out of him.

"Dear Beverly," Picard grimaced. "I'm sorry...I'm so sorry for pushing you away all this time. It's what I do...I push people away...and with Data gone and...so many people gone... it just..." Bev reached out and held his arm.

"I know," she said. "I know, Jean-Luc. You don't have to apologize."

"Then you've understood me better than I understand myself" he said.

"I did understand...I do," she said. "And I had faith...I knew you'd find me when you were ready, if you only accepted some help along the way."

"Is that what you wish for?" Jean-Luc asked earnestly. "Some help?" She looked a little surprised, wondering how he had guessed her thoughts so clearly.

"I suppose," she said quietly. "I guess I simply wished you would find what you needed and that it would be the same thing that I need...I need you to let me love you, Jean-Luc...I have always loved you."

Picard allowed the smile he'd reserved so long for this occasion break across his face.

"I know you do," he said thickly. "You've always been there for me – always. You know me so well, and you help me even when I don't think I need it. I've taken you for granted for far too long, Bev, and you've been so patient and loyal to me. But I need you to know that every lightyear I've traveled, I have carried my love for you – it has always been with me, and it always will be, my dear Beverly."

They gently embraced each other in an intimate moment of recognition and Jean-Luc softly crooned into her ear:

Non, rien de rien

Non, je ne regrette rien

Car ma vie, car mes joies

Aujourd'hui... ça commence avec toi!

"That's very beautiful," Beverly whispered. "What do the words mean?"

“Oh, it’s just a song from my childhood that I never understood,” he shrugged. “But it has meaning for the first time in my life...because of you. It says, ‘No, absolutely nothing. No, I regret nothing, because my life, because my joy – today... it begins with you!’”

“Oh, Jean-Luc, you old romantic,” Beverly whispered back with a kiss. They pressed their heads together until Jean-Luc suddenly realized where they were and what they were doing – standing at the Doctor’s door at an ungodly hour in the corridor.

“Oh, did I wake you?” he asked with alarm.

“No, I was...I was thinking...about you,” she said, gripping his hand. He smiled warmly and then glanced around the corridor.

“Computer what time is it?” he demanded.

“It is 0010 hours,” the computer replied, succinctly.

“And the date?” Picard ordered. “What is the date?”

“What is it, Jean-Luc?” Bev asked worriedly. “What is wrong?” Picard strained to hear the computer’s reply when it came.

“The current stardate is: 56446.6.”

Picard ran the numbers through his head.

“It isn’t too late,” he gasped. “He did it all before the Day!”

“Jean-Luc, what is happening?” Beverly asked concernedly. “Who did what?” Picard straightened.

“It’s Christmas morning, Beverly,” He answered serenely. “How would you like to spend Christmas with me?”

Beverly straightened in surprise.

“Tonight?” she asked completely astonished.

“It’s actually morning,” he replied. “It just turned.”

“Well...I haven’t celebrated Christmas since I was a little girl with my grandmother on Arvada III!” she said, hesitantly.

“We’ll have breakfast under the romantic lights of a Christmas tree overlooking the snow fallen French alps,” Jean-Luc coaxed.

She caught sight of the childish light in his eyes – something she hadn’t seen in a very long time. Was it for her or for this nostalgic Christmas fancy? Then, she knew it was in light of sharing Christmas with her.

“On the holodeck?” she asked.

“On the holodeck,” he grinned.

“Very well, Mr Picard,” she smiled. “I accept your gracious invitation.” He gripped her hand and drew her out of her quarters after him.

“Wait, Jean-Luc!” she exclaimed. “Right now? If there’s snow involved, I’m going to need more than slippers!”

EPILOGUE

A few days later, Captain Jean-Luc Picard stood solemnly at a lectern, finishing up his speech at the Chin'toka War Memorial, overlooking a sea of familiar and unfamiliar faces – Starfleet officers and diplomats, and honored guests. They were seated by the thousands in an old Dominion base on an asteroid that had been converted into a chapel of sorts – a dome of tetrahedral windows, letting in the light and shadows of the star system. Behind him, Picard could feel the warmth of the Eternal Flame memorial, made by the famed Andorian craftsman and artist, Shazat – it burned taller than a Hupyrian with an undying flame of hot blue fire. And in those flames, when you stared intently, you would see the faces of all those who had perished in the Dominion War.

Picard let his last pause linger, so that they could all hear the gentle roar of the fire behind him. He drew strength from Beverly's presence in the front row, and he glanced from her to the empty chair beside the flames, left in honor to Captain Benjamin Sisko, in the hope that one day, he would return from the Wormhole to address the men and women he led out from Hell's Inferno.

“Let the record show that their deaths were not in vain.” Picard continued, “Their sacrifice not an empty plea for us to live their future for them. We carry in our daily duties their conviction of the sacrificial life they led – not for personal glory or accomplishment, but in service of the still unborn child on some remote colony on the furthest edge of the galaxy. They lived so that some far-off world would welcome the laughter of that new and precious life. They died so that those precious lives could

one day grow up to be beautiful and ordinary and persist through the hardships of life to noble accomplishments all their own. This is the highest calling given to we mere mortals.”

At that moment, a trick of light on a pale Vulcan’s skin in the front row caught him off guard and he wrestled with a surge of emotion that swept over him.

“As many of you know...the *Enterprise* recently lost one of the finest officers that ever lived. Commander Data was one of my closest...friends.” He paused to contain the moisture welling in his eyes. “He died to save my life from what some could say was a reflection of my own nature. I desperately wanted to save myself, but in the end, it was Data who saved me...from my own arrogance. These many long days, I had thought his sacrifice a senseless one – an indictment of my failings and deeply irreverent to the promise of his future. But a good friend recently showed me the immeasurable meaningfulness of that sacrifice. Data was a Starfleet officer...and he pledged his life in the service of the best for others, even at the cost of everything from himself. He died in that spirit, so that I could stand here before you this morning and preach at you...” Picard fought back his emotion and then smiled through it. “I assure you he got the better part of the deal.”

The audience laughed softly, caught up in the Captain’s eulogy to his friend, which brought fresh relevance to the sacrifices of servicemen and women in a war that already was drifting from public discourse and memory.

“Commander Data demonstrated that the same spirit of self-sacrifice, which we celebrate here today, has survived the cynicism that fell on us during the dark days of the Dominion War – it showed me and it shows us that this spirit lives on in

the actions of ships and crews across the Galaxy – it lives on in large and small sacrifices every day for the good of others.

“And so,” Picard concluded, “as we leave this memorial today and head back out into the stars ‘through hardships,’ as our motto declares, may we carry that spirit with us in everything – when we return to our duties, our convictions, and our commitments...of what it means to be a Starfleet Officer.

“In everything may we honor those who served us in death by ourselves consciously putting our lives on the line daily for the lives of those we serve – always able and willing to lay our lives down to save someone else’s life, just as these men and women memorialized in this eternal fire did for the lives of our children’s great grandchildren.

“If you remember nothing else today from this rambling old man, or if you dozed off earlier, let me impress upon you this: to be a Starfleet Officer is to offer up our lives for the future, whether in living or dying, echoing those timeless words, “No greater love has anyone than to lay down their life for a friend.

“Godspeed to you all.”

As he withdrew from the podium, the applause rose in a deafening roar. The chapel resonated with the sound of human voices, cheering in cathartic release. The eternal flame flared in an otherworldly flash of brilliant light that took the audience by surprise. As the applause died down, the service concluded to a bagpipe rendition of *Amazing Grace* - a tradition revived many years ago on one of the first *Enterprises* by Montgomery Scott, eulogizing the sacrifice of another Starfleet officer who also gave his life for his friends.

The soulful notes pierced the heavens and then it was over.

It took several hours before Picard and Beverly could get away from the little crowds of diplomats and visitors, fellow officers and friends, who greeted and thanked Picard for his words, some in bursts of sociable affability and some in quiet glances of mutual understanding.

At long last, Beverly was able to draw him away with her and they found the nearest transporter pad back to the *Enterprise*.

“Are you sure you want to do this, Jean-Luc?” she asked, watching him closely. “I’m not sure I can compete with your love affair for the stars.”

She was referring more to their maturing relationship than the six week leave they were taking to his ancestral home in La Barre, France. He squeezed her hand as they waited to mount the platform.

“I’ve never been surer, Bev,” he said softly. “But...I will admit that it frightens me – slowing down to let the past catch up and facing the ugliness of who I’ve been at times. But if you are there with me, by my side, I know I can do it.” He nodded self-consciously to the ensign at the controls: “Two for the *Enterprise*,” and then shrugged as he turned back to Beverly. “Besides,” he said, laboring to cheer his misgivings, “we’ll be picking up Commander Madden who has assured me on more than one occasion that he is...perfectly capable of managing the *Enterprise* should I need some time away.” He said this last part with great difficulty, clearly having second thoughts. But with a deep breath, he squeezed Beverly’s hand reassuringly again and let it go as he watched her vanish with him in a swirling cloud of shimmering flecks.

The words of Hamlet came to him then in the ether:

“What a piece of work is man, How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty, In form and moving how express and admirable, In action how like an Angel, In apprehension how like a god, The beauty of the world, The paragon of animals. And yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust?”

Picard waited until his eyes caught Beverly’s shimmering form returning to him on the *Enterprise’s* Transporter pad, and he answered the Bard: “*It is, to me, as winter’s first snow – the hope of something new and beautiful, dusting all the dreary woe of autumn with its raiment woven pure – even now – woven from heaven’s winking stars – that is what it is to me*, Picard thought with a smile, or had he said it aloud – could one truly tell the difference in the ether?

Moments later, the *Enterprise* banked away from the Dominion War Memorial, picked Earth out of the deep, dark, silent night of space – a dim and humble abode in the cosmic spectacle of uncountable lights. And then, the majestic Sovereign leapt to claim it, vanishing in a twinkling gleam, which was more than likely Q’s wink of assurance that Captain Jean-Luc Picard was entering, ahead of him, an even brighter future than what now lay firmly behind.