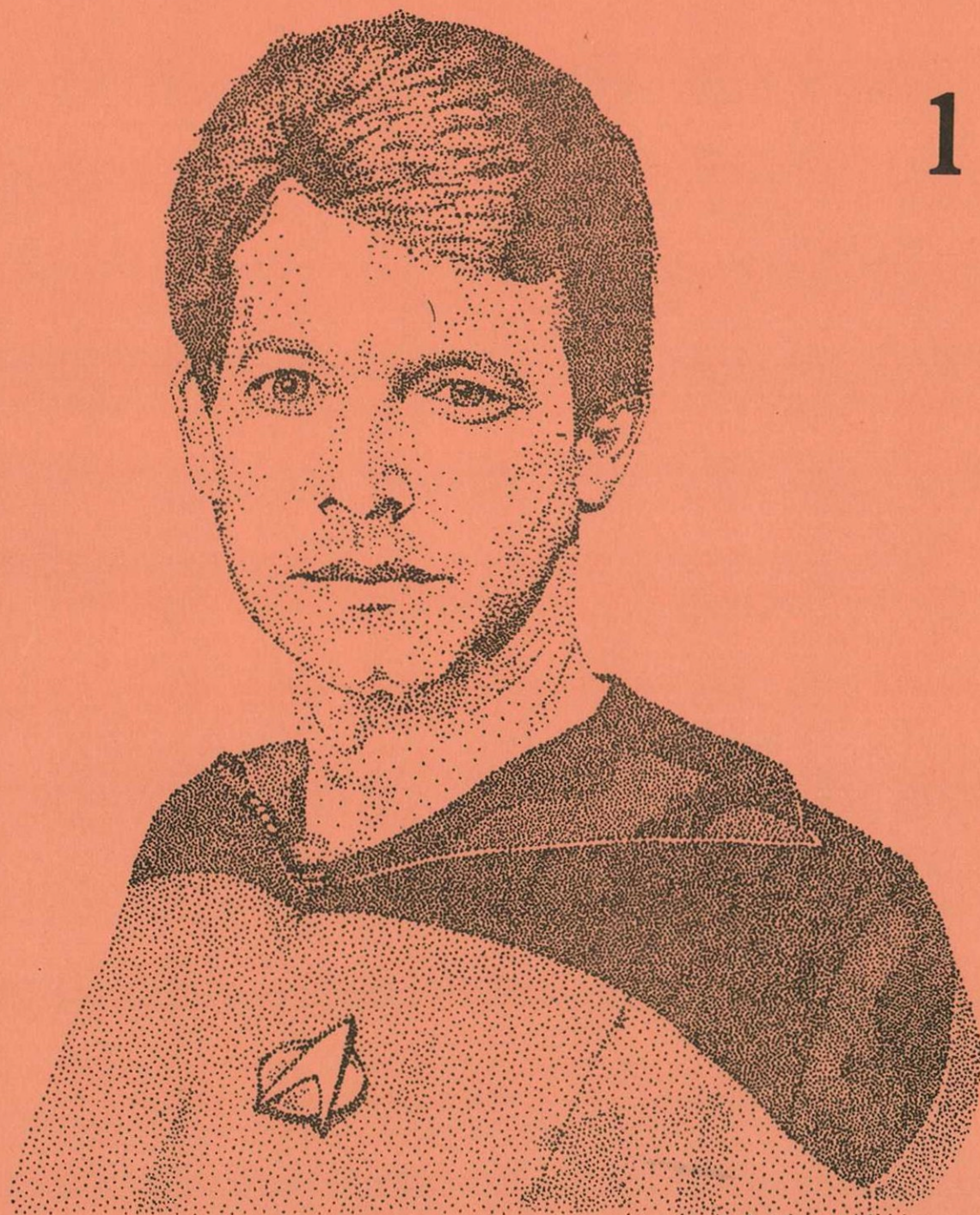


MAKE IT SO

1



Sandra Finch

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ScoTpress - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini, Janet Quarton & Shona

Hello, and welcome to this first issue of MAKE IT SO.

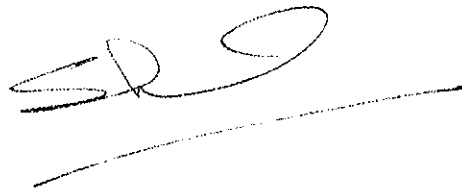
Considering how few episodes of THE NEXT GENERATION are available in this country so far, it is very encouraging that we have been sent enough stories to put out an issue so soon after announcing our plans for a TNG zine. Let's hope that this is the first of many.

The writers whose work appears here are Sandy Catchick, J A Clarke, Sheila Clark, Pam Crabtree, Lynette Muir, Tina Pole, and Karen Sparks; the zine features Karen's BECOMING FRIENDS. Pam's SMILE... got second place in the Midcon '88 fiction competition. The artists who produced work for this issue are Sue Jones, Ann Neilson and Sandra Finch. Pam is a new writer in our ranks, and we hope that this is the first story of many to come from her pen.

I must thank Valerie Piacentini for helping me with the plot for ACADEMY EXERCISE; the story began easily but refused to develop properly, and Valerie came up with a suggestion that allowed it to be finished.

We hope that more writers decide to try their hand at TNG stories. The new series is giving us new characters and relationships to explore; can we rise to the challenge?

Valerie and I may not - at least not yet; I'm in the middle of two long stories, one of them set in the Mirror universe, the other a total alternate universe one, and we're also trying to get on with Variations on a Theme 9 (but don't hold your breath).



Our policy for MAKE IT SO (or for any novel-length TNG story) is much the same as our policy for ENTERPRISE - LOG ENTRIES; no stories about the crews of other ships (ie where all the characters are of the writer's invention) and no stories concerning the death of the main characters (apart from Yar, of course). Submissions - fiction, poetry and artwork - can be sent to either

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ADMISSION

by

Sandy Catchick

The corridor was cold and draughty. His sensors analysed the fact and yet he knew that neither should he feel cold nor could the exterior temperature recorded explain the frozen feeling he experienced. Was this akin to the icy feeling in the pit of the stomach that Humans described as the precursor to facing action or danger? If so, then he should welcome it, for it meant that some part of him at least was responding in a human manner.

The chair on which he sat was wooden. Without conscious thought his circuits provided him with the information that it was made of solid oak, approximately 200 years old. The carving was intricate. Although the age of the wood was too young to make it an original, the chair was obviously patterned on the work of the old Earth craftsman Grinling Gibbons. The corridor was also decorated with dark oak panelling, brightened only slightly by oil paintings. All the gold framed paintings were head and shoulders only views of aging men - every one bearing the mark of distinction. The legend beneath each showed that they had all been previous principals of this great institution - Starfleet Academy.

At that moment the great door swung open. Looking incongruous in such distinguished and historic surroundings, a very young cadet stepped out into the corridor. "The admissions panel will see you now... uh... Mr. Data," said the cadet hesitantly, his eyes never leaving Data as though he were studying a zoo specimen. Data concluded, correctly, that the young man had been informed that he was an android. So be it. If it was necessary to survive four years as an experimental subject in order to graduate from Starfleet Academy as a fully fledged Science Officer who had won his right to serve in the Fleet, then that was a small sacrifice. The years ahead of excitement and the potential to gain great knowledge would be worth waiting for. Time, after all, meant little to an android. Data had another reason for wishing to join Starfleet; one he was less willing to admit, even to himself.

The members of the admissions board were all seated when Data followed the young man into the interview room. No one stood at his entry. Data was unsure of how to proceed and stopped just inside the door where he could study the panel members. They seemed to look right back at him, until the Chairman said gently, "Sit down, Mr. Data."

There was a chair placed facing the interview panel, so Data sat. The man continued, "Let me explain the purpose of this interview, so we are *all* sure why we are here." His tonal emphasis on the word 'all' was not lost on Data, and the Chairman enforced it by glaring in the direction of each of his companions in turn. Data could only reach one conclusion - the Chairman was the only panel member who considered his application valid.

The Chairman - a middle aged man with very pale blue eyes and hair already turned grey - continued. "This Board meets to decide if a candidate has the right motivation, temperament and leadership qualities to become a Starfleet Officer and to uphold the principles that the United Federation of Planets stands for. Your marks in the

IQ, general knowledge and physical training tests are all pass marks - in fact, they are well above average, Mr. Data. Alone, however, they are not enough to make a good Starfleet Officer. Tell me, Mr. Data, what qualities do you possess that make you think you will make a good officer?"

Data hesitated. What use was his fantastic memory, his ability to calculate or his phenomenal strength if none of them could help him in a situation like this? He possessed the collective memories of over a hundred Human colonists, together with a need to serve Humans and an insatiable desire to understand Human ways. Above all, he had a longing to belong, to be accepted as he was, for what he was, but as a part of a greater whole. Starfleet held that possibility for him, reportedly unbiased as to race or origin, so long as Federation creeds were upheld and adhered to. Yet how did he explain that to the Admissions Board? His brain searched circuit after circuit at an incredible speed until he finally found some words to express a portion of what he felt.

"Permission to speak openly?" he asked.

The Chairman nodded.

"I am an android, sir. I do not understand Human emotions or actions but I am willing and quick to learn. I remember every fact I am exposed to. It is my greatest desire to expand on my present knowledge, to learn everything I can about Humans and to serve them to the best of my ability. I believe I can best serve them in space, where my store of knowledge will be of most use, and where the people I serve with, Human and alien alike, will be willing to accept me as a fellow officer, for what I am, because their minds are open and they are not afraid of the unknown."

Data stopped suddenly, realising that he had given away more than he intended. More than anything he wanted to be Human, to be accepted by Humans, to be needed by Humans and to fulfil the needs of Humans.

Surprisingly, the Chairman smiled at him encouragingly and added, "Well said, Mr. Data."

Data's pale facial features could not respond as a Human's would, but inside, a warm glow began to replace the fingers of ice he had experienced since waiting in the corridor. That warmth sustained him as he came under attack from the man on the Chairman's left.

"You freely admit that you are an android, Mr. Data?" queried the blond haired man with eyes of steel grey - cold, forbidding eyes.

"Yes, sir," came Data's unhesitating reply. Truth was also an ingrained part of him.

"Then I submit Mr. Data has no place in Starfleet Academy," declared the man unfeelingly.

"Why? Because he is a machine?" asked the Chairman, seeking clarification.

"Dammit, yes!" shouted the blond man. "What is Starfleet coming to if he has to have machines as serving officers? Computers on starships, yes, that's different. But by his own admission he

doesn't understand Human emotions or actions. How would you like to serve under a cold, unfeeling machine?"

"Yes, I am cold. Cold to the touch," said Data evenly. "But I am not an ordinary machine, sir. I am an android, made in Human form, with Human memories and some, although not all, Human feelings. I do not understand humour, but I do understand sadness." And in his own mind, he added, *and loneliness*. "You accept computers on starships, sir. Well, I wish to be an android on a starship. My Human form makes it possible for me to serve with Humans and I believe I will be able to make a greater contribution than a standard computer."

The Chairman broke in on Data's behalf. "Besides, Craig, we gladly accept Vulcans in Starfleet and they never admit to emotions or feelings. I seem to remember your calling a certain Vulcan a computerised encyclopedia when he got a mark of 100% in your finals paper."

Craig laughed in spite of himself, the action relaxing the cold planes of his face. Data stared at him, not understanding the humour. That was not lost on the Board.

The female member of the Board spoke for the first time, surprisingly coming in on Data's side of the argument. "We are all machines, Craig. The Human body is a wonderful machine with many recuperative powers. Food and water provide our energy. Without them we would die as easily as if our power were switched off. The fact that we don't yet understand ourselves as well as we understand mechanical machines is just a testimony to the long way we have to go to understand even our own part of the world. We're just biological machines - and pretty efficient ones too. Look at the Human hand - the mechanics are so advanced that we have yet to succeed in imitating its movements in a machine twice its size. But the principles are the same, are they not?"

"Quite correct," supplied Data, believing the question to be aimed at him. "Mechanics is a subject I find most interesting. The mechanics involved in the simple Human action of lifting a knife and fork are most intricate. If you take the elbow as the fulcrum and measure - "

"Thank you, Mr. Data," interrupted the Chairman. "Man or machine is not the issue here," he added very firmly. "As I stated at the outset, this Board has to decide if Mr. Data has the motivation, temperament and leadership qualities to become a Starfleet officer and uphold the principles of the Federation."

"I think Mr. Data has demonstrated the first two qualities in our conversation so far," said the lady easily. "What about leadership qualities, Mr. Data?"

Data searched his databanks. *Leader - the principle upward-growing shoot or a tree; a horse in a front place in a team; a tendon; a translucent connection between a fishing line and bait; a line of dots to guide the eye; the principle wheel in any machinery; one who leads or goes first; a chief; the head of a party of expedition...* The infinitesimal time it took would have been unnoticed by the Panel, except that Data appeared to withdraw from them for a fraction of a second. Finally he replied, "I have no experience of leadership, but all my life I believe I have been first to try a great many things. I am, for example, the first android to apply to Starfleet Academy. If you accept my

application, at the end of four years I will be the first android to serve on a Starfleet vessel. I would hope to learn Human leadership customs as I progress through the Academy."

A few further questions were asked, but these were easy for Data to answer as they were matters of fact. Before long he was shaking hands with each Panel member in turn - another Human custom, but one he had quickly learned to respond to. Then the cadet was showing him out of the interview room. He walked the length of the corridor without conscious recognition of it. It was with almost Human relief that he found himself back in the open air.

* * * * *

Three days later Data was summoned before the Interview Panel for a second time. He did not know that this was customary, and so the butterflies he had experienced on his first visit re-appeared. Again a part of him welcomed them as a Human reaction.

A different cadet, this time a Klingon of indeterminate age, ushered him into the same interview room. The Klingon didn't spare him a second glance and Data took this as an indication that he had failed. With a heavy heart he followed the man into the room.

The same Chairman of the panel indicated that he should sit in the same chair. Data did so, meeting the eyes of his adversaries, as he now saw them, straight on. The Chairman handed him a sealed envelope. Data thanked him, as was Human custom as a mere courtesy. He had never felt less like thanking anyone in his life. Feeling crushed, he sat and held the envelope unopened.

The Chairman looked at him expectantly, and Data realised that he was meant to open the envelope in front of the Panel. This seemed to be an added torment, but Data complied with custom and carefully opened the envelope, taking out the single sheet of paper inside.

He read it slowly. Then he read it again. The paper read:

ADMISSION

Starfleet Academy admits Mr. Data to the ranks of its cadets and expects him to report to the facilities based at San Francisco, Earth, on Stardate 40078 at 1000 hours precisely.

Cadet training will last for a period of four years. At the end of this time, should Mr. Data be successful in passing all stages of Fleet training, Mr. Data will graduate as a fully fledged Ensign and will be posted to a Starfleet Base or Vessel in line with his aptitudes.

Data stared at it for a long moment, not even seeing the writing in his excitement. That single page opened up untold doors for him. He could not believe it.

The Panel seemed to understand. Captains Craig Kristianstad and Lorna Menzies congratulated him and shook his hand. The Chairman, Admiral Kevin Buchanan, shook his hand and then, inexplicably, brought himself round to Data's side of the table.

"Let me escort you out," he said in his definite, commanding manner, shooing away the Klingon who had appeared as if by magic.

As he followed Data to the door, however, he lowered his voice to a whisper that only Data, with his sensitive hearing, could pick up. "Don't give up your dream, Mr. Data," he said.

Data stared at him, incomprehension showing clearly in his stance and demeanour.

The Admiral explained. "You are more Human than you admit, Mr. Data. It was quite clear to me at our first meeting that the stars mean more to you than you will admit to. Somewhere out there is your destiny and your home. If you work hard and search diligently, you will find both. When you find the right starship and the right crew, you will have more than even you can imagine. I know, Mr. Data - I have seen it all before; the privilege of serving on a starship itself. I just wish I was young enough to continue sharing it. Keep that dream alive, Mr. Data. Among the stars you will find people with the same dream - to boldly go where no man has gone before - and when you find them you will find friendship and a home. That is your destiny, Mr. Data. Never lose sight of it, and don't give up until you find it."

To Data's surprise the Admiral's eyes glistened with unshed tears. Then he reasserted control and clasped Data's hand in a strong handshake. "Welcome to Starfleet, Mr. Data," he said aloud as he turned back to his fellow Panel members.

Data's "Thank you" was all he could manage through the whirling thoughts in his brain, but he could tell from the handshake that the Admiral understood. With renewed faith in the Human race and with a clear path to follow, Data took his first step to becoming a serving Starfleet officer.

Somewhere out there, in the far reaches of space and among the infinite number of stars, he would find his destiny.



PINOCCHIO

Are you sure it's Human you want to be,
Pinocchio?
Already you touch and hear and see;
Why seek to know
Of wrath and hatred, bitterness, death?
You've surely the better part -
With micro circuits instead of bowels
And a power pack for a heart.

In the future, they said, we'll learn to love,
And that future is now the past.
Can the Next Generation benefit from
The lessons not learned by the last?
You want to love and feel, you say,
For that is the Human's call?
But the greatest love was the Vulcan's way -
He called it logical.

Be wary, android; Rayna said, 'I love',
With her first, last, Human breath,
She learned to feel as Humans do
But the price she paid was death.

ACADEMY EXERCISE

by

Sheila Clark

Ask the male students at Starfleet Academy to name their least favourite subject and at least ninety out of every hundred will say "Survival".

Ask the female students the same question and probably ninety nine out of every hundred will give the same answer. The only reason it is not a unanimous 100% is the presence of a handful of students, most of whom plan to go into Security, who happen to be as interested in athletic pursuits as academic ones - if not more interested.

Indeed, physical education of any kind was not liked, especially by the women, but most students did reluctantly accept the need for it; in the enclosed environment of a starship or even many starbases there was no other method of exercising. But Survival? Those of the first year cadets who were wanting a career in navigation or engineering knew that their chances of seeing alien planets was almost non-existent. Their lives would be spent in space, their planetfalls on civilised shore leave planets! What need did they have for Survival? Security would need it, yes - but for anyone else?

The authorities knew - of course - that the subject was unpopular - it always had been. But what had never been publicised was that occasionally - very, very occasionally - in the past (and even more rarely in the present) ships had been damaged, their crews left with no option but to land on the nearest available planet, to survive as best they might without the advantages that modern technology could give them until rescue came; and on one occasion, in the very early days of spaceflight, rescue had not come for over twenty years, and then only by chance; and by that time most of the crew had resigned themselves to life on what was, fortunately, a not-too-hostile world, and had established what the Federation realised had to be accepted as a colony. So Starfleet Academy continued to include Survival as a compulsory subject.

They might have to attend the lectures, but no power on earth served to make many of the first year cadets listen. The athletic ones listened, but found that they often knew a lot of the basics. The conscientious ones listened, even when they didn't feel that the subject was applicable to them, and some of what they heard stuck in their minds for Lt. Yde knew his subject and was, if they would only admit it, very interesting. But many of them did not listen - indeed, many of them deliberately missed the lectures, once they discovered that Yde, unlike many of the Academy staff, made no attempt to track down absentees - trusting to luck and an evening spent glancing over the notes of a conscientious friend to get them a passing grade at the exams - until the date for the first exams arrived.

The shock came when they discovered that the Survival exam was not, as they had fondly supposed, a written one, but a practical one. Their lecturer, who had appeared oblivious of the lack of interest, now showed himself to be the possessor of a streak of what the absentee cadets could only call sadism; the cadets who attended

the lectures preferred to call it a sense of humour, while admitting that it was indeed sadistic. The last lecture before the exams was given to the handful of first year students who attended regularly and was composed of a number of tips calculated to help them pass. The absentees, on the other hand, simply found an unsigned note in with their mail the next day, telling them to report to the main hall at ten hundred hours that morning. And in the hall they found Lt. Yde - and beside him the Principal. The students were informed that they were to be beamed to one of the orbiting space stations and from there beamed down to somewhere on Earth. They were to treat the planet as a Prime Directive world - they must avoid being seen by any inhabitant, and they had three days to find their way to the nearest police station. To help them they would each be given three maps; one was of the area where they were, the other two were of areas with a similar geography but would be of no guidance whatsoever. They could travel singly or in pairs - but nobody would be allowed to team up with a student who had attended the lectures. Indeed, that would be impossible, for those students had already left.

Meanwhile, the conscientious students had been beamed down a little earlier.

Jean-Luc Picard looked down at the snow, into which his feet had sunk a couple of inches, then glanced round, his eyes opening rather wide as he realised that he and his companion had been landed within two or three metres of a sheer precipice which dropped down to a small lake that was below the snowline. Beyond it the ground sloped gently down towards some trees. In the distance he could see snow-topped hills. Beside them were the rucksacks they had packed with what they considered survival necessities, and, beside them, two ice axes that they had not included. He glanced at his companion. "What do you think, Jack?"

Jack Crusher frowned. "I think it looks faintly familiar. It reminds me of a mountain my brother and I climbed three or four years ago." He looked at the distant hills, trying to assess how far he and his companion were from them, his eyes eventually settling on a hill whose summit was little below them. "Yes! That hill over there..."

Picard followed Crusher's pointing finger. "What of it?"

Crusher grinned. "It's called Little Pap. We're in Scotland, on top of Lochnagar. That's a real bit of luck - "

"Maybe not," Picard commented. "I doubt he would be so blatant as to send anyone to his home area, but I think Yde is pulling out all the stops to swing things so that the students who paid attention to the course have every opportunity of passing. Remember - he asked us, right at the beginning, if any of us had orienteering experience? If I remember, you said then that you'd had at least one walking holiday in Scotland that included route-finding."

"So I did." Crusher thought about it for a moment. "Yes - he did push a bit to find out where I'd been, too... You could be right, Jean-Luc. Let's see - Howard Sulley said he'd climbed in the Alps - we can check with him. If that's where he ended up - "

"We can be pretty sure Yde cheated - this time - to give us the best possible chance. I wonder where he will send the others?"

"I doubt it'd matter. They could be beamed down in the middle of Central Park and still fail - because they aren't even going to know how to keep themselves warm at night."

"That's true," Picard admitted. He dug into his pack for the three maps they had been given. "This one is Norway... Here's Scotland. Where are we?"

Crusher studied the map for a moment, then pointed. "Here. Lochnagar. There's Little Pap. The direct path down passes on this side of it."

Picard peered at the map. "Where's the nearest town? Or at least the nearest place that'll have a police station?"

Crusher nibbled his lower lip. "Probably Braemar. It's to the north-west, and it's all empty territory between here and there."

"Probably?"

"We're about midway between Braemar and Ballater, which is a little bigger." He indicated the two places on the map.

"There seems to be a track leading towards Ballater," Picard said slowly. "All right, we'll head for there."

Crusher grinned. "We don't have to worry too much about anyone seeing us. This is all pretty deserted countryside; a few climbers and walkers, perhaps a shepherd or two... I know we're meant to avoid being seen if possible, but we can pass ourselves off as walkers easily enough."

Picard looked round the deserted landscape again, just as a lone climber appeared round a bend a few metres away from them.

"Afternoon," he grunted as he passed, clearly intent on reaching the summit.

They nodded a polite response, then as the climber passed out of earshot Picard commented, almost in a whisper, "You know, Jack, I've been thinking. Yde may be giving us an advantage this time, but I suspect he may have set a trap or two as well, to see if we have been paying attention as well as attending lectures. With that in mind, that track looks just a little too inviting. Is there an alternative route?"

"Yes. That path goes down to one end of a lake. If we go down this way, we come out at the other end of the same lake."

Picard scowled at the map. "Still too obvious. We still have to follow a road after that. Suppose we ignored both Braemar and Ballater; where else could we go?"

Crusher looked down at the map. "Kirriemuir. It's not on this map. But you're talking about - oh, fifteen miles of road to get to it, too."

"And Yde did say we should report to the nearest police station... so that does rather limit us to Braemar or Ballater. The road to Ballater is the most obvious... so I think we should head for Braemar."

"It'll be rough going, there's no direct track."

"We have three days. We should not need that long, but I think we would be better to take two days and avoid the traps than aim to do it in one day and be caught."

"Well, when you put it that way... "

Picard looked at the sky again, frowning. It was just beginning to cloud over from the east; a three-quarter full moon was climbing towards the zenith. "Jack - it was early morning when we left - very early morning. But the sun is setting."

"We're eight hours ahead of Academy time here."

"Ahead? So we have last night to live again?"

"You could put it that way."

Picard grunted as he looked over the barely-dimming landscape. "Jack - that climber is still sitting at the summit."

"Huh? I'd expect him to be heading down again - it's getting late."

"I know."

"What's in your mind?"

"Might he be the first trap?"

"What do you mean?"

"Prime directive, Jack; remain unseen by the natives. And what has the Academy done?"

Crusher's eyes widened. "Beamed us down close to someone they must have known was there."

"Yes." Picard passed a thoughtful hand over his mouth. "How long before it's dark?"

"Here, at this time of year? Possibly an hour. But the moon'll give us quite a lot of light for at least another six hours."

"Unless it clouds over." Picard indicated the eastern horizon.

"I don't think they'd have sent us somewhere like this if the weather forecast was bad."

Picard nodded his acceptance of the comment. "We don't want to lose any of the daylight, though," he decided. He gazed at the map for a moment longer. "The direct route to Braemar would be to follow the path down to here, then cut across that way - " he pointed across towards the distant trees. "On the other hand... If that climber is a trap, we want to lose him if we can. Could we lose him by going that way?"

His more experienced friend turned his attention back to the map for a minute. Then he shook his head. "No. But we could lose him if we took the long way round."

Picard glanced at him.

"We go down this way, as if we'd decided to head for Ballater. There's bound to be somewhere we can hide to lose him if he follows us, even if it's among the trees here." He pointed. "Of course, if he doesn't follow us, there's no problem.

"Then we go up the track here on to the high ground again. We cut across Broad Cairn here towards Tolmount, and drop down again here, to Callater, just before we reach it, and approach Braemar from the south." He began to fold the map, thrust it into his pocket and slung one of the packs onto one shoulder, then, picking up one of the ice axes he marched off in a south-easterly direction, towards a dip in the plateau. Picard took a moment to put the second pack on properly, took the other axe, and followed.

After a couple of minutes, Crusher glanced back and paused for Picard to fall into step. "He's following us. It could be chance, but maybe not."

They set a fairly fast pace for the snow was bearing well and the slope not too steep at first, but after a while they left the snow behind and the path got steeper and very uneven, treacherous in the fast-dimming light. Ahead of them they could see the moonlight shining on the water of a long, narrow lake.

After a while, with daylight gone and only the moon lighting their way, Crusher glanced back. "Quick - into the heather! Lie flat!" he hissed, and they dived off the track behind a heathery hummock and lay still, heads down so that the white of their faces would not betray them.

Two or three minutes passed before they heard the thud of footsteps that passed them without hesitation. Crusher waited another minute before he looked up. The dark figure was still visible - just - heading on downhill.

They waited for fully ten minutes before carrying on. As they reached the bottom of the hill, Crusher pointed. They could see the moving shape dark in the moonlight, heading unhesitatingly round the end of the lake.

They followed until they came to the foot of the track that would take them back onto the plateau on the other side of the lake, and set off up it.

It was a long, hard slog. Both men were reasonably fit, but the steady climb was tiring and they were glad when they reached the top.

Once there they paused for a breather. Crusher glanced round and without consulting his compass indicated confidently, "That way."

Picard nodded, and they set off again. It was pleasant walking in the clear moonlight across what was a good firm surface; and although it was cold, it was not uncomfortably cold.

They had not gone far when the moonlight suddenly faded. Picard looked up. A cloud had covered the moon. They could still see quite well, however; what light there was was enhanced by the whiteness of the snow, and their pace hardly slackened. The cloud drifted away and the moon shone clear again, but they could see that it was only the first of many; the clouds were no longer hugging the horizon but spreading across the entire sky.

They found themselves on top of a rise, almost without realising that they had been climbing. This time Crusher took a compass reading before heading down the other side towards another high point two or three miles away. Suddenly a gust of wind caught them as the moon was once again covered, and with it came some flakes of snow. They stopped and looked at each other in the falling light as the wind gained in strength and the falling snow whirled past them, thicker and faster.

"What's the quickest way to low ground?" Picard asked. "Never mind Braemar - we have to get off this plateau."

Crusher shook his head. "There's no short cut from here. Half an hour ago we could have dropped off the eastern side of the plateau; now we're at a point where it's as easy to go on as turn aside."

"Can we follow our route in these conditions?" Picard asked grimly.

"No. We'll have to dig in and wait for daylight."

Picard peered round. "Over there - there's already a sort of space beside that boulder."

They stumbled over to where the swirling wind had indeed left a narrow gap between a huge boulder and a neighbouring snowdrift. Using their ice axes they dug into the drift, hacking out blocks of frozen snow which they used to build walls between the drift and the boulder. There was a gap left at the top, but both men knew that they would need to leave an air hole.

Inside the snow hole, Picard switched on his torch, and in its light they unpacked their rucksacks. The empty packs were deep, and they thrust their legs into them, pulling the top flaps around their waists; then they sat, leaning back against the cold snow wall of their refuge. Crusher broke a slab of chocolate in two and handed half to his friend, who took it with a nod of thanks.

It was draughty at first in the hole, but slowly the draught lessened and they realised that their air hole was being covered by drifting snow; and as the draught lessened they gradually felt themselves becoming warmer as their body heat, trapped in the enclosed space, raised the air temperature.

Neither felt particularly tired, and they talked spasmodically about their plight. A lot would depend on how long the storm continued; but they had, they decided, a good chance of surviving unscathed. And of course a rescue party would probably be out looking for them as soon as it was realised that they had run into such adverse conditions. This was, after all, a test - the first of the course; not the real thing.

But Picard, although he said nothing, remained uncomfortably aware that they had left the most direct route to safety; a search would in all probability concentrate on the territory north and possibly east of where they were.

Lazlo Zinkin was about half way along the path that bordered the narrow lake when he finally admitted himself that he had lost the two men he was supposed to be following. They must have been

suspicious of his presence, though he was quite sure he had done nothing to lead them to realise that there was anything untoward in his being there. Just how had Yde expected him to remain unseen up there on that barren plateau? He had had no choice but to try to remain invisible through being completely visible.

Even following them down the unexpected route they had taken could have been chance; he was sure that in his first year he would not have suspected a chance climber in an area where climbers were quite common.

He sat on a convenient rock for a few minutes, thinking back.

Yes - they must have dodged him just about the foot of the hill. The path there had wound round boulders and there were places there where they had definitely been out of sight for several minutes. He had assumed that he knew the route they had taken, and been completely fooled by them.

A cloud covered the moon and he glanced up, noting without alarm the way the clouds were beginning to mass. Even through a fairly thick bank of clouds a nearly full moon would give some light. They would be all right.

As for himself - set to follow the 'beginners', to make sure they did not get into trouble, as part of his third year test - he had definitely failed, and might as well admit it.

He touched his communicator. "Zinkin to base."

"Base here. Report." It was Yde's voice.

"Sir, I've lost Picard and Crusher. They must have suspected something; on reflection, I think they dodged me nearly an hour ago. I'll carry on for a while just in case they're still ahead of me, but I'm certain they're not."

"Behind you?"

"I can't see anyone moving, and I can see back along the track for a good long way."

"All right. Exactly where are you?"

"They came off the mountain by a track that led to the wrong end of the lake. I'm about half way along the side of the lake, heading for the road."

"Go on to the road, and report in again from there."

"Yes, sir."

At the base, Yde grinned cheerfully at the communications officer, who was an old friend. Lamming grinned back, but said, "Your man sounded a bit down."

"It won't do Zinkin any harm to fail; it may cut him back down to size. He's been getting too cocky lately."

Zinkin was still some way from the road when the moon disappeared again and the first flakes of snow fell. The wind was picking up, too; and as the snow whirled round him he quickly realised that conditions on the plateau would be becoming extremely

difficult, and activated his communicator again.

"Zinkin to base. Sir, there's a blizzard blowing up."

Yde heard the urgency in the cadet's voice and glanced at Lamming. "Check the weather updates for the British Isles," he muttered. "I'll be in the transporter room." Lamming nodded and Yde raised his voice. "Transporter - lock on to Cadet Zinkin's co-ordinates and energise." He left the communications room, moving briskly.

In the transporter room, he found Zinkin still covered with now-melting snow, and decided that the third year cadet had not been exaggerating the conditions. He reached over to flick on the intercom on the transporter console.

"Yde to operations room. Scan a radius of ten kilometres around co-ordinates 41 - 26/81, and inform the transporter room the minute you find anyone."

"Aye, sir."

Yde turned back to Zinkin. "Report, Mr. Zinkin."

The cadet gave a helpless shrug. "It was impossible to avoid letting them see me - the top of that mountain is an almost completely featureless plateau - so I pretended to be a climber and went past them to the summit. I waited there until they had committed themselves to a route, then I followed them. By that time the light was fading, but there was enough moonlight to give some visibility. But the path they took - towards the bottom of it I couldn't keep them completely in sight, and I think that's where I lost them. I don't know whether they were suspicious and hid until I passed them or whether they just took a different route from the one I expected them to take at a point when they were out of my sight - there is an alternative path that goes onto the high ground again." He wiped some melted snow away from his eyes. "It was getting pretty rough on the low ground, sir; on the plateau... "

Yde nodded acknowledgement as the intercom buzzed. "Yde here."

"We can't pick out any definite readings at the co-ordinates you gave us, sir. The weather conditions are extremely bad and the sensor pattern is breaking up."

"Very well. Keep trying."

"I'm sorry, sir," Zinkin said miserably.

Yde shook his head and said quietly. "They had their instructions too; it's not your fault if they took them a little too literally."

It was nearly twenty four hours before the operations room reported that the blizzard was easing. During that time two of the conscientious first year groups had reported back, their members somewhat shamefaced that they had not thought to shake off the casual 'native' they had seen; and eight of the 'absentee' first year cadets had run into trouble and had had to be helped by the third year cadets assigned to follow them. Nothing had been heard of the others, but Yde was not worried about them - yet, for the

experienced cadets had not reported any difficulty. He was worried about Picard and Crusher; it had been no part of his intention to endanger any of his students.

Several more hours passed, during which another pair of cadets had to be bailed out of trouble. "Sensor readings are now coming in true, sir," the duty lieutenant in the operations room reported. "Scanning the area in question."

"Lieutenant - you could be looking for bodies." Yde hoped it was not so, but he could not ignore the possibility.

"Aye, sir."

There was a lengthy silence before the intercom clicked into life. "No readings inside the designated area, sir... alive or dead."

Inside the snow hole, the hours dragged past. The temperature rose until it was surprisingly comfortable, and both men dozed for a while, but their cramped positions in the small hole did not encourage relaxation. After a while, Crusher poked the shaft of his ice axe up through the snow roof close to the boulder and a sudden draught blew in for a moment, replenishing their fresh air, and bringing some flakes of snow with it; but the hole quickly covered over again. They ate some more chocolate and talked spasmodically, and every hour opened up their air hole again. As a result, they realised that the blizzard was blowing over almost as soon as it did.

"What do you think, Jack?" Picard asked. "Dare we go on?"

"I think we can," Crusher replied. "It'll be harder going with all this fresh snow, but if we're where I think we are, we should be going downhill soon."

They wriggled out of their rucksacks, pushed the emergency gear back into them, and fought their way out of their refuge. It was daylight; the clouds were blowing away, revealing blue sky and a red sun rising in the east.

"I wonder how that climber got on?" Picard said as Crusher took a quick compass reading.

"It probably wasn't as bad on the low ground. Come on." Crusher set off, sinking knee-deep in the snow as he went.

They took turns breaking the trail. After about an hour they found themselves looking down a fairly steep slope to another lake; the ground around it looked as if it had had very little snow.

"This side of the mountain was sheltered," Crusher commented. "It's a straightforward run down there," he added confidently. He sat down and allowed himself to slide, although he held his ice axe ready to stop himself should it be necessary. Picard hesitated for a moment, then followed suit, and in far less time than he would have expected, they reached the bottom.

There, the going was relatively easy; there was very little fresh snow and they strode out, making good time now that they had a firm surface underfoot. The path took them along the course of a

frozen stream for nearly an hour, then along the side of the lake, becoming a track as it left the water's edge; another hour found them at a road.

"Nearly there," Crusher said cheerfully. "We can't help being seen now if there's traffic on the road, but we can pass as climbers."

They started off up the road, but they had gone less than a kilometre when they felt themselves seized in a transporter beam. They materialised to find themselves facing a worried-looking Lt. Yde.

Yde took a deep, relieved breath as he saw for himself that both men were clearly fit and well. "You're all right," he said quietly.

"Yes, sir," Picard replied.

"What happened? Report."

"When the blizzard blew up we dug a snow hole, sir. Once the weather cleared, we carried on."

"Yes, of course," Yde commented.

The first Survival class of the new term saw a full complement of first year students attending. Lt. Yde looked round the intent, mostly slightly cowed faces, and smiled pleasantly.

"First of all, you will find your marks for last term's test in the envelopes I am about to hand out," he said. "I think I don't need to tell you that most of you failed completely, nor need I go into details here; you will find those with your reports. Several passed with varying degrees of success; but the top marks go to Cadets Crusher and Picard, who, in accordance with their instructions to treat the planet as a Prime Directive world, managed to shake off the third year cadet assigned to follow them and make sure they did not run into difficulties, and then, when the weather changed unexpectedly, throwing them into an extremely dangerous situation, did all the correct things and were finally detected from the space station barely half an hour from finishing the test under their own steam.

"Mr. Crusher, your results... Mr. Picard... Mr. Ahmed... Mr. Sulley... "

Survival remained an unpopular subject... but it became a well-attended one...



DIPLOMACY

by

Tina Pole

The Captain shifted uncomfortably in his chair and fervently prayed that Counselor Troi would not request that he accompany her to the transporter room to meet their temporary guest.

"Something is troubling you, Captain?" she queried, picking up his agitation.

\Damn the woman, does she always have to be so receptive to my thoughts? "Just our being somewhat behind schedule, Counselor," he lied.

"Are you sure it isn't because of my mother coming aboard?"

Picard glanced sideways at his First Officer and caught Riker's bemused expression before turning his attention to the young woman on his other side.

"Of course not, Counselor, she is most welcome to visit us whenever the opportunity arises."

"But she was rather intimidating the last time you met her, Captain."

It was not something he really wanted to be reminded of. He could recall all too vividly the way she had dominated the proceedings on her previous visit, when they had been in orbit around Haven and he had almost had to perform a marriage ceremony for his Counselor and her fiancée.

"Transporter room three is standing by," Worf reported, breaking his train of thought and saving him the necessity of thinking of a suitable answer which wouldn't hurt the Counselor's feelings.

"I'd better get down there. If you'll excuse me, Captain."

"Of course, Deanna." He gave a small sigh of relief as he watched her disappear into the turbolift.

"You'll be holding a dinner in honour of our guest, I assume, Captain," Riker said in a voice that sounded a trifle too serious.

Why had the bridge suddenly taken on an ominous silence? Why were all eyes directed towards him - especially Data's.

"It did prove to be extremely interesting last time, sir," the android piped up.

"That was a special occasion," he quickly said. "I don't think such a function is necessary this time around. Now if you'll excuse me -" he rose to his feet - "I've some work to do in my ready room," and he quickly left the bridge.

Having successfully avoided Lwaxana Troi since she had come on board, the Captain became over-confident and ventured out, even if it was only as far as an observation deck lounge, and as fate would have it, especially when you are deliberately attempting to avoid a certain person... who should happen to be in that particular lounge but Lwaxana Troi.

"My dear Captain Picard... " and she came purposely walking towards him and slipped her arm through his before he could protest or conjure up an excuse to make a run for it. It was as if she had known he had been coming and had been deliberately waiting for him - but then, of course, with her being a Betazoid, anything was possible.

"I missed you at dinner tonight - they said you were busy."

"Ah, yes, that's right - as you can imagine, in this kind of job there's always some work to do," he said nervously, wondering if she was reading his thoughts and was aware of the true reasons he had avoided contact with her.

"Tut, tut! Captain, no need to be so nervous in my company. I won't eat you!"

Picard swallowed hard. There she was, patronising him again. Thank god there were just the two of them, and none of his crew was witness to this embarrassing scene.

"... I do have some respect for my daughter's feelings on how a Captain should be treated," she continued, indicating that she and Counselor Troi had discussed the subject. "Unfortunately, of course, that put paid to any personal liaison I may have attempted to make with you."

Picard inwardly sighed in relief and allowed himself to relax a little, though he was only too aware of her tight grip on his arm and her all too dominating presence.

"However, perhaps we could have dinner together tomorrow evening?"

He was back on the defensive again. "Well... ah... that depends."

"Of course, you're such a busy man... "

There followed a lengthy silence as the Captain racked his brains for a solution to his plight, terminating in his exclaiming aloud, "Data!" as a brilliant idea formed in his mind. "Mrs. Troi, I'm sure my Second Officer would be only too pleased to entertain you during his off duty period."

"Your *Second* Officer, Captain?" she queried, sounding not the least bit pleased at the prospect.

"Commander Data. He is a... unique being, a virtual mine of information," Picard said enthusiastically as he gently but firmly removed her arm from his and stabbed at his communicator insignia. "Commander Data, this is the Captain. Report immediately to the observation lounge."

Seconds later Data responded, "I'm on my way, sir."

Minutes later he walked through the door, curious as to why the Captain should summon him at this time of the ship's night.

"Mrs. Troi, Commander Data," Picard introduced them, rubbing his hands together in satisfaction as he spoke. "Mr. Data, I want you to escort and entertain our guest during your off duty periods."

"Of course, Captain, but - "

"But what?" Picard didn't like the element of hesitation in the android's voice.

"Officially I am always on duty, as I do not have any need for rest and recreation," he finished.

"I am aware of that fact, Mr. Data," Picard said, relieved that that was all that was bothering his Second Officer.

"However, since you have been under my command you have also indulged in taking off duty periods, haven't you?"

"Yes, Captain, but I use the time to pursue my study of Human behaviour."

"Then..." the Captain turned back to Lwaxana Troi... "here is an excellent opportunity for you to study."

"Captain, I must object," she said, seemingly quite shocked at the idea of her being an object of study.

The Captain, however, was quite prepared with his answer.

"As you must be aware, Mrs. Troi," he began, "Commander Data, as well as being an invaluable member of Starfleet, is also an android, and as such is constantly learning and adding information to his... er... data banks." He gave her his most engaging smile. "I would consider it an honour if you would indulge me by allowing him to learn from you."

"Well, as you put it so nicely, how could I possibly refuse."

The Captain quietly congratulated himself.

* * * * *

"... and that, Number One, is why Mr. Data is escorting Counselor Troi's mother in his off duty time," the Captain concluded from where he sat reclining in his chair, behind his desk, having filled his First Officer in with the relevant details.

"Captain, you've certainly got the art of diplomacy down to a fine art," Riker said as he caught the gleam of satisfaction in Picard's eye.

"Of course, Mr. Riker - it's one of my strongest weapons."

"I believe it is, sir," Riker agreed, having experienced the Captain's dealings with a variety of life forms over the months.

"Now if you'll excuse me..." Picard started as he leaned forward and swivelled the desk viewscreen towards him, intending to do some work. "I've got to..."

The door chime went and he gave Riker an exasperated look. "Now what?"

"Come!" Riker called on his behalf, and the door slid open to admit an extremely harassed-looking Deanna Troi.

"Counselor?"

"Captain, I must have a word with you in private."

Picard and Riker exchanged meaningful glances, with Riker taking the initiative to go back out onto the bridge. As the door slid closed behind him Deanna sat down opposite the Captain,

"It's my mother."

Picard retained his composure; the words he and Riker had just exchanged about diplomacy coming to mind. It wouldn't do to shatter his First Officer's illusions of him.

"Your mother," he said, with a note of resignation in his voice. "What's happened?"

"It's Data," was all she offered.

"Data? Is there a problem?"

"A problem!" she echoed. "It's a disaster! Captain, who on earth's idea was it to let Data into my mother's presence?"

"Well..." he began rather uncomfortably, wondering what the disaster could be.

"Never mind, sir. The problem is that..." She hesitated momentarily and then raced on, attempting to cover up her embarrassment. "My mother has discovered that he is fully functional, in *all* areas, and she's determined to marry him."

There was a stoney silence as the Captain digested this information, and then grasped his head in a gesture of hopelessness and softly muttered, "Damn!"

* * * * *

"Mrs. Troi," the Captain began, clasping his hands together and making a slight bow. "I believe we have a slight misunderstanding over my Second Officer, Commander Data."

"Misunderstanding? Not that I'm aware of, Captain."

Picard forced himself to give a benevolent smile, as well as attempting to project a feeling of good will towards her. Perhaps when this incident had been resolved he could retire to the holodeck and work off the negative feelings that were beginning to build up inside him.

"When I instructed Commander Data to... er... entertain you, I didn't foresee that he... er... he and you would take the meaning so literally."

"Oh, Deanna's been to see you!" she said, a touch of annoyance in her voice as she turned away from him and started pacing the living area of her guest quarters.

"She was most concerned that you would... er..." He was rapidly running out of diplomatic things to say.

"Would what, Captain? Oh, it's just Deanna and her usual disapproval of what I do. Wouldn't matter who I chose to marry. She'll never change, you know. Her father was just the same - oh, he loved me but disapproved so much of what I did, and... etc, etc..." The Captain found himself under a verbal assault as she got into her stride. He did attempt to interrupt several times, but she completely ignored him and rambled on.

"MRS. TROI!" his voice suddenly thundered above her chatter, stopping her in her tracks. "I've had enough of this!"

"Why, Captain - I was wondering how long it would take you to show me your true colours."

"Look here, I refuse to pussyfoot around with you any longer. There is no way that you can marry Commander Data!"

"But I had no intention of marrying Data."

"But you..." Now he really was at a loss for words.

"You shouldn't jump to conclusions, Captain. I may have said something along those lines, but then some people do take the meaning so literally."

* * * * *

Captain Picard stormed out of the turbolift onto the bridge. He wasn't at all surprised to find Counselor Troi absent, but then so was Data.

"Captain?" Riker queried very carefully as he practically threw himself down into his seat. This was one of the rare occasions that he had seen the Captain so openly angry. Usually he was extremely controlled in any situation, and his behaviour quite the reverse, keeping himself even more to himself than normally, and it was the quiet, authoritative voice you had to beware of.

"Where's Data?" Picard asked abruptly.

"Down in Engineering, sir," Worf reported quickly, while Lieutenant Geordi LaForge trod into dangerous waters by being unable to resist the invitation to make some kind of humorous quip.

"Decided the further away he was the better," he murmured.

"What was that?" Picard demanded.

"Er... nothing, sir, nothing important," Geordi mumbled, holding his breath momentarily as he waited for the Captain to come breathing a little closer down his neck.

"Humph!"

"Sir?" Riker stared at him in concern; it really wasn't in his nature to maintain such a prolonged outburst of anger.

"Sorry, Number One," he said as he visibly relaxed himself in the chair, and the rest of the bridge crew followed suite. "Afraid Lwaxana Troi got the better of me again - made me make a right fool

of myself in front of her."

"What precisely happened, Captain?" Riker asked, curious to know.

"Not here," Picard said quietly and gestured to the ready room. Riker didn't have to be told twice, but as soon as the Captain got up and made for it, he was close on his heels.

"I can't understand how Counselor Troi has such an abominable mother," he began, making Riker all the more intrigued as to what had passed. "She deliberately compromised Deanna by making her believe what she was saying was true, knowing that she would report the incident to me. She then led me a merry dance to see how far I would go before I lost my cool." He hesitated. "I lost my cool, Mr. Riker; perhaps the art of diplomacy isn't, after all, my strongest weapon."

"I would say that these were exceptional circumstances, Captain - however you haven't told me what she's done yet."

"I haven't?" Picard said, surprised. "No, I haven't, have I? She's definitely got me totally wound up. The crux of the matter was a report that Mrs. Troi had discovered that Mr. Data has everything that it takes, so to say, and that she was determined to marry him."

"I see, sir - and it was just a fabrication."

"Totally, and I jumped straight into the trap, feet first!"

"I don't know if you've considered this yet, Captain, but perhaps she was getting her own back on you," Riker said, watching the Captain's face for some reaction to this fact.

"Getting her own back?" He thought briefly, and then it dawned on him. "Of course, Mr. Riker. I, in so many words, fobbed her off with Mr. Data, didn't I?"

"Yes, Captain. She may not have appeared to be aware of that fact at the time, but she probably was."

"You know, I'm slowly coming to the conclusion that it would have been safer to have held some kind of unofficial dinner party - at least there would have been safety in numbers, and I couldn't have ended up making a bigger spectacle of myself that I've just done."

"It would have been more diplomatic, sir," Riker said, and then realised the significance of what he had actually said.

"No need to rub it in, Riker."

"Sorry, Captain, I didn't mean it in quite that way."

* * * * *

"Mrs. Troi," Picard acknowledged as the tall, dominating female swept into the transporter room with her valet in tow. "I trust our little... er... misunderstanding has now been resolved completely."

She smiled sweetly at him. "Of course, Captain, and it was very considerate of you to come and see me off."

"My pleasure," and he meant every word of it.

"I can see that. Well, goodbye, Deanna, I've enjoyed my short visit immensely."

"Goodbye, mother!" There was a note of finality in the words.

"Tut, tut! My child, you shouldn't think such awful things - nor you, Captain, really you - "

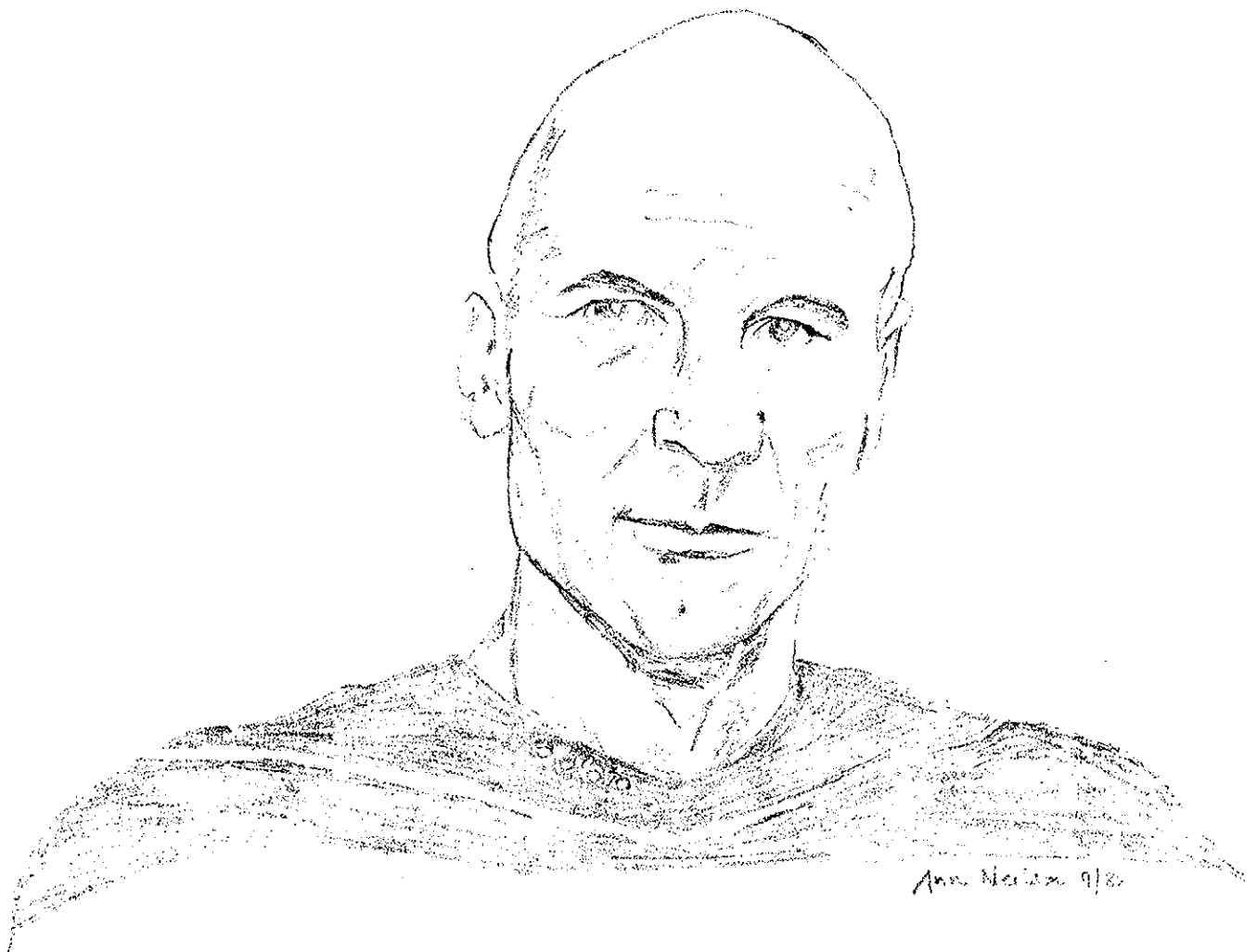
"Energize!" Picard ordered and she was whisked away before she could attempt to damage his personal credibility any further.

"I'm really sorry, Captain," Deanna said as they left the transporter room together. "She's not all bad though - it's her sense of humour."

"The subject is closed, Counselor, but promise me one thing."

"Sir?"

"Next time your mother comes to visit, give me adequate warning in advance so that I can be elsewhere!"



NIGHTMARE

by

J A Clarke

"Captain, I'm worried about Commander Riker."

Jean Luc Picard looked up at Dr. Beverly Crusher from where he was sitting behind his desk in the Captain's ready room.

"Worried? Why?" he asked, indicating that she should sit down.

"It's not anything I can definitely put my finger on," the Doctor replied, settling herself into the indicated chair. "But he seems... oh, I don't know... subdued... brooding... On a different wavelength?" Her voice indicated that she didn't know how to describe it.

Picard leaned his elbows on the table and steepled his fingers in silent contemplation. Had this been some other time, he would have called it 'a woman's hunch', probably about nothing, but on this occasion he had to admit there was... something in it.

"To be honest, I have noticed his... preoccupation." He took a deep breath and let it out sharply - a characteristic Crusher had come to recognise as a prelude to some form of speech that involved a decision. She was not to be disappointed. "We all have different ways of dealing with death, Doctor. Some, it affects more deeply than others. It could well be that Commander Riker is holding himself responsible for Lt. Yar's demise - "

" - But it's not his - "

" - I know... Correction: we know it's not his fault, but Number One was in command of the away team and therefore responsible for the lives of the members of that team. I am confident that this mood will pass. What he needs is time to think; time to reflect and to realise there was nothing he could have done to prevent the event."

"Don't you think someone ought to speak to him - give him some kind of support or alternative view point?"

"I think we should give him some more time before we go prying, Doctor. He's young; grief is a private thing - he must learn to handle it in his own way."

"Counselor Troi - "

"In no circumstances - you should realise that." He gave her the benefit of a cold, hard stare. "Give him another three or four days. If there is no improvement by then, I'll speak with him. Does that satisfy you, Doctor?"

"Yes, Captain. Thank you."

Picard watched her leave and sat back in his chair, thoughtfully. He seriously did hope his young second in command

could handle it, as he was none too sure of himself portraying the father/brother figure that Riker might need. He almost shuddered at the thought.

They had been right about one thing; Commander William Riker was troubled - very deeply so - but for a totally different reason.

It was true - the death of Tasha Yar on his away team had distressed him and he had almost welcomed the grief of her loss to divert his mind from pondering over the other 'thing'.

He admitted shamefully to himself that he had tried to wallow in this grief and guilt, but eventually it had diminished - after all, they had not worked together so very long, just over six months - and now his mind was drawn once again to the nightmare he seemed to be living.

'It' had been truly evil, even down to the blackness of its appearance. Riker had to admit it had been one of the most horrific experiences of his career so far and had really begun when that invisible 'claw' had clamped like a vice around his ankle and dragged him slowly towards that total blackness.

It had been the not knowing that had got to him; the possible feeling of drowning in that pitch-tar. As it turned out, it was worse than he had imagined.

There had been evil all around him; vile, degenerate, shameless; and as he had sunk deeper into the pitch, it had crawled up his body, inch by inch, clinging to him like a second skin, dragging him down, bombarding him with its very foulness.

He had briefly lost consciousness and woke shortly after in a blackness where no light penetrated. Riker found it totally disorientating and nauseating. There was no point of reference; no up or down; no left or right; no backwards or forwards. He was the only source of light; the good surrounded totally by evil - the eternal struggle, as always heavily one-sided.

It had talked to him in its deep, gravelly voice; lied to him about how his so-called friends had deserted him, how they had left him to his fate and what that fate would be - to die horribly, painfully, a lingering death. He would beg for release and would be denied it.

"I don't believe you!" he'd yelled.

It had laughed at him, sensing the beginnings of doubt; panic.

Riker's mind reflected briefly on the lessons of mind discipline Deanna Troi had given him when they had been close. He made use of them now. In answer to the threats, he envisioned a blazing mental thunderbolt and hurled it at the entity. Troi would have been pleased with his efforts.

It had been felt, and it had obviously hurt, for It retaliated by closing around him further, squeezing; forcing the very breath out of him. Riker tried not to breathe deeper to obtain air for his tortured lungs. To do so would mean actually inhaling the evil that surrounded him, leading to possible contamination.

His heart thudded painfully in his chest as the vice-like feeling tightened further, and mentally he writhed in agony.

"That is just a mere sample of what awaits you!" It hissed. "You cannot defeat me! You are one; I am of many!"

"Go to hell!" Riker had sent back with all the force he could muster.

"Hell?" It had asked. "Hell?" Forcibly It had read his mind - in a horrific mental rape - looking for the meaning of the word; making Riker scream in agony. "I *am* Hell!"

He tried to shut the entity out, to cut off the malevolent voice by clamping his hands over his ears, but he was totally immobile, and besides, the voice was within his mind.

It had gone on and on, beating away at his defences, mentally torturing him until he felt soiled, tarnished, unclean and - worst of all - until he started to believe it.

The lack of knowing plagued his mind. Had he been here minutes, hours, days? He had no way of knowing, or of finding out.

Finally, his mind unable to take any more, he had begun to lose consciousness, when suddenly he had been ejected from the blackness into the blinding light.

Riker felt himself heaving and spluttering for breath, still caked in the malignant pitch-tar which seemed to permeate his body.

"*Get it off me!*" he had mentally screamed.

Willing hands went to his aid; pulled him totally clear of the alien, cleared his air passages, touched him, reassured him.

"You're all right, Commander. We'll get you back to the ship." Had that been Beverly Crusher? He wasn't sure.

In fact, he wasn't aware of much more. They had beamed up to the ship and he had been lifted onto a med-trolley for the trip to sickbay. Flashing lights passed over his head; blurred figures hovered in and out of his line of vision.

"... Going... shock... 10cc... " a disembodied voice mumbled. "Commander... Will... hear me?"

A grey fog was hovering at the limits of his vision and then moved across to consume him completely.

He awoke suddenly as if from a nightmare, with a blinding headache, to find himself in the sickbay - alone. That was almost as frightening. The throb of the powerful engines tried to soothe him, but the brightness of the room hurt his eyes and made his head pound even more, yet he preferred it to the darkness.

Cautiously, he sat up, gripping the side of the bed tightly as the room began to spin in a most alarming fashion. Gradually, it began to slow down and when it finally stopped, Riker swung his legs over the side.

He was dressed in a sickbay gown (regular issue) and had been cleaned up. For that he was thankful, yet he still felt dirty and

in need of a shower, so he decided to head in the direction of his quarters.

The weakness came as an unexpected shock, catching him completely off balance. He collapsed in an undignified heap onto the floor, winding himself in the process, and lay gasping helplessly for breath.

Fortunately, Beverly Crusher had been cautious and set an alarm to ring should contact be broken between the patient and the bed sensors, as it was now.

The insistent beeping alerted her instantly and she rushed into the ward to find Riker clutching his side and attempting to get to his knees.

"Stay where you are, Commander!" she said authoritatively as she came over and knelt down beside him. "Don't panic, just try to breathe slowly - that's it. Good. Come on." With some difficulty she helped him back up onto the bed. "Now, where did you think you were going?"

"M-my quarters, for a shower and a change of clothes."

She watched him attempt to quench the shaking of his limbs.

"H-how come I feel so weak?"

"It's just the system reacting. I'll give you a boost." Crusher turned to a side shelf and retrieved a hypo that was lying in a tray. "I got this ready just in case."

Riker eyed it suspiciously. "What is it?"

"Just 20cc of good old-fashioned stokaline - guaranteed to put the colour back in your cheeks." She pressured the shot in. "Give it a few minutes to take effect."

"Thanks."

"Er... Will... How do you feel?"

"Weak - got a headache, that's all."

"Sure?"

"Yes, why?"

"Nothing - I'm just doing my job. After all, you are second in command."

"Yeah. I know. Sorry. It's this headache."

"Okay; when you get to your quarters, after you've had your shower, take these and go to bed."

"But - "

"But nothing. Do as you're told, or you'll finish up back here. I've already informed Captain Picard you'll not be fit for twenty four hours. Now go. And Will - if you feel off colour, or have trouble sleeping, any worries - let me know. It was a pretty horrific experience and I'm a good listener."

"Thanks, Doc. If I have any trouble, I'll let you know."

He stood up cautiously and finding his legs had decided to support him, left sickbay. He wouldn't bother Crusher with his thoughts, it was probably some form of delayed shock that just needed to get out of his system in some way.

Once safely in his quarters, he had almost scrubbed himself raw in an effort to get rid of that tarnished, soiled feeling. Afterwards, he did feel better, but a slight remnant of the feeling still lingered.

Sighing, he settled himself on his bunk, downed the pills as ordered and closed his eyes. Even after taking the pills, sleep was a long time coming, and for a while he didn't think he was going to get any at all, then without realising it he drifted off, a frown troubling the handsome features.

Asleep, his subconscious was released and free to play havoc with reality. It didn't take long for his mind to conjure up the creatures that only existed in nightmare situations, and every single one of them seemed intent on taking him apart.

The alleys were all dark, fog-filled, each hiding something in the shadows. Which way should he go? Which direction was the safe way home?

"None of them!" that evil voice hissed. "All are death!"

"Then I'll stay here."

"Will you now?"

There was a sound of something unearthly behind him. Riker broke out in a cold sweat.

"Why don't you take a look over your shoulder?" the gravelly voice suggested. "You've got a visitor!"

Something reached for his heart, and Riker cried out, jerking himself awake. He was shaking; the bunk cover clung to his perspiring body. His eyes fastened on the dim light and hung onto it like a drowning man would to a life raft.

There were shadows in his quarters; places where things could hide. There must not be any darkness. Riker turned the lights up and immediately felt better, but there would be no further sleep that night.

He reported for duty the following morning.

"Nice to have you back, Number One," Picard had said, smiling.

"Thank you, sir." It felt good to have people around him - so he wasn't alone.

That had been four days ago and he'd hardly slept a wink since. Every time he'd closed his eyes, the nightmares came back, so he decided to stay awake. Unfortunately it was beginning to show. There were dark circles under his eyes and lines of strain on the handsome features. Earlier in the day he had lost his temper

with Wesley Crusher when he had no cause to do so, and had told the boy to get out of his sight. Any minute now he was expecting an irate Beverly Crusher at his door, demanding an explanation - and an apology.

As he expected, the buzzer did go; but he was surprised to see Picard when the door to his quarters slid open.

"May I come in, Number One?"

"Captain." Riker stood back to allow him to enter.

"May I sit down?"

Riker nodded consent and looked on in amazement as Picard placed two glasses on his desk and poured two generous measures of brandy into them from a decanter he had been carrying.

"William?" It wasn't often Picard addressed him by his first name. Riker sat down opposite him and picked up the indicated glass. "It seems to me," his Captain continued, "I've been rather neglectful of my duties."

"Captain?"

Picard cleared his throat rather nervously. "Jean Luc off duty, William."

Riker's mouth dropped open and he made a visible effort to close it.

"We've a long journey ahead of us, filled with many adventures both dangerous and exhilarating. There will be sorrow, but there will also be joy. If this mission is to be successful, we must make a conscious effort to become a family unit - albeit a rather large one. That means keeping an eye out if one of our number is feeling low, or has some problem. It means lending a hand when needed; listening, understanding, problem solving - no matter how serious or trivial. In one word - caring."

Picard paused to take a sip of his drink.

"Right now, one of our family has trouble - "

" - Yes, I know. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have shouted at Wesley like that - "

"William, you are being deliberately obtuse. Let me finish. As I was saying... one of our family has trouble, but is keeping it to himself. His friends don't like to see him in such obvious pain." Picard looked down and studied his glass in contemplation, then looked into Riker's tired grey eyes. "Talk to me, William. Tell me what's wrong."

Riker's jaw tightened and he averted his eyes. The silence was almost deafening as the Captain waited for Riker to say something. Anything.

"Talk to me," he prompted again, softly.

The young Executive Officer cleared his throat self consciously. "I... I find it hard to talk, Cap - Jean Luc."

"Why?"

"You're my Commanding Officer, and a man I very much respect and... I guess... I'm also in awe of you; your reputation, your achievements."

"Forget them. Forget my rank. I'm here as a friend, here to listen and to help if I can. I'm sure that between us we can sort it out, whatever it is."

Riker fidgeted. "I... I..." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I'm afraid you'll find the whole thing so trivial that - "

"William, something that gives my Executive Officer sleepless nights and so obviously disturbs him is not trivial. So... talk to me."

Riker nodded. "Obviously, it was the last... encounter."

Picard nodded knowing, but said nothing.

"It began when that entity dragged me into its very soul. Captain - I've been in a lot of situations, but never anything as horrifying as that. It wasn't its appearance, but what it consisted of - just total evil; everything that is bad, malignant, foul. It enveloped me and tortured me - even, I feel, brainwashed me - made me start to doubt my friends, my shipmates, my family. It clung to me and I can't seem to wash it off, and now - " Riker shuddered to a halt and took a deep breath to calm himself down. "Now I feel like a five year old kid - afraid of the dark; afraid of the shadows because of what might be lurking there. To sleep means to bring them out into the open and I can't face them - not alone - and yet... oh God, I'm so tired..." He rubbed a hand wearily across his eyes. "But if I succumb to sleep, they'll be waiting."

"I used Tasha's death as an excuse to blot this out; but after the holodeck tape, and her words to me, the grief faded and I was left with no choice but to dwell on this."

He got up sharply and paced his quarters like a caged animal; tension visible in every movement.

"And yet, I know if I don't do something, I'll... I'll go crazy." His shoulders slumped and his head bowed. "You don't have to say anything - I know it's stupid."

"No, William, it's not." Picard placed his glass on the table, got up and went over to Riker to place a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "It's not stupid at all. Believe it or not, what you are going through is a normal reaction, but it can be conquered. All of us have something we fear. Any man - or woman - who says he is not afraid of anything - or has never known fear - is either a liar or a fool. Having said that, we must not let our fear get out of hand; it must be controlled, or better still, placed in perspective by being met face to face - with help if necessary."

"You must do this, William, if you want to keep your sanity. You must conquer these nightmares, by facing them; and - if you will permit me - I will stand with you; brace you, if required."

Riker turned slowly at this and looked at Picard with a mixture of amazement and awe. "Y-you'd do this, for me?" he queried.

"Don't act so surprised, William. I'm sure if the situation were reversed..." He let his voice trail off. "But come - finish your drink, and then I suggest you get your head down for some sleep. I shall remain here with you, don't worry."

Riker nodded slowly. He went back to the table and downed the rest of the brandy in one swift movement before moving to his bunk, where he sat down.

"Surely, Jean Luc, you've better things to do than to nursemaid me - "

"I have my trusty old novel, William. You're giving me a legitimate chance to sit down and read it."

Riker smiled for the first time and made himself comfortable. "Don't tell me - it's another private detective novel!"

"But of course! I'll read some to you, if you like, to help you relax."

"Thank you. Thank you very much."

Picard was as good as his word, and began to read the novel aloud. At first, Riker seemed determined to remain awake, to enjoy the story his Commanding Officer was reading in such an entertaining fashion, but his eyelids gradually grew heavier, and he finally succumbed to his body's needs.

Picard glanced briefly in his direction, and noticing he had lost his audience, stopped his narration. He nodded in satisfaction and continued to read to himself, ready to offer assistance though, should it be required.

During his long vigil, he glanced regularly at his sleeping friend, on the lookout for tell-tale signs. For the first couple of hours all was well, then Riker moaned slightly and shifted, as if uncomfortable.

Picard placed his novel on the floor and leaned over his charge. A fine film of perspiration stood out on his skin, and he seemed anxious. Gently, Picard placed a hand on his shoulder and spoke to him quietly.

"It's all right, William - they are merely harmless dreams and cannot hurt you. Shrug them off. Your friends are here with you." He repeated this and other words a number of times, hoping they would penetrate Riker's subconscious.

Meanwhile, his Executive Officer was once again surrounded by shadows and the grip around his heart tightened. *"Please, leave me alone!"* his mind screamed. *SOMETHING* loomed out of the shadows and he stepped back. He found himself holding a two-way conversation with the positive and negative sides of his mind. One was telling him there was nothing there, the other was determined to send him crazy. He was cornered and there was no way out.

Suddenly, he sensed someone at his shoulder. It was his Captain, and he was smiling.

"You're letting your imagination run riot again, William. Look again into the shadows and see - there is nothing there. Go on, I am here. Together we can defeat anything!" The voice spoke with

such conviction that Riker could not help but believe. So he did look into the shadows, through the fog.

He's right! There is nothing there! There's nothing there! he said finally, with confidence, and gradually the light grew and the mists dispersed to prove him right. *Thank you, Jean Luc. Thank you very much!*

Picard nodded in satisfaction as Riker settled down again. Keeping a lookout for the very first signs of trouble had made the job so very much easier. He was sure everything would be all right now, but decided to stay, just in case. He picked up his book and carried on reading until he too began to doze.

It was the thud of the book hitting the floor that woke Riker with a jump - and he was rather annoyed. He'd been having a great dream, in the company of a real sultry redhead who -

Realisation dawned. It was over! He looked at Picard who appeared most uncomfortable in his chair, and then glanced at the chronometer. He had been asleep seven hours!

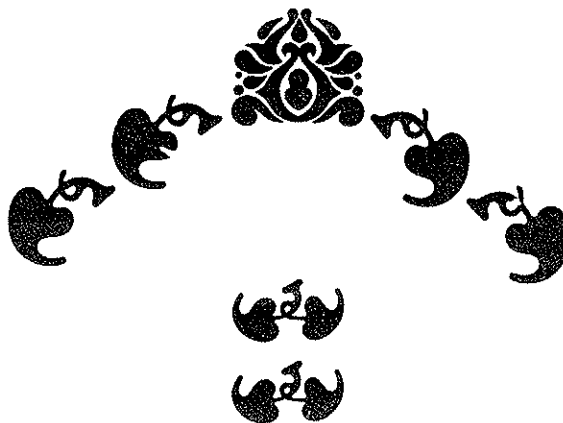
Although still tired, he smiled and let out a sigh of relief. He'd been a fool. He should have spoken to the Captain earlier. He would never make this mistake again.

Picard stirred and winced as his cramped neck muscles protested against the sudden movement. He straightened up slowly and looked into the smiling eyes of his second in command.

"William?"

"Everything's fine, Jean Luc. Just fine!"

And the smile on his face almost lit up the entire room.



SMILE . . .

. . . it makes people wonder what you've been doing!

by

Pam Crabtree

Thanks to Jackie Comben for researching the ranks and responsibilities of the many "chiefs" now in engineering.

Very special thanks to Sue Jones, artist and editor, for much hard work and especially for much encouragement.

This story is for Ghita who started it all. I hope the result is okay. Until we meet again, chum!

To the Enterprise crew a stopover at the famed Wrigley's Pleasure Planet was cause for much celebration. To her Captain, it was merely cause for a severe outbreak of boredom. He reflected that the Enterprise could be tracked anywhere in the galaxy by the paperwork that followed inexorably in her wake. Every time they made orbit around any planet in the Federation another batch of electronic mail descended on them. None of it important enough to be boosted to them while they were on patrol, just the most routine and deadly mundane matters that doggedly hung on until they reached civilisation again.

When his door buzzer sounded Picard acknowledged it quickly, glad for any respite. Geordi LaForge entered looking hesitant. Picard was known to be short tempered when swamped with routine matters.

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"I've just returned from Wrigley's, sir."

"Congratulations. Anything else you feel the need to impart?"

LaForge took a deep breath. "Security Officer Davis thought I should report to you personally, sir, rather than over the com channel. Commander Data and I went on leave together, but we split up and he hasn't returned yet." He paused and added worriedly, "He's now more than an hour overdue."

Picard consulted his desk console. "And Mr Riker is on a sleep period. I'm sure you would have much preferred reporting this to him?" LaForge avoided his gaze. "Very well. I'll want a full report from you, where you last saw him, what he was wearing, all the details you can. Dismissed, Lieutenant."

LaForge hesitated. "Data has never been late for anything before, sir. Should I wake Mr. Riker?"

"Why?"

LaForge realised too late that he had just made a fatal error. Picard's voice had the bark that meant trouble.

"Well... I thought... er... "

"Perhaps you thought that paperwork should get priority over the disappearance of the ship's Number Two?"

"No, sir."

"Or perhaps - " He paused and his voice dropped to a low growl. "Perhaps you thought that Mr. Riker could deal with the matter more capably than an aging, paper befuddled Captain? Dismissed."

LaForge hastened towards the door only to be pulled up by a very forced and overly pleasant tone. "And, Lieutenant. I'd be obliged if you would spread the word. The regulations state that no under-age persons be allowed on Wrigley's Planet. If I find out who managed to get Mr. Crusher down there, I will personally turn them over to the Chief Medical Officer with a full explanation of exactly what her beloved son was introduced to."

LaForge turned back. "Sir, I'm sure no-one has... "

"Oh yes they have. I found Mr. Crusher on the bridge this morning and strangely quiet. My officers were not being subjected to the usual flood of questions and wild theories because our Acting Ensign was staring vacantly ahead with a very silly grin on his face. After some cross-examination on my part and an agony of embarrassment on his part, I discovered exactly what he had been doing and where. To his credit he would not reveal his accomplices but he is now on report. When last seen, even his ears were bright red." He returned to his desk, then continued without looking up.

"I'm expecting your report in the next ten minutes, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir." LaForge exited smartly before he could land himself in any more trouble. Picard leaned back thoughtfully for a moment and then called security.

"Mr. Davis, I've been informed that we have a missing crew member. You've checked with the planetary authorities." It was more a statement than a question.

"Yes, sir, no sign of him. We've some other late-comers starting to report in now. All the usual reasons though, and... er... this particular officer has never been late before."

Picard appreciated that he was unwilling to have the matter widely known by mentioning Data by name. "I take it your men are fairly busy right now?" Several belligerent voices could be heard in the background.

"We're just about managing, sir."

"Very well, I'll handle this matter myself. Picard out." He closed the link to forestall any comment and then checked the duty roster.

"Computer, current location of Chief MacDougall."

"Chief MacDougall is in Engineering 3."

Without so much as a glance at the work on his desk Picard

strode quickly away.

Engineering 3 was a centre of activity under the watchful eye of the Section Chief. She crossed to join the Captain.

"Some maintenance I've wanted to tackle for quite a while, sir. The links to backup system three haven't been sounding right during the last few trials." She frowned worriedly. "I tried the standard Scott tests on them but the - "

Picard interrupted hastily before she got too technical. "Can they manage without you for the next few hours?"

"Yes, sir." She sounded reluctant to leave. It was rarely an easy thing to part engineer and engines.

"It is important. I need someone whose discretion I can trust and whose experience I can rely on."

She met his gaze keenly, and rapidly had the situation assessed. She lowered her voice to match his. "One of the officers missing on Wrigley's?" He nodded and she sighed. "Well, I've lost count of the number I've retrieved from there. Not one of my lads?"

"No, it's Commander Data."

Her eyes widened. "Now that's one I'd not have thought of. I can see why you want it kept quiet. Gossip moves through this ship faster than a turbolift. You want me to change out of uniform?"

"We'll draw less attention. Transporter 5 in twenty minutes?"

She nodded agreement. "That will give me time to leave a few instructions." She moved away and called an assistant over.

Picard scanned LaForge's report and quickly changed to some nondescript clothing before meeting Davis and MacDougall in transporter room 5. Mainly used for cargo, it was otherwise deserted.

"Mr. Davis, you are to report to Mr. Riker if we're not back by the time he returns to duty."

"You didn't wake him sir?"

"No, I did not."

Davis missed the ominous tone. "But it's six hours till his shift, sir." Picard stared at him and raised a brow. He gulped but continued, "I didn't realise you were going down to the planet personally, sir. I mean, I'm sure we can raise a team... "

"A team from Security would only draw attention to themselves, and that is precisely what I am trying to avoid." Davis suddenly found himself pinned by a steely gaze. "Do you really believe that a Starfleet Captain needs to be protected from Wrigley's by his First Officer?" He joined MacDougall on the transporter pad and glared down. "Well?"

Davis activated the console as fast as possible.

* * * *



Picard stared at it bitterly for a moment.

No-one was expected to beam down between shifts and the Security man stationed below was more than a little startled to realise just who his unexpected company comprised. Picard strode past him and then turned back to face the astonished man.

"You haven't seen us, and you will report directly to Mr. Davis as soon as you are relieved." The man nodded mutely, but his thoughts were obviously racing.

As soon as they were out of his hearing range Picard turned to MacDougall.

"According to Mr. LaForge, Data wasn't in uniform. Dressed in a dark shirt and blue jeans, he was last seen entering the Pleasure Palace. Apparently he quoted Tasha Yar about living life to the full." He shook his head ruefully. "Last time I went to the Pleasure Palace I was a very young lieutenant, and from what I remember, those sixteen floors are a warren."

"Twenty three last time I was there, Captain." She sighed. "Once more into the breach... "

He smiled and led the way towards a building which dominated the skyline. He didn't seriously expect Data to be in too much trouble, regulations were too strictly enforced for that. The local authorities would have known by now, no matter what condition he turned up in. But how could the android have become so involved as to forget the time?

At the foot of the great tower was a giant flashing sign proudly proclaiming that all twenty eight levels were now open for their delight. Picard stared at it bitterly for a moment then turned to MacDougall.

"Well, Chief - " He gestured at the monstrosity looming before them. "Do we start at the top or the bottom?"

"The top," she said decisively, and added with a sigh of long experience. "Then if we don't find him fast, at least we won't have so far to carry him."

Agreeing with the logic of that, he followed her over to the nearest turbolift. "There's no way to trace one android amongst so many people, advanced though he is. We ought to make them carry communicators so that we can track them, and to hell with their privacy," he muttered sourly.

"Beats the hell out of paperwork, though, doesn't it?" She grinned impudently at him and he had to smile back, feeling like a schoolboy caught dodging lessons.

Twelve levels and many hours later, all traces of humour had vanished. They plodded doggedly on, with his threats getting answers when her cajoling had failed and with much bluffing on both parts. Occasionally they had swapped roles, MacDougall staying silent while Picard played the amiable friend, with her then resorting to the kind of tongue lashing that kept the whole engineering department on its toes.

MacDougall had always respected Picard as a professional with a sound record behind him, but this genial Captain of the agile and inventive mind had surprised her. Perhaps it was the stern and imposing figure that he projected which had made it so hard to

imagine him relaxed and at ease in such surroundings. In one establishment neither of them had been able to prise any information from the doorman, who stoutly maintained that all customers were entitled to absolute privacy no matter what the emergency. Picard had glanced round as though to make absolutely sure they were in no danger of being overheard. He lowered his voice confidentially.

"Look, this guy is a friend. We're due back on board ship in twenty minutes and he'll be in terrible trouble. We're from the Enterprise." The man's eyes had widened slightly. "You've heard of her?" A quick nod in response. "Then you'll know of her Captain, Picard? Now there's a man with a terrible temper."

"So I've heard. They all talk about him." The man had sounded awed, but Picard had nodded seriously while MacDougall had had to fight to keep her face straight. "Your friend was here, several hours back - I can't remember exactly when, but he stayed a long time. Full of questions when he went in, like one of them time-wastin' researchers. He wasn't half smilin' when he came back out again, though." Picard's only response had been well raised brows. The man had not known of Data's next destination, only that he had gone down another level.

So they had progressed on downwards until they came to a surprisingly quiet bar with no garish lights or flashing signs.

"Come on, Chief, we deserve a break. Another ten minutes won't hurt him. I'll buy you a drink." And with a slight bow he waved her to precede him.

"Seats at the bar?" she suggested.

"Anywhere I can sit down." He slid gratefully onto a high stool. "I'm getting too old for this chasing about."

"You're not the only one. Even for an android he's got a hell of a lot of stamina."

"What would you like, Chief?"

"Do you have a decent malt whisky?" she enquired hopefully of the barman who approached.

"Ah. A discerning lady." His hand stopped hovering over the auto dispenser and he rummaged briefly under the bar, reappearing with a bottle in his hand. He displayed it for her and smiled as her eyes lit up. "You won't want me to spoil it by adding anything?" She shook her head indignantly, and he turned to Picard.

"I'll be guided by an expert and have the same." He slid his credit chip into the nearest slot for the charge to be deducted, and on impulse added, "It seems quiet just now, will you have one yourself?"

"I will and I'll be grateful. It's never mad busy in here. Not popular with the younger set, but I do well enough. Mainly from folks like yourself who like somewhere quiet with no flashing lights or loud music."

MacDougall nodded and rubbed her face. "My eyes are blinking in unison with the lights."

The barman looked at them questioningly. "Were you dragged

along by some younger crewmen?" He smiled at their surprise. "Oh, I could soon tell you were Starfleet personnel. You learn to judge people pretty fast from behind a bar."

Picard sighed. "We've lost one of our younger officers," he replied as MacDougall returned appreciatively to her drink. "We know that he was in the Palace and that he seems to have been working his way down, but we've been too far behind him all the way."

"What's he wearing?"

"Blue jeans and a dark shirt. And his skin has a yellow/gold tint that's unmistakable."

The man smiled. "Like a seasick Vulcan?"

"He's been in here?" Picard sounded surprised.

"Better than that, he's still here. Seemed a decent young fellow. Grinning all the time, but a bit confused, so I let him sleep it off in the back room."

"What!" Picard's voice emerged in his customary sharp bellow and the man's smile vanished. MacDougall prudently swallowed the last of her drink.

"Hey, he had nothing from here. Whatever affected him, he'd had before he got in."

"It's all right. I believe you, he's not a drinking man. It's just ironic that after trampling all over this blasted building we should find him as soon as we sit down to rest." He stood and looked questioningly at the barman who gestured to a curtained doorway on their left. Picard abandoned his drink and hastened through the opening.

MacDougall paused, aghast at the thought of leaving good whisky. The barman winked at her and proffered the glass. She downed it in one swallow and winked back at him before joining Picard in his attempt to drag an apparently comatose, but still smiling, Data to his feet.

The barman peered into the room. "Slapping them usually brings them round," he suggested.

"Thanks, but it wouldn't help in this case. I'd just get a broken hand," gasped Picard as he wrestled one of Data's arms around his shoulder.

"Oh. Violent when he wakes up, is he? Well, I wish you luck with him then." And with that the barman retreated, leaving them to it.

Too many people dodging payment and trouble meant that a forcefield around the building prevented them from using the transporter. They were both panting and sweating by the time they managed to manoeuvre Data down to ground level and outside its influence.

Picard took a firm grip on Data with one hand and groped for his communicator with the other.

"Picard to Enterprise. Patch me through to Security Officer Davis." There was a brief pause.

"Davis here, sir."

"We've got him. Dr. Crusher should be on duty by now. Don't give lengthy explanations, just get her to transporter room 5 and then beam us up," Picard commanded briskly, and then made a grab for Data who was gently subsiding groundwards against the valiant efforts of MacDougall. He hoisted the sagging Data upward again and she peered back at him from under the android's right shoulder.

"Is this what they mean by being a comrade in arms?" she grinned as she renewed her grip on Data yet again.

After what seemed to be an endless ten minutes, they felt the familiar transporter effect take over. When their vision cleared they could see a very startled Dr. Crusher awaiting them.

"Full story later, Doctor. For the moment, suffice to say that Commander Data has been sampling the delights of Wrigley's for the last few hours," Picard said drily; and added, "we haven't been able to rouse him in the half hour or so since we found him."

Dr. Crusher ran a pocket scanner over him and frowned. "He seems to have suffered some type of sensory overload."

"He damn' well should after all he's been doing," muttered a very tired Picard.

"Captain? I didn't quite catch... "

He waved her silent with his free hand then grabbed at Data who was slipping again. "I suppose you want him in medical?"

She nodded and briskly led the way. Picard rolled his eyes heavenwards and braced himself to follow. Davis stepped forward. "Can I take over, sir?"

"I'm starting to get used to him. Chief?" He looked at her enquiringly, but she shook her head weakly.

"After getting him this far, I can manage the last bit."

They struggled out to where the Doctor was waiting impatiently in the turbolift. Fortunately the lift could be programmed to take them straight into medical so no other personnel spotted them. They heaved Data onto the nearest examination table with mutual sighs of relief.

Dr. Crusher attacked a small device to Data's forehead and after a moment the constant smile faded and his eyes blinked rapidly several times.

"Why am I in Medical? I was on shore leave." He sounded most indignant.

"Data, what happened to you?" Dr. Crusher leaned over him concernedly. He frowned for a moment.

"I wanted to follow Tasha's advice about living life to the full, so I... " His voice faded away and the dreamy smile returned in full force.

"Oh no, not another one." Picard clapped his hand to his head and groaned. "If he starts blushing as well, I'll have him thrown off the bridge!"

Dr. Crusher regarded him with disfavour. "Whatever he's been through has obviously affected him deeply. I'll need all the information you can give me. We may have to duplicate some of the events to ascertain fully... Chief MacDougall... Captain?" Her voice faltered as the two overtired officers became convulsed with helpless laughter.

"Just give him a cold shower!" gasped MacDougall and brought them both to the deck, weakened by fresh gales of mirth.

* * * * *

Several hours later Riker called in on the Captain and discovered him asleep at his desk. He smiled.

"Is the paperwork getting too much for you, sir?"

"Yes, Will. Can't keep up with it at my age." He straightened and rubbed his eyes. "Do me a favour and schedule Mr. Data and Mr. Crusher to see me tomorrow, will you?"

"Do you want to see them together, sir?"

"No, I do not. Data first, I think. It won't do Mr. Crusher any harm to wait around a little." He got to his feet and stretched. "I think I'll get some fresh air. I need a present for a friend." He paused thoughtfully. "More a comrade in adversity, really."

* * * * *

MacDougall was back on duty when one of the crewmen brought her a gift-wrapped package.

"Chief MacDougall, this was outside your office. Have you a secret admirer, maybe?"

"Get on with your business and never mind mine."

He grinned at her, unrepentant, and passed over the package. She unwrapped a bottle of best whisky and then read the attached note, which said simply,

"From a comrade with sore arms."

This story won second place in the Midcon '88 fiction competition.





It won't do Mr Crusher any harm to wait
around a little.

BECOMING FRIENDS

by

Karen Sparks

"Sir, I'm picking up a distress call," Yar reported, her fingers darting with anxious rapidity across her board as she tried to locate the source. The bridge crew tensed with interest and their Captain rose from the command chair and turned to face his security chief.

"From a ship, Lieutenant?"

She shook her head, no; still concentrating. "Tracing now, sir - it originates from the planet Ludros." She straightened and waited expectantly for orders.

Just hearing the name again was as shocking and breath-robbing as an unexpected cold shower. The Betazoid woman looked up at the Captain in concern as the force of the flood of his returning memories brushed her mind. The First Officer had been regarding with curiosity his superior's uncharacteristic delay in giving orders, but when he intercepted the counselor's solicitous scrutiny he rose to face Picard, speaking softly enough for only him to hear.

"Are you all right, sir?"

Picard gestured impatiently, snapping back into action. "What is the nature of their distress, Lieutenant?"

"It's some sort of chemical disaster. A chain of explosions at a major chemical manufacturing plant has caused dense clouds of toxic gas to spread over two large cities." She looked at the Captain standing below her in the well of the bridge, uncertainty shadowing her mobile features.

Picard nodded sharply in answer to the unspoken question in her eyes. "Inform them we are on our way to assist. Mr. LaForge, lay in a direct heading to Ludros, warp 8. Data, what is our ETA?"

"Five hours, seventeen minutes, sir," replied the android immediately.

"Thank you. Lt. Yar, pass that information on to them. Data, the moment we are within sensor range, I want a full scan of the planet to verify their story."

"Something we should know, ~~is~~ sir?" asked Riker.

Picard met his First Officer's eyes. "Yes, Number One. The last time a Starfleet vessel called at that planet, one of its best officers was murdered there."

Riker saw Data incline his head slightly as if he understood. He opened his mouth to inquire further, then closed it again without speaking. The Captain's expression invited no idle questions and Riker knew they would be told more if and when they needed to know. He thought he saw gratitude for his forbearance in Picard's eyes.

"Shall I inform sickbay to prepare for casualties, sir?" came Yar's eager question, her hand already poised over the intercom panel.

"No!"

She flinched at his harsh exclamation and jerked her hand back from the control as if it had burned her. Riker and Troi exchanged glances. Picard smiled apologetically at his startled security officer. "I'm sorry, Lieutenant." Hers was a sensitive spirit, he knew; her mood changes were unpredictable and lightning-swift, and she was easily hurt by reprimands - particularly when they were as undeserved as this one had been. He admonished himself for the dismay in her eyes and wondered what had overridden the care he always took to be particularly patient with her. He rubbed the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger, trying to smooth away an ache. "I will inform sickbay personally, Tasha," he explained.

Yar relaxed a little, nodded. "As you wish, sir."

He smiled at her. "Thank you." He turned. "Number One, compile a list of crew available to help with the evacuation - if the disaster is on a large scale, we shall need to ask for volunteers from the civilian complement. Data, inform shuttle maintenance to prepare craft for launching upon arrival at the planet, and warn the chemical sciences people to stand by. I will be... " he hesitated momentarily... "in sickbay."

Picard left the bridge slowly, almost as if, Riker thought, he did not want to go. He glanced enquiringly at the dark-haired woman beside him. "Is he all right?" he asked in an undertone.

She looked at the closed lift doors. "Painful memories," she said softly, "and much worry and apprehension."

"Data."

The android pushed back his console and stood to face Riker. "Yes, Commander?"

"Do we know who was killed on Ludros?"

"Yes, sir."

Heads swivelled in unison towards Data. He tilted his head, almost apologetically. "Lieutenant-Commander Jack Crusher of the Stargazer."

There was a concerted harsh intake of breath from all the bridge crew. LaForge let out an expressive whistle, shaking his head.

"The Doctor's husband!" exclaimed Yar, her voice full of sympathy.

"The Captain's First Officer," said Riker comprehendingly. One hand reached without thought to touch the back of the command chair, as if to offer support to the man whose place it was.

The man whose place it was suddenly slammed his hand onto the

'hold' key in the turbolift. It halted obediently between decks. Picard leaned back against the wall and wiped a thin film of sweat from his forehead with his sleeve, shaking his head in exasperation at the dread with which he was approaching his next duty. He tried to compose an easy way to break this news to the widow of his old friend, and rejected possibility after possibility. He had absolutely no idea how she would react; he had not once, since she first walked onto his bridge, predicted correctly how she would respond to any given situation. Of all the women he had ever known, she was the most distant and unreadable. They had an efficient enough working relationship, but Picard believed that a good Captain should know what made each of his key officers tick, and it disturbed him that she was still as much of a stranger to him as on her first day aboard. She was on good (but not close) terms with the other officers, but was always very reserved, seemed to have made no particular friends aboard, and never attended any of the off-duty social events. Her own company, and that of her son, seemed to be sufficient for her. In fact, Picard realised, that was the only constant in her behaviour - her irrationally fierce defence of that boy of hers. No criticism of him was ever permitted; in her eyes he would always be right about everything, even if the rest of the world was wrong. *The trouble is, thought the Captain, frowning, the brat usually is right!*

His reverie was interrupted by the chirping of his communicator. He touched his insignia with a finger and released the lift control with the other hand.

"Riker, sir. We are within scanning range of..." He hesitated fractionally, and Picard smiled a little at his First Officer's tact as he continued, "The planet, and their story is confirmed. Lt. Yar is continuing to monitor their communications and casualties are reported in the thousands."

"Thank you, Number One. Inform relevant departments - except medical - and schedule a meeting of section heads in one hour in the bridge lounge."

"Acknowledged, sir."

Picard nodded once to himself as he moved along the corridor. As long as this was a genuine emergency, he knew he would be able to send his crew down to help - not easily, but he would do it. He squared his shoulders unconsciously as he entered sickbay. The Doctor was working over at the far side, her back to the room, recording readings from a wall panel display. She glanced over her shoulder to identify his approaching footsteps, then returned to her work.

"Something I can do for you, Captain?" she enquired.

"Ah, yes. I'd like a word with you. In private, if I may."

She raised her eyebrows in a query that seemed somehow faintly mocking to him, but duly switched off the panel, pocketed the instruments and led the way into her office. He followed, feeling increasingly uncomfortable and wishing belatedly that he had brought the Counselor along.

She stood behind her desk, official, remote, having no inkling of the news to come which would surely shatter her composure. "What's the problem, Captain?"

Picard cleared his throat and could not quite meet her eyes. "We are en route to assist at a major medical emergency, Doctor. Your presence is requested for a briefing in the bridge lounge in one hour."

"What kind of emergency?" she asked, sinking into her chair, one hand reaching for a memo block. "How major?"

"Casualties numbering in the thousands. There are heavy clouds of toxic gas covering two cities, resulting from an explosion at a chemical manufacturing plant."

She nodded. "Do we know what the gas is?"

"Not yet."

The Doctor's head bowed as she scribbled figures on her pad, and a length of hair fell forward over one shoulder. A hand rose in an absently impatient gesture to push it back again, and it reminded Picard with a sharp pain of the first time he had ever seen her make that quite unconscious movement, many years previously. She had looked so achingly young, that dreary November day, wearing a simple black dress and jacket. Her hair had been longer then, and the chilly wind carrying the sharp smell of damp earth had whipped it in tendrils, damp from the drizzle, across her face. She had stood with only her small son beside her, the two of them alone together, apart from the others. It had been after the ceremony, which she had endured motionless and dry-eyed, when she had pushed back her hair in that now familiar gesture before turning, her face taut with strain, to make polite expressions of thanks to the other mourners who had attended her husband's funeral. Picard had not known what to say to her then, either. He swallowed hard.

"Beverly."

She looked up, appearing surprised to find he was still there, and then frowned when his rare use of her first name registered. "Yes, Captain?"

He willed his voice to be steady. "You should know that the planet in question is Ludros."

Her face contorted as if he had hit her but for such a fleeting moment he almost thought he'd imagined it. She regarded him coldly. "Do you expect that to make a difference to my ability to handle the crisis, Captain? If so, you obviously can't have a very high opinion of my professional -"

Picard held up a peremptory hand. "Just one moment, Doctor. I only wanted you to know that if you would rather not take charge of the rescue operation, I would understand."

She rose to her feet behind the desk, her fair skin deeply flushed. "I will do whatever is required to save those people," she snapped, "and I strongly object if you ever thought otherwise."

Picard bit back a sharp retort as he noticed her hand holding the stylus shaking. "I meant no reproach, Doctor. I merely thought that perhaps you might find the idea of dealing with these people as... unwelcome as I do." He stared fixedly at her medical graduation certificate on the wall behind her. "As commander of this vessel, I have no choice in the matter, but I am prepared to excuse you from the responsibility."

She looked away from him, wrapping the edges of her lab coat across each other. "I don't have any more choice than you do, Jean-Luc," she said, almost in a whisper. She turned her back on him abruptly, her voice suddenly curt. "I will be at the briefing."

The Captain watched her rigid back for a minute, struggling to subdue the maelstrom of heaving, conflicting emotions and longings within himself. He wanted to shake her, he wanted to understand her, he wanted to hold her to try to ease the pain she wouldn't show; *he wanted to tell her he was sorry he had sent her husband to his death.* There were so many feelings they could share to make both their burdens easier if only she would ever drop her defences a little and allow it.

"I admire your courage, Doctor," he said quietly, and left the office.

When the doors had closed, Beverly Crusher dropped back into her chair and covered her face with her hands, shaking her head.

Picard returned to the bridge and resumed the centre seat. While he listened to Data updating the situation for him, he was aware of thoughtful glances from his First Officer beside him, and he could feel Yar's eyes burning into the back of his neck. He heard Data out, thanked him, then turned to regard Yar with an air of kindly patience. "What's troubling you, Lieutenant?"

She looked uncomfortable and began, "Sir, as Chief of Security, I..." then faltered and looked appealingly at Riker, who took over.

"Sir, Tasha and I have reservations about the safety of any crew members beaming down to the planet - being ignorant of the details of what happened last time," he finished awkwardly.

"We hoped to discuss the situation with you before Dr. Crusher arrived," added Troi.

"And we're very sorry, sir," blurted out Yar.

Picard sighed softly as he scanned the row of faces before him, worry showing in varying degrees in all of them. "I appreciate your concern. You are right, of course, you should be aware of what happened there last time, although I do not believe we will be in any danger on this occasion, since we will not be visiting the area involved in the conflict." He began to pace back and forth in the clear space between the command chair and the ops and con stations, trying to find calm, unemotional words to describe the horror that had left such a void in his life.

"Captain."

Picard halted his pacing for a moment to look at Troi. Her eyes, dark and liquid, glanced around the bridge, encompassing all the officers present, then returned to rest on him.

"Support and comfort, sir," she translated for him.

Picard relaxed a little, smiled. "Thank you, Counselor - all of you. I know you will extend the same consideration to Dr. Crusher; she needs it more than I do." He took a deep breath. "For your information, the planet of Ludros has reached the equivalent

technological era of Earth's mid-twentieth century. The governing council's first petition to join the Federation fifteen years ago was subsequently rejected - the reason for which will become clear to you presently. Their second petition is currently pending; they claim to have resolved the conflicting needs of their population." His shoulders moved slightly in a disbelieving shrug. "Time will tell. They offer an archipelago of tropical islands in the southern hemisphere for use as a shore leave base in return for help from our scientists in terraforming the vast, arid dust plains and desert areas of their world.

"Stargazer was the nearest vessel at the time their original application was being considered so we were sent to make the preliminary arrangements. We were also there to investigate rumours of suppression of a minority nomadic race. For as long as their tribes can remember these people were free to wander where they chose, but the government passed a rapid succession of new laws which drastically reduced their rights of way over land. The penalty for 'trespassing' outside their allocated area of harsh, unwanted desert was imprisonment - which was tantamount to a death sentence to these simple people whose religion and philosophy forbade them enclosed spaces. Thus two away teams were required at different locations." Picard fell silent, his expression hard and unrevealing. Riker glanced at Troi automatically for some impression of the Captain's feelings, and was not reassured by the obvious tension in her slim frame and the compassion glowing in the dark eyes, which never left the Captain's face.

Picard resumed his narrative with an effort, his voice bitter. "I beamed down to the capital city with a team of diplomats and sociologists and spent the day in discussion with the governors. My First Officer took a small away team dressed in native costume to mingle with one of the nomadic tribes to try to ascertain the truth. They had to be disguised because although most of the people on the planet were technologically advanced enough to be told of our existence, these nomads were not; they were still living in the middle ages.

"Around mid-day - " A pulse throbbed visibly in his temple, and his hands gripped each other. " - the nomads were attacked by a gang of youths from the nearest city." Worf growled in his throat. Picard's hands opened before him, palms uppermost, in unconscious pleading. "My people were unarmed. Crusher... He bought escape time for the rest of the away team with his life. The others made it to the shelter of some nearby caves where the natives were afraid to go, and were able to beam back aboard unnoticed. Two of the nomads were also killed. The tribe surrounded the bodies; they just sat there in the raging heat for the whole day, watching them in silence. Because of the Prime Directive I couldn't... go down to bring him home until after nightfall, when they finally moved off to set up their camp."

There was silence on the bridge. Tears glistened in Troi's eyes. Worf looked as if he wanted to tear something apart with his hands. Yar looked like she would have helped. LaForge sat motionless, his chin resting on a clenched fist. Data watched everyone intently, trying to analyse their expressions. Riker had eyes only for the Captain, whose pacing had taken him to the door of his ready room. He glanced back half way over his shoulder, and said flatly, "Take over, Number One," and the doors closed after him.

Shortly before the briefing was due to begin, Riker went on ahead of the others into the ready room. Picard turned, startled, from staring out through the viewscreen.

"Is it that time already?"

"Almost." The First Officer held out the sheaf of computer printouts. "I thought you might want to see the latest reports before everyone arrives."

The Captain took them and seated himself at the desk. He motioned to Riker to take the place beside him and began to study the reports. Riker watched him for a few minutes, then said hesitantly, "I won't mention this again, but I'm very sorry. It must have been..." Words failed him and he shook his head helplessly.

Picard looked steadily at the younger man. "I hope you'll never know how it feels to have ordered a man to his death, Number One. Perhaps now you'll understand something of my side of the disagreement we had that first day you were aboard. You see - " He started blindly at the deck. "I was originally going to lead that team, and Jack deal with the diplomats - but he hated all that red tape even worse than I did, so we changed over." He looked back at Riker. "It should have been me who died that day. It was around that time that Starfleet finally decided that Captains were too valuable to be risked on away teams. First Officers, it seems, are considered more expendable." His voice was very bitter as he finished.

Riker straightened in his chair. "I do sympathise with your reasons, sir, but that is a subject on which we must agree to differ. Starship Captains are not expendable, and I shall not back down from that opinion."

"No," agreed Picard with deceptive mildness. "Not until you're a Captain, anyway."

Riker flushed hotly in sudden embarrassment, and Picard mercifully returned his keen eyes to the report, becoming apparently engrossed in it. A few minutes later he said quietly, without looking up, "And I won't mention this again, but Jack Crusher was the best First Officer I've ever had."

Riker bowed his head in respectful understanding.

"Until now."

The last two words were spoken so casually that it took a few moments for their import to dawn on Riker. Very slowly, a pleased, disbelieving grin tinged with pride replaced his stunned expression.

The two men moved to the more spacious officers' lounge where the briefing commenced. It proceeded very efficiently and lasted for more than an hour. The Enterprise was in subspace communication with the afflicted planet and all necessary details had been obtained regarding the scale of the disaster and the most urgent and specific needs of the population. The planet's councillors were only too relieved to hand over full control of the rescue co-ordination to the approaching starship, having neither the technology nor the resources to deal effectively with the crisis.

Picard outlined the situation to the section chiefs present and

then sat back, allowing ideas and suggestions to be aired and discussed to their logical conclusions. Each of the bridge crew was to be deployed according to their talents. LaForge volunteered to help at the area of the original devastating explosions by using his unique, extraordinary vision to locate survivors trapped in the rubble of half the industrial estate which had been destroyed. Worf and Data also volunteered to assist in this area where their superior strength could be put to the best use in shifting debris. Yar all but demanded to be allowed to head a security team to protect the away team; Picard agreed at once. Nobody looked at Dr. Crusher. Riker and Picard were to co-ordinate the entire rescue operation from the bridge where they could most conveniently maintain the essential constant contact with all of the most crucial areas involved - the planet surface, shuttlecraft, transporter rooms and the medical section. Bridge personnel manning ship's sensors would have to work closely with the transporter rooms, relaying co-ordinates and numbers of victims, and with the medical department which was to set up a triage on Holodeck 4 which would be programmed as a huge sickbay.

The section heads left the briefing, all loaded with notes and lists, to organise their departments. Picard watched thoughtfully as Deanna Troi and Beverly Crusher left together, deep in conversation. He was grateful to the Counselor for offering to help with the wounded, knowing that she would also keep an unobtrusive eye on the doctor's well-being. During the briefing, the doctor had been in full control of any negative feelings she might be experiencing, and outlined her plans and requirements of the other departments with precise efficiency. *She surely can't be finding this as easy as she appears to be,* Picard thought doubtfully. He had seen a minute crack in her armour earlier in her office, it wasn't just his imagination. Was it? *Well, whatever her feelings may or may not be,* he chided himself impatiently, *she's certainly handling the situation better than I am so far!* Snapping out of his contemplation, he found only Riker left in the room, waiting for him by the door, having correctly anticipated his preference for continuing their work in the ready room. They settled down quickly and embarked together on the complicated task of drawing up a rough schedule for the available crew and the civilian complement who had volunteered their services en masse to be assigned to the jobs where they could be of most use.

In sickbay, Beverly Crusher finished briefing her assembled staff on the priorities and procedures to be used in treating the thousands of Ludrosans who would pass through their hands in the next few days. Only the most critically ill were to be kept aboard; those who had been merely trapped inside buildings and were unaffected by the gas were to be beamed directly back down to prearranged safe locations on the planet, and all the cases between these two parameters were to be given emergency treatment and then relocated in planetside hospitals, according to their needs.

The doctor dismissed her staff with a smile and a few words of encouragement, and instructed them to proceed to Holodeck 4 where 200 volunteers (untrained but willing) were waiting to be apprised of their duties. As the main body of the medical staff left sickbay, a long figure entered against the flow of people and headed straight for the doctor.

"Hi, Mom. They told us after class we're going to assist at an emergency and everyone can do something to help - what shall I do?"

The doctor looked at her son standing before her, his face alight with eagerness to help, and swallowed against a sudden tightness in her throat. She smiled and held out her hand to him. "Come sit with me for a minute, Wes. I want to talk to you."

Picard glanced up enquiringly as his First Officer swore softly under his breath. The younger man scrubbed at his pad with unnecessary vigour to erase a page of notes and grinned ruefully at the Captain.

"I just had half of security team C in triage and half off duty - "

Picard looked puzzled. "What's wrong with that?"

"And half helping in transporter rooms 1 to 6," he finished, clutching his forehead in mock despair.

His companion smiled in sympathy. "Anyone would think maths wasn't your strong point!"

Two heads bent over their work again, but lifted sharply in perfect unison almost immediately as sounds of shouting on the bridge reached them. The Captain frowned and stood up, muttering, "What the hell...?" He began to move towards the door as the commotion drew nearer, but Riker leaped up from his seat and crossed the intervening distance in a blur of movement to stand between Picard and the door, his hand reaching automatically for where his phaser would have been if he'd been wearing one.

The doors opened and Wesley burst in twisting out of Yar's restraining arms, yelling at her to leave him alone. Riker relaxed from his protective position and stepped aside, only then noticing the foreboding, later-for-you glare on his Captain's face. As Picard's eyes returned to the cause of the disturbance, he appeared to be noticeably tenser than his First Officer. Unknown aliens and adversaries he had a chance of dealing with, but children...!

Yar began to apologise to the Captain but he waved her worried explanation aside with a smile, and she left the ready room with a backward, incredulous glance at Wesley. The youth stood just a few feet away from the Captain, who, to his inward surprise, had to raise his eyes slightly to meet the boy's raging expression. (*When did he suddenly grow that tall?* he wondered irrelevantly.) His face was pale and set in hard lines that totally transformed the usually cheerful countenance in a way that unnerved the two officers slightly. Riker moved towards him, a friendly hand extended, but Picard's curt, "Leave us, Number One. I believe it's me that Acting Ensign Crusher wants to see," stopped him completing the movement, and he walked obediently on past and out of the room.

Picard folded his arms. "You do have an explanation, I presume?"

Wesley took a step forward, his body almost rigid with suppressed fury. "I came to tell you," he said harshly, "you can't do this!"

His commanding officer drew himself up to his full height, his arms dropped to his sides. "You forget your position, Acting Ensign," he said sternly.

"I don't give a damn about my position!" came the fierce response, "but I do care about my mother." He moved closer, his fists rising slowly (and quite unknowingly, judged Picard) until they were level with his chest. "I'm not going to let you treat her like this."

"To what, precisely, are you objecting?"

Dark eyes blazed in response. "Don't tell me you don't know! Are you so callous you can't even imagine how she's feeling? You can't make my mother help those... those murderers!"

Picard could feel the boy's hot, ragged gasps of breath on his face. He did not move back. "Did she tell you I was making her do it?" he asked sharply. He studied the figure standing before him, radiating righteous fury from every pore as only the young can, and despite his own anger, found a feeling of grudging respect growing within. He had never liked the precocious interference this brat displayed all too often, but this fierce defence of someone he cared for (however misplaced) was something he could identify with.

"Of course you're making her do it!" exploded Wesley. "She'd never betray my father if you weren't making her - "

"That's enough!" snapped Picard.

"Oh, no, it isn't, not nearly enough!" His voice was choked and his eyes bored accusingly into the older man's. "You have no soul! It isn't enough for you that my father died because of you, is it? Now you're trying to destroy my mother - "

His words rubbed salt into a wound so recently reopened and Picard's right arm drew back with a jerk. He saw the figure in front of him flinch, and horror dawned in his own eyes at the realisation of how close he was to hitting this - this child. He spun away with a harsh oath and laid his hands flat on the table, arms straight, head bowed between them, forcing himself to breathe deeply. There was silence in the room.

When he was sure he was in control of himself, he turned round slowly to face his nemesis. Wesley had not moved. The mien of the tall, lean lad - the feet braced slightly apart, shoulders back, the chin jutting out stubbornly forward - suddenly produced a rushing surge of aching familiarity in the Captain, and he was amazed he had never before noticed the strong resemblance this boy bore to his father. *He has certainly inherited his father's knack of knowing which buttons to push to invoke a strong reaction in me,* he reflected ruefully. He suddenly became aware that the face before him was as white as he'd ever seen on anyone who wasn't actually unconscious, and that he was beginning to tremble.

"You'd better sit down," he said flatly.

The youth merely looked at him for a minute, his jaw clenched, and then dropped with rather startling suddenness into the nearest chair. The Captain leaned against the edge of the table and surveyed him.

"You're not feeling - um - faint, or anything, are you?" he asked doubtfully.

Wesley shook his head once, his accusing eyes never leaving the Captain's face. Picard was not convinced, and alarming visions in

his head of an overprotective mother coming to claim her cub and finding him passed out on the floor of his office prompted him to dial up a cup of coffee on the processor and place it on the table in front of him.

"Drink some of that, please."

Wesley ignored it, and him. Picard ran a hand agitatedly over the top of his head. "Do you really believe what you said to me just now?" he asked slowly.

Once again came that stubborn lifting of the chin, and dark eyes regarded him coldly, unblinking, waiting to see what his next move would be.

"I don't know what you want from me!" Picard exclaimed in exasperation. "And I certainly haven't all day to spend coaxing it out of you, so I'll just say this, and if you're not prepared to talk, you can leave." He began to pace slowly back and forth in front of the moving starfield on the viewscreen, a hand rubbing his chin as he thought. Wesley's eyes followed his movements as if hypnotised, back and forth, back and forth...

"First of all, I am not putting any pressure whatsoever on your mother to organise this rescue. The choice is hers alone."

"You're lying!" The accusation was forced out through gritted teeth.

Picard regarded him gravely, surprising himself by suddenly understanding why he would not want to believe this. "No, Wesley, I'm not lying."

"But why?" cried Wesley, bewildered, hurt, angry. "Why should she choose to help them? They murdered my father!"

The Captain sensed dimly that whatever words he used now would remain with the boy for a long time. He spoke quietly.

"Your mother is a very caring person. This is not going to be easy for her, but as a doctor she has pledged an oath to save all the lives she can, and she is too dedicated to her profession to allow her personal feelings to interfere with her duty." The boy looked as if his world was falling apart. "It does not mean she loves your father any less," Picard continued firmly. "Furthermore, you cannot - you *must* not - blame an entire population for the deeds of a few misguided individuals." He looked at the floor. "In fact, before you came in, I believe I was guilty of that prejudice myself."

"You!"

Picard nodded. He tried to smile, and his voice was gentle. "You see, whatever you may think, your father and I, we... we were very close. So I didn't want to help these people any more than you do. But as Starfleet officers, and as decent human beings, we can't let hundreds - or even thousands - of people die - as they will if we don't help them; you must realise that - because of what happened here long ago."

Wesley bowed his head and did not speak.

Picard tried to explain further. "Many buildings have

collapsed in the area of the first explosions - there are hundreds of people buried under tons of rubble. There are two cities full of people who are trapped inside buildings - homes, offices, schools, hospitals; they can't leave because of the gas clouds. Many of them have been without food and water for the three days since this happened. When they look out of the windows they see the streets littered with dead bodies of strangers and friends who could not reach shelter quickly enough. There is no way for the rescuers to reach these people - the last report said that over a hundred desperate individuals have died trying to reach their families." There was silence for a minute. Picard watched the motionless boy and could not tell whether his words had had any effect or not. Struck by sudden inspiration, he added gently, "Your father would not have wanted us to ignore their need for our help."

A hand came up to cover Wesley's face and his shoulders began to shake. Picard realised with horror that the boy was crying. He backed away a few steps and looked at him helplessly, wondering what the hell to do. He glanced towards the door, half-guiltily, half hoping that someone would arrive to take charge, but it remained firmly shut. His gaze returned to the quietly sobbing boy. He thought of summoning Troi who would sense what he needed, or Tasha who couldn't bear to see anyone in distress and would put her arms around him, or Riker who seemed to understand the boy - hell, even Data would probably have a better idea of how to react than he did now! He cleared his throat.

"Shall I call your mother, Wesley?"

The youth shook his head violently, his face still hidden in his hands. The Captain considered contacting her anyway, but refrained from doing so - it would hardly improve his tempestuous relationship with the child to act against his wishes at such a delicate moment. He rubbed his hands together in embarrassed indecision, then approached the boy cautiously, almost as if he might explode at any moment. He reached out tentatively to touch a lean arm.

Nothing happened. He swallowed hard. He tried again, moving his hand to pat the shoulder awkwardly and said as kindly as he could, "Come on, now, there's no need for this."

This had more of a result; the boy made a visible effort to stop crying and scrubbed at his eyes with his fists. "Sorry," he said, sniffing. "But I'm all there is to look after Mom, and I thought..."

Picard withdrew his hand thankfully, now that the boy had gained a precarious control, and pushed the cooling cup of coffee towards him. "Now will you drink it?"

Wesley sipped obediently at the beverage and the Captain regarded him thoughtfully. The child considered himself responsible for his *mother*? The idea was intriguing, if faintly ludicrous.

"Your mother may need your support in the forthcoming days. I hope she knows she already has mine - as you do, if you should require it," he added as an awkward afterthought.

Wesley sat up straighter, looking suddenly older. "I'll take care of her."

Picard looked at him keenly. "I think your father would have

been proud of you."

Eager dark eyes were turned on him in an expression of burning hope. "D'you really think so?"

Uncomfortable at the desperate longing his impulsive remark had engendered in the young face, Picard thought hard, trying to be honest and to push away his own adversarial feelings towards the boy. He considered impartially his undeniable intelligence, his mature grasp of ship operations, the number of times he had been instrumental, either directly or indirectly, in saving lives aboard the ship. With great relief he was able to give the boy the answer he wanted, truthfully.

"Yes," he said firmly. "I know he would." Wesley's face glowed with pleasure. Picard was a little surprised. "I'm sure you don't need to hear that from me - your mother must have told you before."

"Yes, she has, but... well," he shrugged slightly, "she would, wouldn't she? Being my mother."

Their eyes met and a look of mutual understanding flashed between them. Picard smiled a little, thinking of the woman they were discussing. "Yes, I suppose she would. But you can believe her, you know."

The boy rose and walked over to the tall, narrow viewscreen and stood, gazing out into the starlit darkness. "Dad told me he'd take me into space to see the stars one day."

Picard was a little confused. "Your mother told you he said that, you mean?"

An emphatic shake of the head. "I remember him telling me." He looked around to see the surprise on the Captain's face. "I do remember him," he said vehemently, "and no-one can take that away from me." He leaned his forehead against the screen for a minute, as if he was very tired. Picard watched him covertly, hoping he wasn't going to start crying again. Then Wesley straightened up and, noticing the faint mist of condensation left by his breath, traced something on it with a finger, with apparent aimlessness. Picard glimpsed the marks before they dissipated in the heat of the room, and sighed softly. NCC 2893. He had never realised it before, but now he realised that the Stargazer's registration code must be as deeply ingrained in the boy's consciousness as it was in his own. He knew he had not been giving this youngster any part of what he owed him. He sat down and stretched out comfortably in the chair, crossing his ankles and resting his arms on the supports, deliberately projecting an air of relaxation, as if he had all day to talk.

"Tell me what you remember," he invited.

Wesley glanced round. "Really?" There was barely suppressed eagerness in his tone, and guilt stabbed at Picard - would it really have been such a hardship to have talked to the boy about this before?

"Really. I'm interested."

"Well, it's not very many things," Wesley admitted reluctantly. "But they're quite clear, like holovids. One is of

him and Mom teaching me to play ball in a park somewhere. It was one of those balls that change colour in the air. And the sky was green," he added as an afterthought.

"Alpha Centauri!" exclaimed Picard, suddenly remembering a brief shore leave stopover there when Crusher had met up with his family.

Wesley shrugged. "Maybe. I don't know. But best of all - " his expression grew abstracted, his eyes seeming impossibly dark - "I remember one night I'd had a bad dream and he came in and picked me up and held me on his lap. He talked to me for a long time that night. It was the last time I saw him."

"Can you remember anything he said?" asked Picard, genuinely curious.

A nod. "Everything, I think. He took me to the window and showed me the stars, and told me one day families would be allowed to live all together on starships, and then he'd take me and Mom along with him. He told me about the Stargazer, how she looked silver in starlight and gold in sunlight - and how horrible the coffee tasted."

A chuckle escaped the Captain at the forgotten memory his words revived - his First Officer who had braved danger and endured injuries in stoic silence - but who never stopped complaining about the coffee!

"And," the voice continued, sounding distant and dreamy, "he told me stories about his Captain."

Picard crossed the room, almost unconsciously, to touch the finely-crafted model of his former ship and wondered what kind of stories his friend had told his infant son. He recalled many long evenings spent talking, sharing their dreams and their hopes, their pasts - and the glowing tales of a beautiful young doctor-wife and a very precious son.

"He told me stories about you, too."

Wesley turned with a delighted smile and the Captain held his gaze, sensing that, somehow, some of the antagonism between them had dissolved forever. At that moment the door chime sounded and the door opened. The two occupants of the room turned in unison to encounter the ship's medical officer entering rather hesitantly, looking distinctly apprehensive.

"Doctor," Picard greeted her politely.

"Hi, Mom." Wesley went over and hugged her.

She looked from his still tearstained face to the Captain, and back again. "Is everything all right?" she asked her son anxiously, reaching up to push an unruly lock of hair back from his forehead in a gesture only a mother would use - and be permitted to use. "You went off so upset - you didn't give me a chance to explain. I've been looking everywhere for you."

"Everything's fine, Mom," her son reassured her. He glanced questioningly at the Captain. "Isn't it, sir?"

"Mmm? Oh! Yes, fine," Picard nodded. "We were just - um -"

having a chat, Doctor."

She still looked mystified. Wesley faced the Captain and stood to attention. "Thank you, sir," he said in some embarrassment, "and I'm sorry."

"Don't mention it," responded Picard automatically, unable to stop himself from adding gruffly, "but don't let it happen again!"

When mother and son finally left the room (not without a lingering suspicious glance over the mother's shoulder), he heaved an enormous sigh of relief and wiped his forehead with a sleeve. He felt as if he had just battled single-handedly with a ship full of Ferengi! He gathered up the notes he had been working on and paused by the tank recessed into the wall. He pointed a finger at the elegant lionfish within, which regarded him unblinkingly. "Don't ever get involved with families!" he warned it. When he was certain enough seconds had elapsed for the Crushers to have vacated the bridge, he left his ready room, and had to suppress a smile at the way everyone very carefully did not turn to look at him. Only when he had resumed his command station did Riker glance at him with raised eyebrows in silent enquiry. Picard shook his head briefly, then remembered something. He assumed a stern expression.

"At the risk of rehashing an old subject, Number One, tell me - was it strictly necessary to leap in front of me in such a heroic manner?"

Riker studied the deck. "Sorry, sir." He did not look sorry, merely faintly embarrassed. "But it might have been Q back again. Or anything, really." He looked innocently at his commanding officer. "Mightn't it, sir?"

"Hmmp!" Picard leaned back in his chair and slung one leg over the other, resting an ankle on the other knee. "I think you need to take something for your nerves!"

* * * * *

Ludros became distinguishable on the forward viewer precisely when Data had predicted. Picard's jaw clenched involuntarily at the sight of the orange-red planet he had left with such a heavy heart all those years ago. LaForge manoeuvred the ship expertly into orbit and Data complied with Riker's order for full screen magnification; silence fell on the bridge as they all stared at the ominous grey smudges marring the scattered white clouds of the planet's atmosphere. Picard touched the intra-ship comm control and his voice broke the tension.

"This is the Captain. We are now orbiting Ludros. Remember this is going to be a long job, lasting a minimum of several days, and it won't help anyone down there if you all work yourselves into the ground in the first twenty four hours. Do not neglect to take your allocated rest periods; our medical facilities are needed for the victims of this disaster - not for worn-out rescuers. Thank you all, and good luck." He closed the circuit and stood to face his chief of security. "Tasha, take good care of the away team, please."

She returned his look, knowing this was more than a rhetoric order. "I will, sir."

He nodded his thanks. "Bridge crew, dismiss to your assigned

tasks. Everyone - be careful."

The officers left eagerly to begin what they had prepared carefully for. Riker assumed his position at the bridge scanners and flicked open the comm channel to the transporter room. Picard attended to the flashing light indicating an incoming message from the planet, and so the massive rescue operation swung into action.

The crew worked long hours, giving of their best in their individual duties so that the rescue as a whole proceeded as efficiently as if they had spent weeks instead of merely hours preparing for it. The transporters were in constant use, day and night, beaming up natives trapped inside buildings, and casualties, and beaming down relief shifts for the crews working planetside. The shuttlecraft, hurriedly adapted by engineering for the purpose, proved to be more expedient at spraying the lethal gas clouds with the neutralising chemical than the light aircraft the Ludrosans had been using initially - three of which had crashed, killing their pilots, after they had been overcome by the toxic fumes seeping into their 'planes. It took two days and nights of spraying before the clouds thinned enough for the effect to be noticeable on the bridge viewscreen.

Picard was very well aware of the need to sustain the morale of his crew during such an exhausting, often distressing, mission. Accordingly, he spent many of his off-duty hours walking through the ship, giving support and encouragement to crew members and ordering off duty those whom he considered too fatigued to continue; where necessary, taking over their tasks himself until a replacement could be found. He monitored the mood aboard very closely. The first thirty six hours or so passed quickly for everyone in a blur of adrenalin as they all operated at the peak of their abilities, but this optimistic air degenerated gradually over the second and third days as people tired with the long hours of intensive effort they were all working, and became depressed by the seemingly endless streams of casualties arriving, injured, shocked, choking, many dying in slow pain from the poison in their lungs. Medical supplies which should have lasted the Enterprise for years to come began to dwindle, and the chief engineer commenced reporting hourly to the Captain on the effects the constant drain of ship's systems (particularly the transporters) was having on the reserve power levels.

On the evening of the third day, Picard and Riker ate a hasty meal together in the main dining hall. There was little of the usual cheerful bustle of people in the large room; its occupants spoke in subdued tones, and moved with uncustomary lethargy between the food processors and the tables. Picard glanced around the sparsely occupied room and counted six people yawning at the same time. He shook his head. "Something tells me these people aren't following my orders about taking proper rest periods too precisely," he said darkly.

Riker pushed aside his empty plate and reached for his coffee. "You can talk," he commented. "Sir."

"I'm not doing any more than they are," retorted the Captain. Riker let the unlikely statement pass. "I just hope we run out of casualties before our people's energy and the medical supplies give

out." He took a sip of his drink and pulled a face. "Ugh! What's happened to the damn tea?"

The First Officer tried his coffee, pulled an identical face but drained the cup anyway. "Got to keep body and soul together with something," he said in answer to Picard's raised eyebrow. "I'll check on the processor."

"Right. Well, if you're ready...?"

Riker stood up when his Captain did, then suppressed a groan, his hand moving to rub below his rib cage.

"What is it?" Picard asked, concerned.

"Indigestion," replied his companion ruefully. "And it wasn't the coffee, either! Just an occupational hazard of the past few days." They collected up their trays and moved towards the exit, but Picard paused, looking across the room. His First Officer followed the line of his gaze and saw a figure slumped over a table, head buried in his arms, his meal untouched on the tray before him. From the tufts of distinctive grey hair showing, he was recognisable as the chief transporter technician, who was due to retire shortly. Riker put a hand on his Captain's arm to stop him heading for the table and handed him his tray. "I'll see to him, sir. You get some rest."

Picard nodded his thanks. "You too, Will - that's an order. I don't want to hear any more rumours of a ghostly presence bearing a remarkable resemblance to my First Officer roaming the ship at night."

Riker grinned. "Of course, there haven't been any similar rumours about *your* doppelganger, sir," he said pointedly.

"Precisely my point," returned Picard seriously. "We can't both keep spending half the night up working - at least one of us must be well rested. I have things to check on tonight." The reason for their nocturnal visits to departments most involved in this mission was so obvious to both men that there was no need to discuss it.

Riker gave in, nodded his acquiescence and they parted company. After disposing of their utensils, Picard proceeded towards sickbay once again, feeling that he must be wearing out the route to the department with his recent frequent visits - all fruitless attempts to see Beverly Crusher. Her well-being remained a minor but nagging worry to him amid this plethora of major worries.

He reached the dimly-lit department, crowded with extra beds but surprisingly quiet apart from the occasional moan or cough from patients. The medical staff showed as shadows moving noiselessly between the beds, their faces lit eerily by reflected pinpoints of coloured lights from the monitors. This area, Picard knew, was being kept aside for the most seriously ill and injured casualties; most of them were unconscious and many were hooked up to life support systems. A shadow detached itself from checking a monitor and moved towards the Captain; as it approached him he recognised the olive complexion of the department's third in command, Dr. Ayubi. He motioned respectfully for silence as Picard began to speak and drew him into an adjoining lab and closed the door. They both blinked in the comparatively bright light.

"What's the situation?"

Ayubi passed a hand wearily over his eyes. "We're coping, sir. They keep sending us casualties, we keep treating them. If they survive, we take care of them - if they die, we send the bodies back down for their families to dispose of." He forced his shoulders back. "Sorry, sir. I didn't mean to sound - "

"It's all right, Doctor, I understand. Take heart; all personnel on the away teams report we're well over the worst of it now. The gas clouds are practically invisible from the bridge, and one of the cities has been declared safe."

Ayubi nodded gratefully. "I know. The numbers of incoming wounded are less now - just not less enough."

"They won't be less enough until they've stopped," agreed Picard. "Where is Dr. Crusher?"

"She's in surgery."

"Again?"

"No, sir. Still."

"Still! But the last time I asked was - " he checked the chronometer - "ten hours ago!"

"She's doing a magnificent job - I've never seen anything like it," Ayubi said with admiration. "I assisted her for four hours this morning and her stamina is unbelievable."

Picard hid his consternation with the skill of an experienced commander. "You're all doing a magnificent job, Doctor," he said. "Let's hope it won't have to be for much longer."

The Arab smiled, looking momentarily less tired. "Thank you, sir."

They returned to the relative gloom of sickbay, and Ayubi left the Captain's side hurriedly as the subdued bleeping of one of the life support machines changed to an ominously flat sounding tone. Two nurses arrived simultaneously but Ayubi shook his head at them and began dejectedly to disconnect the apparatus. Picard left quietly, knowing there was nothing he could do here.

As he rounded a corner of the corridor, something small and fast-moving crashed into his legs. The Captain grunted and bent down to rub his assaulted kneecaps, glaring at the young child who was backing away from him in wide-eyed alarm.

"Haven't your parents taught you not to run round corners?" he demanded testily.

Before the girl could answer, there came the sound of many small footsteps and a buzz of chatter. Picard straightened up to see a party of a dozen children approaching in a more orderly fashion, being shepherded along by Wesley Crusher, who stopped in dismay when he saw the guilty expression on the face of his recalcitrant charge.

"Sharma, didn't I tell you not to run round corners?" he asked reproachfully.

She ran to him and hid her face against his leg, sure of her welcome despite the reprimand. He bent down to pick her up and the other children clustered round him, casting unafraid, hero-worshipping glances at the Captain. Wesley looked at him apologetically over their heads. "I'm sorry, sir. It was an accident. I won't let it happen again."

Picard couldn't help being impressed by the easy rapport Wesley had with the children, and the relaxed easy way he handled them. He regarded him with open curiosity. "What are you doing?"

He shifted the child clinging around his neck to a position less likely to result in his own strangulation. "I've been teaching the infant class today, sir," he explained. "And right now I'm taking them for a meal before they go to bed."

That will certainly liven up the dining hall, thought the Captain. He studied the face of the boy before him and frowned as he noticed shadows under even *his* eyes, and fatigue in his face. Wesley suddenly flushed under his scrutiny and stared at the floor.

"I know what you're thinking, sir - I wanted to help after what you said to me, truly I did, but - " he looked embarrassed - "Mom wouldn't let me."

Picard shook his head emphatically. "I wasn't thinking that, Wesley. Not everyone can be in the thick of the action - they also serve who only look after the children," he improvised rapidly.

Wesley grinned tiredly, then started and looked past the Captain's shoulder, calling, "Hey, Rix! Leave that alone!" Picard moved hastily out of his way as he charged down the corridor towards his errant pupil, his entourage trailing in his wake, to disentangle small fingers from the release control of the fire-fighting equipment store.

"Wesley!"

The acting ensign glanced back at the Captain, looking very harassed.

"I think you're doing an excellent job!"

A pleased smile broke over Wesley's face before he disappeared rather abruptly around the corner, tugged along by the children who were informing him in clarion tones and all at once what they would be having to eat. Picard grinned to himself and shook his head, thinking that, by comparison, perhaps Wesley wasn't quite so aggravating after all.

As he passed transporter room three the doors opened and the bridge officers of the away team emerged, all liberally begrimed with the characteristic orange dust of Ludros. Yar, a bruise swelling purple on a scraped cheekbone, led the way, chattering animatedly to LaForge close beside her. Behind them, Worf carried the four sets of breathing apparatus and Data walked with his arms apparently folded across his stomach. They ceased talking when they noticed their Captain and halted, and he checked them when they would have stood to attention.

"Is everything all right?" asked Picard. "You all look somewhat the worse for wear."

Yar and Data looked down at themselves, noticing for the first time their bedraggled appearance.

"We're fine, thank you," replied Yar for all of them. "We've just finished down there." There was pride and relief in her voice. "We just completed searching the last of the collapsed buildings for survivors."

"That's tremendous!" exclaimed Picard warmly, relief evident in his voice too. Perhaps now his crew could start taking the rest they all needed. "You must all be exhausted after - " He frowned, noticing LaForge's hand resting lightly on the security officer's arm. "Geordi, what's - Are you all right?"

The dark-skinned man nodded, his teeth showing white in a wide smile. "Yes, sir. It's just been so windy down there for the last hour, my visor has got clogged up with the dust blowing around. It's no problem, though." He smiled confidently several inches to the left of where Picard was standing. "Worf is going to clean it out for me."

"That's very thoughtful," commented the Captain, suppressing a smile at the burly Klingon's obvious embarrassment. His gaze moved to the android beside him and turned shocked when he realised Data was cradling an arm. He looked closer, seeing the torn sleeve stained with some dark, sticky substance and what was exposed to the air between the edges of the rip. "Data! What's happened to you?" Picard asked sharply.

The android glanced down unconcernedly at his partly crushed arm. "I sustained slight damage from falling masonry, sir," he said brightly. "It is of no consequence. I have the required equipment in my quarters to make the necessary repairs."

"Data!" Picard gestured helplessly. "You... Does it hurt?"

"We tried to make him beam aboard when it happened, but he wouldn't," interjected LaForge, "and he outranks us."

"There was no need, my friend," replied Data. "My left arm was quite undamaged and I preferred to stay with you all as long as I could be of use."

"And Data can do more with one arm than all of us can with two," added Yar, her voice tinged with admiration.

The Lieutenant-Commander saw that his Captain still looked unconvinced. "There is absolutely no cause for concern, sir," he assured him earnestly.

"Very well. See that you receive any assistance you may need." Picard's eyes cast over his officers ranged before him, noting the varying degrees of fatigue in their faces, and the quiet triumph that comes from the knowledge of a worthwhile job well done. "I'm very proud of all of you," he said quietly. LaForge and Data looked pleased, and Yar positively glowed with pleasure. He smiled. "Carry on and take care of yourselves; that's an order."

They took their leave and moved off in a group, their conversation turning to hot showers and food. A shadow; dark and indefinable, crossed Picard's face as he looked at the faint orange footprints they left behind in a trail on the deck. He turned away abruptly and continued briskly along the corridor, finding the

thought of Data repairing his own arm distinctly gruesome.

His destination was holodeck 4 where the majority of the medical staff and volunteers were working in triage, treating the casualties beamed directly to them. His pace quickened as he saw a familiar figure huddled on the floor near the entrance, dark head buried in her arms, hands clasped around her shins. He bent down and gently touched her shoulder. "Counselor, what is it?"

When she did not respond, he knelt beside her to determine her level of consciousness. The doors beside them opened to admit a nurse guiding a gurney, retreating rapidly towards the turbolift and sickbay. During the seconds the doors were open, a raucous cacophony of noise from within assaulted their eardrums; disturbing sounds of choking and moaning and retching and sobbing and a child's screams. The doors cut off the tumult with startling suddenness, and silence fell once more in the corridor.

"Counselor," Picard said again. "Talk to me."

With an obvious effort she lifted her head; unshed tears swam in dark eyes in a face deeply lined with strain. "Pain," she gasped. "Can't... So much pain, fear... "

"You've been in there too long." The Captain realised immediately what had happened. He tried to imagine the emotions behind the sounds of suffering that had shaken him, and how they must have been constantly battering her defensive shields, bruising her receptive mind. He shuddered. "You need to get away from them - from everyone," he said decisively. He tried his best to subdue his own worry and turmoil, guessing that she couldn't shut out anyone's feelings right now. "Come on, I'll help you. You'll be all right, Deanna." He lifted the exhausted Betazoid woman to her feet and she sagged against him. He supported her, half senseless, to the turbolift, which deposited them near her quarters. Once inside, she collapsed limply, trembling, fists pressed against her temples. He strove to overcome the alarm he felt. "Is there anything I can do for you?" he asked quietly.

After a minute she whispered something in her native language, but it was not one of the few phrases she had taught him so he did not understand what she wanted. Then one of her arms moved vaguely towards her computer console, and going over to it, Picard saw that the music selector was on standby. He touched the control and a hauntingly beautiful melody played softly on some kind of reed pipes spilled soothingly into the room. He listened, enchanted, to the intricate harmony weaving a spell of tranquillity, and did not realise his eyelids were drooping until he swayed on his feet and had to open his eyes to regain his balance. He cast a guilty look at the Counselor, and saw with some relief that she was not shaking so badly, although she kept moving restlessly as though unable to find a comfortable position. He had an idea and crossed to the wall slot - surely her food processor would be programmed for - ? - Yes, there, Behallan tea! He lifted the cup of greenish liquid carefully and set it down on the table beside her bed. Her eyes opened as the bitter aroma of the restorative herbal brew native to her planet reached her nostrils. She uncurled a little, weakly smiling her thanks at the Captain. She struggled to sit up and he helped her, propping up the pillow to support her. Her long, slender fingers closed around the comforting warmth of the cup and she sipped at the tea, some of the strain easing from her features. She raised one hand to remove the hairpin from her bun and soft waves of dark hair cascaded onto her shoulders, framing the delicate face. Her lips

parted and she tried to speak, but he forestalled her.

"Please don't try to talk, Counselor. Just rest quietly. Don't even think about coming back on duty until you hear from me. Call me if you need anything."

Her eyes closed and as he watched anxiously from the door, her expressive face relaxed towards sleep. He let himself out of the room quietly; the door closed on the muted alien music and the exhausted alien woman.

He entered his own quarters, deeply worried about her, blaming himself for not checking on her personally earlier, instead of relying on the brief exchanges they'd had via communicators. He'd had no idea it would have affected her so severely, but now, with the benefit of hindsight, it seemed blindingly obvious that such constant, close contact with stressed, suffering people would affect her mental shielding. He could only hope fervently that the solitude of her cabin with the familiarity of her native music would comfort her, and allow her abused system to heal itself, and that there would be no long-term effects.

Picard stared at his reflection in the bathroom mirror. "Not doing a very good job of protecting your officers, are you, Jean-Luc?" he asked his image sarcastically.

As he showered, he considered the cost of this mission, growing all the time; his crew exhausted but battling on valiantly through their fatigue to save lives; Tasha's bruised face; the intricate device that enabled Geordi to see, and Data's unique biomechanical body, both damaged (he prayed only temporarily); the sensitive Troi injured in a way that could only be imagined... And what of the ship's Doctor? He scowled, stepped out of the shower only half dried, and paged sickbay. Ayubi responded and informed him that Dr. Crusher had just gone off duty, sounding as if he didn't quite believe it himself. Picard thanked him and dropped wearily onto his bed, his worry about her reduced a few degrees by the news. He rubbed the back of his neck and only now realized the tension ache had been there for days. He reached again for the intercom, vaguely surprised at the heaviness of his arm.

"Captain to bridge. Everything all right up there?" He leaned back against his pillows, his chin sinking onto his chest despite his effort to stay alert, at least for the duration of contact with the bridge.

"All under control here, sir," replied the voice of the science officer who had relieved him earlier. "Numbers of incoming casualties have slowed to a trickle and the second city has just been declared safe for habitation."

"Mmm. C'est bien - Uh, thanks. Good work," he mumbled, not very coherently. He cut the connection with an effort, ordered the lights down and stretched out. Sleep came, but not gradually, after a comfortable descent into relaxation of aching muscles; it arrived with all the subtlety of a sledgehammer blow, as it does when the body has been denied rest for too long; the kind of sleep that guarantees a bad headache upon awakening, almost as if the body wreaks revenge on its owner for not taking better care of it.

His subconscious still haunted his mind with strange dreams; disturbing, fleeting images, superseded by others. He dreamed of Geordi operating on his own eyes; of Data crushed to biomechanical

pulp but still assuring him earnestly that it didn't matter; of hundreds of tiny children crawling like ants over Troi's face and her putting her hands over her ears to stop them reaching her brain; of Beverly coming towards him with a phaser to take his life as payment for his crime, which seemed only right - and everyone, everyone wore a mantle of the thick orange-red dust that Jack had been covered in when they beamed aboard; that had stuck to his dead face and permeated his clothing and only the blood from his wounds had been thick enough to wash it away.

Picard awoke, sweating coldly in the darkness, his head pounding, his throat raw as if he had been shouting. He froze rigid as Jack spoke to him.

"Wake up, please, sir; you've got to wake up!"

He grabbed at the hand that was shaking his shoulder and hoarsely called up the lights. He squinted blearily at the tousled figure whose wrist he was clutching, and let go immediately, sinking back onto the pillows with relief so powerful it left him dizzy. He licked his lips. "What on earth are you doing, Wesley?" he demanded. "What time is it?"

"03.00 hours, sir. I - "

"Why are you here?" he asked hazily. "This isn't your room."

"You've got to come, sir, please. It's Mom. Please come," begged the boy, his eyes looking huge in the pale face lined with anxiety.

Picard sat up so fast the room spun around him. He reached for his dressing robe. "What's wrong with her?"

"She's having one of her bad dreams again and I can't wake her up," came the breathless explanation.

The Captain stopped half-way through tying his belt. "You woke me up because she's having a bad *dream*?" He stared incredulously at the son of his old friend. "What am I supposed to do about it? I can't just walk in on her when she's - "

"You don't understand!" Wesley bit his lip to control his cry. "It's really bad this time - usually I can take care of her, but she won't wake up. Please come, sir, I don't know who else to ask. She'll listen to you. You did say..." His voice trailed off and he moved agitatedly towards the door.

"Yes, I did, didn't I?" said Picard, half to himself. "But surely someone better - the Counselor..." He cut himself off, remembering the condition she'd been in. He rose, disturbed by the genuine fear in the boy's eyes.

They sped along the deserted corridor and Picard spared a glance for the worried young face beside him. Surely, he thought fuzzily, *it's the parents who are meant to get up in the night to see to their children. Isn't that what parents do?* He shook his head to clear the cloudy remnants of sleep from his mind. "What do you mean by 'usually'?" he asked brusquely. "How often does she have these nightmares?"

Wesley's urgent pace did not slacken as he answered. "Not often, but when she's got really worn out or upset, then it

happens. The last time was the day we beamed aboard."

A picture flashed before Picard's eyes of her standing on his bridge, like a ghost from his past, defending her son against him that first day, and another memory, later, when he had gone to her office to offer her a transfer and had made a complete idiot of himself by misunderstanding everything she'd tried to say to him, and his feeble parting line, "I hope we can be friends, Doctor." He groaned inwardly. A hand tugged hesitantly at his sleeve and he realised they had reached the threshold of the suite shared by the Crushers. Wesley led him through to his mother's room, then hung back in the doorway, his eyes fixed worriedly on the subject of their concern.

Picard looked at the woman writhing in the torment of some inescapable nightmare, then glanced questioningly at her son, not sure what was expected of him, but Wesley just shook his head and blurted out, "Help her," and backed out through the door into the sitting room, leaving them alone together. He watched her helplessly for a minute. He could not make out the words she was whispering to herself; her head thrashed from side to side as if in unbearable pain. Shadows under her eyes were startling purple smudges against white skin.

The Captain approached the bed slowly and his mouth set in a hard line when he picked out her husband's name from the endless stream of words she was muttering. He tried not to listen; she seemed to be begging him to forgive her for something. He silently damned Ludros to hell - was it going to hurt everyone he cared about? He moved nearer in sudden alarm when he spotted blood on the bedcover. A fist was crushing a fold of blanket in its grasp and he saw that the back of the hand was marked by long, deep scratches, oozing blood. He hesitated no longer, but bent over the bed and shook its distressed occupant, gently at first, then harder. It had no effect and as he paused, wondering what to do next, he saw her right hand move to her left, fingers bent with blood-stained nails ready to inflict more damage.

Hastily he caught hold of the offending wrist, thinking, *Mon dieu, is this what Wesley meant by looking after her?* The wrist fought to be free of his restraint and tugged him off balance and he found himself sitting unexpectedly on the edge of the bed, still clutching the wrist as it strained to reach the injured hand. "Beverly, wake up!" he ordered. "You're having a bad dream." She stopped struggling and lay tensely, her head tilted as if listening, her breathing ragged and harsh. Encouraged by such an improvement, he repeated, "Wake up, Beverly. It's all right. It's Jean-Luc."

When he spoke his name, she suddenly flung herself upright into his arms, hugging him fiercely, crying and laughing all at once. "Oh, Jack, Jack! I've had such an awful dream!" Picard sat rigid with shock, holding her by automatic reflex, staring numbly at the tangled auburn hair on the head leaning against his chest. Words poured from her. "Oh, Jack, I dreamed you'd been killed and your captain brought home your body and there was orange dust in your hair and I hadn't told you about the baby and I was so afraid and lonely, I was going to - "

"Beverly!" His voice cracked on her name as he found the strength to hold her away from him and shake her slightly. God knew he didn't want to be here doing this, hearing this, feeling this...

Her eyes came open and stared at him, not seeing him, he knew,

but who she wanted to be there. "Please, Beverly, wake up," he begged.

She smiled slowly. "I am awake, darling. It was only a dream - the baby's fine, he's in the nursery with Wes, everything's all right." She pulled away from his support and sat up, leaving his neck feeling cold where her arms had been and pushed back the tangled blankets to free her legs. Picard watched in growing alarm as she padded barefoot over to the mirror and sat on the stool before it. She picked up a hairbrush and began brushing the tangles from her hair with regular, methodical strokes. She smiled a little vacantly at his stunned reflection in the glass. "What shall we do today, darling? I thought we might take Wes and the baby out for a picnic by the lake."

Picard stood up irresolutely. What was wrong with her? She appeared to be awake but she didn't know him. Was she still asleep, and dreaming all this? - surely their cool, reserved doctor didn't walk in her sleep? Yet that was a more preferable theory than that the strain of dealing with the Ludrosans had proved too much for her, and her mind had regressed in time to spare her the pain she had suffered since. He did not know what to do - this was outside his experience, and command training had not included dealing with somnambulists on the syllabus. He clung to the hope that was all this was. He only recalled vaguely that people said you weren't supposed to awaken them. So he wouldn't. He advanced towards her, feeling curiously apprehensive, and tried to sound more confident than he felt. "Come on, Beverly, back to bed now."

She replaced the hairbrush carefully and seemed to look right through him. "No, Jack. I don't want to. I might have that dream again."

He marvelled that whatever was going on inside her head could be so real to her. "But it's not time to get up yet," he said persuasively. "It's still night."

"Oh." This seemed to make sense to her. "All right." She stood up and he reached an arm around her shoulders to guide her back to bed. Half way across the room her steps faltered and she stopped.

"Come on, you're nearly there," coaxed Picard, his eyes fixed on their goal. When she did not move, he looked at her and saw disorientation cracking her calm, mask-like expression. She glanced around wildly, then back at him, and he steeled himself as he saw horrified realisation dawn with agonising slowness in her eyes. Her knees buckled suddenly and he caught her before she fell. "It's all right," he said softly, manoeuvring her to the bed. She sat down, shaking, and covered her face with a hand in a gesture eerily similar to the one her son had used a few days previously.

"I'm sorry," she said, her voice catching on the words. "I've made a fool of myself, haven't I? Please go away now."

"No, you haven't, and I'm not going anywhere just yet," he replied firmly. There was no way he could leave her in this state, no matter how inviting the thought of resuming his own interrupted slumber might be. He wrapped the half of the blanket she wasn't sitting on around her trembling shoulders, and sat beside her.

"I'm sorry," she said again.

"Please don't apologise." Picard felt quite unnerved by her continued, unnatural calm - he would have had a better idea of how to treat her if she was howling her eyes out, which was surely what she ought to be doing.

She picked at a loose thread in the blanket, her face averted from him. "Mother and father used to be angry when I sleepwalked," she said flatly.

"Why?"

She shrugged. "I had to promise not to tell anyone about it so they wouldn't be embarrassed by their odd daughter. In fact, my whole existence was an embarrassment to them."

"What do you mean?" asked Picard, resolved to keep her talking as long as she would in the hope of easing some of her rigid tension.

"They never wanted children," she explained, still in that flat, monotonous tone. "I was a very late baby, totally unplanned. A mistake. They didn't know what to do with me - I was an intrusion in their well-ordered lives. They preferred it when I was kept out of their way, so I figured out very early on in my life how to cope with problems myself. I never let them see me upset because it irritated them. My parents were never there when I needed them so I learned never to need anyone."

You learned well, thought Picard, full of sorrow for her.

"But you never stop trying to win their approval, do you? No matter how obvious it is you'll never get it."

Picard shook his head, bemused. "I don't know. This isn't like anything in my childhood."

"They made large donations to local hospitals - veritable pillars of the community. Father had a cardiac problem; he had to see a specialist quite regularly. They both had a lot of respect for the medical profession."

"Is that why you became a doctor?"

"I only wanted them to be proud of me. Just once," she whispered.

"Oh, Beverly!" Picard groaned softly in an agony of helplessness.

"It didn't make any difference, of course. But it didn't matter. I enjoyed my training, particularly the academic aspect of it. I wasn't so comfortable coping with the patients but I got by. I started doing research in my own time. It was a useful way of helping people without having to get... involved with them."

Or letting them get close to you, realised Picard, beginning to understand more about this enigmatic woman than he had ever imagined possible.

"I spent all my spare time working, so before long the other students stopped asking me to go out with them for meals and visits and left me alone. I got more wrapped up in my research in between my studying. But then I started having problems with my medical

training." She smiled, a small, grim smile. "No doubt you've noticed my bedside manner leaves a lot to be desired. Well, it was much worse then. Patients always wanted to talk about their problems and their families - and they'd want me to help them and reassure them. I just didn't know how to do that - I couldn't understand how they expected talking about their worries to solve anything when they should have been getting on and *doing* something about them." A frown of frustration creased her forehead, as if this was still beyond her comprehension. Picard thought it best not to interrupt her to offer his own opinion at this point. She continued, "During my fourth year of training, I was on the verge of being dropped because of my 'cold, unfeeling attitude' to patients. The situation was something of a predicament for the faculty, because my academic work was always the best in the class." She stated this matter-of-factly, with no pride or sense of achievement.

Picard shifted his position slightly. "You never had a chance to learn how to relate to people."

"A poor excuse," she said. Then her expression softened. "Anyway, one day a young Starfleet cadet fell down a flight of stairs in a shopping mall and landed on top of me!" She noticed the Captain's involuntary grin. "Yes, I suppose you already know that story, don't you?"

"I heard about the matching sprained ankles, and a very heated lecture on the subject of cadets not watching where they're going given by a highly attractive young medical student."

She smiled reminiscently. "I don't know what came over me - I didn't make a habit of shouting at strangers. This stranger - he wouldn't leave me alone. All the excuses I'd perfected over the years to avoid going out with people never worked with him. He wouldn't take 'no' for an answer."

"He always was a single-minded individual," observed Picard.

"I learned so much from him," the Doctor said wonderingly, as if even now she couldn't believe it. "He taught me how to be genuinely interested in people and their lives, to stop being so afraid of them and to enjoy their company. He had so many friends, and they all welcomed me and included me in everything. I couldn't understand why, but it was a wonderful world to be part of, instead of on the outside, always looking in. I got better at dealing with patients - there was no more talk of my being dismissed. I had to suspend my research - I never seemed to have time for it any more. We both graduated our respective academies with honours and we got married and I was happier than I'd ever dreamed anyone could ever be. Life was a different colour - like a rainbow! Of course, when he was assigned to his ship and away for long periods we missed each other a lot, but his friends were very kind to me, and I enjoyed my work at the hospital and resumed my research, and we planned our lives around his shore leaves. We kept in touch by tapes and subspace comm when we could, and the time we spent together was so special it made up for the partings. When Wes was born we had everything we ever wanted. Jack adored him and we made such plans! I was going to be the best mother there had ever been and our baby was going to be the happiest. At the very least," she said, suddenly fierce, "I was always going to be there for my son when he needed me. And then, one day - " She fell silent, and the spark of animation faded from her eyes and life seemed to drain out of her. With a visible effort she continued. "One day a Starfleet chaplain turned up at the hospital to see me, and not long after that you

arrived, so I had to believe what he'd told me, and it was all over. A door slammed shut and the colours died and it was all grey again. I went straight back to my old ways." Her face contorted. "It was almost as if he'd never existed. All he'd taught me was for nothing - I couldn't believe it on my own. I couldn't bear anyone's company but my son's. I must have hurt all our friends very badly when I rejected all their offers of help. I realised that caring for people doesn't always work. There was no point in trying any more - apart from Wes, of course. I couldn't switch off my feelings for him - and I wouldn't have made the effort to survive that time if it hadn't been for him."

There was a long silence. Picard felt overwhelmed with the amount of information he had received in such a short space of time. He wanted to put her right about so many, many things, to break through the wall she'd spent most of her life constructing to hide behind, and free her from this pitiful isolation, but he held back, sensing strongly that there was much she had not yet spoken of that would enable him to understand her even better, and he wanted to keep her talking. He was still concerned by her preternatural calm as she sat unmoving beside him, and wondered if her unyielding self-control would break tonight. If it did not, at this time when her normally impenetrable defences were practically non-existent (due, he supposed, to the after-effects of her sleepwalking and the nightmare, whatever that had been about), he feared it never would, and what became of a person who never, ever, gave into their feelings?

He noticed she was shivering. He passed her the dressing robe draped over the back of a chair, and looked away politely while she put it on over her nightgown. She leaned back against the wall, pulled the blanket over her knees and hugged a pillow to her stomach, resting her chin on it. Picard changed his position from the bed to the chair so he could face her. She glanced up as he moved, looking tired and pale, and very vulnerable. "You aren't going?" He thought he detected panic in her voice.

"No, I'm just fidgeting," he reassured her. He nodded towards the robe she wore. "That's nearly the same colour as the dress you wore to the party the year Stargazer was in spacedock for Christmas," he remarked. She stared at him in surprise. His face was screwed up with an exaggerated effort to remember. "It was long and floaty, sea green, and you wore your hair up with a sort of..." his hands clumsily sketched a small tiara in the air... "thing in it."

Her head tilted in acknowledgement. "Well remembered, Captain. May I ask why?"

"Madam, you underestimate yourself!" returned Picard, bringing a ghost of a smile to her lips. "Don't you think I wasn't intrigued to meet this beautiful young wife with whom my First Officer was besotted?" His eyebrows rose in mock reproach. "You and I had one dance together, as protocol demanded."

"You trod on my foot!" she recalled.

Picard looked embarrassed. "You were very polite about it. You spent the rest of the evening dancing with your husband. You never seemed to tire - you were both still going strong when I left the party."

She relaxed a little, reliving the past. "That was a wonderful

party. I was so proud of him."

"Beverly."

She glanced at her husband's friend, mildly curious at the hesitation in his voice, still warmed by the memory of that happy time.

"Tell me why you came to the Enterprise." There was a note of pleading in his voice.

She sighed and hugged the pillow tighter to herself. "I think I hated you for a while," she said frankly. He nodded; he had expected that and was only relieved to hear her use the past tense. "I was - I found things... difficult for a time. I kept... forgetting it had happened. When I woke up in the mornings, I still expected his tapes to arrive, and the little presents he used to send. I kept making plans in my head for our next shore leave, for things to tell him on tapes." She shook herself and continued a little more steadily. "But when I could - when I started to watch his old mail tapes again, I began to notice just how many times your name cropped up in stories and anecdotes he told me." She stared intensely at the hologram of him beside the bed. "I joined Starfleet because they let me take Wes with me, and Jack always wanted him to know and love space as much as he did. We couldn't take him, so I did." She reached out for the hologram, smiled a little at the image of the man proudly holding their baby. "And I came to your ship because I was curious to know what kind of man had commanded my husband's loyalty enough for him to die for." She looked at the Captain whose eyes were fixed on the floor, his cheeks flaming. "I had found myself thinking about you more and more. You shared more of Jack's life than I did, you saw a different side to him. You must have known him better in many ways... I thought by coming here, I might understand him better. I wanted... to know more about him."

"I wish you had told me," he reproached her gently. "It has been my dearest wish to talk with you about him, but you must realise my position - the first move had to come from you."

She flushed and thumped her pillow into a more comfortable shape. "It wasn't like I thought," she admitted, embarrassed.

"What wasn't?" The Captain's bewilderment was obvious.

"You don't like Wesley!" she blurted out accusingly, her face burning.

Picard leaned back in the chair, his hands clasped with fingers interlaced. "Ah." How could he expect her to understand if he tried to explain his conflicting feelings about her son, when he himself did not?

"And I had - I *have*," she corrected herself, "no idea how you felt about Jack. For all I know you could have been just another -"

"You have no right to say that!" snapped Picard, coming to his feet, his eyes blazing.

She looked up at him. "As I said," she replied mildly, "I have no idea."

"I'm sorry. Of course you haven't." He made himself sit down and tried to speak calmly. "Jack was an excellent First Officer - and my best friend, and I sent him to his death that day. I will always wonder if it would have made any difference if I'd sent fewer men with him, or more, or if I'd been there too. I've never been able to forgive myself for what happened." She watched changing emotions shadow his face as she listened to the words she had wanted to hear for so many years. He continued with difficulty. "I haven't lost many men under my command," adding bitterly, "as deep space missions go, but," he stared into nothingness, reliving old memories, "I've mourned all of them; Jack most and longest of all. That night, when I knew he was dead and I couldn't even get to him..." His hands clenched convulsively as he remembered the agony of guilt and helplessness; the flaming row with his chief security officer who had tried to prevent him beaming back down; the incongruous beauty of the black, velvet sky strewn with diamond bright stars above the chill desert night; the weight of the limp, lifeless body of his friend in his arms. He looked at her almost pleadingly. "Don't ever think I didn't care."

She bowed her head to hide her face from him. "Thank you," she whispered. "You don't know how long I've wanted to hear that. It gives his death... some meaning."

"You could have asked," he said softly.

The Doctor reached up to push her hair back and winced as she bent her head. She glanced briefly at the scratches, stiff with drying blood, and hastily thrust her hand into her dressing robe pocket in an attempt to conceal its condition from the man watching her.

"It's a little late for that," he pointed out gently. She looked embarrassed. "It must have been quite some dream." His voice was very quiet, his tone encouraging.

She shifted her position on the bed wretchedly, almost angrily, as if unable to endure even the memory of it. The captain waited patiently. Her chin sank into the pillow she still clutched to her chest. "Have you noticed the awful dust?" she asked eventually, her voice muffled. "It's on everyone."

Picard nodded, grimacing. "I know. It's horrible. I was dreaming about it." He checked himself and looked at her, surprised. "How did you...?"

"It was in his hair," she said unsteadily. "I tried brushing it out but it was sticky."

"I'm sorry, I thought I'd got it all..." He trailed off uncertainly.

"It's all right. I've realised these past few days that he must have been covered in it." She began to shiver again, and hugged the pillow to herself more tightly. Picard started to move towards her in concern, but she shook her head and began to speak rapidly, a quality of desperation in her voice making the hairs on the back of his neck prickle. "Jean-Luc, have you ever done something you've hated yourself for, and however much time passes, the guilt never goes away?"

"We've just been talking about it," he said simply. He wondered what was coming.

"There's something I've never told anyone." Her shaking was getting worse, her breathing fast and shallow. He was becoming increasingly worried about her.

"Try to tell me," he said gently.

She shook her head; wanting him to know, he could see, but unable to say it. "You'll never trust me again," she got out through chattering teeth.

"If you trust me with a secret that's hurting you this badly, how could I not trust you in return?" She looked down at him, tormented, and he could see her longing to believe him. "You can tell me, cherie, it's only words."

She began to twist the plain gold band around and around her finger in agitation. He noticed its existence for the first time and with inward surprise - he had looked for but never seen her wearing her wedding ring since she had been aboard. "Do you remember you came to see me the day before the funeral? You brought me his things."

"Of course."

"There was a mail tape. He hadn't opened it."

Picard cast his mind back. He recalled his own dread at the meeting; how hollow his words of condolence had sounded in the quiet room; how unnervingly calm the widow had been. Until - he had passed over the box of her husband's possessions. A long-buried memory rose to the surface of his mind with startling clarity. Her hand had delved among the clothes, the holograms, the medals and other personal effects, apparently searching, and had picked out a mail tape she seemed to recognise. Her eyes had fixed onto the seal, still unbroken and firmly in place, and her expression had crumpled and she had fled to stand by the window, staring unseeingly outside, clutching the tape tightly. Picard had approached her cautiously, asking her if she was all right, if there was anything he could do, but she had given no sign that she had even heard him. She had remained motionless, almost catatonic, for several minutes, and the spell was only broken when her infant son trotted into the room, carefully carrying a plate bearing a sandwich several inches thick, stuffed with a weird and wonderful assortment of fillings, both sweet and savoury, and topped with a melting blob of ice cream. He had presented the concoction proudly to his mother, declaring it to be her lunch. She had collapsed into helpless laughter, hugging her son close to her, and soon afterwards had bid the Captain a polite farewell.

"I remember seeing the tape. It arrived a few days after - too late for him to see it. Was it from you?"

She nodded once, tightly, her eyes averted from his. Picard's mind whirled with increasingly ridiculous scenarios. "Do you want to tell me what was in it?" He hoped against hope she wasn't going to tell him she'd been having an affair because he didn't think there was anything he could say to make her feel less guilty about that. When she spoke again, she appeared to have changed the subject completely and his mind had to make another leap back in time to keep up with her.

"Three months before he died, Stargazer stopped over in spacedock to undergo warp drive adjustments. The crew all got a

fortnight's leave."

"Yes, I remember."

"Jack came come. We had a wonderful holiday, the three of us. Just like a normal family." A faint smile touched her lips for a second, then was gone. "That tape - it took me a long time to get the words just right. I had a surprise to tell him about. I'd much rather have told him in person, but he wouldn't be home again in time." She fell silent for a long time, her eyes closed, until the Captain began to wonder if she had fallen asleep. She finally spoke again, so quietly he had to strain to make out her words. "I was pregnant."

The words hung in the air like oil droplets suspended in water, and nothing between them would ever be the same again. Picard swallowed hard several times. "Jack never knew." It was not a question - his friend would never have been able to keep that news to himself.

"No." She stared blindly at the hologram. "Somehow, it wouldn't have been so hard if he'd known."

He thought back to the fitted black dress, the wind playing through her hair, the toddler standing sturdily beside her, regarding the proceedings with solemn interest. "It didn't show at the funeral."

"I know."

"What happened?" he asked gently.

She shifted her position uneasily on the bed. "What happened... was... I..." She stopped, shaking her head. "I can't tell you. It doesn't matter. Please leave me alone now." Her fingers twisted together wretchedly in her lap. He could see she was balanced precariously on the knife-edge between her great need to share her life-shadowing burden and her fear at having already revealed her vulnerability. He knew that if he left now, when she had struggled to tell him this much, she would withdraw into herself permanently and neither he, nor probably anyone else, would ever be allowed this close to her again. He moved to sit on the edge of the bed and took her uninjured hand in both of his. "Yes, you can tell me," he told her firmly. "You're nearly there."

She clutched his hands with surprising strength, her breath coming in choking sobs. "Oh, Jean-Luc, don't hate me... I couldn't face having it, I felt so alone - I couldn't talk to anyone about it; no-one knew. I already loved Wes, but another unknown life might have come between us. I was all Wes had, and he was still hardly more than a baby - he needed me. I wouldn't have been able to love a new baby. The day after the funeral, I got some pills and in the evening, just after I'd put Wes to bed, I put them on the table in front of me and just stared at them. I don't know how long for; hours, I think." Picard's hands were crushed painfully in hers and her head bowed to hide her shame from him. "I knew it wouldn't hurt much, just the cramps and the bleeding - it would have been all over by morning."

Picard realised that he was holding his breath, and made himself exhale slowly. He could feel his stomach muscles contracting in empathy with her searing emotions.

She continued unsteadily, "I picked up the pills to take them, and just as I did the door opened and Wes came in. He had blue pyjamas with spaceships on. He asked me if I was all right - said he thought he'd heard me crying. I wasn't, of course - he's never seen or heard me cry," she added with a touch of bleak pride. "He climbed onto my lap and hugged me and told me he'd look after me. He was three years old, Jean-Luc." He squeezed her hand, but did not speak. She went on hoarsely, "I took him back to bed and tucked him in and read him to sleep with a story. Then I went back to the kitchen and flushed the pills down the sink." A clenched fist pressed against her mouth. "It was Jack's child I was carrying, for God's sake! I couldn't just... I'm a doctor, that's against everything I believe in. I knew we'd have to manage somehow." She drew a shaky breath, and her voice faltered on her next words. "Exactly one week later I had a miscarriage."

The Captain closed his eyes momentarily. He understood intellectually what she had told him, but he supposed only another woman could fully identify with the emotional loss she had suffered, enduring it alone, as she had, and so soon after the death of her husband. He remembered suddenly an incident which had puzzled him a month earlier, but had subsequently forgotten. He had entered sickbay late one night, unnoticed, and had seen Beverly cradling in her arms the latest twenty-four hour addition to the Enterprise's complement. The expression downturned to the baby was tender and loving beyond any he could have imagined seeing on the CMO's face, but there had also been some indefinable hunger, some deep sadness in her eyes. He had withdrawn silently, oddly troubled and feeling as though he had intruded on a very private scene. Now he understood.

"It wasn't your fault," he managed.

"How can you say that!" she cried desperately. "It so nearly *was* my fault that it makes no difference. I came within seconds of taking those pills; of killing Jack's baby."

"But you *didn't*!" Picard caught her shoulders in his hands and shook her gently. "Listen to me! You didn't take those pills. It wasn't your fault. You can't be sure you'd have swallowed them even if Wesley hadn't interrupted you. Do you hear me, Beverly? Having the intention to do something doesn't make a shred of difference in life - not until you do it. And you *didn't* do it."

"But I betrayed Jack," she said unevenly.

"You did not. Stop being so hard on yourself." Picard reached out to tilt her chin upwards gently, making her look at him. "Remember you told me I knew him better in some ways than you?" She nodded, her eyes fearfully on his face. "Well, you were obviously right about that, because I *know*, with no shadow of doubt, that he would have understood how you felt, how alone you were, and have forgiven you, even if you had carried out your intention."

She seemed to be having trouble with her breathing. "I don't think I feel very well," she told him faintly. Her eyes were wide with fright as she began to labour for air.

"I'm not at all surprised," Picard said gently. He knew what was happening to her at last, even though she didn't seem to. "Don't fight it. Let me help you." He touched her shoulder and she half-collapsed against his chest with a stifled cry and clung to him, desperate for the comfort his arms offered. He murmured

something to soothe her and suddenly, finally, her conscious will lost to her subconscious needs and a great storm of weeping broke from her. She cried as someone might who never had before, who didn't know how. The racking sobs were wrenched violently from her, as if the escape of each one was physically painful for her, and a disgrace. Picard held her close to him, bowing his head to rest on hers as it buried into his shoulder. Her hair smelt faintly of roses. The great depth of her distress brought an ache to his throat, and his own eyes were not entirely dry by the time her sobs gradually subsided, an eternity later. She leaned against him drowsily and they remained quietly for some time until Picard found himself almost dozing off. He stirred and withdrew his arm, stiff and aching from its awkward position around her shoulders. She took the tissues he offered and rubbed listlessly at her red, swollen eyes. She glanced up to encounter deep compassion on the face watching her and she reached out to touch his cheek, smiling slightly in almost childlike wonder at the tear glistening on her finger. "Is that for me?"

Picard smoothed her hair back from the face still damp and flushed from crying. "For you, and for Jack. I don't think I really cried for him either."

"Thank you for caring, Jean-Luc."

"We still have a great deal to talk about, cherie, but I think for now it would do you the most good to sleep."

"I feel strange," she told him as she lay down obediently. "Sort of heavy. Like I've been drugged."

He tucked the blankets around her. "You'll feel better when you wake up, you'll see." He hesitated. "Please don't be embarrassed in the morning for having told me this. I'm glad you've told me, and you'll find it might hurt a little less, now you haven't got to bear it alone."

She caught his hand for a moment. "Thank you," she whispered.

He squeezed her hand before releasing it. "Thank you for trusting me. Friends now?"

"Friends," she told him, smiling sleepily.

He touched her cheek with the back of two fingers in a gentle caress and then headed for the door. Her drowsy voice stopped him with his hand poised to dim the light.

"Jean-Luc? I forgot to ask. How did you know to come?"

"Wes fetched me."

"Wes?" Her eyes widened in hazy surprise and she struggled to prop herself up on one elbow. "Not 'your son' or 'the boy'?"

"I said 'Wes'," repeated Picard firmly.

She smiled with pleasure as if he had given her a gift she would value above any other, and he left her to sleep.

In the sitting room he discovered the subject of their parting conversation sprawled out on the sofa, his mother's lab coat draped ineffectually over his lanky form. A line of worry creased his

forehead even in sleep. Picard entered the boy's sleeping quarters in search of a blanket and lingered a moment in the untidy room to look thoughtfully at the star maps and science charts adorning the walls, and the chain of molecular models arranged on the table. He returned to the sitting room and was careful not to waken the boy as he covered him with the blanket, thinking drily that if the current trend continued, there soon wouldn't be many members of his crew that he hadn't tucked into bed. He stepped back to admire his handiwork, and his expression became pensive as he found himself studying the sleeping face. He saw for the first time, not a precocious, tactless child continually meddling in matters which did not concern him, but a young adult with the initiative to take charge, efficiently and uncomplainingly, of a herd of pesky infants no-one else had time for during a crisis; with the intelligence and maturity beyond his years to strive to overcome a lifetime of understandable bitterness towards a race of people responsible for his father's death and his mother's long years of unassuageable grief and loneliness; who considered his mother's welfare his natural and obvious responsibility because he was the only person permitted close enough to her heart to do so, and defended her staunchly, without her even knowing, against anyone, however high in Starfleet hierarchy they might be, who he considered was threatening her right to as happy a life as was possible.

Picard's eyes lifted to the hologram on the wall which he recognised as the one Jack used to keep in his quarters, of him and his wife, radiant on their wedding day. *Would you approve of what I've said to your wife and your son, mon ami?* he silently asked the image smiling at him with heartbreaking familiarity. *Have I, perhaps, discharged a small part of the great debt I owe you? I will try to take better care of them, now that I have glimpsed a little of what lies in their hearts.*

Wesley stirred, drawing the Captain's attention back to him. He wondered whether it was the place of a confirmed bachelor, inexperienced in family matters, to suggest to a mother that her son was old enough to understand much more than she gave him credit for, and that trying to hide her feelings from him worried him more than sharing them would. Did he dare to try to reiterate the lessons Beverly Crusher had once learned from her husband, that true friends were the most precious blessings held in the universe and that people you cared for deeply did not always - or even usually - reject your love, or die and leave you vulnerable and alone?

Picard's chin came up decisively and he nodded once at the hologram in salute before leaving the room to head for his own quarters, his exhaustion temporarily forgotten. It was his choice now to try his utmost to help Beverly - not as an attempt to repay the great debt of her husband's life, because there could be no repayment of that, but because she was a valued member of the crew, given to his care and protection, and as such he owed her no less attention and understanding than he tried to accord the rest of his key officers - his patience with Tasha, his trust of Deanna, his encouragement of Data, his friendship with Will. It would need all of these considerations and more to give her the chance of believing that love was something to be cherished and rejoiced in, not feared and fought against, and he knew it would not be easy, but his decision to try was made, and this night he had taken the first step in making it so.

