

MAKE IT SO 3



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

Hello everyone, and welcome to MAKE IT SO 3. It's nice to see so many writers working with the Next Generation characters - Lorraine Goodison in particular has been very prolific!

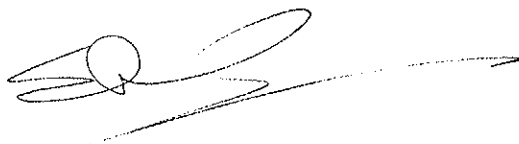
Karen Sparks has been keeping busy; as well as having two stories in this issue, she typed them. She has also been typing up some long stories for us (thanks, Karen!), and between Scotpress and IDIC we hope to have two of these out in the next month or two, certainly in time for Frontiers in May.

A lot of the writers are still using the TNG episodes, or facts given in one of the episodes, to explore the characters, and three of the stories here typify this well; Lorraine Goodison's "Turning Point" and Scott Carrick's "Decision Time" both take as a starting point the episode "Samaritan Snare", in which we learn that Picard has an artificial heart which is malfunctioning and must be replaced; however, where Lorraine explores what happened to Picard as a cadet, Scott explores Picard's reactions after his operation. The two stories show very clearly how two people, starting from the same point - the same information, if you like - can produce two totally different stories. And Karen's "Natasha" is a beautiful story about survival in the most adverse of circumstances.

Lori Scott's "What's In a Name" will also be appearing in an American zine. Lori is a new writer, and in all innocence she submitted the story to two editors. When she told us (after we'd typed the story) we thought about it very hard, because it's not really fair to readers if they buy two zines and the same story is in both. However, it's a nice little story, and we felt that since it's only three pages long and the other printing will be (has been?) in America, only one or two readers are likely to find themselves with two copies of it and we could go ahead this time.

MAKE IT SO 2 has been criticised for including a couple of stories involving the characters from Original Trek. As we already said in the IDIC newsletter, we have a problem here. What should we do with OT/TNG cross-over stories? As we see it, we have three options; put the story in the time slot where it occurs (which we did); put it where the main character is 'at home', so to speak (which, again, we did); or do we keep one zine purely for these stories? As readers of MAKE IT SO, which would you prefer? We've already had one or two suggestions from IDIC members, but we'd like a wider range of opinions. The problem has not arisen in this issue - all the stories in it are pure TNG - but we know of at least three writers who are working on cross-over stories.

We hope you enjoy this issue.



As always, submissions are welcome; stories should be about characters who appeared in TNG; no death stories (except Yar); and no explicit sex. Submissions can be sent to either

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or

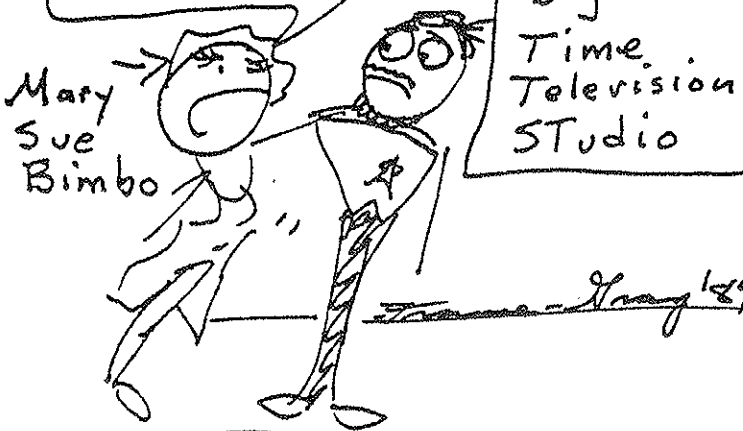
Valerie Piacentini
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The Schizoid Man

Please, you got to help me! My evil mentor, The Mad Professor, has taken over your Token android!

Mary Sue Bimbo

Big Time Television Studio

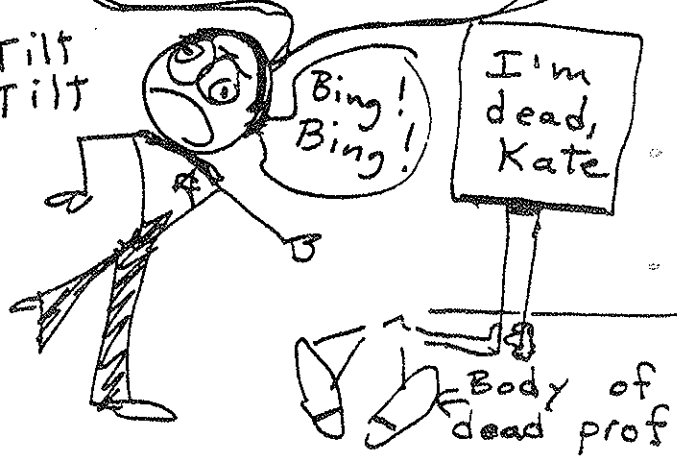


"I think that I shall never see A mite as lovely as a flea!"

Tilt Tilt

Bing! Bing!

I'm dead, Kate



To know him is to love him is to barf--

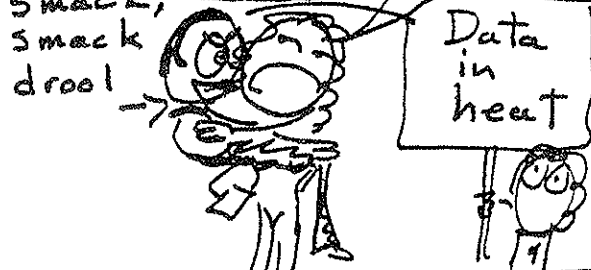
Uh Data, isn't it time for you to take command of The Bridge?



Uh, Data, you've been acting a little strange (even for an android). So, to prove my competency as a ship's shrink (it's about Time) I've decided to give you some Tests!

Smack, smack drool

Data in heat



Counselor, how could Data be threatening the ship's engines when you tests passed him off as normal?

Writer's whim?

Help me! I'm too young to die!

Giggles! hehheh

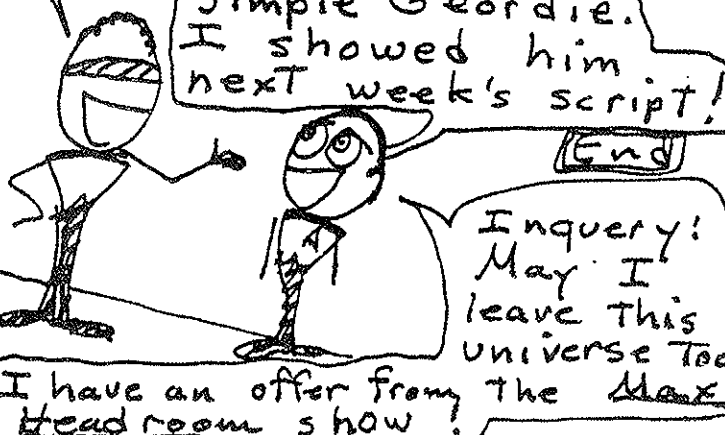
The Big E. Doubletalk Engines



Incredible! The spirit of The Mad Professor has left and you're Data! How did you do it?

Simple Geordie. I showed him next week's script!

END



TURNING POINT

by

Lorraine Goodison

Commander Einar Malik had, he believed, seen more than his fair share of young officers fresh from Starfleet Academy. The Academy seemed to delight in sending them to Farspace Starbase Eirhart in the belief that a spell of final training on the edge of Federation territory knocked them into shape. Malik was of the opinion that there were easier ways and he frequently wished he had one of them at his disposal. As it was, his task of moulding these youths into half-decent Starfleet personnel was often complicated by their own mercurial natures. A prime example was at this moment sitting opposite him, waiting for final words from his tutor before bouncing off to whatever social pursuit he had planned.

Cadet Jean-Luc Picard was the kind of graduate who gave Malik sleepless nights. Keen as mustard, greener than a Vegan and puffed up with self-importance, Picard embodied the average new graduate - cocky as hell. Intelligent, genial, opinionated and stubborn, Picard was top of his group with the popularity stakes. In Malik's experience, that combination spelt trouble. The young man was not a shirker, far from it, but he was too sharp for his own good. Malik knew there was potential there and felt that with a little self-discipline, Picard could make an excellent officer. The difficulty was in imparting this wisdom to someone who thought he knew it all.

Malik eyed Cadet Picard thoughtfully, pondering how he could broach the subject without hitting against that infernal stubbornness. Well, in for a penny...

"That's about it," he said, relaxing back into his chair. "Your over-all assessment for this quarter has been excellent." Malik winced inwardly at the beaming smile his comment produced. "There are one or two rough areas, but I'm sure you'll work at them."

"Yes, sir."

"I thought so..." Malik paused, turning the words over in his mind. "There is one point, however, that I think it's time you seriously considered."

Picard sat forward in his seat, all attention. "Sir?"

"Passing all the course is one thing - putting everything into practical application is another." He stared long and hard at the cadet. "In two weeks, you'll be posted to a ship for training."

Picard nodded, eyes gleaming at the prospect.

"What I want you to ask yourself is - 'Am I ready?'"

"Oh, yes," Picard blurted before looking faintly embarrassed at his exuberance.

"Blind self-confidence will only take you so far," Malik said

acidly, reminded of too many eager faces who never reached their dreams. "In a command situation, blundering ahead because you're sure you're right won't win any points."

"Surely self-control is the key to control of the situation," Picard suggested. "You should have the courage of your convictions."

"Not if it loses you respect, or worse. There's a difference that you'll learn as you go, but for now you have to learn self-control or you'll never leave planetside, much less travel deep space." Malik waited, wondering if his words were sinking in. From the slight frown on Picard's face, he doubted it. *Here it comes*, he thought.

"I have learned self-control," Picard asserted. "When I took fencing this year, I - "

"You learned all the correct moves, all the techniques, just as you should," Malik interrupted. "Oh, you're good, or so I'm told, but have you wondered why it's included as an elective in the fourth year?"

"Discipline," Picard responded crisply.

"Exactly. Discipline of mind and body, but more importantly - " Malik leaned forward, willing the cadet to take his point - "it teaches a discipline which goes beyond the surface gloss. Can you truly say you've taken what you've learned into your everyday life? Have you absorbed its lessons?"

For once Picard was stuck for words. Malik could practically see the wheels turning. He turned towards his desk screen and called up the report on the next cadet. "That's all for now," he said quietly. "Send the next one in as you leave, and... Jean-Luc, think about what I've said; in the past and today."

Cadet Picard left the office in a more subdued frame of mind than when he'd entered, but the friend waiting outside chased the momentary blues away.

Sanyi Harredn grinned widely, walking forward to slap Picard's shoulder. "What kinda mood's he in today, Jean-Luc? What did he say?"

"Nothing new," Picard replied with a shrug. He pulled on a conciliatory expression as he continued, "Bad news for you, I'm afraid... he said you're destined for the garbage detail."

"Ha!" Harredn swung an arm at his colleague, who dodged it easily and sauntered away. The Andorian turned as he headed for the office door. "Don't forget - Stell's tonight."

"Am I likely to forget?" came the jaunty reply.

The merriment quickly wore off once Jean-Luc Picard left the main administration block. As his feet covered the distance to his quarters, he pondered Malik's words. He'd told Sanyi they were nothing new, and neither they were; he'd heard them in as many variations as possible from widely diverse sources. They still went against the grain. He just did not see why he should have to change when he'd got along fine just as he was.

The comment about fencing had surprised him, though. He had never really considered applying its disciplines outwith the lessons. His mind flashed back to a frequent complaint bellowed at him by his instructor; 'Restraint! You must learn restraint. There is more to this than throwing a blade around and looking flashy!'

Self-discipline. Of course he was disciplined! He would not have got this far if he wasn't in control. As for being over-confident, he would rather be that than cautious like Martin Boyd or diffident like Tran D'vnon.

Picard smiled to himself. What was he worried about? There were far more important things to deal with - like the first night of shore leave, starting as soon as he could wash and change. He shrugged off the faint doubts, quashing the small voice which insisted he should listen.

Martin Boyd was sprawled on his bed in the room they shared, one arm supporting his head while the other held a magazine. He glanced over the pages as Picard entered. "Pep-talk over?"

"Uhuh." Picard surveyed the magazine with brief interest. "Ah - teenage nymphomaniacs of Vulcan, eh?"

"You wish," Boyd retorted, returning his gaze to an article on politics. "How did it go?"

His friend made a face. "So-so."

"That good? What did he say - that you haven't a chance in hell of making it past Ensign?"

"Oh, there were dark portents, that's for sure," Picard evaded, heading for the shower, "but nothing I can't handle."

Hollow laughter met his comment and he retaliated with a well-aimed face flannel to Boyd's head.

The Bonstell Recreation Facility, or Stell's as it was more commonly known, was frequented by an assortment of rough company who drank heavily, gambled ruthlessly, and lived by rules likely to change without prior notice. Starbase Eirhart's most popular watering hole, Stell's welcomed all comers as long as their credit was good.

When the Starfleet cadets elbowed their way in, there was some difficulty in finding a seat among the noisy crowd. An eclectic mixture of aliens eyed the young officers with varying degrees of animosity as they cheerfully searched for a table, and several regulars mumbled that Stell's let anyone in these days.

Boyd finally spotted a table being vacated by a group of Orions who'd concluded their business for the night. The cadets took possession and settled down to the serious business of drinking.

In the interests of personal safety, an unspoken truce reigned over inter-racial squabbles inside Stell's. Outside it was a different matter and many an argument had ended bloodily on the pavement. Inside, peace of a sort held sway, but some races were afforded extra respect, just in case. Klingons were one, Zaranites another, and Norsicans always found an empty seat.

When a trio of Norsicans entered the bar, tired and sweaty from a long journey, they were given plenty of personal space. The crowd parted before them and regulars watched to see who would lose their seats.

The trio's leader, Venzrak by name, pushed aside a small Vonusian at the bar, his lip curling when he noted the Starfleet casuals. Tran D'Vnon smiled nervously and hurried away without his drink.

"Do you see who's come in?" the Vonusian blurted as he rejoined his friends.

Three pairs of eyes followed his wildly pointing finger. "Oh, Norsicans," Picard said with some disdain. "Nothing to worry about, Tran - I doubt if they match up to their press."

D'Vnon swallowed as he stared at the honour sword each Norsican carried. The serrated edge looked lethal. "I wouldn't like to test the rumours."

"You worry too much. Now, as I was saying... "

Moments later, Tran D'Vnon's worst fears came true. The Norsicans decided the cadets' table was ideal for them to relax at.

In said corner, Jean-Luc Picard was well into a tale of epic proportions. "So I said, 'Why don't you just fire off a few photon torpedoes, let them know we mean business?'" He paused, his voice affecting the deep tones of the officer he spoke of. "'We don't just fire off photon torpedoes, Cadet Picard,' he said. 'We talk first.'"

"Something you're particularly adept at," put in Martin Boyd.

Picard shot him a tolerant look. "Shut up, Martin. Anyway, I suggested that by the time we talked, the ship would be in tiny pieces - "

"Oh, no," D'Vnon interrupted nervously. "Trouble. Norsicans on intercept course."

The four looked at the approaching aliens with varying degrees of apprehension. The leading Norsican, a heavy-browed, sour-faced fellow, loomed over the table.

"Want a seat," he said with brutal directness.

"No, thank you, we have enough," Picard replied with deliberate obtuseness. He ignored the outraged expressions on his companions' faces and dodged the kick from Sanyl Harredn.

"You a misthead or what?" Harredn hissed. "You *don't* answer back."

Venzrak knuckled his hand on the table and leaned forward to glare at this upstart puppy. "You stupid. We want seats. You move."

"Right away," D'Vnon agreed eagerly, starting to rise. "Let's warp out right now, guys... "

Picard stopped him with a firm grip on his arm. He stared down

the Norsican, buoyed into bravado by his friends' obvious fears. Norsicans weren't that bad, surely. Reputations were one thing, but he was damned if he was running like a frightened Gronk because an ugly Bospor said 'Boo!'.

"No," said the cadet, oblivious of the chorus of groans from his friends. "I'm in the middle of an extremely amusing story, and I happen to like my seat here. Find another."

A horny, six-fingered hand shot out and grabbed Picard's tunic by the neck. Picard found himself dragged across the table, which went flying along with their drinks. The thought occurred to him that he might have a slight problem.

Venzrak's spittle landed on Picard's face as he pushed his leonid features toward the Human. "You move now, or you dead."

A stubborn light entered Picard's eyes, one that Martin Boyd would have recognised had he been able to see them. As it was, he found himself held down by three tentacles round his arms, while the others were similarly pinned. The regulars weren't about to let their night's drinking be spoiled by a potential riot.

Picard stood toe to toe with the Norsican, his formidable temper slowly reaching eruption point. Keeping his eyes on his assailant, he prised the alien's grip from his tunic. "I don't like loud-mouths," he said with careful deliberation. "I don't like bullies and I don't like airheads with the disposition of a slime-devil and the manners of a pot-bellied yargon."

Venzrak's lip curled, revealing his sharp teeth. He growled deep in his throat and his friends moved threateningly.

"Jean-Luc, power down! You wanna get yourself killed?" cried Boyd, horrified by his friend's taste for suicide.

It was, however, too late. By the time Picard had called into question Venzrak's ancestry, friends and planet, the outcome was no longer in question. The Norsicans moved as a group to teach this Starfleet upstart some manners. Picard disappeared into a tangle of limbs.

"Hell!" Boyd leaped up, or tried to, but the tentacles held firm.

"You want dead too?" demanded the owner.

"We've got to help!" cried Harredn, ducking as one of the Norsicans stumbled back, arms flailing.

"It'll be stopped before it gets outta hand," a man reassured him. "'Sides, your friend ain't doin' too badly."

As if to emphasise his point, one of the combatants did a mid-air somersault, landing heavily against an unyielding pillar. The Norsican's head went limp, and an enterprising Ferengi began to offer bets on the outcome.

Jean-Luc Picard was having the time of his life. Three-to-one odds were nothing to worry about - he'd coped with worse in Academy training. The Norsicans were heavier than he, but he could use their weight against them and their insistence on taking him en masse only hindered their efforts.

He slammed one in the face with a backward punch, ducking out of his grasp to kick Venzrak off-balance into a pile of chairs. Turning back to the first, he stabbed a finger into his neck, hitting a nerve he'd hoped was possessed by Norsicans as well as by Humans. The alien roared, found his arm was paralysed, and finished up full-length on the floor, held by a joint lock which effectively disabled him.

A wide grin spread across Picard's face as he glanced up at his friends, but they did not return his glee. Martin Boyd struggled forward, yelling something as he did so.

Too late.

With deadly efficiency, Venzrak drew his honour sword and impaled the young Human on its razor-sharp point. The serrated edge sliced through cloth, bone and sinew, nicking Picard's heart as it passed through his chest.

Picard fell to his knees, dimly aware that something was wrong, that there was a strange pressure and people were shouting. He heard Martin's voice - was that fear in it? Everything was tinged in black and a giddy warmth swept over him as he swayed on his knees. He stared down at the sword blade. *There's hardly any pain*, he thought. *How bad can it be?* and he laughed as consciousness finally left him.

Venzrak was immobilised before he could withdraw his sword. Boyd threw himself down beside his friend, eyes wide with horror as blood spread over his hands. "Don't touch it!" he shouted with D'vnon made to take the sword. "You'll only increase the bleeding. We'll have to carry him."

"Are you crazy?" asked D'vnon. "We could make things worse."

"And he could die before medical help arrives," Boyd snapped. "Now support his legs!"

It was a nightmare journey from Stell's to the medical unit just along the road. The unit's close proximity had saved many a life before this, and Picard's friends could only hope they were in time.

Willing hands rushed to aid as soon as they staggered through the doors and before the friends knew what was happening, Picard was taken from them and rushed into an emergency room.

D'vnon stared anxiously after the medical staff, mumbling fervent prayers to his ancestors. Harredn and Boyd looked at each other, stone-cold sober after the events.

"I warned him he'd go too far one day," murmured Boyd.

"Yeah." Harredn cast a look towards the closed doors. "I only hope the lesson's not a fatal one."

Unconsciousness can be a strange experience. Some speak of being 'awake' and 'aware', others know nothing until they waken in a strange disorientating world. For Jean-Luc Picard, it was the latter experience. He came round slowly, eyes travelling round his limited field of vision, trying to match present reality to memory.

A head came into view; a Human woman with blonde hair and brown eyes. "Good morning," said the head. "It's about time you woke up."

Picard blinked at her, lost for words as he tried to make sense of his memories. "There... there was a fight..." he croaked.

She nodded. "Uhuh. A stupid fight, but all fights are." Her eyes shifted to the readings by his bed and her voice took on a detached tone. "You were badly hurt - the sword touched your heart."

"My... heart?"

"Heart. We had to replace it." She lightly tapped his chest, which he slowly realised hurt a good deal more than it ought to. "You were damn lucky," the doctor continued. "And damn stupid."

"Dear God."

She sniffed. "That had little to do with it. Now - rest is all you need." She glanced across her shoulder and back, her expression one of consideration. "Feel like some visitors? I've had three young men tripping me up for some time now."

Picard swallowed and nodded, still dazed by the whole thing. His heart? But it hadn't been that painful...

"Hey, phaser mouth, I hear you're gonna be okay." Martin Boyd's jaunty tone belied the anxiety held in his eyes.

"I was lucky," Picard replied simply, feeling too off-balance to come up with witty remarks.

"And dumb," put in Harredn, unaware that they were echoing the doctor's words.

D'Vnon appeared at Boyd's side. "I prayed to my ancestors," he said earnestly. "I knew you'd survive."

"Just," Picard said, sobering them all. There was a painful silence while all four contemplated the incident, then Picard murmured, "I suppose I'm up on report. Probably be thrown out."

"Not according to Commander Malik," Boyd assured him. "Of course, they'll have to wait until you're better."

"Mmmm." Picard moved one hand to touch his chest, feeling the steady thump, thump of the new organ. "I got a new heart, and I hadn't even worn out the old one."

"Now you'll cause even more trouble," Harredn laughed.

Picard looked at him strangely. "I don't think so..."

The doctor returned to shoo out the visitors and Picard watched them go with a detachment quite unlike him. His mind was coming to terms with what had occurred and running through his thoughts in a continuous loop was the realisation; *I could have died. But there's so much to see, so much to do. How could I die before I've even begun?*

It was frightening and it made Jean-Luc take a long hard look

at himself and his aspirations. He seemed to have spent his time going from one catastrophe to another, keeping on an even keel for the most part, but wasting his abilities and hopes in an opinionated lunge for the stars. Perhaps that was what Malik had been getting at.

Oh, he knew it all, right? Wrong. He knew nothing, and the Norseican incident only put substance to that doubt he'd ignored for far too long. So many people had warned him - he would never amount to anything in Starfleet if he didn't discipline himself, control his impulse to live life to the full and damn the consequences. Well, there it was - he'd done that, and almost lost his life in the process. What use was his damn pride now?

He had potential, he knew he did, and up until now he had expected others to see it without attempting to prove it existed. What potential was there in getting himself killed?

He could have died. Now he had a new heart, and was he going to charge on until that one died too? No.

With the stubbornness that was his saving and his curse Jean-Luc Picard came to a decision, and the self-discipline which grew from that turning point developed into a command ability destined to take him further than his wildest dreams.



This poem refers to events in the second season episode
"Where Silence Has Lease"

TWENTY MINUTES

Live every moment as your last because it may be.
Duty keeps us still before the storm.
Trying hard to concentrate and study,
To learn a little more - no time to mourn.

We see friends die or leave - or worse, stop loving.
They see us always leaving them behind.
We claim we can desert them - keep on moving.
They say that we are only running blind.

A decision once it's made cannot be moulded.
The choices narrow down to only one.
We wait a lifetime, years, or only moments,
Death comes at last, I meet her at a run.

He says I must decide for others' limits.
I meet him and his torments eye to eye.
The self destruct is set for twenty minutes -
We live still but are all prepared to die.

They wonder as I summon execution.
Their fear is conquered by their trust in me.
But I must ask myself the awkward question,
And find if I deserve the trust I see.

Angela Brown.



ON ANOTHER'S SORROW

by

Karen Sparks

"Can I see another's sorrow
And not be in sorrow too?"

from Songs of Innocence by William Blake

As the turbolift approached the nerve centre of the Enterprise Counselor Troi steeled herself to lower her mental barriers just enough to analyse the emotions of the officers on the bridge.

Three days ago she had started her usual shift on the bridge, but after only an hour had been summoned to sickbay by Dr. Crusher to attend to grief-stricken children from the judo class Tasha had taught, too distressed to be in school. Ever since then Troi's unique services had been in constant demand in every area of the ship but the bridge, and she had been concerned about how the command crew had been coping through this difficult time.

She was pleasantly surprised by the generally more relaxed air which met her tentative probing; a distinct improvement on the prevailing air of sadness with which she had been overwhelmed on her last visit. However, as the lift doors opened she staggered back involuntarily as the powerful force of ruthlessly-suppressed feelings of the kind that, for days she had been encouraging people to release slammed into her mind. The doors closed on her, screening her from view, affording her precious privacy in which to battle for self-control. She clutched at the rail for support, not knowing her eyes were clenched shut or that her face was beaded with perspiration, aware only of her desperate need to block out this flaming torment before it consumed her soul. In that unguarded moment the pain had been like blinking in a darkened room and, in the next instant, staring into the incandescence of a sun's fiery heart. Optic nerves would be burned, causing blinded eyes to stream with pain. Similarly assaulted empathic senses showed no such visible signs of suffering, but the echoes of the onslaught reverberated back and forth within the confines of her belatedly tightly-shielded mind. Disciplines learned in childhood enabled her to gradually moderate the pain to a bearable intensity, and then to regain a measure of composure - outwardly, at least. Lending urgency to her struggle was her overriding concern for the person on the other side of the doors whose distress this really was.

As soon as she considered herself sufficiently recovered to continue she released the door control and stepped through onto the bridge to pause by the guard rail. The scene of complete normality which met her anxious scan was the last thing she had expected to see. It had not occurred to her that she might not be able to recognise immediately whose pain it was she had shared. Her first suspicion was of young Geordi La Forge, who had initially been the most obviously affected - wretched misery and depression had been evident in every line of his slumped posture and listless movements when she had last seen him, but now he was apparently absorbed in teaching some obscure children's poem to Data seated next to him.

The android looked better too, she noted, his head tilted to one side in concentration as he listened to La Forge. Three days ago even the reliable Data had been uneasy and restless, darting anxious, sidelong glances at his companions - acting like a cat on hot bricks in his uncertainty at how to deal with friends who were suddenly behaving unpredictably and were like strangers to him. Troi's gaze swept around and up to the stolid figure of Worf behind the command chair, standing exactly mid-way between his station and that which had been his colleague's, ready to operate either at an instant's notice. The great Klingon was no more skilled than Data at reacting to the intricacies of fragile, Human grief but was trying in his own gruff way to make her absence less apparent.

The Counselor's dark eyes rested consideringly on the two remaining occupants of the bridge. Not Will, no, she would know if this pain was his. He was leaning forward in his chair, an elbow resting on one knee, the other arm gesturing emphatically as he explained something to the Captain. Picard, then, by a process of elimination? But he looked the very epitome of relaxation, legs outstretched before him, crossed at the ankles, forefinger and thumb of his left hand rubbing his chin thoughtfully as he listened to his First Officer.

Troi was confused. She could not be wrong about the intensity of emotion she had unwittingly intercepted, and yet to be unable to detect even the smallest outward sign of it was hard to believe - surely she had known all these people for long enough to have learned by now if any of them were capable of such phenomenal self-control? One final sweeping glance confirmed what her eyes had told her, but she was not prepared to risk lowering her fragile, hurriedly-reconstructed mental barriers to corroborate her first impression for fear of being incapable of containing the pain a second time.

The Counselor strove to eradicate any signs of worry or puzzlement from her face, reasoning there was nothing she could do other than to watch and wait and be ready to offer her assistance when - not if, when - it was needed. She walked down the ramp to her station, her movements smooth and graceful in a way which had always contrasted sharply with the energetic, ranging stride of their Security Officer.

She was greeted by a welcoming nod from Picard, while Riker flashed her a warm smile, his dark eyes searching her face with the tender concern he had not ceased to show her since he had stayed with her all through that first night, holding her while she cried, sharing her grief. She smiled reassurance at him and saw him relax and turn back to continue his conversation with the Captain.

"I'll get on with it right away, then, shall I?" he said hopefully.

Picard waved an arm invitingly. "Be my guest, Number One."

Riker rose to his feet with barely restrained eagerness, grinned his thanks and strode rapidly up the ramp to disappear into the turbolift. Troi took her seat, noticing that the undercurrent of distress did not disappear when he left. She gave her attention to responding cheerfully to Picard's courteous inquiry about how she felt. He asked for her opinion on the condition of the crew as a whole and she took a moment to formulate her experiences and impressions of the past three days into a concise report.

During the pause they heard La Forge recite the last line of his rhyme with a triumphant flourish, his face turned hopefully to the android for his reaction.

Data's reply sounded clearly. "It is a most interesting poem, Geordi - but please could you explain the meaning of the words brillig, slithy, mimsy, borogroves, frumious - and what precisely *is* a jabberwock?"

Troi smiled to herself and without realising, relaxed her guard for a moment at the involuntary grin that appeared on her Captain's face. He was half-turning to glance up at the tactical station behind him -

Grey-green eyes automatically sought the answering smile of the one who found such great delight in such little things, whose face would be aglow with amusement and whose laugh was just about to ring out across the bridge - Picard arrested his movement before it was completed, a searing pain borne in silence as he remembered (God, how could he have forgotten?) that she was not there and never would be again.

Beside him, Counselor Troi crumpled forward soundlessly in her chair; his outflung arm caught her reflexively before he even realised what was happening. Data was there in a second, one arm effortlessly supporting the unconscious woman in the chair while Picard bent over her in concern. It had all been too much for her, he surmised rapidly, the job she had to do of consoling others when her own grief was probably greater than anyone's. Data's golden eyes were darting curiously from the slumped figure he held to the Captain's face. He opened his mouth to ask a question; his inquisitive expression revealing to Picard the kind of question it was to be.

"Not now, Mr. Data." Picard forestalled him with a trace of weariness in his voice. Data looked disappointed but complied.

At the sound of Picard's voice, Troi lifted her head to him, her eyes huge and impossibly black in a paper-white face.

"You are relieved of duty, Counselor," Picard told her gently. "Mr. Data will escort you to your - "

"No!" she whispered, clutching his arm feebly. "Please... your ready room."

"Of course, if you prefer," he responded, a little surprised. "Please make yourself at home." He helped her to stand, Data still supported her swaying frame.

She smiled apologetically at the android, not wanting to hurt his feelings. "If Data doesn't mind - " she looked pleadingly at Picard - "would you come with me, Captain?"

He hesitated momentarily, debating with himself. He could hardly provide the reassuring, stable presence he felt his officers needed at this time if he was hidden away in his ready room - but if he did not accompany her they might think he did not care, and that would not be good for their morale either. And he was worried about her.

"You have the bridge, Mr. Data," he said crisply, replacing the android's steadying arm with his own.

Inside the ready room Troi sank limply into the chair he guided her to, her hands immediately lifting to press against her temples as if to relieve pain. Picard filled a glass with water and placed it on the desk where she could reach it, then hovered uncertainly, not knowing how to deal with this sudden descent into such debilitating misery.

"Shall I call Dr. Crusher?" he asked, adding delicately, "or Will?"

The dark head shook; no. It seemed a long time to Picard before she let her fingers fall away from her face and raised haunted, black eyes to him. Then, disconcertingly, a faint smile fleetingly touched her lips and she glanced over her shoulder back towards the door. "Concern for my wellbeing out there," she told him.

Picard straightened up. "Concern for your wellbeing in here," he assured her firmly.

"Enough concern to help me?" she asked quietly.

"Of course - tell me what you need," he responded, his hand moving to his communicator to summon anything or anyone the ship could provide.

She shook her head. "Only you can help, Captain." She closed her eyes against the tears filling them.

"What is it, Counselor?" asked Picard gently. "How can I help you?"

She drew a deep breath and tried to speak calmly but her voice caught on the words. "How can you stand this pain?"

"What?" The exclamation was involuntary. His expression became guarded. "You mean all this is to do with me?"

"If I'd been on the bridge these past days I wouldn't have let it get this bad," Troi said shakily.

Picard moved stiffly away from her. "My apologies if I am the cause of your distress, Counselor. You have my permission to be relieved of duty for as long as you consider it necessary."

"Please don't, Captain." Tears spilled down her pale cheeks. "What you are trying to deny to yourself that you are feeling will become more and more painful unless you release some of it." He looked at her stonily and she reached beseechingly towards him. "You have been a tower of strength to your people. No Captain could have been more sensitive to the needs of his crew or given them more support. I know what you've done for them - the tactful ways you found to help them without their realising, the tasks you gave them to occupy their attention so they could forget for a little while and so it didn't seem quite so bad when they remembered again. I admire and commend your actions, sir; you've been strong for them and kept them all going, but you can ease up now. Their grief is starting to heal. Yours is buried so deep it hasn't had a chance."

Picard looked away from her, not knowing what to do. He had remained at his station for the whole of his shifts, strongly believing it his duty to be seen to be continuing with routine. As he had worked his way up through the ranks of Starfleet it had

become increasingly obvious to him that it was the Captain to whom officers and crew looked for example, never more important than in times of crisis. In his time he had seen a good Captain hold a battle-torn, grief-shattered crew together with no more than personal example and force of character, and conversely he had seen a good crew drift apart at the slightest stress under an indifferent commander. The Captain was the anchor of the ship's crew and was allowed no weakness; any departure from established behaviour on his part sent ripples of uneasiness radiating down through the ranks. Thus Picard had been careful to maintain an exterior of absolutely normal behaviour, falling back on the experience of his many years in command to do so - successfully, he thought, until now.

"Please help me," Troi whispered. "Talk to me."

"It's not possible." Picard wished she was not trembling so badly; it made him feel brutal refusing her request. He couldn't expect her to understand this was the only way he had ever been able to deal with the loss of a friend and yet still function in command. This refusal to acknowledge grief had become a habit built up over long years of service, through the loss of too many friends and, later, as a Captain, when they were not only friends but fine crewmembers for whose lives - and deaths - Starfleet (and his own conscience) held him responsible.

"Because you are my Captain you feel it your duty to be strong for me too." She looked up when she felt him flinch at her words. "I am your Counselor," she reminded him, "and it is *my* duty to know when you need to share some of your burden."

"Then it seems we have reached an impasse," he said stiffly.

She shook her head, the jewelled band in her hair sparkling as it caught the light. "Not at all, Captain. We simply have to find a compromise." When he did not answer, she continued, "You have always given me the courtesy of considering my advice. Is my advice any less valid now because it concerns you? I know it's not that you don't trust my discretion."

Picard gestured impatiently. "Of course your discretion is not in question." He began to pace the room restlessly, hands clasped behind his back. Troi shifted uneasily in her chair, as if in echo of his inner turmoil. He stopped, his back to her. "You don't know what you're asking."

Very quietly she said, "Oh, yes, Captain, I do. And I would not put you through this if I did not feel absolutely certain that it would ease the pain."

He spun round to face her. "Whose pain, Counselor?"

"It is the same thing."

He looked away uncomfortably from dark eyes pleading for his acquiescence. Was this just some psychological ploy on her part because she was worried about him, or was it the truth? He was convinced he could handle his feelings; he had done so before and if it somehow got a little harder every time, well, doubtless he could handle that as well. But if his feelings truly were so painful to her, it would hardly be fair to deny her this help; it was not her fault if the kind of help she needed from him required him to act against all his long years of rigid self-discipline and was infinitely more difficult for him to give than that which he had

given to his other officers. He remembered how precisely her collapse on the bridge had coincided with his own sudden increase in pain. He looked at her face, white and still wet with tears she had not managed to stop completely. He noticed the tension in her posture as she leaned forward in the chair with hunched shoulders and arms wrapped protectively across her stomach, almost as if it hurt her to breathe. Unconsciously his hand moved to the relentless ache under his ribcage which was the accumulated tension of days of smothering emotions and which made breathing deeply painful. He knew then that she was right, and he would have to give in, but even knowing she was right did not stop the approach of almost-panic at the thought of talking about his feelings, something he never did.

"I know it's very hard for you," came Troi's soft voice, "but please try." She tried to smile. "You don't want your Counselor falling apart, do you?"

He saw her again as he had when Armus had finally allowed him into the crashed shuttlecraft, trapped beneath and surrounded by fallen debris, pain lining her delicate face and strain in her voice as she had asked him, 'Were you able to help Tasha?'

'No,' he'd had to tell her, and even with the dreaded confirmation of what she'd felt happen in her mind, she'd still been brave enough to fight back her her distress and give him the information he'd needed about the evil creature holding her captive. He had come so close to losing her as well. His attempt at an answering smile was even more strained. "No, I certainly don't want my Counselor falling apart."

Troi wished for the thousandth time in her life that she could project emotions to help people, instead of just receiving them. The Captain turned away from her to try and compose himself for the coming ordeal, not able to fully understand - as no Human could understand - that what she felt from his mind was far more revealing than any facial expression could ever be. She looked at the lean figure profiled against the blackness of deep space. "What troubles you the most?" she prompted gently.

His shoulders rose and fell in a shrug, one arm gestured helplessly. Eventually, he spoke. "It will sound absurd. There are - aspects of her life that I can't stop thinking about, that I find myself unable to come to terms with."

"And until you can accept her life, you cannot accept her death." There was an infinity of compassion and understanding in Troi's voice. "Which aspects in particular?"

Picard shifted his weight from one foot to the other. He stared out at the moving starfield. "When the Traveller and Kosinski came aboard and the ship was hurled millions of light years through space to the Outer Rim - you remember we all had hallucinations. Ours were almost all of being reunited with lost loved ones, of living out fantasies and fulfilling ambitions. Not so Tasha." His voice cracked on her name. Troi sat very still. "Geordi told me that her hallucination was of running away from rape gangs." Troi shivered at the bleakness in her Captain's mind. When he continued his normally expressive voice was utterly toneless. "She loved life more than anyone I've ever known. She seemed determined to enjoy every moment, rejoicing in the freedom from the hell of her homeworld - but she never was truly free of it. Some days she would come on duty looking strained, haunted, as if she'd hardly slept. I think her past came back in her dreams. On those

days she would be *extra-Tasha* - she would laugh more often, work harder, be more determined in everything she did as if it might banish the memories of the bad times."

Troi nodded, impressed by the depth of his insight. "I had those feelings too."

"I *hate* what happened to her!" declared Picard with sudden vehemence. He folded his arms tightly against his chest, as if trying to physically contain his outburst. He continued in a low, tense voice, "It never ceased to amaze me how anyone could survive what she did and still be so caring and loyal. She was mature beyond her years in so many sad ways - and yet at other times she seemed more of a child than Wesley - more like Data is sometimes. She showed a naive delight at so many minor things the rest of us have taken for granted all our lives. She experienced everything so intensely, she couldn't bear seeing people suffer. I always hoped she developed that sensitivity of feeling *after* she joined Starfleet. It's unbearable to think that she might have always..." He stopped and swallowed hard; some fears could never be voiced. "The only person she was ever hard on was herself. She seemed to think she wasn't permitted normal, Human failings." He paused and Troi felt anger rising within him. "You weren't with us when Q honoured us with his second visit, were you?"

Troi shook her head. "No, I was visiting my home. Will told me afterwards what happened between him and Q. He didn't mention Tasha."

"He didn't know. Q whisked all the bridge officers, myself excepted, off to some planet to play his damned games. I was trapped alone on the bridge, no communication with anyone. I started cursing when I discovered I couldn't even make a log entry. Then I heard Tasha's voice behind me. Do you know what she said? 'I wish I could help you, Captain.'" His expression darkened. "It seemed an ordinary enough thing for her to say at the time - but then she told me why she was there." His fists clenched in anger at remembered cruelty, digging into his ribcage. "The omnipotent Q had put her in a 'penalty box', if you can imagine anything so ridiculous. One mistake from any of the others fighting for Q's amusement down on the planet and she would die - just wink out of existence. Can you imagine how frustrated she felt?" Picard began to stride up and down in front of the viewscreen, sharp, rapid hand-movements punctuating his words. "It was vicious and cruel to put her in a position where she could do nothing to defend herself. She must have felt as helpless as she had as a child, back on her homeworld, where her survival depended on the whim of some sadistic being."

"How did you feel?" asked Troi in the brooding silence that followed.

Picard spun on his heel to face her, anguish etched on his features. "How do you think I felt?" he demanded. "How was I supposed to feel? This barbarian was victimising my Security Chief and I was powerless to protect her. I was furious - and I still am. Of all the things Q has done to all of us, what he put Tasha through that day is the only thing I will never forgive him for. He made her cry, Deanna!" Troi closed her eyes against the torment on his face; she wished she could shut out that in his mind as easily. He continued with an effort, "She was angry with herself for what she saw as weakness on her part - she made no allowance for the fear and frustration she must have been feeling. She had more reason to

cry than just about anyone I've ever known and that was the only time I ever saw her do it."

"But you let her see that it didn't matter to you?"

"Of course. I knew she hated for me to see her crying but I couldn't just ignore it. I went over to her and first of all she shook me off, too angry to bear it, but I tried again and then she listened to me."

"She always would listen to you," said Troi quietly, "and your kindness at a time she was so vulnerable would have meant more to her than you could ever imagine."

Picard's pacing had taken him to his desk. He dropped tiredly into the chair and began to toy with a stylus, his gaze locked onto his ever-moving fingers. "I suppose it had become a habit with her to pretend to be tough all the time."

"I think you understood that about her better than anyone," ventured Troi, "because it was a trait you both shared, to some extent."

Picard raised his eyebrows, sternly warning her not to know him too well.

Troi said carefully, "The difference is she learned to hide her feelings to protect herself - you do it to protect others."

"We are not here to talk about me," he said stiffly, avoiding her gaze.

Troi accepted the rebuke without argument, not wanting to push him into revealing more of himself than she already had; that was her part of the compromise. "Tasha learned early in her childhood not to show when she was hurt. It made her a little less vulnerable to her tormentors. It's a defensive mechanism that's very hard to unlearn." *As you are finding out now,* she added silently, in sympathy.

"I wish she'd had time to unlearn it," Picard said almost inaudibly.

"So do I," agreed Troi. She looked at his bowed head. "You must know, Captain, how very much she loved her life here."

"I hope that she did."

"You must believe me when I say that I know she did." Troi spoke with conviction. "Your regret that she had to suffer what she did in her past is natural, but you could do nothing to change that. What you *could* do was make her time here happy, and you did that. You trusted her, you gave her dignity and respect, you gave her room to develop and grow. You made her feel secure, and to someone from a background like hers, that is a very precious feeling."

"She was - very dear to me," Picard admitted quietly. "I wish I had told her."

"That's not the sort of thing Captains can say to their Security Chiefs," Troi said gently. She felt a flash of gratitude from his mind, and a simultaneous lessening of the guilt. She

continued, "But you showed her, and that's just as important. And you do know she cared deeply for you also, don't you?"

In his questioning glance she read the universal need of all bereaved to be reassured that the lost soul for whom they mourned had cared for them. "As Captain of the Enterprise, part of Starfleet and all that position represents, you were a hero to her. As Jean-Luc Picard, a friend, you were - well," Troi broke the eye-contact, looking faintly embarrassed, a smile curving her lips. "I cannot, even now, break confidences I was inadvertently exposed to, but I can assure you that you were very special to her."

Picard leaned back in his chair and she breathed deeply, feeling a release of the aching tension in the abdominal muscles that had been restricting his breathing for days. The stylus was rolled between his fingers again, but only with mild embarrassment at the admission she could feel him steeling himself to make, not with the tension he had displayed earlier.

"You know, I always thought one of the hardest parts of losing a... crewmember was the letter I have to write to the next-of-kin. Now I've discovered that somehow it's even harder when there's no-one out there to write to. To think we are the only ones grieving for her."

"What's 'only' about a family of over a thousand?" asked Troi softly.

Picard looked at her in astonishment. "I never thought of it like that."

"Oh, but you must, because she did and that's what matters," Troi said with confidence.

Picard's features relaxed into a genuine smile at the slender, blue-clad figure seated before him. "Thank you."

Troi dipped her head. "Thank you, Captain," she replied, stressing the pronoun.

His hands rested in a loose clasp on the desk, still for the first time since entering the room. "This has been difficult for you too, hasn't it?" he asked gently. "You must be very tired."

"It has been... precisely as difficult as it has been for you," she told him with a smile. "If that offer of a little time off is still open, I would accept it now. I advise you to do the same - you should find sleep will come more easily now."

"Really?"

She laughed aloud as his surprise tickled her mind; he truly could not see the connection between having unburdened himself of his most haunting worries and the prospect of sleeping better as a result. "Try it and see."

He studied the woman for a moment, noticing that the deathly pallor had left her skin, and that she now looked comfortable in the chair, sitting upright and relaxed. As he was. He marvelled again at her empathy. "May I ask you a question?"

"Go ahead." She gave no hint that she knew what it would be.

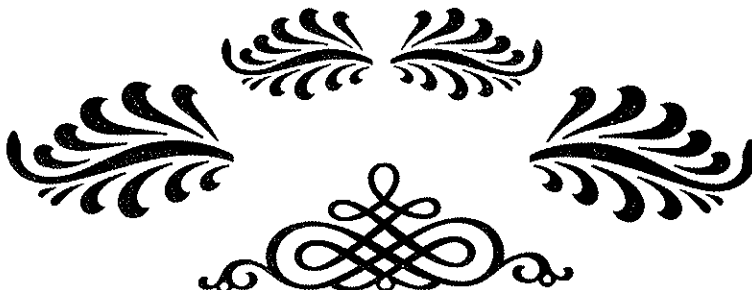
"You don't have to answer - but how do you cope with all this? I can only imagine how painful it all must be for you, coming on top of your dreadful experience of being held captive in the shuttlecraft by Armus, and feeling everything that happened. You were closer to Tasha than anyone else, I think, and yet you always have time to help all of us. Who helps you, Deanna? Who do you talk to?" Picard opened his hands apologetically. "I don't mean to pry but I really would like to understand."

Troi returned the direct, honest gaze of the man whose unceasing quest to learn all he could about those in his care made him, in her opinion, the finest commander Starfleet had ever had. "I did all my crying for myself in the first night. Ever since then - you forget, Captain, that it isn't only negative emotions I receive from those around me. There is an abundance of love for Tasha on this ship that is very beautiful to experience. The crew has drawn more closely together in this tragedy; I draw strength from all of your strength, and I am sustained by the support and compassion being shown to those most deeply affected by her loss."

He nodded thoughtfully. "I very much appreciate your telling me that." He lifted his clasped hands to rest his chin upon, the lines around his eyes crinkling with good humour as he declared, "Well, Counselor, you are looking better, if I may say so. How am I feeling?"

She smiled at the old joke. I know how you are feeling more accurately than I ever would have believed possible. I only hope for both our sakes that this ultra-sensitivity to your thoughts disappears when I've had time to rest and sort myself out. You are feeling exhausted but much calmer. Your headache is getting better. You miss Tasha very much and the sadness has not gone but some of the anger has - you can think of the good times now. You are mildly surprised that I am still here, not treating you any differently after having seen a side of you you've never let anyone see, and that discipline on the ship has not collapsed instantly as a result. You are thinking that admitting to your feelings was one of the hardest things you've ever done but you consider the resulting improvement in my condition justifies the effort it cost - thank you. You are hoping fervently that a Captain's duty will not require such self-revelation again - but if it ever does, you have the comfort of knowing that you are capable of it.

Realising that he was waiting with genuine curiosity for her answer, she extracted the most salient point from her thoughts with a smile. "You are feeling better, sir."



FORTUNATE HAPPENSTANCE

by

Lorraine Goodison

When Captain Jean-luc Picard beamed down from the USS Stargazer that night, it was with the sole intention of losing himself for an undefined period. As he left the main transporter terminal and mingled with the thinning crowds of commuters he considered the fact that, out of uniform, he could be anyone, an anonymous figure hell-bent on forgetfulness. But he was not anonymous, never could be. The communicator in his pocket was silent testimony to the fact that, even here, he was not entirely forgotten. Not that anyone was likely to call him back from this particular respite. The Stargazer, his well-worn, comforting workplace and home, had suddenly become enclosing. He had felt the need of fresh air, of uneven ground under his boots and the unknown round hidden corners. So he came here, and found the same claustrophobia as before.

Breden Nine was a pleasant enough place as bases went; a mish-mash of functional Starfleet design and native merchantry all crouched together under the dubious designation of spaceport. A centre for trading, arrival and departure, it had a slightly seedy feel, like a lady of the streets who'd seen better days but was not about to let the side down. It suited Picard just fine.

The Stargazer's Captain had no particular destination in mind, so he strolled away from the modern area into the suburbs where Starfleet personnel were fewer and locals pursued the business of daily living. He had some vague idea of finding a bar where he could nurse a drink and watch the local colour, but each place he approached seemed too raw, too jarring, and he finally had to admit that socialising was not the cure for him tonight. He did not want to be alone with his thoughts, however, so he continued wandering, lost in unaccustomed indecision.

Picard was violently jolted from his grey moodiness by the impact of bone on bone as someone crashed into his shoulder blade and ricocheted on past him. He scowled at the running group of boys, sorely tempted to upbraid the young pup who'd left him bruised and disorientated.

The group ran on, laughing and calling with exuberant overconfidence, criss-crossing through themselves as they rushed on to nowhere in particular. A woman walking up ahead was caught up in their flurry and they danced round her before moving on. One of their number decided to add to his monetary store by taking her purse.

Outraged, Picard roared, "You! Drop that at once!" before breaking into a run.

Flustered by the stentorian order, the youth complied with wide-eyed haste, fear lending speed to his retreating form. Picard swept up the discarded purse, turning to the woman as she caught up with him.

She was small, with cocoa-dark skin and a round homely face. Her heavy-lidded eyes held a spark of humour and a wide smile thanked his efforts. "Thank you. I didn't even feel him take it."

"Damned kids," Picard grumbled, giving her the purse.

Her face was sombre but merriment danced in her eyes. "The young have to be crazy every now and again."

"Humph," grunted Picard with an expression that spoke volumes.

"You certainly made him jump."

"Comes with the job."

She seemed to absorb the brief comment before lightly remarking, "Well, thanks again for your help. Can I reward you with a drink?"

Picard seriously considered her offer, but - "No - thank you. I'm... not the best of company tonight."

"I'm a good listener."

He smiled. "I'm sure you are, but the answer is still no." He inclined his head and bade her a gracious farewell.

"Goodbye."

The woman watched her champion depart, shrugged lightly, tucked the purse back into the pocket of her voluminous dress and took a different path.

The incident was a bright spot in an otherwise dismal evening. Picard began to regret his solitude. The momentary lift given to his spirits faded quickly, leaving a darker mood than before. The reason for his sojourn crept back, although it had never really been further than the periphery of his thoughts. If he so much as dwelt on the knowledge, the images flooded back, spiced by the numbing grief which had driven him from his ship.

Jack Crusher was dead. Gone forever, save in memory, and the only memories he could find now were the most painful and final. He still remembered the horrifying news of the returning away team; his total loss of self-control when his Security Chief would not let him beam down to Ludros - he would have to make amends to Peale for that. Most terrible of all, the endless hours of waiting for nightfall to come so he could recover Jack's abused body. If he thought about it, he could still feel the limp weight of his friend in his arms. He tried not to think.

An image came to mind - the face of Beverly Crusher, composed, lost in her own unreachable hell. He well remembered his own conflicting emotions during that visit. He wished he could have shared them, but she held him at bay and he could not pierce her defences. Then he had to return to normal duties and he buried his feelings so well he could pretend they never existed until the posting of a new First Officer jerked him back to reality. How long, he wondered, *did I manage to deceive myself?*

Trying to shake off his despair, Picard came to a halt and forced himself to take stock of his surroundings.

He stood in a trapezoid, the central point for five narrow streets. There was an old dry fountain close by and the surrounding aged houses opened sleepy eyes on their deserted view. It was quiet, but the hush was lightly embroidered by a soft melody issuing from an orange-lit doorway.

Picard found his feet taking him that way and, giving himself up to intuition, let himself enter the bar.

It was compact and gave the impression that it disdained the crowds more well-frequented venues stuffed themselves with. The outside hush extended within, where soft shadows hid the low ceiling and crept over the edges of comfortable furnishings. There were around eight people there who minded their own business when Picard crossed the floor to the bar.

He glanced over the counter as he waited for the bartender to appear and noted the orderliness of the bar. There was an air of familiarity about the place, as if he'd walked into a comfortable home and the owner did not care to remind the clientele of the indelicate procedure of transaction.

"Hello again."

To his surprise, the Captain found himself facing the woman from the street.

"It must be fate," she quipped, and Picard realised he'd been staring.

"Oh - ah - yes, I suppose it must be," he replied lamely.

"I guess I can buy you that reward after all," she continued with that same twinkle in her eyes.

"Mmm. What would you recommend?"

She considered him for a moment. "The local wine is pretty good."

"Fine."

With an economy of movement and scarcely a sound, the woman filled a lilac glass with burgandy red wine. Picard accepted it with a smile, raising his eyebrows slightly when he took his first sip. He turned on his stool, his gaze sweeping the room. "Is it always this quiet?"

"This is busy."

Her expression was deadpan and Picard was not completely sure if she was serious or not. He gave her a shrewd glance. "A select clientele."

"I like to think so." She watched him savour the drink. "Guinan."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Guinan. It's my name."

Picard returned the social honour, surprising himself in the process. "Jean-Luc."

Guinan nodded as if he'd confirmed something although she was unlikely to know who he was. She drifted off to serve another customer, leaving him to watch the small gathering in silence. He did not notice her return until he soft deep voice said, "I'm still a good listener."

The Captain eyed her over the rim of his glass. "What if I don't want to talk?"

"Silence can be interesting too."

Picard considered this for a moment. "Only when there's nothing to think about," he murmured sadly.

"Are your thoughts so terrible?"

"Some of them."

Guinan leaned her folded arms on the counter, regarding her customer quizzically. "I have terrible thoughts too. Want to trade some?"

Once again Picard checked to see if she was being flippant, but there was no humour in Guinan's eyes, only patience and a willingness to listen. The Captain let go a sigh, turning the glass in his hand as he stared at his own imperfections. "It's guilt, mostly," he admitted. "Guilt that another man died in my place... guilt that I wasn't there to do something."

"Guilt's a powerful emotion," Guinan remarked. "Especially if it's misplaced."

"You think mine is?"

"I didn't say that," she replied evasively. "Let's just say I've met a few in my time who should feel guilty and don't, and those who do feel guilty rarely deserve that condemnation." She paused, reaching out to fill his empty glass. "I've found that life's too complicated as it is to waste energy on self-recrimination. It never helps the situation."

Picard studied her, a small part of him marvelling at her ability to put him at ease so quickly. Her words sank into his consciousness, permeating through to the layer of pragmatism he'd buried under self-reproach. "The worst thing was... I couldn't do anything. I was completely helpless to save him or even recover his body."

"Was he a friend?"

Picard nodded, his expression clouding. "Oh yes... a very good friend."

Guinan waited a respectful space before murmuring, "I lost a good friend once. There aren't enough as it is."

Picard felt the grey moodiness returning as he contemplated his loss. "I'll never forgive myself."

"Maybe, maybe not. Forgiveness is part of the grieving process. It comes when it wishes, not because you want it to."

"I don't want it to," he said bitterly.

"Now you don't. Maybe you'll change your mind later."

Picard made a disbelieving noise and swirled the wine round his glass as he regarded Guinan. "Do you often do this?"

"You'd be surprised." She shrugged, smiling warmly. "How about you?"

He returned the smile, feeling a lightness of spirit which seemed to come from Guinan as much as from himself. "I'm not one for regularly baring my soul, if that's what you mean - which reminds me - " he wagged a finger at her - "the deal was we swap thoughts. Your turn."

Guinan's smile widened and her dark eyes swivelled away and back again. She leaned forward confidentially. "Sometimes I dream of running away."

Picard's eyebrows rose. "Running away? Where, and why?"

"Everywhere. Just away. Over the horizon."

He gestured towards their calming surroundings. "What about this?"

Guinan grimaced. "It's nice but I wouldn't say it's perfect. Sometimes I get this wanderlust. Contentment's fine but it can change into stagnation if you're not careful."

"I see your point," agreed Picard, remembering his original fears all those years ago in Paris. He occasionally wondered if those fears were the continuing impetus for his life. It seemed likely. "And what if you get the chance to run?"

"New challenges are better than being in a rut."

With a smile, Picard nodded agreement and raised his glass. "Here's to new challenges, then."

"And beautiful memories."

They exchanged a look of mutual understanding which cemented their regard for each other.

The rest of the evening passed in pleasant conversation with no further reference to Jean-Luc Picard's motive for being there. Walking back to the terminal afterwards, he found himself unable to say exactly what they had talked about, but somehow the words had eased his depression, leaving him unburdened by guilt. The pain for Jack's death was still there, but during the evening acceptance had begun to creep in and he knew he could return to his ship with a lighter heart.

Picard did not return to the Starbase that particular shore leave and as months became years there was never again the same opportunity to visit the sector. He hung on to the memory though, as a mind stores the essence of such moments. On occasion he would recall Guinan's gift for putting people at ease and wonder how she'd come to Breden Nine, and if she was still there.

Time passed in a stream of faces and events; the loss of the

Stargazer and the resulting court-martial; the painful process of proving his worth to himself, if not to Starfleet; the news that he was to command the Enterprise and all the doubts and hopes which went with such a triumph.

She was magnificent, this new ship, welcoming him with verve and beauty. Much had been written about the line of ships called Enterprise, but Jean-Luc Picard knew mere words did not encompass the sheer personality held in her lines. She was special from the moment he set eyes on her. Every ship was special to her Captain, but this one... this one was a swan built to glide imperiously through space. When he stepped onto the bridge, he felt at home in a way he had not done since losing the Stargazer.

The shake-down cruise was eventful, to say the least, and over the following months Picard got to know his ship intimately. As he settled into his new assignment, he came to realise that one extra touch was needed to make the ambience complete. Fate intervened once again, with the result that, one night, Captain Picard left his ship and beamed down to Breden Nine.

It was much the same. The fountain still didn't work and the painted walls were faded and peeling. Weeds peeked through the cracks in the paving and across the way a modern tavern had opened, but Guinan's bar was as welcoming as Picard remembered.

He found Guinan serving behind the bar. He sat unobtrusively, waiting for her to turn his way. When she did, her face showed only faint surprise and obvious pleasure.

"Well, hello! It's been a long time."

"I wasn't sure you'd remember."

"I never forget faces, especially those of Starship Captains."

"Hmm."

"A drink?"

"What would you recommend?"

Guinan chuckled and poured two glasses of the same wine she'd given him years ago. She pulled up a stool on her side of the counter and hoisted herself onto it while Picard surveyed the room.

"It hasn't changed," commented the Captain.

"Some things are fine as they are," Guinan told him serenely. "So what brings you to this neck of the woods?"

"Oh... an important errand."

"Really?" Guinan said with interest. "Tell me more."

"Later." Picard swallowed his drink, letting the atmosphere of the place soak into his skin. "Did you ever find those new challenges?"

"A few, mostly small. I can't complain. You?"

"Much the same," he answered, with a roguish glint in his eye. "In fact, I've recently taken on perhaps the biggest challenge of my

life."

"A new ship?" came her shrewd observation.

Picard nodded, pride evident in his face. "She's a beauty. There's a marvellous bar lounge for the crew, right at the front of the main saucer."

"Mmm. Sounds nice."

"It's extremely pleasant. The windows have the best view on the entire ship, and that includes the Captain's cabin."

Guinan grinned. "That good, huh?"

"Yes. However..." Picard paused, putting down his glass. "There is one snag. It needs a host."

"I'm sure there are plenty to go round."

"Oh, there are," Picard agreed lightly, apparently examining his drink. "They're... not quite suitable, though."

Guinan lifted her head knowledgeably. "Not made of the right stuff?"

"You could say that." Picard rubbed his chin thoughtfully, gazing past Guinan at the back wall. "What the bar needs is someone with a calming influence, someone who's welcoming, experienced, thoughtful... and above all, not frightened of new challenges."

There was a perceptible pause until Guinan remarked, "I know someone who might fit the bill."

"Really?" Picard turned his wry smile on her. "I had hoped as much."

"Of course, she couldn't just up and go," Guinan continued, toying with her drink.

"I wouldn't expect it. Besides, a few strings might have to be pulled."

She gave him a sideways glance. "I bet you're good at that when you want to be."

"I have my moments," Picard answered serenely. He raised his glass. "To the new hostess, and all the horizons she'll see from Ten-Forward."

Guinan met the toast, a questioning look on her ace. "Might one enquire the name of this beautiful ship?"

"The USS Enterprise."

She turned the name over in her mind, found it fitted quite well, and smiled warmly. "That'll suit me just fine."

The Captain relaxed against the bar. "I thought it might," he said.



THE BEST YEARS...

by

Michael Simpson

What state of progress does it signify when one can create, in a single room, a microcosm of the world with all its apparently finite detail, and then, like so many neatly folded clothes in a suitcase, pack it away into a cluster of the minutest microchips by reducing all of its elements to a string of numerical variables?

And, if it is all so 'real' when one enters its fray, what becomes of the perpetual wheel of life's fortunes and the eternal time and tide of nature when the game is over and that little black button is pressed?

Does it make any difference when that innocent computer voice inquires...

"Do you wish to save the present scenario?"

'Do you wish to suspend indefinitely the consequences of those life-changing events you have perpetuated within?'

Should we ask how 'real' can we allow the most realistic of fantasies to get?

The Chief of Starfleet Medical Corps, with all his experiences behind him, had asked himself this question numerous times. Indeed, since he had never had absolute faith in the transporter system, by the same token he had never participated in any of the holodecks' glorified pantomimes. Nor had he even seen inside one, for that matter. His aversion however was based more upon a gut revulsion for the idea of being swept away by an abortive computer program, than by the fear of molecular disruption, such as might occur in the ice-cold void of space. Considering the often-mooted revolt of Man's superior subservient technology, it seemed to him a case of putting one's head in the lion's mouth. He had himself never made a secret of his distrust of computers, and fancied that those operating the holodecks might just be waiting for an opportunity to silence his dissenting voice, having lulled him, once inside, into a false sense of security.

When, therefore, his presence was requested in the off-stage area of this ship's own artificially intelligent, spontaneously interactive playhouse by the two bridge officers, he felt decidedly sceptical about their motives and inclined to decline. However he liked the young navigator (feeling the android was in all probability merely an eccentric automaton) and Geordi La Forge had been most insistent that what he had to exhibit would be of interest, though he wouldn't be specific as to what it was, or why.

Besides, the Admiral reflected, he didn't have to actually go in!

Thus it was that he found himself hobbling down the corridor

deliberately subdued with a cinema-like dinge towards the two young officers who stood outside the large double doors accessing the main 'arena' itself. Geordi was finding it hard to subdue a smile, whilst Data merely looked quizzical, trying to work out what it was that his companion and friend might find so unacceptably amusing.

"Well, here I am." McCoy stopped before them and leaned both hands upon his cane of twisted bulamayna.

Geordi La Forge, who stood nearest the entrance, gestured towards the control panel. "If you'd care to press the black button, sir."

The Admiral twisted his head and stared suspiciously into his face. *Why can't I see his damn eyes?* he thought to himself. *And why's he trying so damn hard not to smile?* After a brief pause, waving his stick in the general direction of the doors, he said, "I won't go in there."

"I sure can't make you," the young navigator responded.

McCoy studied him a moment longer. Then, as if tired of waiting around, he abruptly lunged forward and thrust his finger at the control. There was a sudden hiss, a loud clunk and a heavy whoosh as the thick doors slid aside, flooding the artificial dusk with a widening shaft of bright light.

McCoy stepped back and squinted into the glare. What he saw took his breath away and made his heart beat three times faster. Half a minute, seeming like two, passed before he turned his stunned face and wide eyes upon the anxious Junior Grade Lieutenant standing three feet away.

But the glance was only momentary.

Ten seconds later he had hobbled into the 'illusion' and five seconds after that the big doors slid shut behind him...

"Welcome back, Bones, it seems to have been a long time!" James Kirk said.

Leonard McCoy found himself on the bridge of the USS Enterprise. The Enterprise he had known over a century ago, now but a distant memory. Like a Great War soldier's homecoming, recalled today. Crossing that threshold had been like stepping again upon the country roads trodden in one's youth. When he had entered it had been like walking into a museum piece. The whole place had been empty, but the doors closing behind him had caused him to turn around, and upon his returning his attention to the front, the area had miraculously become a hive of activity, with the familiar faces of long dead friends all around. But Kirk was greeting him as if he had just returned from off-ship duty. James Kirk, his oldest and dearest friend, whom he had not seen and always missed in so many days gone by. Days that now seemed to possess a hidden loneliness, blacker than ever before.

This bridge he had not looked upon since returning from that fateful five-year voyage of exploration. A place and a time that doubtless held more precious memories for him than any other. From this very position he had seen through that forward viewscreen so many strange phenomena, a viewscreen that now showed the most

familiar image of all. An infinite expanse of brightly glowing stars, each one promising adventure and discovery to these pioneers, united by a common cause and a need to survive amid the great unknown. From this very spot he had witnessed the eccentric precociousness of Balok, observed the systematic pursuit and destruction of a Romulan crew in the name of duty and heard Charlie Evans' pleas for a second chance as he dissolved into the spectral nonsubstance of the Thasian entity he had to become in order to salvage his Human life.

And this James Kirk, a man in the prime of his youth, had witnessed them all with him. A James Kirk who was now turned in his centre seat facing him, smiling that instantly likeable smile. A weird and extraordinarily wonderful thought occurred to the aged man very suddenly. Could this figure really be seeing him? What did he see him as? McCoy looked down at himself, leaning on his stick, his back now permanently slightly bowed, his slow stiff sandalled feet poking out from beneath the bottom of his full-length robe. He felt the hard dry skin of his fingertips and saw the same ancient parchment stretched over the knuckles as he reached up one hand to his face, feeling the deep-ploughed furrows of unnaturally old wrinkles. Yet all the time he knew not quite why he did this, for he knew that the illusion, however convincing, could not change him. But could this man before him be seeing him as this, or as he had appeared ninety three years ago? Was he in fact seeing at all? He certainly looked as if he were. And spoke as if he were, too.

Leonard 'Bones' McCoy suddenly felt very much younger.

"Jim!" he found himself whispering.

Another familiar voice made him turn his head slightly to the right. It was flat, almost monotonic, yet strangely agreeable. "It is good to see you back, Doctor."

"Spock!" This time a little louder. He felt a compulsive urge and he could not resist it. It suggested false composure to his overwhelmed consciousness. "How can it be 'good', Mr. Spock?" he half smiled. He had intended it just as a thought, but the words must have slid past the drugged sentries of his private mind. It was like the dream. He seemed to know it was unreal, yet he equally lost in its over-riding reality.

Spock's own composure did nothing to surface his from immersion in a flood of long-hidden, deeply carved sentiments, seemingly suddenly released from behind doors bolted and all but seized up by the necessary rationalities of mundane every-day life. The Chief of Starfleet Medical Corps could no more cry daily over past glories in the broom cupboard than could the retired war veteran with nought but the garden and the neighbours' gossip to concern him. That right was reserved only for the supposedly 'mad' tramp on the city street, laughing at the shoppers as he walked through the precinct, sneered at by those who could only wish for such an occasional moment of innocent private 'madness'.

For Leonard McCoy, though... that dream had come true!

"I use the term 'good' in a purely logical context, Doctor," Spock was saying. "Since most of the crew find some discernible pleasure in your return, it can only have a positive, therefore 'good', effect upon their morale."

McCoy, his head a jumble of all those thoughts, just listened

and squinted at the impassive Vulcan.

What Sulu said gave McCoy a start.

"You know, Doc, you haven't changed a bit!" His face wore that big broad irrepressible smile, always a complement to the freshness and enthusiasm for life in his young voice. And it was a Sulu-type joke.

But was it true?

Nonsense. It couldn't be, any more than the white sailing boats on the pale blue bedspread of his Georgia dream.

Sulu's face glowed with the blood of youth.

Chekov had always looked young, right up to beyond middle age. McCoy saw that now better than ever, because the absurdly boyish looking Russian was seated, of course, at the navigator's console, and not looking where he was going. Boy, what a life you had ahead of you, McCoy thought, searching those schoolboy eyes for... something, he knew not quite what. More memories flashed through his head, like reviewing the life of a close friend from snapshots of juvenile adventure the day after his funeral.

A movement to his immediate right made him turn again, all comprehension of his own true age overwhelmed. Inevitably, Uhura was there, a greeting made up of a half rise from her seat. Her bright eyes rarely clouded, and they spoke a welcome all of their own. McCoy reached up a hand and touched her smooth cheek very slightly. He realized at once there were tears in his eyes, sparkling from the glare of the bridge lights. "I haven't seen you like this in over sixty years," he whispered with the gruffness of emotion.

"Why, thank you, Doctor," she answered in perfectly sincere gentility.

He turned back to survey then all as a whole and inspect the rest of the room. They were all at work again as if nothing had changed. Jim Kirk was signing a data tablet, his back to the 'good doctor' now. Spock was making calculations at his science station.

"All clear for departure now, sir." a voice of a familiar deep Caledonian brogue abruptly announced over the intercom.

Jim Kirk returned the tablet to its owner, business-like as ever. "Very good, Mr. Scott. Mr. Chekov, lay in new heading and execute. Ahead warp factor three." Altogether it was, to McCoy, as if he had rediscovered some dusty old letters to home in a rusty tin box in the attic. The Captain again swung his chair round abruptly to face him again, his cheeks exaggerating that grin. "Don't you think you should get down to sickbay, Bones?"

His image blurred in McCoy's tear-filled eyes. He tried to focus beyond them, looking for something, anything, within the face of his friend, that his emotionally bludgeoned reason could latch onto one way or another. What he found was nothing. And yet everything.

"I guess," he replied in words he barely heard and did not

really know why he said.

The idea of leaving seemed to shake him back to a dazed consciousness.

Where did he go from here?

As he turned, he thought the bridge turbo-lift doors were opening to accommodate him. But instead, their image seemed to dissolve before his eyes to reveal the backwash lit corridor of the holodeck beyond and the two officers facing him from within it. Reality flooded back to exorcise his bewilderment... but not his emotion. He half turned to look back, and almost as if by magic, or sixth sense, James Kirk rounded to him again, this time frowning.

"Problem, Doctor?" he asked plainly.

After a moment spent staring, McCoy answered, "No, I guess not." He turned his back on the scene and walked awkwardly into the corridor, hearing the doors hiss and clank shut behind him but not looking round.

In the dim light of reality he tried to stare beyond Geordi's VISOR as if attempting to contrive an image of the other's eyes by sheer force of will.

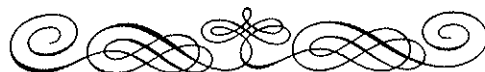
To see what he was thinking, or to pass on his own wordless thoughts somehow?

He neither knew nor cared. Whatever, he gave up after the briefest of efforts, turned away and began to hobble down the passageway towards the elevator. He uttered not a sound, the emotional swell behind his unreleased tears washing away any effort at speech.

Once he was out of hearing distance, Data, for once perceptively restrained, turned to his friend and asked, "Do you take that as a sign of approval?"

Geordi La Forge was no longer smiling. He stood watching the old man limping with his stick, his expression a mixture of surprise and incomprehension, giving way to a creeping understanding. Since receiving that enhanced close up of the Admiral's glittering eyes an unusual atmosphere of seriousness had pervaded him.

"Absolutely," was all he finally said.



LONELY WITHIN

by

Lorraine Goodison

Her room was empty. Solitude stood by the door, casting its grey despair over everything familiar. Outwith these walls she could pretend and forget. Within, she remembered; and remembering, grieved.

She chided herself, the trained logical part of her mind asserting that her reaction was quite valid, given the circumstances, but it was time to let go. She could hear her voice as she would counsel another in the same situation; *'Accept your grief. It will pass and one day you'll be able to look back with happy thoughts.'* How true, but her training did not prepare her for this desolation, this feeling that strangled every meaningful attempt to place her grief in the box where it belonged and close the lid.

The door-chime startled her from her introspection. She jumped up guiltily, reaching up to ensure her hair was in place. A dry cynical voice murmured that it would not do for the Counselor to appear flustered. She told it to shut up.

"Come in... "

Her visitor was Captain Picard, as she had expected. If anyone would notice her preoccupation, it would be him, even with his attention given to their urgent mission. Once, she would have expected another to note her need, but that was long ago and she bitterly reminded herself that she could no longer expect Bill Riker's support in anything.

Jean-Luc Picard entered on steady tread, his expression open but neutral, his tone warm and supportive. "Counselor - I noticed you were... somewhat subdued earlier. I wondered if you were unwell."

Deanna Troi hesitated, reluctant to unburden her thoughts, which seemed foolish and self-centred. "I am... not my usual self, it's true, Captain."

"That's understandable."

She felt his compassion and it almost tipped her control over the edge. Her hands curled into tense balls. "I was... deeply affected by Ian's... departure." *How clinical you sound, she thought. How detached. Can you not put words to your loss?*

Picard absorbed her words and the meaning behind them, pacing across the floor as he considered what to say. He was not one to interfere unduly, but it was clear she needed someone to talk to. As he drew near, their eyes met. "I think I can understand some of what you must feel," he said softly. "It can't have been easy."

Troi shook her head, wishing she could respond to his silent offer. She looked away, her hands moving to twist together in an

unconscious need for touch. "It wasn't," she admitted, staring blindly at the couch. "It was very painful."

"Would it help to talk about it?" Picard smiled wryly as he continued. "I'm sure even Counselors need someone to talk things over with occasionally."

She wanted to. She wanted to speak of all the hurt and fear and anger and desolation she felt, but all she said was, "I will, later, but... I think I need some time to come to terms with it myself."

Picard clearly did not believe her, but he did not push the issue. He inclined his head slightly in assent. "Very well. If - when - you wish to talk, you know can to me, Deanna."

"Thank you."

When the door closed, Deanna Troi tasted the restraint so many others had exercised against her in similar confrontations. It made no sense then, and no sense now. What was wrong with her? The man wanted to help and she closed him off, erecting polite words as shields against his humanity. He cared, but she could not bring herself to accept that giving.

She slowly turned round, looking at the empty table, the space where for a while a small bed had stood. *Healer, heal thyself.*

Picard walked slowly from Deanna Troi's quarters, troubled by her obvious turmoil. He did not require empathic abilities to know she was deeply distressed by the death of her child.

Death.

It was not even that, for the being which was the heart and soul of Ian Andrew Troi had simply cancelled its Human seeming and reverted to its true embodiment. *Where is it now?* he wondered. *Did it truly comprehend the repercussions of its brief brush with humanity?*

He still found the whole incident unbelievable; Deanna's announcement of her pregnancy, her coming to term within a matter of hours and - stranger still - the child's growth from baby to boy in an equally short time. Who - what - was it, and why had it come among the members of this Starship? In a short communication with Troi, it had passed on some of its reasons, but the fundamental questions of its origin and eventual intent would remain unanswered.

Picard paused by a string of windows, arms folded and chin supported by one hand as he stared at the star-studded vacuum. A tiny frown creased her forehead. The alien - he still could not attribute its given name to it - wanted to experience Human existence, or so it had said. Why then did it accelerate that existence to an abnormal rate? How could it truly appreciate what it was to be mortal if it did not experience it as others did? Was its intent to grow 'old' and 'die' in order to encapsulate the essence of being Human without the emotional baggage that went with it? If so, it chose a probably problematical parentage in an empath whose abilities it would surely possess. Or was that its conscious decision; did it deliberately choose Deanna Troi?

Picard breathed heavily, frowning darkly at his faint reflection. All this conjecture, stimulating though it was, got him nowhere. His immediate concern was the well-being of his Ship's Counselor. She was closing him off, which was unexpected but understandable. It was too personal, too delicate an event to talk over with your CO, however sympathetic he might be. Perhaps a female point of view was needed; she had gone to Pulaski first.

Something in Picard balked at the thought of going to ask Kate Pulaski to intervene. He could see the faint mockery in her eyes, hear the quiet surprise in her voice as pompous Picard confessed to concern for a crewmember. He pursed his lips. No, definitely not Dr. Pulaski.

Who, then? The answer came immediately, surprising him with its obviousness. An old friend might be better than all the professional interest in the world. He turned on his heel, heading for the First Officer's quarters.

Commander William Riker blinked owlishly at Captain Picard, as well he might, having only recently wakened up. "Talk to Deanna?" he echoed. "What about?"

"I would have thought it self evident," Picard replied evenly.

Riker regarded him thoughtfully. Picard had clearly set his mind on a determined course. Protests were likely to fall on deaf ears, especially if accompanied by feeble excuses. "The boy?" he asked, taking a glass of grapefruit juice from the food dispenser. "I know she's still upset about it, but I hardly think I'm the one - "

"That's where you're wrong, Will," Picard gently interrupted. "I am aware you and Deanna were on... intimate terms for a while. You are best qualified."

Riker took a sip of his juice, using it to cover his chagrin at being found out. He and Deanna had been careful to keep their previous relationship quiet, but he might have guessed Picard would put two and two together. The Captain was the master of the 'You learn a lot by watching' philosophy. "That was a long time ago," he hedged. "Things have changed."

"But you're still friends, at least," countered Picard.

Riker had to nod agreement.

"Then talk to her on that basis. She needs a sounding board. I'm asking you to take on that role."

Wonderful, thought Riker, but he was trapped. To refuse would make him appear uncaring, thoughtless. To accept... "I can't promise she will open up to me."

"Just give it a try," Picard smiled, turning to leave. "I'll cover for you on the bridge."

Riker slumped into a chair, sighing as he thought of his assigned task. It would not be easy.

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Deanna Troi had dimmed her cabin lights to a subdued glow and lay back in a chair listening to a somewhat melancholy melody which suited her mood. She was revelling in self-pity, she knew, but she did not care. It was past time she answered her own needs. All she wanted to do was swim in the depression, allowing it to have its way before she forced it into a dark corner along with the other doubts.

She looked up, her empathy tapping in to the mixed feelings of someone hesitating outside. *Bill*. Of course. Her voiced acknowledgement mingled with the chime, causing momentary confusion while he decided if he'd heard correctly. Deanna did not bother to repeat her words.

Riker was chastising himself as he entered. This was stupid - he shouldn't feel this awkward. He shouldn't feel awkward at all, but he did, and the knowledge that she would sense it made it twice as bad.

"Hello, Bill. Shouldn't you be on duty?"

There was a neutrality to her tone; neither a welcome nor a denial. He was not sure how to take it. "I have some spare time - thought I'd find out how you were."

"Fine."

She was doing it to him, too, keeping him at bay, testing him. *Why?* "That's kind of non-committal."

"Is it? Perhaps that's the way I feel." Troi looked away, indulging in non-response.

Riker stifled a sigh, walking slowly into her private space. "We haven't had much chance to talk lately..." he remarked. "After all that's happened, I - "

Troi's dark alien gaze held him, drowning him in its directness. "You couldn't come yourself - Jean-Luc had to ask you. I thought we were friends, Bill."

"We are. Deanna, I didn't - "

"Forget it, I'm too sensitive." She broke contact, dismissing his protest.

"I'd never say you were that," he countered gently.

It was a while before she answered and when she did, her words were not what he expected.

"Sometimes... Sometimes I wish I weren't so sensitive. Sometimes I wish I took more from my father's heritage instead of my mother's." She stared at a pool of shadow, remembering painful days of youth. "By Betazoid standards I'm crippled, a half person. By Human standards I'm a miracle worker, a pocket guide to hidden emotions."

"No one sees you that way."

"How can you be so sure?" She felt intense emotions rising like a bubble to the surface and for once did not deny them. "You can't know that, Bill. Even in our closest moments, you could not know how I truly feel. You never will know, because you are Human

and even our most intimate communication paled beside the real thing."

"Is that my fault?" Riker asked gently, sinking into soft cushions beside her.

Troi shook her head, distracted by the rebirth of long-buried truths. "No, of course not."

"Deanna." He lightly touched her arm, wishing she would let him cross the barriers. "Deanna, you demean yourself because you're not perfect, because you're neither one nor the other. You should remember you're unique. You have a place - "

"Don't tell me that again, Bill, not now!" She flung herself from his side, covering the distance to the window in swift strides, features creased with distress. "Ian Andrew was unique..." Her voice quavered, grew strong with a bitter edge. "Just as I am. I felt him, Bill. I knew him better than I know myself. And right now I wish I had simply been Human!"

"Do you truly think that would have changed anything? Would being Human make it less painful?"

The questions echoed in her head, bouncing off the yin and yang of her dual heritage. Her eyes closed in sorrow. "No..."

Riker went to her, reaching out to hold her as he'd wanted to when her child died. She bore his touch for the briefest of moments, moving out of reach when the intimacy became too painful. How could one ache for physical comfort that was too agonising to bear?

"I want to help," Riker told her, knowing she could feel his sympathy.

Troi spun round to face him, her eyes brim-full with tears. "Then make me forget it ever happened! Help me fight the grief!"

"I'm trying to, but you won't let me."

They stared at each other over a gulf of half forgotten promises and polite distances. How had it come to this? How could they have shared so much yet be further apart than at the beginning?

This has gone far enough, Riker thought. *She's letting it get to her, and all I'm doing is encouraging it.* He tried to bridge the gap between maudlin self-pity and fell head-first into a pit of good intentions. "Deanna," he began quietly, "you're upset about Ian's death. I don't completely understand why, but - "

"You don't understand?" she repeated, pain in her voice. "He was my child! I lost - "

"No," Riker interrupted, trying to stall her spiralling morbidity. "He was an alien, who forcefully used you to further his own experiment."

Troi stared at him, eyes wide, mouth open in a shocked 'o'. "How can you say that?" she whispered. "You saw him born - you saw him die!"

For once Riker's tact deserted him as desperation overtook good

sense. "I truly don't understand you, Deanna. You get yourself upset over some - some intruder who used you. The same thing happened with Wyatt!"

"What has that to do with anything? Wyatt was a gentle, giving man who - "

"Wyatt was a kid who never knew what he was being handed on a plate!"

Troi stared at him, her empathy stirred by a spark of dark emotion behind the outburst. "You were jealous of Wyatt. Were you jealous of Ian also?"

"No, of course - "

"You were!" Troi interrupted, remembering the brief conference concerning her unexpected pregnancy. "You accused me. Not in words, but in tone and thought."

"I was not jealous!" Riker thundered, losing control of the situation and his objectivity.

Troi clearly did not believe him. She held herself straight, tears coursing down her cheeks. "Bill, I'd like you to leave now."

"Deanna, I didn't mean to - "

"Now. Please."

He did as she bade him, leaving her alone in a storm of emotions and accusations, battered by their intensity. Wrapping her arms about herself, she gave in to the whirlwind.

Riker stood in the corridor for a while, staring at the closed door, breathing deeply to get himself under control. Where the hell had that come from? He meant to help her, and instead he off-loaded his childish resentment into her lap like a buzz of angry bees. He wished he could retract his words, his thoughts. It was too late - on oh, so many levels. Sighing, he turned towards the turbolift.

Picard's silent enquiry greeted him as he strode down the ramp and took his seat at the Captain's side. Sitting on the edge, palms rubbing together as he stared at the carpet, Riker murmured, "It didn't work."

Picard lifted an enquiring eyebrow. "Oh?"

Mortified, Riker looked at him. "I lost my temper."

Curiosity turned to concern. "I think you'd better tell me about it," Picard remarked, rising from his chair to stride to his Ready Room. "Data, you have the bridge... "

After Riker had given a brief, awkward resume of his talk with Deanna Troi, Picard breathed sharply through his nose and looked at his First Officer. "I must apologise, Will. I wouldn't have suggested this had I known it might go awry. I read your relationship with Counselor Troi completely wrongly."

"No, you didn't," Riker assured him. "We had a close

relationship once and there are still ties, but much of that closeness has died." He did not add that he was instrumental in making sure it did.

Picard perched on the edge of the desk, arms folded as he watched Riker. He would never pry into the private affairs of his crew, but he was curious as to why Riker and Troi had broken their bonds. Then he remembered a girl in Paris, who became a woman not completely forgotten in his heart, and he understood. "Some choices bring just as much heartache as they're intended to prevent, don't they? Especially if they return to haunt you."

Riker nodded his agreement.

"It seems to me," Picard continued, "That I have compounded a problem by creating a new one, and I sincerely regret that. However - I can hardly set things right now, and I can't apologise on your behalf. You will have to be the one to solve this, Will."

"I know. I'll speak to Deanna later on when she's... not so sensitive."

They looked at each other, aware of the aptness of that description when applied to Deanna Troi.

Will Riker found the Betazoid Counselor later, when his shift had ended and hers begun. He traced her whereabouts to an observation lounge where she stood gazing at the stars slipping by. She did not turn at his approach but asked in a low voice, "Are we nearly there?"

He nodded, forgetting she would not see the gesture. "Two hours ETA. Off-loading of the viruses will begin as soon as possible after that."

"Good."

The silence between them was not unwelcoming, merely distant, and so Riker took the opportunity to apologise. "Deanna - I'm sorry for what I said. I had no right."

She turned to look at him, but he could not see her expression in the shadow. "Once you had every right."

He had no ready answer and as she glanced back at the stars Riker reached out to her. "Deanna, don't close me off. Stop trying to pretend you're perfect. I know you're hurting, I know I hurt you even more, but believe me, I do still care."

Her carefully-outlined lips stretched into a smile. "I know that, Bill, and I understand, but I cannot let myself go. You of all people should know that."

"So you hide it all away and pretend it never happened?"

"No - not this." This was too close to hide. Troi felt a need welling inside her to tell of the pain and joy of her brief motherhood. She wanted someone to know and share and so she turned to the man who once loved her. "Imzadi... it is so difficult. My body was used, yet there is no trace of pregnancy. I carried the child for a few scant hours, but I touched him with my mind and knew

his love. When he was born, I loved him as my own... and for the first time in a very long while, I was not alone." She paused, resting one hand on the windowsill while her eyes were drawn unwillingly to the outer view. "Then - then he left me and once again I had to face that unbearable loneliness."

"Loneliness can be overcome," Riker said after a long silence.

"I know that, but - this is almost too much to bear."

Riker moved closer to her and this time she did not refuse his touch. "Let me help," he murmured into her hair. "Let me chase the loneliness away."

Troi closed her eyes and leaned against his strength. "Oh, Imzadi... I have no right to ask this of you."

"Who's asking? And who said anything about rights?"

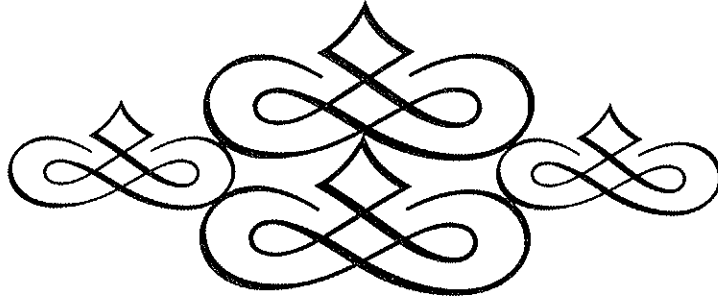
She looked up at him, liquid dark eyes meeting frank blue ones. "Why did we have to part?"

"You know the reasons, but for now - all deals are off. Let's be friends."

"For ever."

Riker chuckled. "That's a long time."

"It'll do for me." Her smile mirrored his and for a while she allowed herself to accept his support. After all, what were friends for?



NEW SHIP, OLD NAME

It's strange to be back after so many years.
 She is no longer the 'Silver Lady' I knew
 For so long and so well - engineers love to change things!
 But she bears the same name. She has
 A proud heritage, a reputation to live up to.
 A new, older Captain, not so impulsive as Jim,
 But one I know will be gentle with that Lady
 Called the Enterprise.
 I shall return to haunt him, if he is not!

Oriel Cooper



THINGS THAT GO BUMP

by

Ann Neilson

He was lost, completely lost and it was his own fault. How long had it been now? It seemed like an eternity, but logic told him that it had only been a couple of hours at most. His eyes strained in the oppressive blackness trying desperately to find some recognisable signs to help guide him out of this labyrinth of tunnels. His ears listened for the tiniest sound but all he could hear was the steady plip-plop of water as it dripped from the roof of the cave to land in the pools of water collecting below, and the sound of his own laboured breathing.

He was exhausted; had to rest, yet was afraid to. Afraid that if he closed his eyes even for a second the darkness might claim him completely.

"Keep together." That had been the order. "It's easy to get lost down here."

What a laugh! One minute he was with the others, the next he was on his own. He had no-one to blame but himself; it was his own stupid fault. Once again his curiosity had got the better of him; didn't he always have to know better than everyone else? He had stopped for a few seconds, perhaps just a little longer, to study his tricorder readings in the dim light from his torch and when he looked up the others were gone. He hurried in the direction he thought they had taken, but soon came to a dead end. Trying to retrace his steps, he stepped into the ever-present shadows, his feet began to slip and he fell...

That had been hours ago, or was it only minutes? He had no way of knowing how long he had lain unconscious. In the darkness he had been unable to locate his tricorder or his torch, and when he felt at his chest for his communicator it was to discover that it was missing, the cloth of his tunic ripped. Without these he was blind - no way of finding his way to the surface and no way of alerting the others to his predicament. The Enterprise would have been able to locate him quickly using her powerful sensors but at present she was light-years away dropping off emergency medical supplies at the Federation colony on Delphinus 5. He would have to rely on luck, and so far that had not been on his side.

He shivered in the cold, damp air. His body ached from the fall, and as if to add to his misery, he was hungry... maybe he would starve to death! Worse still he would slowly go mad and roam the seemingly endless tunnels for ever! He felt the fear well up, gnawing at his insides. He shouted for help, again and again. An act of desperation or defiance? He did not know which, and he didn't even care as he listened to the fading echo of his voice, praying for a reply which never came.

He sank to his knees, gradually bringing the fear under control, a very tenuous control which threatened to crack at the slightest cause.

A tear slowly rolled down his face. So this was it, then, the end? Funny, he had never really thought about dying before, although he had always assumed that he would meet his end in space... with his eyes open, as the Klingons would say... quickly, not alone, not like this. Anger born of desperation filled him and he forced himself to his feet. He *had* to go on; he couldn't just lie down and give up!

Stopping dead in his tracks he stood holding his breath so hard his lungs hurt.

What was that?

He listened... Nothing. Slowly he let out his breath. Nothing. Just his imagination running riot in the dark like that of a four-year-old. He tried to relax and took another step.

There it was again!

Something was following him... no, stalking him!

He backed away from the sound but stumbled over a rock and fell heavily. The thing stopped then began to advance on him again. Desperately he groped around in the darkness trying to find a weapon. His hands closed on the rock he had fallen over and without pausing for thought he heaved it with all his might in the direction of the sound. There was a dull thud as the rock struck home, followed by a groan, and the thing fell. He ran for his life, crashing against the tunnel walls like a ricocheting bullet as he went.

Eventually he stumbled and fell. He had no strength left. He would wait here for whatever was following him; perhaps his end would be quick after all. Then came the sound. This was it... but no, it came from up ahead! Were there two of them, mates perhaps? He became aware of a light, very faint but definitely there and coming closer all the time.

"Wesley!" He recognised that voice. "Where the hell did you get to? We've been looking for you for hours!"

"Geordi... Geordi? Is that you?" he asked, scarcely able to believe it.

"Who else?"

"Geordi, I... I got lost." His voice was a mere whisper, on the verge of breaking as a huge surge of relief swept through him.

"Hey, Wes, are you all right?" He could only nod, not daring to speak. "Wes, I don't fancy being in your shoes right now. Your mother has been worried sick about you, and Captain Picard... well, let's just say he's more than a little annoyed."

"The Enterprise is in orbit? But how?"

"Nope, but she will be in about forty minutes."

"Actually, that should be thirty eight minutes twenty -"

"Data, enough already! When we reported you missing, they increased warp speed to get back here quickly. For all we knew you could have been lying somewhere seriously injured... Boy, I sure

hope you can think up something good before you report to the Captain!"

"Something was after me back there." He pointed down the tunnel.

"Something? Do you know what it was? According to our scans, with the exception of ourselves there is no life on this planet."

"I heard it." He saw the look of doubt on their faces. "I hit it with a rock! I heard it fall!"

"Easy, Wes, easy. We believe you. Let's go take a look. Do you want to come, or would you rather stay here?"

"No! No, I'll come with you!" If the truth were to be told, he was terrified at the thought of being left alone again.

"How far back is it?"

"Not far... I'm not sure."

They walked for almost half a mile, La Forge using his heat vision to pick the path taken by Wesley in his panic-stricken flight through the tunnels. After a while, they came to an intersection where the ground had been disturbed. A rock lay in the centre.

"This is it! But... but I don't see where... It must have crawled away."

La Forge looked at Data who was conducting a tricorder sweep of the area. "Data? Anything?"

"No, we are the only life forms registering."

"But that can't be! The tricorder must be wrong! Let me see!" He snatched the tricorder from Data's hand and stared at the readings in disbelief. "This must be wrong!"

"Wesley, did you actually see this creature?"

"No, it was too dark." He looked from one to the other. "Mr. Data, Lt. La Forge, I know how it sounds, but I did hear it. There was something here. It followed me and I hit it with that rock!" He pointed at the rock to emphasise his last statement.

La Forge picked up the rock and turned it over in his hands. "Wes, I've examined this rock microscopically and seen no sign that it hit anything, Data's tricorder doesn't register any other life forms, and ours are the only tracks here."

"Are you trying to say that I imagined all this?"

"Well, what else are we supposed to think? There's absolutely nothing to indicate that there was ever anything or anyone here apart from us." He paused, trying to choose his next words carefully. "You know, Wes, being down here in the dark with all those shadows... on your own and all... Well, your imagination could have played tricks on you..." He was interrupted by a beep from Data's communicator.

"This is Commander Data."

"Have you located Ensign Crusher yet?" It was Picard's voice.

"Yes, sir, he's quite safe."

"Very good. Beam up at once... and have him report to me immediately he is on board. Picard out."

"Well, you heard what the man said. Let's get out of here."

"Geordi, Mr. Data, sir... er... will you tell my mom or Captain Picard what I told you?" He looked at them pleadingly.

"We should; after all we would be failing in our duty as Starfleet officers if we didn't. What do you think, Data?"

Data cocked his head to one side and appeared to consider the matter very seriously. "Indeed."

Wesley interrupted. "But you said it was just my imagination. Couldn't you just say I got lost or something? That's the truth, after all - it was after that I thought I was followed."

"Well... okay by me. Data?"

"Please, Data."

"Agreed - on one condition. I have been practising some new jokes... "

"That's blackmail!"

Data smiled. "Indeed; that is something else I have been practising. Is it a deal?"

"Deal."

Dr. Beverley Crusher anxiously awaited her son's return in the transporter room. She sprang onto the platform the second he materialised and hugged him in relief. "Wesley! Are you all right? What happened down there?"

"Yes, mom, I'm all right really. I got lost, that's all. No big deal."

"That's all? That's all? Wesley, I've been worried sick about you." She paused, reaching out to brush the hair from his forehead, to reveal a large bruise. "What happened to your head?"

"It's nothing, honest. I just bumped it."

"Well, I want to check you out after you've seen the Captain."

"Now?"

"Now! And if I were you, I'd hurry before I have to give him something for high blood pressure! He's steamed up enough as it is!"

Picard listened in silence to his hesitant explanation. When he had finished, the Captain got to his feet and walked around the desk to stand in front of him.

"So you got lost. Perhaps, Ensign Crusher, you would care to explain exactly how you came to be separated from the rest of the away team?"

"I'm not sure, sir. I guess I wasn't paying attention."

"You weren't paying attention. Don't you know that the first rule of being a member of an away team is that you must remain alert at all times?"

"Yes, sir."

"But do you understand why? Don't you realise that as part of such a team other people are as dependent upon you for their safety as you are on them for yours? A lapse of concentration for even a second could cost a life or lives, perhaps even your own. You *must* remain alert at all times. Now do you understand?" Picard emphasised every syllable of this last question.

He swallowed nervously. "Yes, sir, I do understand. It won't happen again."

"It had better not, young man. You learned a valuable lesson today; remember it well. The next time you may not be so fortunate. Now report to sickbay and get that injury tended to."

"It's really nothing sir, just a bump."

"Nevertheless, it will give your mother something to fuss over!"

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." He headed for the door; as he reached it it slid open to reveal Data and La Forge waiting to enter.

"Oh, Ensign, one last thing."

He turned back. "Sir?"

"When you were alone in those tunnels did you by any chance... ahem... see..." Picard's voice trailed off; he looked faintly embarrassed.

"Sir?"

"Did you... er... see or hear anything... er... strange?"

He glanced accusingly at Data and La Forge. Had they told? No, he decided; they had been with him right up until he reported to the Captain, so they couldn't have without his hearing.

"No, sir. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, well, no reason really. It's just that there are stories... legends of... ghosts." He paused, growing even more embarrassed. "When I was a young ensign, not much older than you, I thought I... er... well, I thought I saw one."

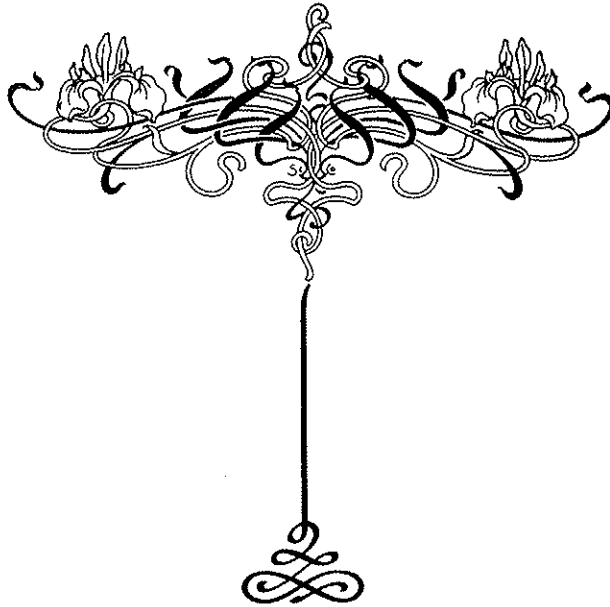
"*You saw a ghost in those tunnels?!!*" He looked victoriously

at Data and La Forge.

"Yes... well, the imagination of youth, I suppose, though it certainly put the wind up me at the time." Picard cleared his throat. "Send in Commander Data and Lt. La Forge, please."

"Yessir!"

Gratefully, he headed for the corridor.



A VISITOR

Suddenly he is there beside me,
A strange inscrutable Being
Radiating a sense of enormous, indifferent power.
Like a cat with a toy, he plays with me
Seeming to enjoy my helplessness.

Who is this creature 'Q' and
What is his real form?
If I were to probe beneath his disguises,
What would I find - my future or
The vast unfathomable Universe?

Oriel Cooper



DINNER DATE

by

Lorraine Goodison

(a follow-up to 'Measure of a Man')

Jean-Luc Picard was not surprised to find Phillipa Louvois waiting for him in Starbase 173's new restaurant. It was her style, to arrive early so he would feel guilty for being late. The only thing that surprised him was that he was about to sit down with a woman he once regarded as an aggravating thorn in his side. Strange how relationships changed.

"You're early," he remarked as he approached the table.

"You're punctual," Louvois retorted. "I expected as much."

"Don't get cocky."

Picard gave her an appraising look and was unaccountably reminded of another time they faced each other; when he was court-martialled for the loss of the Stargazer.

Picard remembered that day well.

The entire procedure had a dream-like quality, as if he was still imagining the scene while adrift in the Stargazer shuttlecraft. God knew he'd had plenty of time to consider the consequences, but his mind persisted in trying to reject the present, insisting it could not end this way.

Was it an ending? he questioned. Was he allowing himself to consider defeat before the battle began? It was not like him, but lately nothing was as it should be. Despite his certainty of his acquittal, a knot of unease formed in his stomach.

"Jean-Luc."

He turned toward the speaker, an older man whose face mapped his life experiences in laughter and worry lines.

"Worried?"

Picard did not allow the question time to filter through. "Never," he answered instantly.

"Good, because there's nothing to worry about." Mark Cameron surveyed the courtroom. "Plenty to sweat over," he added absently, "but certainly not worry about." He nodded to a new arrival just across the floor from them. "Phillipa Louvois. She'll be a tough act to beat."

Picard watched the slender brunette take her place. He'd heard several opinions of her, all bad. "I heard she gave Viko a devil of a time."

"Hmmm," agreed Cameron. "A very determined lady. She pursues her law with ultra devotion, trampling egos along the way. She's

made some enemies."

"A problem?"

"Nah. I love a challenge. Your case is water-tight. Just don't let her trip you up."

The words echoed in Picard's mind, fading as he noticed that Phillipa Louvois was steadily meeting his gaze in much the same way as she had in that courtroom ten years before.

"Wonderful," she said with just a touch of irony. "I meet you for dinner and you sit staring pensively into infinity."

Picard shook off the memories. "Sorry. I was... thinking."

"Don't let me stop you," Louvois commented archly. She fingered her glass. "The hearing?"

He nodded, neglecting to specify which hearing. "I never thanked you properly."

"Don't - I was simply doing my job." She smiled to take the sting from the words. "Your Mr. Data is a remarkable being. I can understand why you didn't want to lose him."

"He's a valuable bridge officer," Picard answered evasively. "What Maddox proposed was... distasteful."

"I'll say. You made a damn good job of defending Data - ever thought of taking it up professionally?"

"That's your line, not mine."

"Ah - the passionate starship Captain, never happy unless he's among the stars."

"It's the only worthwhile place to be," Picard replied, reiterating the phrase she'd once used to describe her return to Starfleet.

Louvois chose to ignore the opening, feigning interest in the approaching water. "I guess we'd better order."

Picard followed her lead, recalling as he did so a time when they had been on opposing sides and Phillipa Louvois was less inclined to be friendly.

"Oh come now, Captain! You expect this court to believe that an unidentified ship suddenly appeared from nowhere and fired on a Starfleet vessel without provocation?"

"Yes I do, because that's the way it happened."

Louvois paused, arching an eyebrow at him. "No need to shout, Picard. We can all hear perfectly well."

Picard gritted his teeth, quietly seething as he met the Prosecutor's mocking gaze. She'd goaded him all the way through this examination, calling into doubt his integrity, his command ability... It was too much, dammit!

Cameron cleared his throat, a polite signal to Picard to keep

his temper bottled. Cameron had warned him Louvois would do this; make him angry, try to trip him up so the court doubted his rationality. Picard swallowed, unclenching his fists.

Phillipa Louvois turned from a calm examination of her notes. She strolled across, the picture of cool detachment. "Captain Picard... you said this... unknown vessel fired without warning, taking you by surprise and badly damaging your ship before you were able to return fire."

"That is what happened, yes," Picard confirmed evenly.

"A little sloppy, wouldn't you say?"

"I beg your pardon?"

She met his eyes, a subtle power play accompanied by verbal needling. "You are an experienced commanding officer, if your records are to be believed. Experienced, yet you lost a good part of your crew and your ship. Is there no standard procedure for such an encounter?"

"It is not procedure to assume unidentified ships are enemies. When the ship's intent became clear, I ordered - "

"Ah, procedure," Louvois interrupted. "I'm sure no-one here has to be reminded of Starfleet procedure - " her gaze swept the officers present - "but, Captain, is it procedure to completely destroy an unidentified ship?"

"When that ship threatens destruction of my ship, yes!" Picard replied hotly.

"Did it?" snapped Louvois. "Was it truly about to destroy you or was it attempting to give assistance to rectify an unfortunate mistake?"

"There was no mistake."

A murmur ran round the court, seasoned officers exchanging words over Louvois' approach. Mark Cameron rose to address Admiral Ulvaeus. "Your Honour, I fail to see the necessity for such adversarial questioning."

Louvois swung to meet the judge's questioning gaze. "It is pertinent, Your Honour."

Ulvaeus nodded, but her face showed slight displeasure.

"No mistake..." Louvois repeated, continuing her examination. She turned on her heel, her expression one of determined resolution. "Captain Picard, I put it to you that there was a mistake."

"I put it to you that the Stargazer was disabled because of a fatal error in judgement and that in order to cover up your blunder you destroyed the unknown vessel."

"That's not true!"

Again the mocking gaze. "You're losing your temper again, Picard. Is it because I am close to the truth?"

Picard glared at her, aware that he was not doing himself any

good at all. He forced back the rage, taking a deep breath to calm himself.

"Better?" Louvois asked provokingly. She laced her fingers behind her back, taking a step towards the witness stand. "Captain Picard... you are on good terms with your crew, yes?"

Frowning at the sudden change of tack, Picard answered in the affirmative.

"I thought so. Now... how long were you adrift in the Stargazer shuttlecraft?"

"Just over three weeks."

"Three weeks. Three... long... weeks." The arrogance returned. "Long enough to straighten out a story."

Something stuck in Picard's throat as disbelief slowly dawned. "I don't understand your meaning..."

"Let me put it another way. Would you say your crew is loyal to you?"

"Yes."

"Then it would be understandable that they should follow your lead, fall in with your version -"

"That's preposterous!"

"Objection!"

The two voices rang out as one, Cameron jumping to his feet. "Your Honour, Captain Louvois is harassing my client and calling his reputation into disrepute with no sound basis for her accusations. May I remind you that this is not the first time."

"Objection sustained." Admiral Ulvaeus stared imperiously at the Prosecutor. "Captain Louvois, I remind you that the crew of the Stargazer have made their statements and the records confirm their reports. Unless you have evidence to support your accusations, I'd advise you to stick to facts and not wild conjecture."

Louvois replied with a slight air of defiance. "I am simply trying to find the truth, Your Honour."

"Are you indeed. I think it better that we disregard that last line of questioning."

Louvois acquiesced, revealing no hint of her inner rage.

"I never realised I was so boring."

Once again Phillipa Louvois' light mockery brought Jean-Luc Picard back to present-day reality.

"Sorry," he apologised. "Was I miles away again?"

"Yes, I'd say," she replied with some insight. "You're remembering the court martial?"

"It has crossed my mind, yes."

"Do you still blame me?"

She actually sounded as if she wanted his forgiveness. "For what? You were doing your duty, remember?" Picard answered with delicate irony.

Louvois stared at him in silence, wrestling with conflicting emotions. Duty. The last time she'd exercised her duty, her whole world had collapsed. Like Picard, she found herself remembering that fateful time.

She walked out of the courtroom - straight into Cameron and his client. She smiled, perhaps a little insincerely, but she had a lot on her mind. "Well, Captain Picard, it seems you've been exonerated. Congratulations."

Picard returned her handshake in tight-lipped silence.

"Weren't you a little excessive in there, Phillipa?" Mark Cameron queried with a hint of reprimand in his tone.

"I don't think so," she replied confidently, meeting Picard's obvious animosity. "I always search for the truth."

"Your truth or the actual facts?" Picard challenged.

His tone angered Louvois. "You lost your ship, Picard," she reminded him sharply. "My job was to find out why. I look for the facts."

"As you see them."

"Now who's excessive?"

"I suspect you have more experience of that than I." Jean-Luc Picard strode by her, his dismissal more effective than angry words.

Louvois watched him go, angered by his reaction. Another one who refused to see it her way. She was only doing her job in the best way she knew. What right did he have to judge her?"

She blinked, sliding back to the here and now. Now, after resigning because she felt her integrity was being compromised and then returning to Starfleet for reasons she had not examined too closely, now she considered that Picard might have been right. Perhaps she had been too certain of her right to zealously pursue the path of justice as she saw it. Perhaps that was why she wanted him as friend rather than enemy. She would never let him know it, however.

"Much good it did me." She lifted her chin, defying him to say anything to contradict her. "And before you say it again, you're wrong - I did have to leave. They gave me no choice."

"You could have backed down."

"I don't compromise my principles."

"Oh, I can believe that..." Picard murmured, lifting one eyebrow to reflect his sardonic tone. He sipped his drink, waiting for her retaliation.

"Sure, easy to be magnanimous now." Louvois leaned back in her

chair, the light of battle in her eyes. "Admit it - I had you on the run."

"You had me angry."

"Uhuh. Court martial or not, it certainly didn't cramp your style. It might have done your career some good, given you a sash of heroism."

Coldness crept into Picard's even gaze. "That was uncalled for."

"You're right," she answered quickly, wiping off her sarcastic smile. "Sorry. I shouldn't have said that." She sighed, a slight smirk returning to her lips. "We had one helluva good fight in that courtroom. It's kinda nice to know the possibility's still there."

"It doesn't have to be."

"Don't be so sure. My grandma always said - put two firecrackers together, there's sure to be sparks."

"Did we meet for dinner or an argument?"

She cocked her head, half smiling. "I don't know. What do you think?"

"I think it's time to bury the hatchet," Picard told her seriously.

Lowois tilted her head to look each side of him. "Don't see an olive branch," she murmured lightly.

"Is one necessary?"

"Nope."

Both fell silent, feeling the unspoken currents of the moment flow between them. Perhaps it was possible to put the past aside and be friends, at least.

Picard cast his mind back to the encounter in the office. "I wish things were different," she'd said. At the time he had doubted her sincerity, but now...

Lowois studied the man who embodied a part of her life she had determinedly laid aside. It was incredible how much of an impact he'd had on her career. Being here now, with him, she was reluctant to return to their mutual animosity. "I guess I can call you Jean-Luc now," she remarked.

"I dare say you can, Phillipa."

She laughed delightedly at the slightly pompous reply. "You'll never change! But I'll tell you this - "

"What?"

Her glass was raised in a toast. "I'm seriously considering a belief in miracles."



WHAT'S IN A NAME?

by

Lori Scott

He had been coughing steadily for the last ten minutes, and Beverly had begun to suspect he was doing it just to annoy her. As he began another fake coughing fit she shot him a look that would have made a phaser rifle look friendly.

Of course, she thought, pig-headed man that he is, he doesn't even have the decency to notice. She began to cough herself as a cloud of dust rose in front of her face, and Beverly could hear Jack softly laughing behind her. *Oh, well... she sighed, after being empty for two years the place is awfully dusty.* Turning slowly she surveyed the dingy grime that covered most of her home's living room and then let her eyes come to rest on her husband's back.

Jack glanced over his shoulder at her and smiled. "Bev, if you don't stop looking at me like that we'll never finish getting this room cleaned."

"I don't mind if you don't. And besides, Wesley did say he wanted a baby sister for his birthday."

"Beverly Anne Crusher! I'm shocked. What would your father say. Such wanton behaviour." He did his best to look shocked by his wife's behaviour, but couldn't quite pull it off. "My mother warned me about women like you. But then again I never did do what momma told me to." By now they were laughing, their lips met and...

War broke out in the kitchen.

"DAD!"

A collective sigh filled the air. "Oh no. Not again."

Bev smiled sympathetically as Jack's shoulders drooped in resigned acceptance of the inevitable. "I wonder what he broke this time?"

"MOM-DAD! Help! They're falling!" Another crash could clearly be heard coming from the direction of the kitchen.

"You'd better go help him before he destroys the entire kitchen.!

"I guess I'd better." Flashing Beverly a quick smile he went to the door of the kitchen and taking a deep breath, walked into the war zone.

Beverly resumed her dusting; all the while singing out of tune under her breath.

A small fire burned in the hearth of a now spotless living room. Wesley, long asleep, dreamed of adventures on far away

worlds, while Beverly lay on the couch staring into the fire.

"So... " she said between yawns. "What did he break today?"

"Four dishes and two glasses." He paused. "This time!" Bev could feel Jack's legs shaking slightly under her head. "He was so embarrassed." He spoke in a pitiful little voice with just the slightest hint of mirth. "I didn't have the heart to yell at him. I was twice as clumsy at his age, so I'm sure he'll grow out of it. It always amazes me that Westley can take a computer apart and put it back together again, but can't do the dishes without breaking one." As he spoke his voice got progressively quieter, and Beverly realised he had fallen asleep.

She smiled to herself as she recalled the reason that Jack had called their son West. Thinking back to the first present that he had ever given her, she remembered that it had been their one month anniversary. One month since they had become an official 'couple'. She had surprised him with dinner for two at the Bay Bridge Restaurant in San Francisco; he had given her something much more special. And he had been so nervous.

"Well... you see... I... Well... Oh! Bev, look, you remember how I told you that my mother died when I was still just a kid and how my father basically went off the deep end; well, I wound up living with my grandfather for a couple of months. He had this old book that his father had read to him when he was a little boy, and when I went to stay with him he read it to me. Well, sometimes I think that my grandfather and that book are the only things that saved my sanity when my mom died. And well, I know how much you like to read, and... Ah, hell! Here, I hope you like it. I'll see you later."

He'd walked away before Bev could thank him and, for the longest time she'd just stood there at the copy of "The Princess Bride" resting so solidly in her hands. "What am I going to do with that man?"

Two years later their son had been born. Jack had been so excited when she told him she wanted to name the boy after his favourite character in the book, Westley. It wasn't until West enrolled in school that they realised that a mistake had been made on his birth certificate. They'd left the 'T' out of Westley. Then Wesley, at the ripe old age of four, announced that he liked 'Wesley' anyway! So they decided not to correct the error and eventually everyone fell into the habit of calling him Wesley or Wes. Everyone, that is, except Jack. Despite everything he continued to call their son 'West', and even more surprisingly Wesley tolerated his father's little quirk. Bev had no doubt that if anyone else had dared to call him 'West' he would have corrected them quite firmly. Whenever anyone enquired as to Jack's nickname of Wesley, Jack would just smile and say, "What a boring place the universe would be without secrets." And so no-one but the three of them ever knew the truth about Wesley's name.

The day before Wesley's ninth birthday, Jack received a call from Captain Picard. There was an emergency and the Stargazer had to leave orbit immediately. With barely enough time for goodbyes he grabbed his uniform, kissed Beverly goodbye and promised West he's have a special surprise for him when he got back.

Three weeks later Beverly was changing out of her hospital uniform when the doorbell rang.

"Jean! What are you doing here?"

"Beverly... I'm sorry... I... May I come in?"

A picture of their wedding, an old pair of hiking boots, a picture Wesley drew. It had taken all of the courage she could muster but Beverly had finally begun to sort through some of Jack's things.

Effects, she thought again. *Effects. Not things. They call them effects when someone... Quit thinking! Just clean.* So far she had not been able to throw away a single thing.

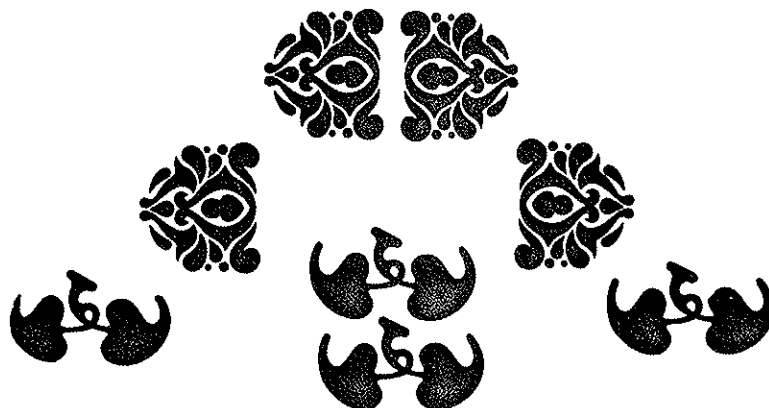
Lifting the lid off another box, she saw something that made her heart jump into her throat. It was Jack's birthday present for Wesley. Hands shaking, she picked up the old leather bound, first edition copy of "The Princess Bride" that had been in Jack's family for over three hundred years. Opening the book's cover she realised that there was an inscription in the book. There in Jack's elegant script were two simple sentences.

Never forget, my son, that the most important thing to be in life is happy. May this book bring you all the happiness it brought me, and more.

Love always,

Dad.

Suddenly the tears that Beverly had been holding inside since Jack's funeral began to flow as she realised that he would never be able to share this very special gift with his son. Later that night, after she had read Wesley his first chapter of "The Princess Bride", Beverly sat quietly by his bedside contemplating the kind of love that could go into a book, and... into a name.



DECISION TIME

by

Scott Carrick

(NB - This story is set during the second season episode "Samaritan Snare")

The shuttlecraft moved through space at maximum impulse speed, its engines silent in the vacuum, leaving a faint ion trail behind it.

On board, Captain Jean-Luc Picard was lost in thought, gazing out of one of the side windows at the surrounding darkness.

Much had happened in the last twenty-four hours; much that he didn't care to remember. He had journeyed to Starbase 515 in the shuttle with Wesley Crusher; thinking back on the events that had taken place since, it was hard to believe that it was only twenty-four hours since he had left the ship. A lot could happen in a day - and in his case, his past had almost caught up with him - in a terminal way.

Until he told Wesley about it, Dr. Kate Pulaski had been the only one on board the Enterprise who knew he had an artificial heart - it was a secret that he looked to keep to himself, as he didn't want to appear less than perfect - or indestructible - in the eyes of the crew. But Kate Pulaski was the kind of woman who liked to speak her mind; and when his heart had begun to malfunction several weeks previously, she had, in no uncertain terms, told him that it would have to be replaced - and quickly.

She assured him that it would be a routine operation - parthenogenetic transplants usually only lasted thirty to forty years, and the slight malfunction that was beginning to manifest itself in the valves of his heart was simply the early warning sign that it needed to be replaced. As he had only been twenty at the time of the incident, it simply meant that it was happening slightly earlier in his case.

When he told her bluntly that he didn't want the operation carried out on board, Pulaski had commented on the fact that he did have an ego after all. And, in a way, it was the truth. It wasn't that he was egotistical - it was just that he didn't want the crew to find out; as Captain, he had to be strong, not just for himself but for all the people on board, and he feared that if they knew of his physical weakness there would always be some doubt in the back of their minds that under pressure he might collapse at a critical moment.

Picard stared at his reflection in the window of the shuttlecraft.

Damn you! he thought. *Why did you have to be so rash, hot-headed and impetuous that you insulted those thugs in the first place?*

He was remembering the incident in the bar on Starbase Eirhart

as though it was yesterday. He had insulted three Norwegians, who had proceeded to lay into him - and before he knew it, a serrated knife had been thrust through his chest, seriously damaging his heart. Luckily there was an emergency medical centre nearby, otherwise he would have died from the physical trauma and loss of blood. He had been taken into the accident and emergency building, and was operated on within the hour. Two days later, he walked out on his own two feet, as good as ever.

Maybe the implant had not been up to standard right from the start - that was probably the reason it needed to be replaced now, sooner than most implants. In fact, he was doubly lucky as it was the only artificial heart they had in the whole medical centre. *Just my luck*, he thought, *to need another transplant now, just when the Enterprise is heading off to survey the Epsilon Pulsar Cluster - something he had wanted to see for months.*

The events of the last twenty-four hours were extremely hazy in his mind, but he tried to remember them as best he could. After refusing to have the operation on board, he had left in the shuttle with Ensign Crusher for the six hour journey to Starbase 515.

The Enterprise had headed off to witness and record the Cluster, with Commander Riker in charge. Picard hadn't told Riker the reason for his urgent journey; he didn't want to have his First Officer worrying unnecessarily.

Although he was intensely curious about the reason for the Captain's visit to the Starbase, Riker didn't pry - if Picard wasn't forthcoming with the information, he wasn't going to press - and anyway, it was Picard's own business.

So Picard and Crusher had left in the shuttlecraft, while the Enterprise sped off at Warp 2.

During the journey to Starbase 515 Picard had told Wesley the reason for his trip and the story behind it. *What the hell*, he thought - *maybe it'll prevent him from making the same silly mistake himself.* But Picard was sure that Ensign Crusher wouldn't be so silly; he was a fine young man who would make an excellent officer some day, and Wesley's reaction at the end of his story confirmed Picard's feelings - he knew the story, and his secret, were safe with the boy.

They had reached the Starbase uneventfully six hours later. Meanwhile, unknown to them, the Enterprise had picked up a distress signal and diverted to the Rhomboid Dronegar Sector. There they encountered a drifting, powerless ship, manned by some extremely dim-witted aliens who asked for assistance to repair their ship. Chief Engineer Geordi La Forge had beamed over to assist, but after completing the repairs he was held hostage - to the aliens, he had become a valuable commodity that they couldn't do without.

Through some brilliant improvisation and thinking by Worf, Riker, Data and La Forge himself, the aliens eventually gave up their hostage. However, during the kidnapping incident they received an urgent message from Starbase 515 to say that Captain Picard was in a critical condition, and requesting Dr. Pulaski's medical expertise immediately. So as soon as La Forge was back on board, they headed back to the Starbase at maximum warp speed.

During the hour-long journey, Riker asked Kate Pulaski to fill him in on the Captain's condition. She realised the cat was now out

of the bag, and told the story of the Captain's artificial heart to the whole bridge crew.

The senior officers realised that what they were hearing was being told to them in confidence; but Pulaski had not realised that on the bridge was a junior officer who regarded this piece of information as too good to keep to himself, and by the time the ship assumed orbit around Starbase 515, the whole crew knew Picard's story.

Pulaski beamed down to the base's medical centre, where the Captain's operation was taking place. She arrived just in time to save his life - it took her over an hour to stabilise the implant, cauterise the bleeding and seal the blood vessels and nerve endings. Eventually the worst was over and Picard was wheeled into the post-op recovery room.

All this had taken place less than ten hours previously; due to the improvements in modern drugs and post-op care, Picard was able to take the shuttle flight back to the Enterprise with Crusher and Pulaski within a few hours, weak, but well, and thankful to be alive.

He knew he had a lot to thank Kate Pulaski for, but he didn't know how to say it, after the way he had snapped at her on the ship before he left; it meant that the half hour journey back to the ship took place mainly in silence, for Picard didn't feel like initiating a conversation, Wesley was engrossed in piloting the shuttle and Kate Pulaski was reading some new medical journals she had picked up on the Starbase.

Hell - why is it so hard to say thank you? he thought bitterly. He had, rather tamely, said "Thanks" when he had first wakened up in post-op to see a concerned Kate Pulaski leaning over him, but somehow he knew it wasn't enough - could *never* be enough - for what she had just done.

Picard sighed to himself and turned away from the window. He meant to say something to Pulaski, but seeing her absorbed in her journal, he turned to Wesley instead.

"Mr. Crusher," he said briskly, adopting his official tone, "what's our ETA with the Enterprise?"

"Only another five minutes, sir - she should be coming into view any moment."

Picard nodded, turning again to resume gazing out of the window. Although he didn't like to admit it, he was growing fond of Wesley - at first he had felt uncomfortable around him, but that was more of an inbuilt uneasiness with children than any active dislike of the boy. But in recent months the young Ensign had been growing into a mature and responsible young adult, and Picard could see the beginnings of an intelligent and responsible bridge officer in him, especially after his success in the Starfleet exams he had just taken on the Starbase while Picard was undergoing his operation.

Perhaps I'm treating him like the son I never had, he thought, smiling slightly to himself. *Or is it because I still feel responsible to his mother?* Picard knew that if anything happened to Wesley under his command, Beverly Crusher would never forgive him, even though she was millions of miles away at Starfleet Medical Headquarters. Picard sighed. *I do think of him as my son,* he admitted to himself. *I owe Jack Crusher that much.*

He was aroused from his reverie by Wesley's voice.

"There she is now, sir - just becoming visible."

Picard glanced up, to see the small but distinct outline of the Enterprise appear around the curve of the planetoid on which Starbase 515 was constructed.

"ETA three minutes," Wesley intoned, his voice sounding as if he was speaking automatically. "On course for automatic controlled landing." He opened communications. "Shuttlecraft Galileo to Enterprise - come in please."

The subspace radio crackled into life. "We read you, Shuttlecraft. Shuttlebay force field is on, shuttle bay doors opening. Tractor beams standing by - ready for automatic shuttle landing."

Picard turned to the young Ensign, a slight smile on his face. "Would you like to pilot her in manually, Mr. Crusher?"

Wesley's face lit up. "Really, sir? Yes, sir, I would!"

"All right. Inform the Enterprise that the tractor beams are unnecessary - you're bringing her in manually under my instructions."

Wesley relayed Picard's orders to the Enterprise, but Pulaski, who had put her medical journal down when she heard Picard's statement, now interrupted. "Do you really think this is a good idea, Captain?" she asked, looking at Picard but glancing anxiously at Wesley.

"Doctor, calm yourself. It's a perfectly safe and simple procedure."

"That's not the point," Pulaski said acidly, her voice rising in protest.

"Doctor!" Picard, who was not totally confident himself that Wesley was ready for this manoeuvre, fixed her with what he hoped was a commanding stare. "I have complete trust in Ensign Crusher's abilities - and you forget one very important thing."

"And what's that?"

"Everyone's got to learn some time."

Pulaski matched his stern gaze, but said nothing; she merely sighed, exasperated, and settled back into her seat, double-checking her seat belt as obtrusively as possible.

Picard smiled, glad that she hadn't decided to continue complaining, and turned to Wesley. "All right, Ensign - take us in."

"Yes, sir!" Wesley contacted the ship for final instructions, made several small adjustments to the controls which were not on manual, and manoeuvred the shuttle around behind the looming bulk of the ship, which now filled the entire front window of the shuttle.

The engine noise dropped to a low hum as Wesley cut power to a bare minimum, using braking jets and thrusters delicately to position the craft in front of the open bay doors. He then gently

nudged her forward, and a moment later cut power completely as the shuttle passed through the open bay doors to touch down in the centre of the landing area.

Wesley followed the landing procedure to the letter, switching off all systems one by one. Flicking the last switch, he whistled through clenched teeth, and relaxed.

"Well done, Ensign - that was one of the best landings I've ever seen."

Wesley smiled, delighted at the Captain's compliment but still rather shaky, and thankful that he had got them down without any major mishap.

The shuttlecraft doors opened, and the three occupants descended to the deck, which was now teeming with technicians and shuttlebay engineers.

"All right, Wesley - you can go and change, freshen up, and I'll see you on the bridge in fifteen minutes. I'm sure Commander Riker will be pleased to see us again, even if it is only so that he can go off duty."

"Yes, sir, I'm sure he will."

"Not so fast, Captain!" Dr. Pulaski's voice froze Picard in his tracks. "First of all I want you to come to Sickbay with me. I've got to give you a thorough physical to make sure that new ticker of yours is functioning correctly."

Picard groaned audibly. "Doctor, the medical team on Starbase 515 gave me a thorough check up after the operation. Don't you think they would have discovered any problems?"

"Frankly, Captain, the answer is no, I don't. Remember, I had to beam down to save your life!"

"For which I am eternally grateful, Doctor, but - "

Pulaski cut him off in mid-sentence. "Captain, I am the only person who can relieve you of command on this ship - and unless you accompany me to sickbay *immediately*, I will state that you are medically unfit to take command of this vessel. Now are you coming or not?" She fixed him with her steel grey eyes, hard and unflinching.

Picard sighed, beaten. "All right, Doctor, if you insist. Wesley, if I'm not out in fifteen minutes, report to Commander Riker on the bridge and resume your navigational position. I'll be there as soon as the good Doctor lets me."

"Aye, sir." Wesley turned and strode off to the nearest turbolift.

Tapping his comm-badge, the Captain spoke. "Picard to bridge."

A weary First Officer answered. "Riker here, sir. It's good to have you back again, sir."

From the concerned tone in his voice, Picard knew that Pulaski must have told him about his artificial heart. *Damn it - it's impossible to keep anything secret on this ship!* he thought,

annoyed.

"I'm going to sickbay for 'a chat' with Dr. Pulaski." Picard glared at her; she glared back. "Hopefully I won't be very long - after that I'll go to my cabin and change, and then I'll come straight to the bridge. Picard out."

"Aye, sir - understood."

Gesturing at the door leading to the corridor, he allowed Pulaski to walk in front of him. Without a single word, they left the shuttlebay and headed for sickbay.

In sickbay, Pulaski ordered the Captain to remove his top and lie on one of the diagnostic beds. Thanks to the miracles of twenty-fourth century medicine, it was virtually impossible to tell that Picard had just been through a heart replacement operation - all that was visible was a faint pink scar running round the right side of his chest - and due to the administration of coagulants and artificial skin grafts, within a few days even the scars would disappear and it would be impossible to tell that he had been operated on at all.

"Is this really necessary, Doctor?" he pleaded as Pulaski attached various devices to his chest and looked at the diagnostic readout screen above the bed.

"Just shut up and lie still," she commanded. Picard did as he was told; he knew he could walk out if he wanted to, but he believed her threat to declare him medically unfit if he left. He knew that behind those cold grey eyes was a warm, caring Human being - and that she was doing all this for his own good. He didn't have to like being what he called 'fussed over', though.

After several minutes of instrument readings and tricorder scans, Pulaski began to remove the instruments from Picard's chest.

"Well, Doctor?" he asked, interested. "What's your prognosis?"

She finished removing the heart readout devices and turned to walk back to her desk, allowing Picard to sit up and put his top back on.

"Your new heart is working at 98% efficiency - your body has accepted it totally, there is no tissue rejection, no internal haemorrhaging - in short, it is functioning perfectly - much better than your original implant."

"Excellent! Well, Doctor, if that's all, I'd better get changed and then get up to the bridge - "

"Not so fast!" She raised her right hand to stop him. "Although your heart is fine, and physically you are fine, I want to talk to you - personally!"

Picard looked at her, faintly amused. "All right, Doctor. Fire away."

"I'm glad you find this all so amusing," she said through gritted teeth, her eyes glaring at him. Picard couldn't believe it - she was still mad at him! He shut up and let her speak. "Jean-

Luc, you are an excellent leader and Starship Captain - and you're even overcoming your personal awkwardness around children."

Picard looked up, surprised. How had she known that? Then it dawned on him - Wesley.

Pulaski continued. "But... Frankly, *sir*, I think you take too many risks for someone your age. Your new heart should last you for the rest of your life - at least another thirty to forty years. However, the stress and strain of command could shorten its life - and yours - by quite a bit; anything from ten to twenty years. I'm telling you this so you can make up your own mind. You could retire now to safeguard your health, or carry on as Captain and risk killing yourself some time in the future. It's totally up to you. I can't make you retire, but I can put in a medical report to Starfleet Medical Headquarters, and they could make you resign on medical grounds."

Picard opened his mouth to protest, but Pulaski cut him off. "I won't do that unless you want me to. I'm only telling you this for your own good. The final decision is totally up to you."

Picard was gazing down at the floor, lost in thought.

"I suppose you've lived on the edge all your life," she went on. "Who knows - possibly if you hadn't taken risks you'd never have reached the Captain's seat. But frankly, you're reckless. You wouldn't even have needed an artificial heart at all if you hadn't been so damn cock-sure as a young Ensign!"

Picard interrupted. "But that was over thirty years ago, Doctor!"

"Yes - but you're still the same. I wouldn't have been having this conversation with you if something hadn't happened to convince me you're still as reckless as you used to be."

"What?" Picard enquired, although he knew what she was going to say.

"Allowing Wesley to pilot the shuttle in manually. You know how dangerous that procedure can be, yet you still let him do it, putting all our lives at risk. I know why you did it, as well - you can't experience the danger of living on the edge yourself any more, so you're doing it through others."

It was Picard's turn to get angry, and although he knew she was at least partially right, he gave as good as he got. "That's not true, Doctor. That was a perfectly safe procedure, and Ensign Crusher has a trainee pilot's licence. Manual landing is merely a practical extension of what he has learned up to now."

"So that was it - educational training? I've never heard such rubbish in my life. I could tell you were itching to do it yourself, even though you forced Wesley to do it. Yes, forced - would you have refused such an 'offer' at his age?"

Picard was fuming, but decided not to antagonise the Doctor any more; he kept silent, lips pursed, staring at a spot on the wall behind her head.

Pulaski paused, noticing how quiet he had become; slowly her anger began to subside, and her tone softened.

"All right, Jean-Luc, I think I've said enough." She still met his gaze unflinchingly, but her eyes had softened and her voice was quiet and soft. "I realise that you must have a lot to do, so I'll let you go and get changed and report to the bridge. As I said, no part of this conversation will be repeated elsewhere and I will not be making out a report to Starfleet Command unless you want me to. But Captain - "

Picard, heading towards the door, stopped, turned and listened.

" - please consider what I've just said. You're not twenty years old any more - retire before the strain of command kills you. The decision is entirely up to you; but please let me know as soon as possible what you're going to do. Speech ended."

Picard nodded, grim-faced and silent, then turned and left sickbay. As the door closed behind him, Pulaski put his file to one side and returned to her medical journals.

When he reached his cabin, Picard immediately went to the sonic shower, stripped off, washed and then put on a fresh uniform. Feeling clean and refreshed, he sat down at his desk and began to think back over old times. Faces swam before his vision - most were of old friends, some of whom he had not seen for years. His mind began to ask him "What if... "

What if he had married Janice Mannheim all those years ago in Paris? What if Beverly Crusher had remained aboard the Enterprise?

No. He pushed the thoughts away. *Don't get maudlin!* Those decisions were in the past; it was no use thinking about them. But he couldn't help it. Suddenly he realized why he was dwelling on such thoughts.

They were all decisions he had made in the past - a stark choice between family and career. And he had put his career first every time. If he had married Janice, he would probably never have made it to the Captaincy; he would have become a desk-bound bureaucrat in some dingy backwater somewhere, with family problems on his mind.

They were all decisions, just like the decision he had to make now. Different circumstances, but a similar choice - to remain on board as Captain, or to retire while he was still healthy enough to enjoy it.

But I wouldn't enjoy it, he thought. My life is here. Sure, I would be healthy and financially secure, and I could go and live outside Paris as I've been planning for years... but what would I do? Thirty to forty years, Kate said - as long as I look after myself. But what sort of life would I have? It would be living death for someone like me. Stagnation. I would be better off dead.

Picard paused in his thoughts, head cradled in his hands, eyes closed. No, he reasoned. *It's not for me. My life is out here among the stars - and there's still so very, very much to see and do.*

Picard sighed, leaned over and pressed his desk intercom. "Picard to sickbay."

After a slight pause, Pulaski's voice filled the room. "Dr. Pulaski here. What can I do for you, Captain?" Her voice was tense, expectant - she knew that he had come to a decision.

"I've made up my mind, Doctor. I'm staying on board. Retirement's not for me - not yet, anyway. My life is here - and I'm willing to accept the risks. Life *is* risk, Doctor - it's the whole point of living. People who don't take risks aren't living; they're merely existing. I'm staying on as Captain."

Pulaski sighed, and nodded to herself. "Very well, Jean-Luc, it's your life. I have to admit I knew that you weren't ready to retire; it was obvious. You'll never change - maybe if you did you wouldn't be the same person. All right; the matter's closed. But I had to try, and I'll be keeping a close eye on you. If I feel you're taking unnecessary risks I'll come down on you - hard. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly clear, Doctor. And... Kate?"

"Yes, Captain?"

"I just wanted to say thank you properly. For everything."

She knew how hard it was for him to say that; the statement was followed by an embarrassed silence from his end.

"Think nothing of it, Jean-Luc. That's what I'm here for. Sickbay out."

Pulaski switched off the intercom, then reached over and picked up Picard's medical file. Picking up a red code marker she wrote across the top right hand corner FILE FOR FUTURE USE, and then dropped it into place in the ship's medical file cabinet. There would be no letter to Starfleet Command; the Captain had made his choice, and it was, after all, his life.

She looked down on his file one last time before closing the drawer. She hoped that she never had to open that file again.

Picard left his cabin and walked to the nearest turbolift. He was surprised to see Wesley Crusher waiting for him. Although Wesley's cabin was on the same deck, it was several corridors away, and this was not the closest turbolift to it. Picard knew instantly that Wesley wanted to speak to him, because he should have been on the bridge at least ten minutes previously.

Wesley said, "Hello, sir," as they entered the turbolift.

Picard just nodded, and ordered "Bridge," as the door closed. The lift began to move. There was silence for a moment, then Wesley spoke.

"I just wanted to say thank you, sir, for allowing me to bring the shuttle in on manual. It was scary, but quite an experience."

"Think nothing of it, Ensign. It's just part of your shuttle pilot training programme. You would have got a chance to do it sooner or later."

"Probably, but not for another year or so. Thank you for the

experience."

Picard smiled, nodding.

"Captain... "

"Yes, Wesley?"

"I'm sorry - everyone knows about your... your medical problem. I know you wanted to keep it quiet. Scuttlebutt hasn't got hold of the whole story - the crew doesn't know exactly why you have that... problem, but... I'm glad you told me the whole story anyway."

"That's all right. As soon as I knew Mr. Riker knew about it I realised that it must now be common knowledge. I'm resigned to the fact. As for you, Ensign - hopefully it'll prevent you from making the same sort of mistake yourself - though I'm sure you won't."

Wesley grinned from ear to ear. "I - uh - certainly hope not, sir."

Picard turned to the door as the turbolift slowed down. Now just what did he mean by that? He couldn't tell if Wesley was joking or not. There was a moment of embarrassed silence, and then the door opened onto the bridge.

As they stepped out of the lift, Commander Riker rose from the Captain's chair and began to clap. Immediately the rest of the bridge crew joined in; they were all pleased to see Picard alive and well.

"I beg your pardon?" Picard said, pretending to be annoyed.

"Looks like things are back to normal!" interjected La Forge from the Engineering section at the back of the bridge.

"I'm pleased to report that Ensign Crusher's exam results permit him to continue his studies on board the Enterprise. Furthermore - " Picard continued - "any reports you might hear of my brush with death have been greatly exaggerated. Is that clear?" he finished sternly.

"Yes, sir!" Riker replied.

"In that case - Ensign Crusher, set course for the Epsilon Sector, Warp 5. Engage."

Riker was pleased that the Captain was back with them again, quite well and able to resume command. He turned and spoke directly to Picard. "I'm glad you're back with us, sir; things got a bit out of control while you were away."

"Oh, really, Number One? Well, you'll have to tell me all about it - later." Picard turned and smiled. "And - I'm glad to be back. I've been looking forward to seeing the Epsilon Pulsar Cluster for quite some time."

Picard turned back towards the main viewscreen, starlight reflecting off his face.

And I've never felt so glad to be alive, he thought as the Enterprise went on her way.

THE PINOCCHIO EQUATION

by

Synda Surgenor

When I was a boy, if I was troubled about anything, I used to go outside when the skies were clear, and lie on my back and look at the stars. On a starship, of course, one cannot go outside - but there are always the great observation ports. On every ship on which I have served I have made one of them my own, and to it I have brought the emotions I could not deal with elsewhere - the disillusionment with myself when I failed to meet my own exacting standards, the anger - or regret - or shame...

And always - always! - I have looked out on the cold, deep, infinity of space, and the stars have gazed back at me, and in time the turmoil within has been soothed and I have been enabled to look, if not kindly, then at least with understanding, upon myself again.

Not this time.

I have been standing here ever since I beamed back on board the Enterprise at the end of the hearing, and the stars still accuse me as much as I do myself.

"Pinocchio is broken! Its strings have been cut!"

Cruel words.

Harsh words.

Words that repeat themselves again and again in my head, as does the scene in which they were uttered; Data slumping lifeless in his seat; the expressions of shock on the faces of the others, especially on the Captain's; myself, walking back to my chair and sitting down, amidst the most deafening silence I have ever experienced.

"Pinocchio is broken!"

At that moment I was convinced that I had won, and the taste of victory was like ashes in my mouth. For the first time in my life I damned that inner urge that has always driven me to search for perfection, that will not allow me to do less than my best. There had been no need for Captain LeBois' warning. That urge alone had forced me to search for the one flaw in Data's makeup, even though I did not want to find it; that urge alone had forced me to use that flaw to such dramatic effect when I *did* find it.

By switching him off I had proven, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that Data was indeed, as Maddox insisted, a 'thing' - an object - with no more right to choose what happened to him than any other 'thing' on board the Enterprise.

And I hated myself for having done so.

I looked across the room at Picard and saw dismay replacing the shock in his expression, and I knew his thoughts had to be the same

as mine. How could he possibly refute my argument, the demonstration I had just given? How could he possibly prove to *anyone* now that that broken creature before us was entitled to be treated with dignity, given the choices accorded to humanity?

"Pinocchio is broken!"

Those cruel words, and the even more cruel action preceding them, had destroyed any chance Data might have had, had condemned him to a future that did not bear thinking about.

When Picard asked for and was given a recess I beamed back to the ship and spent the time until I was recalled alone in my quarters. I could not face anyone, least of all another member of the crew. I knew how they all felt about Data - I knew how *I* felt - and I knew how I would feel - *did* feel - about someone who had done to him what I had done.

If someone had told me before I joined the Enterprise, or even during those first few weeks on board, that I would grow to first respect, then like, then love an android as a valued friend and comrade I would have laughed at them.

An *android*, for God's sake!

But - it happened! How, I don't know. I have never made friends easily, have always been satisfied with being a loner, but there is something about Data that somehow penetrated my soul when I wasn't looking. When I eventually discovered it there, it was too late to do anything about it - not that I wanted to, anyway. He had proven himself worthy of my trust time after time by then, and his faster than Human reflexes had saved my skin more than once on away teams. Who would not want a friend like that? Android or Human, such distinction no longer mattered.

Until today.

God, why did Captain LeBois force me into such an invidious position? Why couldn't she simply have found someone else to play the prosecutor's role? She knew my feelings, knew he was my friend - yet she insisted, threatened a summary judgement there and then if I continued to refuse.

"I shall find that Data is a toaster, and he will report immediately for an experimental refit."

Damn the woman! And damn Maddox, who started the whole thing with his crazy plans!

When the hearing reconvened he sat down beside me wearing the flicker of a triumphant smile, so certain was he that we had won. I saw his eyes settle on Data, considering, calculating, and I saw the way Data studiously avoided meeting those eyes, and something struck me for the first time. Data did not want to be the subject of Maddox's experiments simply because he believed them to be ill-conceived - he was also afraid of what they might do to him. I have never seen him afraid before - cautious, yes, but never frightened. Suddenly, I shared his fear.

Then Picard opened his defence. He spoke softly, almost nervously, without emphasis, looking down at his hands. At first I

thought he was only going through the motions because he knew he had nothing to fight with, but then I thought, *This isn't like him. Even with nothing, he'd put up a better fight than this!* and I began to pay more attention.

When he put Data on the stand, I had a sudden glimmer of an idea of what he might be up to, and under cover of the table I found myself crossing my fingers. When he called Maddox and began questioning him, first quietly then more forcefully, I knew I was right.

Sentience - it all hinged on sentience. Data is a machine - he admitted it, I had proved it - but if Picard could prove that although he is not Human Data is sentient, there was no way Captain LeBois could find that he was the property of Starfleet. A sentient being, be he Human, alien or android, cannot be owned; a sentient being has the right to choose his own life, his own future.

Abruptly Picard stopped tearing into Maddox, abandoning him in the witness chair as though he was no longer worthy of attention, and began to sum up his case. I don't know where he found the words, but they were masterly. Looking at Captain LeBois as she listened to him, I felt success beginning to slip away from me, and the sense of relief was overwhelming.

"Starfleet," Picard ended, "was founded to seek out new life." He flung out one arm, pointing at Data. "Well, there it sits - waiting." He paused, then took a couple of steps to stand directly in front of Captain LeBois, gazing down at her. After a moment he added quietly, "You wanted the chance to make law. Well, here it is. Make it a good one."

There was a long, long silence that I thought would never end. Data glanced once at Picard as he resumed his seat, then fixed his eyes steadily on the woman upon whom so much depended. Picard looked at no-one. He clasped his hands together on the table in front of him and looked down at them. He appeared totally relaxed, but I could see the stress he was feeling in the stiffness of his shoulders. Maddox was gazing at Data as though he had never seen him before - or perhaps, although seeing him, had never really considered him. It seemed Picard's words had touched one person at least.

Then Captain LeBois began giving her judgement, and even before she said the words the tension started to drain from me. Picard had also touched the one who mattered; Data was safe, now and in the future, and knowing that I had failed was the most wonderful thing that has ever happened to me.

But it was so close - so damnably close. A hair's breadth, a mere heartbeat's span. So near - so very, very near did I come to destroying him.

What would I have done, had I succeeded?

God knows!

Failing is bad enough. Even the stars that have always helped before simply stare back at me, cold, distant, unforgiving, as I cannot forgive myself.

"Pinocchio is broken! Its strings have been cut!"

To do such a thing to an enemy, *that* I can understand and condone - but knowing I could inflict that kind of humiliation on someone I called friend is what really hurts. It is that which I find hardest to forgive in myself, that which makes it difficult to look myself straight in the eyes.

There is the soft whoosh of the door sliding open, a moment's hesitation, then the sound of footsteps crossing the room. I know who is there, even before he speaks.

"Sir? There is a celebration on the holodeck."

I turn slowly, reluctant to face him. He gazes back at me, composed as always.

"I have no right to be there."

"Because you failed in your task?"

He must not believe that! I can't allow him to believe that I'm upset because I lost, believe that I did what I did because I *wanted* to, because I agree with Maddox. I take two or three hurried steps toward him, holding up my hand, thumb and forefinger almost touching.

"Oh, God, no! I came that close to winning, Data - *that* close!"

He nods slightly. "Yes, sir."

I'm not getting through to him. Making him understand is the most important thing I have ever done, and edges my voice with desperation.

"I almost cost you your *life*!"

He blinks, and his expression alters. I thought I had grown able to read him most of the time, but now, when it matters, I cannot.

"Is it not true that had you refused to prosecute, Captain LeBois would have ruled summarily against me?"

"Yes."

Who told him about that? Picard? It must have been. His expression changes yet again, softens - and suddenly I can read it, and relief almost swamps me.

"That action injured you, and saved me. I will not forget it."

He *does* understand - everything. He understands better than many Humans would, in the same circumstances. It is a strange feeling, realising that someone knows you like that. And he forgives. If only I understood him half as well as he does me, I would have known he would react in this way, and would not have spent so much time castigating myself. If he can forgive me for what I put him through, surely now I can start to forgive myself?

I take a deep breath and, relaxing, let it go in a wide smile.

"You're a wise man, my friend."

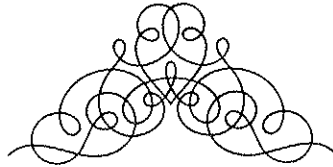
In answer his mouth twitches into the beginning of that shy, almost mischievous smile that is so uniquely his own.

"Not yet, sir. But with your help - I am learning."

He gestures toward the door in invitation, and I laugh and shake my head and clap him on the back, and go with him to join in celebrating his return to us, once again at peace with myself.

There are those out there who, with Maddox, would say that because Data is not made of flesh and blood he is less than Human. They do not know how wrong they are, nor how much they are missing, because they do not know him as we on the Enterprise have come to know him.

And they would never, in a million years, understand how delighted I am that Pinocchio is not broken, after all.



DENIAL

"I'll tell you this just once - it never happened."
 I do not understand. I shall never understand.
 How can she have changed so quickly, so completely?
 How is it possible that she can deny
 A thing from which she garnered such delight?
 She asked for love, and joy, and gentleness,
 And that is what I gave her in full measure.
 And in return I saw
 A Tasha Yar no-one has ever seen before:
 Warm and kind and loving, soft and feminine,
 And happier than she has ever been.
 - I say that without boasting; I made her happy! -
 Yet now she looks upon me coldly, turns away
 Oblivious of all my hurt confusion.
 I thought that what we shared was beautiful,
 A memory to be treasured always,
 Not denied as never having happened.
 I thought I knew her better, but it seems I was mistaken.
 And if that is true, it makes me wonder:
 Would she still have said those words if I were Human?
 Or is it just an android's loving
 That was such a shameful thing?

Synda Surgenor

NATASHA

by

Karen Sparks

Natasha. Her name was Natasha, and it was the best, the longest name of any of the kids born on the wretched colony. Her parents had given her that name; it was all she had left of them and no-one - no-one could take it away from her. Natasha. Her name was her most treasured possession, something to be proud of in a place where her sort owned only what they could steal and carry with them, and in a time when there was little enough cause for pride.

She always travelled alone. She kept to herself. She had seen the other kids who travelled in groups for protection, and occasionally, watching them from hidden viewpoints, had felt some yearning deep within to join them - with her skills she would be an asset to any group, she knew. But she had always held back, had not given in to the weakness she did not understand and despised in herself, and time and time again had proved herself right. When one of a group became injured or separated from the others, deciding what to do inevitably caused argument and dissension among the rest and, often as not, meant trouble - or even capture - for all of them. She observed with a detached curiosity the bonds which grew between members of a group, making rational behaviour apparently impossible when one of their number was in danger. No, she had proved that travelling alone was the best way. No-one to slow you down, argue with your decisions, eat your food. Natasha didn't need anybody.

The brief summer was over. Autumn would not last long; on this world it served merely as a depressing prelude to the dreaded winter which would return to hold the planet hostage in its icy grip. Everyone knew that winter lasted longer every year; some of the older kids claimed to remember having been told by their parents that it was something to do with the earthquakes. The unspoken fear was that each time winter arrived might be the year it would never end.

Natasha sat cross-legged at the entrance of a shallow cave as dusk fell rapidly over the surrounding forest. She finished skinning the large rodent and speared it expertly with the sharpened stick, balancing it between the prongs of the two forked sticks dug into the soil each side of the small fire. She knew there would not be many more such meals before winter set in, sending creatures like this into hibernation and stripping the land bare of food which could be picked or dug up. Soon she - and all the other kids - would be forced into the annual, unwilling migration towards The City in search of food.

She cleaned the blood from her knife with a handful of moss and then examined it critically, turning it this way and that to catch the light from the fire. It must have been a truly splendid weapon when it had its handle, she thought. The blade had been encrusted with dirt and rust when she'd found it, years ago, but many hours of patient work had restored its usefulness, if not its beauty. She had bound the broad end thickly with rough twine which gave a good grip and protected her hand from its cutting edge.

The fire flared up as a rivulet of grease dripped from the cooking meat. Her stomach rumbled noisily in hungry anticipation as the savoury smell wafted to her nostrils. She rolled the spit between the supporting sticks to allow the other side direct access to the heat, then froze as her acute hearing caught a distant rustle in the undergrowth. She scooped up her cloak over one arm and picked up the knife which was never out of reach, and melted silently into the cover of the surrounding dark forest, well beyond the flickering light of her fire. She waited tensely, where she could see but not be seen, her senses straining into the darkness. The shuffling did not sound like any animal she was familiar with, and yet none of the other kids would make so much noise moving through the forest - on this world, you learned the hard way to travel quietly. It was certainly not loud enough for any of Them, and anyway, this was too far from The City for Them to venture. The rustling drew nearer in short bursts interspersed with pauses which were even harder to endure than the noise. Natasha tightened her grip on the knife as finally a figure stumbled into the circle of feebly flickering firelight and fell to its knees there. She waited to see if anyone else would appear, but when several minutes brought no more sounds from the forest and no further movement from the shadowy figure collapsed by her fire, she advanced cautiously towards it, weapon in hand. Only when she stood over the figure huddled on the ground did it finally raise its head with obvious effort to look up at her. Natasha saw a girl of about her own age, but slighter of build and dressed in even shabbier rags than those she wore herself. The stranger's left arm lay twisted and useless at her side, the other was lifted in feeble defence against Natasha's instinctively raised knife.

"I'm not stealing anything," she whispered. "I just saw the fire." She was shivering uncontrollably.

"Are there any more of you?" demanded Natasha. Her voice sounded hoarse and strange in her ears; travelling alone gave her little reason to use it.

The girl shook her head and tugged her threadbare cloak protectively around her scrawny frame. "I'm alone." She sounded utterly defeated, as if she hardly cared what happened to her.

Natasha relaxed her aggressive stance and tucked her knife through her crudely-woven belt. She dropped to a crouch, keeping the fire between the stranger and herself. "You can share the fire," she said curtly. It would deprive her of nothing, she reasoned; the fire was already lit and she would lose none of its warmth by sharing it. The girl's eyes closed in grateful acknowledgement; she looked as if she could not have moved even if her life had depended on it.

Natasha extended an arm to remove the spit from the fire, and blew on the charred meat to cool it. She tore off a leg and began to chew at it, still regarding her uninvited companion warily. The girl watched her eating as if mesmerised, her face pale and pinched and drawn in the flickering firelight. Natasha recognised hunger when she saw it; had experienced it too many times not to. It was an unremarkable fact of life on this colony, something to be endured. She tore another chunk off the spit but hesitated with the meat half-way to her mouth, disturbed by some strange feeling she could not identify. She told herself that this unknown kid's hunger was no concern of hers, as her own hunger had never been the concern of anyone else - then found herself diffidently offering her the meat. After all, she had eaten at least once a day for a week, and

so close to winter that was a bonus.

Her companion eyed the proffered food longingly but shook her head. "I haven't anything to trade," she said with some embarrassment.

"Oh." Natasha was nonplussed. There was no room for charity in this harsh world; trading of goods or knowledge was the only way food ever changed hands between kids who were strangers here. Just because she lived alone did not mean she was ignorant of the customs which represented civilised behaviour. She took another mouthful of meat and chewed it thoughtfully. She swallowed. "Tell me your name." The giving of one's name to a stranger was a subject taken seriously here, and while it would be stretching a point to consider it worthy of food, it was not unheard of.

"My name is Kit," came the shy response.

"Kid?" exclaimed Natasha. "That's not a name!"

"Kit, not kid," the other girl corrected her.

Natasha nodded and held out the untouched meat on the spit. Kit hesitated.

"You told me your name," Natasha said in curt explanation. "Take it."

Disbelief registered on the smaller girl's face. She reached out timidly for the meat, as if she expected it to be snatched away from her, but when she was allowed to take it, she fell upon it hungrily, almost choking in her haste.

"Not so fast," snapped Natasha. "It's full of bones." As if to illustrate her point she spat out a sliver she had inadvertently almost swallowed. They ate in silence, the only sounds coming from the flames crackling between them and an occasional mournful call from a distant nightbird in the forest. When they had stripped every edible shred from the carcass, Natasha used a stick to dig a shallow pit to bury it. Then she felt in her pocket and withdrew a handful of slightly squashed orange berries. She began to divide them into two heaps, then paused, looking searchingly at the dark-haired girl. "Can you tell me anything else?"

Kit frowned in furious concentration. "I'm ten summers old," she said hopefully.

Natasha looked doubtful. Learning that her companion was one summer younger than herself was hardly worth several lorka berries, especially not this late in the autumn. Kit realised this too, and sank into deep thought again. This strict ritual of equal exchange between strangers had developed among the refugee kids as defiant protest against the violent ways of the adults in The City who simply took everything they wanted by force. The fact that the two girls were alone and that the exchange would be witnessed by no-one did not lessen the importance of keeping to their customs.

"You could tell me where you've come from," suggested Natasha. She thought she saw Kit's face contort as if in pain, but decided it must have been a shadow cast by the fire. She was curious about her visitor; she knew there were very few like herself who travelled alone, and Kit's obvious exhaustion and her general demeanour told Natasha it was not a state she was accustomed to. Finally Kit

nodded her agreement and accepted a small handful of the berries. She began to relate her story hesitantly, her narrative punctuated by both girls spitting the tough skins of the large berries into the fire when they had sucked out all the juice.

"My parents were killed in the earthquakes that destroyed Second City."

Natasha nodded almost impatiently; everyone's parents had been killed, one way or another. Her own father had died in an accident before she was born. She had been in her fifth summer that day when all their lives had changed. The transport ship Black Maria had crash-landed on this world after suffering massive systems failure months earlier during a barrage of ion storms which had hurled it wildly off its intended course to the remote Federation Penal Rehabilitation Colony. Although the ship had been destroyed by the fire which gutted it after the crash, most of the convicted criminals it carried survived to seize with relish the opportunity for freedom. The guards and crew were greatly outnumbered and were killed, as were many of the colonists who had seen the ship's burning trail through the atmosphere and had hastened to the crash-site to help. The criminals had retraced the colonists' journey back to the place known affectionately as The City - in reality a congregation of wooden and prefabricated buildings surrounded by fields they had claimed from the forest and planted with crops or grazed by descendants of Terran farm animals. The occupants of The City had been totally unprepared for the brutal attack launched upon them by the intruders. Natasha took an obscure pride in the knowledge that her mother had been among the small band who had stayed to try to defend The City. She had died fighting, unlike the majority of the colonists who had fled in fear with their families, eventually settling far away in a network of caves set in the silver-grey cliffs overlooking the sea. The community had survived there for two more years until one of the increasingly frequent earthquakes destroyed the place they called Second City, crumbling the cliffs into the raging sea. The adults who had been out fishing drowned in the ensuing tidal waves and those who had been working in the caves were crushed. Most of the children were saved by being inland at the time, on a food-gathering trip supervised by several of the older kids.

"I was trapped by some fallen rocks and it took my brother Joe two days to get me out. That's when I got hurt." Kit indicated her withered arm matter-of-factly. Natasha thought the breadth of her gesture included more than her arm but, covered by her cloak as she was, she could detect no other abnormalities. "Joe was two summers older than me. He was... I couldn't walk for a whole moon after I was trapped, and Joe carried me. He took me into the hills where the other kids had headed. They'd split up into groups. At first none of them would take us because of me, but then we found a group that would. They let us stay as long as Joe took care of me and I wasn't a burden to them. We were a group of seven. We got on well and were together a long time." She paused, lost in memories. Natasha stirred to ease stiff muscles and Kit started at the movement, then went on, "Then, half a moon ago they decided to make a foray into The City."

Natasha frowned. "In autumn?" Such an early raid was foolhardy. In deep winter, when living off the frozen land became impossible, stealing from The City became necessary for survival, but in the autumn?

"We'd been in the Northern Forest," explained Kit, "but the

game there has some disease that makes their fur fall out, and we became sick whenever we ate anything. There weren't enough roots and berries for all of us." Natasha nodded; this was further proof that travelling alone was best. "So the others decided to stop off at The City to get some supplies to last us until we could reach a new place." She stopped, staring into the flames, and Natasha could see two tiny reflections of the fire dancing in the glistening, dark eyes. Something in the other girl's face made her shiver suddenly. She pulled her cloak more tightly around herself.

"What happened?"

"Only the boys went," Kit began. Natasha nodded, knowing this was customary among the groups in an attempt to protect the girls from the horror of their inevitable fate should they be captured. Boys were perceived as a threat and were killed, usually quickly. This was considered preferable by the majority of the groups to what happened to the girls if they were caught.

Kit continued heavily, "They were caught. My brother and Ben, the leader, were both killed." She fell into silence, her face averted and covered with her hand. Natasha could see her shoulders heaving convulsively as if she was crying, but no sound escaped from the shaking figure. She did not know what to say. It was a common enough story, although it didn't explain why Kit had become separated from the others; it usually took more than the death of only two members to break up a group. Perhaps they had rejected her when her brother was no longer there to take responsibility for her? She tried vaguely to imagine how it must feel to lose a brother. Parents didn't count for everyone had lost their parents; here on this world siblings and group members were all that anyone had. She wondered if grief was worse than being very hungry.

She looked at Kit again, trying not to stare. Her face was still hidden. Something cold dripped onto Natasha's cheek, making her glance upwards into the night sky. The fire hissed as sleet spattered onto it through the trees. She bit her lip; winter would be here before long. She scattered the dying embers with a stick and then rose to her feet. Kit looked up at her.

"Come on," said Natasha impatiently. "Inside." She gestured towards the shallow cave in the cliff wall. Obediently, Kit hauled herself to her feet and hobbled painfully towards the entrance. Natasha stared after her in astonishment, understanding now why she had spoken of being a burden to her group. She could hardly walk; her left leg was inches shorter than her right and she took all her weight on the side of her foot. She waited deferentially for her hostess to choose which wall to sleep against. When Natasha gestured brusquely to her to sit anywhere, she said shyly, "I have nothing to trade for a night's shelter."

"It's big enough for two," growled Natasha, tossing aside loose stones from the area she had chosen to sleep on. Kit used the rough wall for support to lower herself clumsily to the ground. Each girl wrapped herself in the ubiquitous cloak - the most important item of clothing possessed by even the youngest kids, cobbled together from whatever was available, and used as coat, blanket, cushion or sack, as required - and settled down, each with a wall at her back. Then Natasha lifted her head.

"I forgot," she said into the darkness. "My name is Natasha." Her voice held its usual note of defiant pride when introducing herself to a stranger. This time it was not to be the object of

ridicule.

"It's a beautiful name," said Kit wonderingly. Then she said, "Sleep safely, Natasha."

The elder girl settled down again, inexplicably pleased. "Sleep safely, Kit."

Natasha's last act before preparing for sleep was, as always, to check the position of her knife. She lay awake for a long time and was surprised at how quickly her companion's breathing assumed the soft regularity of sleep. Perhaps it came more easily to those in groups, she thought, trying to imagine how it must be to have others to share the responsibility of protecting yourself - other eyes to watch the night, other ears to listen for danger. An interesting thought, but she knew she could never trust another with her safety; she had been alone for too long.

She always slept lightly and awoke frequently but this night it was the slightest movement or sound from her uninvited guest which disturbed her instead of distant bird calls or animals rustling in the forest undergrowth. She bore the sleeping girl no resentment for this; it was dangerous to sleep more than one dream at a time, so it mattered little what awoke her as long as something did.

As the first glimmer of light filtered into the cave, Natasha set out into the sleety rain to search for food. It was daylight proper by the time she returned, satisfied with the pocketful of sweet roots she had dug up, and she found Kit huddled miserably against the cave-wall. The younger girl looked up at her entrance and Natasha noticed two things simultaneously; the despair on her face which was swept away by a smile of relief, and the faded bruises which had not been visible in last night's shadowy light.

"Natasha! I thought you'd gone!"

"I would not have left you while you were sleeping unprotected," Natasha told her, shocked. She held out some of the roots. "I only went to get these. Have some."

She saw the customary shyness spread over the younger girl's face, but suddenly her expression brightened as an idea came to her. "There might be something I can trade! Can you read?"

Natasha scowled as she removed her wet cloak. "Of course not."

"But I can! I'll teach you!" cried Kit, her face alight with eagerness.

Natasha regarded her suspiciously. "Kids can't read."

"I can," insisted Kit. "My parents taught us when we were young, and Joe - " she faltered, then went on, "Joe and me used to practise together. You can play games with writing."

"I couldn't learn," Natasha said, glowering with embarrassment. She cut out a rotten portion from her root with a savage twist of her knife. "It's too hard."

"No, it isn't," argued Kit. "I could show you if you like. To trade for the shelter last night, and these roots."

Natasha considered, chewing thoughtfully. She squinted at the curtain of sleet falling past the cave entrance. Then she shrugged off-handedly. "I thought I'd stay here for a few more days - there's still some food around. You can stay if you'll teach me to read."

Kit's intense expression was softened by a pleased smile. She ignored the small pile of roots Natasha had given her in favour of a stick with which she brushed an area of ground clear of dead leaves and debris. She used the stick to sketch a few marks in the soil. Natasha stared incomprehendingly.

"That says 'Kit'," explained her teacher. "And this," a more prolonged scratching at the earth, "says 'Natasha'."

The fair-haired girl's face glowed with pride. Not only did her name sound longer than all the other kids', it looked longer too.

The next two days passed more quickly for Natasha than any she could remember. She proved to be an eager pupil, determined to learn as much as her patient instructor could teach her. She became accustomed to Kit's presence and without realising, even began to enjoy her company - entertained by her stories of life with her group and feeling a growing respect for the fortitude and good humour with which she bore her disabilities.

On the third morning Natasha made a foray into the forest in the hope of finding more lorka berries, but had to be content with a few of the red mushrooms. On her return to the cave she spread her cloak out on the floor to dry. She shook her head to dislodge clinging water droplets, then released her hair from its usual confinement tucked inside her ragged jersey. Absently she began to comb her fingers through the tangles and to remove entwined bits of twig, her head tilted in concentration as she carefully studied the new letters Kit had scratched in the earth.

"Natasha!" exclaimed her teacher admiringly, distracted from her duties. "I didn't know hair could grow so long."

Natasha held out a length of it ruefully. It was matted and dirty but it reached half way down her back, and it was another way in which she was different from all the other kids. She remembered as a small child playing with her mother's hair which had been soft and beautiful, the colour of something she called corn, and reached to her waist. Not even Natasha understood why she so stubbornly wanted hers to be like that. The other kids more practically kept their hair short - Kit's was hacked off unevenly in the accepted manner.

"It could be so pretty," mused Kit, then her face lit up. "I know!" She searched feverishly through her pockets and eventually extracted a small white block which she held out triumphantly to the other girl.

Natasha took it uncertainly and sniffed it. "What is it?"

"Soap," Kit told her. "Joe got it for me once. I've saved it for ages. Let's wash your hair."

Natasha protested that it was too cold, that it would never dry, but was inwardly curious and finally gave in to the younger girl's persuasion and submitted to having her head soaked in the

falling sleet. Kit vigorously worked up a lather with the soap and then rinsed it all off again - which seemed an incomprehensible waste of time to Natasha, more used to a quick sluice in a convenient stream when she could bear the idea of getting it so wet. Afterwards Kit teased out all the tangles with a gentleness that was surprising since she could only use one hand.

By the time dusk fell the hair was dry and spread over her shoulders in a shining mantle the colour of afternoon sun. Natasha held out a gleaming strand and stared at it disbelievingly. "It's just like my mother's," she said wonderingly. "I never knew it could look like this."

Kit smiled, as pleased at the results of her efforts as Natasha was. "It's the soap," she told her wisely. "It's magic."

Days passed, and then weeks, and somehow Kit never left. Food became harder to find as autumn merged into winter, and Kit awoke one morning to see Natasha entering the cave empty-handed, a light dusting of snow clinging to her hair and her clothes.

"It's time for us to move on," declared Natasha, shaking the snowflakes from her cloak. She wasn't sure just when 'You and I' had become 'Us' but the progression had seemed quite natural.

She was surprised therefore, when her companion asked her quietly, "Where will you go?"

"Nearer to The City, of course," replied Natasha. "Where else? There's not enough food left around here."

Kit held out her hand, a strained smile on her face. "Good luck, Natasha. Travel safely."

Natasha stared blankly at the proffered hand. "What do you mean? You're coming too."

Kit shook her head. "No," she said, her voice suddenly hard in a way Natasha had not heard before. "This is as near as I go to The City."

"But that's silly," came the protest. "Where will you go? Who'll look after you?"

"I'll stay here," Kit stated defiantly, her face twisted with embarrassment. "I can manage."

"No, you can't," argued Natasha, fighting a sudden, inexplicable fear at the thought of losing her companion. "You've never lived alone, Kit. You don't know what it's like. You can't hunt for yourself - you can barely even walk."

The younger girl's face was crimson with shame at these things Natasha had never referred to until now, but she did not waver. "I'll be all right. I can find roots."

"Don't you understand?" Natasha was unaware that she was shouting with frustration. "There *isn't* any food! If I can't find any, I know you won't be able to." She saw Kit hang her head miserably and realised with a shock that she really was intending to risk starvation in staying here alone than face whatever frightened

her so much nearer The City. She dropped to her knees and clutched the younger girl's arm urgently. "Please, Kit. I'll take care of you - I want to. I thought we were friends now - we've been sharing for ages, instead of trading. Friends stay together, don't they?"

"We are friends, Natasha, and I'll miss you very much. But it's not fair to depend on you all the time, and - and I know you have to go and I can't come with you."

Natasha looked at her helplessly, hardly able to believe that Kit - always so amenable, so willing to follow Natasha's lead, to abide by her slightest wish - could suddenly turn so obstinate. "I've come to depend on you too," she admitted, only now realising it. "You've taught me a lot. I've been... happy since you came. I didn't know having a friend could be like this." She struggled with feelings she could not understand. She found she had come to care deeply for this girl whose cheerful company and quiet wisdom, courageous spirit, and gentle sense of humour had brought a joy and a purpose into her life she'd never known before, and she could not bear the thought of losing her. "Kit, what happened to Joe was very sad, but it wouldn't happen to us. I'm always very careful - I've been into The City lots of times. I won't get caught."

Kit moved wretchedly. "It isn't just what happened to Joe."

"Then what is it? Tell me, Kit," begged Natasha.

Her shoulders slumped in sudden defeat. She began to speak, so quietly that Natasha had to lean close to catch her words. "You never asked what happened after Joe and Ben were killed. There was a younger boy with them, called Lee. They beat him to make him tell Them where we girls were waiting. He was very brave. He took Them in the wrong direction the first time but They realised and beat him some more and he had to give in and he brought Them to our cave." Her hand gripped her friend's painfully, and Natasha felt sick with apprehension as she sensed what was coming. Kit continued unevenly, "There were eight of Them. We heard Them coming - Their shouting and laughing and the dogs barking - and there was nowhere we could go to; we couldn't get away. Do you know what They do when They catch you?" Her head bowed and she was suddenly choking on the tears streaming down her face. Natasha stared at her, numb with horror, and didn't know what to do. All these weeks they'd been together she'd never given any hint of this. And Natasha had thought she was the strong one.

"You wouldn't think They'd have wanted me, would you?" cried Kit, thumping her twisted leg angrily. Natasha found her arms unaccountably full of her sobbing friend and she rocked her clumsily, holding another person for the first time in her life. She was biting her lip worriedly. She had always been quick enough and clever enough to avoid the rape gangs but she knew there were no guarantees; it was a risk they all took. When the only alternative was starvation in the hills it tended to give one confidence in one's own abilities.

Natasha spent all of that day trying to persuade her frightened companion to accompany her just a little nearer to The City. She cajoled and begged and shouted and they both cried, and none of it made any difference. In the end, desperate, there was only one thing left for her to say. She declared that since Kit would not leave the cave, she would stay there with her.

"But Natasha, you already said there isn't any food," protested

Kit, too weary to cry any more.

"I know," said Natasha grimly. "But I'm not leaving you alone. You'll die, Kit, without me. We'll both die if we stay here, but if you won't come with me to a cave just near enough for me to steal food from The City, then this is where we'll both stay." Her chin set with the stubbornness Kit had learned to recognise, and finally, with a heavy heart, she gave in. She knew Natasha meant what she said, and she could not condemn her friend to death because of her own cowardice.

That night the screams from Kit's nightmares woke them both over and over again, and each time she clung to Natasha, weeping with remembered terror until exhaustion claimed her in sleep again. By morning Natasha had absorbed much of Kit's fear and, although she kept it well hidden, was dreading moving towards The City almost as much as her friend was.

It took more than half a moon to reach the place Natasha had in mind. Kit's progress was slow and difficult; Natasha supported her on her crippled side for the whole journey, and learned to recognise in her face signs of the pain she never complained of, and to declare halts for rest accordingly. It snowed during much of the trek; wet, intermittent falls at first, but gradually becoming drier and almost continuous. Some days Natasha managed to trap a skinny rabbit, or dug the freezing ground stubbornly again and again until she found some tough roots or winter fungi; on other days she could find nothing to eat at all. The nights they spent in whatever shelter they could find, often no more than beneath overhanging branches of a tree to protect them from the heaviest of the falling snow, huddled together in their cloaks and waking to find frost on their faces.

But their spirits were higher than circumstances might have suggested - after all, lack of food and harsh weather were conditions they were both used to. Once Kit had agreed to go with Natasha, she never mentioned her fear again and outwardly was determinedly cheerful. She taught Natasha songs she'd used to sing with her brother and had an endless supply of amusing, affectionate stories about other members of her group. She kept up Natasha's lessons in reading and writing, using the snow to draw in. In return Natasha taught her friend about the countryside they travelled through, instructing her in the art of setting different kinds of traps and how to read nature's clues to locate the best places to dig for roots - having lived with other kids who were all so much better qualified to hunt for food, Kit had never learned how, but Natasha, painfully aware of exactly how little chance her friend stood of surviving on her own, was grimly determined that she should know the rudiments, at least.

After many days of travelling they reached Natasha's cave. It was set into a hillside with a reasonably good view of the surrounding sparsely-vegetated area. The entrance was screened by a clump of scrubby bushes. The cave was dry inside, and the roof was just high enough to allow Natasha to stand upright. Near the back the roof became lower and half way up on one side was a natural recess set into the rock. Kit, obviously relieved that they had reached their destination safely, and that it was not in sight of The City, declared this to be a storage shelf and promptly placed her neatly-folded cloak there to demonstrate its usefulness to her friend. Natasha smiled at her efforts to domesticate the place. "But you need your cloak all the time, Kit."

The younger girl shrugged, undaunted. "You never know. It might come in useful for something."

The weather continued hard throughout the winter, but not unbearably so, and they were sheltered enough in the cave. The hill was shaken occasionally by shock-waves from distant earthquakes which sent Kit, white-faced with memories she never shared of being buried under rubble for two days, close to Natasha's side, but their rock walls never even cracked. The bond of friendship between the two girls strengthened all the time, and they became as close as Kit had been to her brother. Natasha cherished their relationship and looked back on the years she had spent alone with a kind of amazed horror that she had never realised how lonely she had really been. Having someone to care for was what made life worthwhile, to have a friend to laugh with, to hold you when bad dreams disturbed your sleep, to share your discoveries and minor achievements with, to be there with the same cheerful welcome when you returned from hunting, whether you had been successful or not. They talked of their dreams for the future long into the nights. They were simple enough dreams, of having enough to eat, of being warm all the time and wearing clothes that fit...always they dreamed of freedom from fear. The basis of many of their discussions of the future was a story Joe had often told his sister - that soon after The City had been taken over, one of the escaped colonists had fired something called a 'distressbeacon' into space. None of the group had known what a 'distressbeacon' was, but they were all sure it was something magical and wondrous, and that one day it would bring a Starship to take all the kids away to some planet where it was warm and there was always enough to eat. Natasha visualised the Starship as glowing golden in the sun, and the rescuers would all have long hair and the face of her mother.

On the first of her forays this winter into The City, Natasha was struck anew by its continuing deterioration. Every year it became shabbier and more sprawling, and the precious store sheds seemed to be less full each winter. It bore little resemblance to the cheerful, industrious community she remembered dimly from her very early childhood. By now most of the lamps lining the main streets were broken and many of the buildings were in need of extensive repair. Prefabricated and wooden walls leaned at impossible angles, doors swung on broken hinges and smashed windows bore silent testimony to drunken gangs that had passed this way. On one of her visits there were sheep and cattle roaming through the streets, having obviously broken through weak fencing enclosing their fields. When the escaped animals were noticed, a dozen or so inebriated men straggled out from one of the ever-full, brightly-lit bars to chase unsteadily after them, waving sticks ineffectually, with much shouting and laughter. That night Natasha had to hide inside one of the deserted buildings for hours which stretched endlessly, until The City quietened down enough for her to dare venture out again.

During her night-time raids she became accustomed to the presence of a scraggy, ginger cat which always arrived shortly after she did. The first few times she saw it, they ignored each other totally; she concentrating on gathering her supplies and it occupied in expertly catching the shrew-like rodents disturbed from the grain sacks by her movements. Over a period of time, however, the cat became less wary of her and sometimes, after it had fed, it would approach her to rub against her ankles, demanding attention. If the night was quiet and she knew she had the time, she would pause to

pet it for a minute or two, smoothing the soft fur over the protruding bones and smiling at its responding purr.

The journey into The City took Natasha a full day each way, and the intervening night provided the protection of darkness necessary to allow her to collect supplies without being detected. Each time she returned to the cave she found Kit keeping an unceasing vigil at the entrance, and could see by the lines of fatigue around her eyes that she never slept while she was alone. The time Natasha had been delayed several hours by having to hide, Kit had been almost frantic with worry when she'd finally returned. She'd been unable to restrain her sobs of relief when she'd hugged her friend as if she'd never let her go, and even Natasha's proud recounting of the signs she'd been able to read in The City did little to cheer her up that night.

One day more than half-way through the long winter, Natasha returned from one of the regular hunting trips she still made to supplement the stolen supplies. She dropped the scrawny rock-pigeon onto the cave floor and emptied her pockets of nuts and an assortment of tubers. Kit began sorting them with exclamations of admiration at her friend's skill. She did not see the trouble in Natasha's blue eyes, nor the grim set of her jaw as she looked down at her crippled charge. She had discovered today that another group had moved into a cave barely two hours travel from their own, which was dangerously close in Natasha's estimation. She did not want to worry her friend with the news yet, but she knew she would have to try to find another location for them to move to. She was not prepared to risk having a group living so near by - not only would the meagre hunting be reduced still further but it only needed one instance of clumsiness on one of their visits to The City and she and Kit might be discovered too. She considered and rejected the idea of confronting them to claim prior ownership of territory, for they were five and she was only one, and she preferred to keep knowledge of her existence from them for as long as possible. No, she would have to try to find another base for Kit and herself.

Kit glanced up from cracking the hard nutshells open with a sharp stone and frowned as she glimpsed the tension in her friend's face. "What's wrong, Natasha?"

The older girl dropped down beside her, smiling reassurance. "Nothing. Quite a good haul today, wasn't it?" Kit still looked uneasy and Natasha sought to distract her. "Look, these feathers can go with your collection for the pillow you're making - you've got nearly enough now, haven't you? I'll see if I can catch another bird tomorrow."

She spent much of the following few days exploring further afield in directions away from The City but could find nowhere suitable for spending the rest of the winter. She scouted around the area the group had taken over and detected traces of their presence - an area of trampled snow by the stream, and animal bones not buried properly, but no sign of the kids, and deduced that they must have gone into The City. She returned to Kit that day with only a few roots to show for her day's labour, and worry deep in her heart. Still without Kit's knowledge, she kept watch on the other cave from a distance and did not relax until several days had passed after the group's safe return, proving that they had not been followed.

It did not take much longer to confirm that there was nowhere near enough for her to take Kit, not now in the bitterest cold of

the winter. So she made the only decision she could, to do nothing; but she increased her vigilance, keeping a distant watch on the other group and becoming more cautious about lighting fires (much to Kit's puzzlement), and covering her tracks on her trips outside the cave.

Another moon passed, and Natasha made another successful journey into The City, and her fears began to fade gradually to the back of her mind. She noted as a matter of routine each time the group went into The City, and when three such trips passed without incident, came to the conclusion that their new neighbours were more experienced than she had given them credit for. She had no reason suppose that their fourth trip would be any different from the preceding ones.

Kit presented Natasha with a hairband she had made for her from crimson and soft green vine creepers twined into a spiral pattern. She persuaded Natasha to allow her hair to be washed before she tried out her new present, and laughter from both girls rang out over the hillside as she squirmed protestingly beneath Kit's application of melted snow to rub the fast-dwindling bar of soap into a lather. As the afternoon sun set, Kit patiently combed the drying hair through with her fingers, taking a personal pride in its sheen and softness, and then plaited it loosely back from her face, securing the end with the band of twisted vines. When Kit declared her handiwork finished and Natasha had duly admired the end result, the older girl moved to the cave entrance to part the bush branches for a routine check of the hill.

What she saw turned her skin icy-cold and started a knot of sick terror growing in the pit of her stomach. She leaned against the rock wall for support, unable to turn her eyes away from the sight she had been dreading for most of her life, and even more intensely since she'd known Kit. A small group of men, dark blobs against the white snow, was straggling its way along the foot of the hill, shoving a small child along in front of them. As the child's face turned fleetingly in her direction she recognised him as the youngest of the neighbouring group. There was no doubt that they were heading for her cave. She tried to think fast but her brain seemed almost paralysed by a sickening fear. She could not get the memory of Kit's screams out of her mind. There was no time to take Kit to safety, and no safety to lead her to. She could not move fast enough even under normal conditions, let alone the state she would be in if she knew what was coming. As Natasha watched, the party of men halted and a wild hope surged through her, but she saw they were only pausing to light the lanterns they carried. She took one last look at the approaching gang, then forced herself to turn resolutely back into the cave, withdrawing from a hidden pocket something she was suddenly thankful she had somehow never mentioned to her friend.

Kit glanced up from writing in the earth. "Everything quiet?"

"Sure. Look, I found us something to eat earlier on."

Kit took the proffered handful of smooth, grey berries and studied them with interest. "Haven't seen these before," she commented. "I thought there weren't any berries left now."

"These are probably the last," said Natasha off-handedly. "Try them."

Kit tried a couple, chewing cautiously. "Not bad," was her

verdict. "A bit bitter, though."

"Oh, have some more - they're good for you," urged Natasha. She apparently popped some into her own mouth, munching with every appearance of enthusiasm. Kit ate a few more as bidden, then looked more closely at her companion. "Are you all right, Natasha? You don't look very well."

Natasha swallowed hard against a wave of nausea. "I'm just tired. Let's hurry and finish eating and then we'll settle down, shall we?"

Kit obediently swallowed the rest of the berries and Natasha watched her discreetly, willing them to take effect quickly. That time she had eaten them accidentally herself, they had worked almost at once....

Her acute hearing caught a sound carried faintly on the wind. She looked anxiously at her companion to see whether she had heard it, and saw her leaning dizzily against the wall, her face suddenly pale. As Natasha touched her shoulder, Kit's head lolled sleepily to one side and her eyelids closed heavily. There was no time to spare for wondering if she had eaten too many of the berries; Natasha bent down to grasp her friend under her arms and dragged her to the back of the cave. There was a sleepy smile on Kit's face and her eyelids did not flicker. With a massive effort, Natasha hauled her up in her arms and pushed her into the hidden recess in the wall. Panting with the effort it had cost her, she tucked Kit's cloak around her unconscious form, drawing a fold of it over her face which was gleaming palely in the darkness. She breathed a swift plea for protection over her friend, then hastily kicked over the scrape marks the dragging had left in the earth.

A noise from outside drew her back to the cave entrance. The glowing lights from the bobbing lanterns were terrifyingly close, she could hear drunken singing and jeering. *We heard them coming - we couldn't get away.* Not strictly true in her own case - there was a possibility that she might be able to escape into the darkness. She had only seconds to decide. To run and hide, and hope they would not find Kit... or stay, and try to defend herself... Something Kit had said that day they'd spent arguing about coming here surfaced in Natasha's memory. *Don't make me, Natasha, I would rather die than face that again.* But she had made her come, had promised to take care of her....

This was the only cave in the area - They had no dogs with them, so they would not find Kit if she stayed to be found first, but if she left they would not stop searching, not after having come all this way, until they found the sport they wanted, and Kit would be discovered. Natasha stifled a faint moan of fear as nearby bushes were illuminated by the beams from lanterns and torches, the light reflected back off the white snow. She could make out individual voices, hear harsh laughter and drunken catcalls. Only five of them, she told herself desperately. Her body was trying to give her away, her heart pounding so loudly they must surely hear it, her breathing rasping harshly in her ears. Natasha, her name was Natasha. She flattened herself against the cave wall and drew her knife. Natasha. She flew at the first one as he pushed clumsily through the bushes, and she felt her knife go in deep and he fell to the ground, groaning. Then there was a blinding light in her eyes and shouting and a sickening smell of alcohol and she fought and hit and kicked but she was knocked to the ground with bone bruising force and she couldn't move and one of them reached

for her shining hair....

Something dripped onto her face. She opened one eye; the other was swollen shut. It was daylight. Her body was on fire with pain. She had never imagined such pain as this, and yet the brutally clear memory of the horror that had been done to her burned deeper into her soul than the physical hurt. She feebly licked a split lip and tasted dried blood.

"Drink this," urged a soft, trembling voice. Cold water trickled into her parched mouth. She choked a little and turned her face away. Kit's hand was gentle on her wrenched shoulder. "Natasha," she sobbed. "I'm so sorry. Why did you do it? I'll never forgive myself."

Natasha struggled painfully to sit up; Kit helped her to lean against the wall. She tucked Natasha's cloak protectively around her shaking body and wrapped her own over the top of it. Natasha glimpsed the pile of bloody clothing pushed to the back of the cave and was suddenly, violently sick. Kit held her through the gut-tearing spasms of vomiting, murmuring reassurances, tears rolling unceasingly and unnoticed down her cheeks.

"Where's my knife?" croaked Natasha as soon as she could speak.

"It's here." Kit handed it to her. "I cleaned it."

Natasha hefted it in her hand, her head bowed to examine its condition as if it was the only thing in the world that mattered. A strand of hair fell forward to brush her bruised face. She stiffened. The first thing They'd touched had been her hair.... They'd run Their filthy hands through it....

Moving so suddenly that it made Kit recoil in shock, Natasha grabbed a fistful of hair and sawed at it savagely with her knife, close to her scalp.

"Natasha, don't - we'll wash it - it'll be all right," begged Kit, reaching to hold her. Her outstretched arm was knocked aside as Natasha hacked singlemindedly at the remaining length of hair and hurled it disgustedly towards the entrance.

She looked at Kit. "It's all right," she said, in an oddly normal voice. "Don't cry. That's all I wanted to do."

"I know," whispered Kit brokenly. "I know." She reached into a pocket and extracted the last precious sliver of soap. She held it out. "You'll want this, Natasha. I'll get you some snow."

Time passed. Some things changed; some things did not change. Bruises faded and cuts healed slowly. The bleeding took a long time to stop. For many days afterwards, Kit could not stop herself from dissolving into tears for no reason at all. Natasha never cried. Sometimes Kit tried to encourage her friend to speak of what had happened but Natasha always refused, becoming withdrawn if pressed, burying the memories deep inside herself and insisting that it did not matter, she was all right, talking would change nothing. So Kit soon learned never to allude to it and Natasha became determinedly cheerful, always looking for new ways to distract Kit when she

lapsed into brooding spells of depression. Natasha sensed dimly that something had died inside Kit that day she had discovered what she had done for her. Natasha felt guilty for the change in her friend, for bedimming her sparkling spirit, and developed a new tenderness towards her, becoming more gentle and patient than she had ever been. She also became more fiercely protective of her friend, fighting for survival for both of them because Kit no longer seemed able to. More than ever, Kit became Natasha's reason for survival.

The winters became longer and drearier but competition for the best caves to spend them in decreased drastically. Kit appeared not to notice that each year they found a cave safer and warmer and drier than the winter before. There was only one conclusion to be drawn, and Natasha kept the bleak knowledge to herself that the kids were dying out.

Kit began to get sick with increasing frequency, and even on her good days she suffered from a dry cough which seemed to weaken her. Natasha knew it must be because she wasn't finding enough food, and desperately she increased her already strenuous efforts at hunting. She became skilled in the art of giving Kit most of the food without her realising. Often she said she had eaten while out hunting. Kit apparently believed her, although sometimes she choked on her food and could not finish it. Natasha worried more about leaving Kit alone while she hunted, knowing how terribly afraid she was to be left, but the only other option was for them to starve and that was no option at all. Time spent together talking, working, playing simple games, became doubly precious for both of them.

Inevitably, Natasha got tired; a bone-deep weariness set in which would not fade, caused partly by the long nights she spent awake worrying ceaselessly about how to keep them both alive. She struggled on because she had to, and did her best to hide her flagging spirits from Kit. Partings for Natasha's trips into The City became more painful for both of them, with each girl's private dread that this might be the last time they would see each other hidden beneath a bright, cheerful manner.

On the second trip of Natasha's fifteenth winter, her fatigue made her less alert than usual until a noise from outside warned her she was trapped inside the storehouse. She put down the ginger cat she'd been stroking and whispered, "Run, this place isn't safe at all." The animal melted silently away into the darkness, but there was no time for her to hide and she turned to see one of Them swaying drunkenly in the doorway, the lantern he held up making shadows dance on the walls. Natasha crouched defensively, her eye measuring the distance between them. She gritted her teeth, cursing herself bitterly for her carelessness, trying to think clearly above her mounting terror. He lurched towards her and she darted to one side, but not quickly enough to avoid his meaty fist closing around her upper arm. She kicked out again and again at the legs as thick and solidly planted as tree trunks, and tried unsuccessfully to reach her knife. She unbalanced him enough to make him drop the lamp, but not herself. Spilt fuel trickled over the broken glass onto old sacking and burst into flames. He ignored the fire and lifted the slight girl easily into the air by her arm to draw her close to his pudgy face. She felt something snap in the arm bearing all her weight and the pain was almost blinding but, as rancid breath from a leering grin blew into her face, terror gave her strength to overcome her pain and she struggled frantically in his

grip. His fat lips parted in a dirty-toothed smile and he drooled in anticipation at the pleasure he intended to get from his victim.

A kick, directed as much by panic as intention, finally hit home and her attacker dropped her to bend double, wheezing. His flailing fist caught her across the side of the head but she was free and she staggered outside, choking on the billowing smoke. The darkness was illuminated by flickering shadows from the spreading fire and she ran along the street desperately away, away, clamping her broken arm close to her body. She had to dive behind a shed when she heard shouting and running footsteps coming near but they went on past towards the blazing storehouse. She left The City and ran and ran, forcing herself on by sheer willpower when her legs trembled and threatened to give way and when she got so dizzy and sick that she began to weave from side to side. She was more than an hour's staggering run from The City when she slipped on ice and crashed to the ground. The pain in her arm exploded into fiery redness behind her eyes and she lost consciousness.

She awoke in the swirling grey mist of dawn. Instantly she was swamped by panic which would not be easily subdued. No-one in sight, she told herself severely, much too far from The City to be seen. No tracks other than her own in the half-frozen snow. When she moved ice crackled on her clothes where they had been wet with sweat and snow. Her head hurt and the pain in her arm was sickening but she had escaped, and she hoped her attacker had died in the fire. She got to her feet, setting her teeth against the pain and nausea and trudged on unsteadily through the snow. She was anxious to get back to Kit, longing to see her dear, familiar face and make sure she was all right. She tried to think up a plausible excuse to explain away her injuries - and more importantly, her lack of food - without worrying Kit.

It was evening by the time the cave came into sight and Natasha's pace quickened in eager anticipation of seeing her companion. She gave her customary greeting whistle as she approached the entrance, and strove to quell the surge of cold fear at the unnerving silence which met it. Kit was inside asleep, she desperately tried to convince herself as she covered the last dozen yards. Just because Kit had never slept before while Natasha was away didn't mean she couldn't change her habits if she felt like it. She entered the cave, unconsciously holding her breath, and saw Kit curled up at the far end. She hurried over to kneel beside her friend and the dread that something was wrong gelled into certainty. Kit's face was flushed brightly, her skin dry and hot although she was shivering. Her breathing rasped between parted lips. Natasha shook her shoulder urgently.

"Kit! Kitty, wake up!"

The younger girl shifted restlessly but her eyes did not open and her shoulder felt impossibly thin and fragile beneath Natasha's touch. She choked back her fear, telling herself resolutely that this had happened before, it was only another of her chills, of course she would be all right. She took off her own cloak (worn to holes in several places by now, but better than nothing) and spread it over her friend. She tucked the pillow Kit had made years ago beneath her head to try to ease the laboured breathing. She went out into the cold twilight to fill the bowl with water from the spring and used it to moisten Kit's dry lips and to sponge her burning face. When she had done all she could, she lay down beside her friend, broken arm resting across her own stomach, with her other hand holding Kit's for reassurance, as much for her own as for

her friend's.

This fever did not follow the pattern of previous ones. For three days and nights Kit drifted in and out of consciousness. Often she cried out in delirium and Natasha hugged her and reassured her, and Kit was usually calmed by her presence, but there were also heart-rending times when her friend did not recognise her and was terrified and fought off her soothing touch. Natasha did not dare to leave her for long enough to try to hunt so she did not eat during her lonely vigil, saving what little food there was for Kit's recovery. She managed to get her friend to drink a little during her fleeting moments of lucidity. Once she choked on the water and coughed up blood, and made Natasha nearly cry when she apologised for it.

On the third day Kit seemed to be resting more quietly, and Natasha crept away from the fragile figure which meant all the world to her and sat by the entrance. She leaned back against the cold rock wall, automatically supporting her arm which had turned into a spongy mass of violet bruising. She was past being hungry but she was tired, so tired, and she did not know how much longer she could go on fighting to keep them both alive. She knew deep down that if Kit... if Kit ever wasn't there (and that thought felt like someone had taken hold of her heart and squeezed it hard) she would have no reason to fight for her own survival. It would be so easy to just stop struggling against the inevitable. Would it be so bad to slip quietly into death when the alternative was to die bloodily in a drunken attack by Them? Her chin sank onto her chest and she let her heavy eyelids close for just a moment to rest them.

She thought the sound was part of her dream; it penetrated her mind so slowly and seemed to mean so little. Then realisation dawned and shocked her awake with a jolt that set her arm pounding sickeningly. She darted a look at Kit but she knew it had not been her voice. She looked outside. Two figures were climbing the hill to the cave. The all-too-familiar terror rose with the bile in her throat.

"Please, no, not any more, I can't stand any more," she whispered, tears of frustration and helplessness stinging her eyes. Even so she found herself rising instinctively to her feet, reaching awkwardly for her knife with her left hand. Just like before, except there were only two instead of five, and it was afternoon, not evening. That only meant daylight to see Their faces by when They... She tried to think through her terror, to evaluate the situation. She would not have to drug Kit with berries this time... but there was nowhere in this cave to hide her and little chance of being able to move her with only one hand even if there had been.

Burning hatred of Them fired Natasha because she knew that mere unconsciousness would be no defence against Their brutality. *She had failed Kit.* Yet... there was one last thing she could do for her friend....

A glance outside showed her the figures coming nearer. The one at the front carried a small, black box. She wondered irrelevantly how They had found the cave - if she had been followed on her flight from The City she would have known before this. But it didn't matter. Only one thing mattered now. Voices sounded outside and she moved to the back of the cave to crouch protectively beside Kit. She gripped the knife tightly. If she could not defend Kit and herself, she could at least make sure they died by her own hand.

"...readings in there," she heard from outside.

Shadows blocked the feeble sunlight shining through the entrance and They were inside her cave, two of Them, but... Natasha's jaw dropped with astonishment at Their appearance which was quite unlike any she'd seen before. They looked clean and Their hair was short and They wore one-piece suits, one red, one blue. They didn't even look drunk... but doubtless the end result would be the same. She swallowed convulsively and gripped the knife more firmly, meeting their eyes defiantly.

The one in red moved forward, his arms outstretched towards her, smiling, saying, "Don't be afraid, we're here to help you. How about giving me the knife?"

He stopped abruptly as she raised the weapon threateningly. Natasha's throat constricted with terror. This was it. She was going to have to - Kit stirred and muttered feverishly. *A few more seconds, Natasha promised her silently, and then I will do it.*

"It's all right, kiddy," the man in red told her. "No-one's going to hurt you."

Natasha shrunk back against Kit. "Don't come near us," she hissed, almost more afraid than if They'd begun the attack right away instead of tormenting her with games first.

"Please don't be scared," the man said in the same tone of voice Kit used to her when Natasha had nightmares. "My name is Paul Ryan, First Officer of the U.S.S. Challenger. We're both from the Starship." He indicated his colleague with a quick hand motion which made Natasha flinch. Contrition showed on his face. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you. We've come to take you away from this place. You're going to be safe now."

Natasha could not understand him. She could see his lips moving and hear words being spoken, but they were surely in her own mind. She shook her head to clear the buzzing in her ears, but raised the knife warningly as Ryan moved towards her again. He halted at once, looking helplessly at his fair-headed colleague who took over, smiling at Natasha.

"Please believe us - we really are here to help you," he said. "My name is Lars Jonson, I'm a doctor. Your friend looks sick - can I take a look?"

Natasha glanced fearfully from him to Kit's white face and struggled against the dizziness washing over her. *Kit, I don't know what to do.*

"You don't look too good yourself," commented the doctor. Natasha jumped, her nerves taut almost to screaming point as the small object he held towards her made a humming noise. He stopped the sound as soon as he saw her reaction. "I'm sorry, it won't hurt you. It's only a scanner. It tells me if people are ill."

"Why did you come?" Natasha asked hazily. Nothing made sense and there was only her to decide what to do for Kit. She must not be wrong.

"We'll tell you everything you want to know, but won't you put the knife down? You might hurt your friend." Her suddenly bared teeth showed Ryan that she had no intention of parting with her

weapon. Having seen as much as he had of this planet, he could not really blame her. "Okay, you keep it," he said hastily. Her tension decreased fractionally. "Our ship was passing near this sector and we picked up a signal from a distress beacon."

"Distressbeacon?" Natasha murmured the magic dream-word disbelievingly. "There... there really was one?"

"Yes, there really was," the doctor said gently. "It had obviously been there for some years. You see, this planet is a long, long way from the Federation's trade and exploration routes - that is why it was selected by the colonists; they wanted to be left alone to prove they could develop and grow without outside help. No Federation vessel has passed this way for over ten years. It was only by chance that we were passing near enough to pick up the signal. I'm so sorry we didn't come sooner."

A strangled sound escaped from Natasha. She gulped back the storm of tears threatening to explode from inside her. Natasha never cried.

"We've rescued nine other children so far," Ryan told her. "We think you're the last - unless you know of any more?"

"Nine? Only nine?" repeated Natasha numbly. Even more had died than she had feared. Her hold on the knife slackened a little. Could it possibly be over?

"How many should there be?" asked the doctor, his face creasing with worry. "Yours are the last readings our sensors show, apart from in the colony buildings back there."

"There used to be a lot more of us," Natasha said flatly. She reached to soothe Kit with a gentle hand as she cried out from fevered dreams. "It's all right, Kit." She looked up at the two figures and her vision blurred. "I think perhaps it really might be all right now."

The two men exchanged relieved glances.

"Let's get you and your friend Kit up to the ship," said Ryan. "Is there anything you want to take with you? You won't be coming back."

Won't be coming back. Natasha's heart lurched in a most peculiar manner. She looked vaguely around the cave and shook her head. Nothing to take. For ten years she had lived on the run and she had nothing to take.

Ryan tapped the gold badge on his chest and Natasha eyed it with interest as it beeped like a bird. "Ryan to Challenger. We've found the last two. Beam us up, please."

There was a blue sparkling light and a rushing noise all around. Natasha tried to hold Kit but she could not move and suddenly the cave was gone. In its place was a brightly lit room where all the surfaces were smooth. There were people near the only exit, all looking at her, and she felt trapped. What had she done? Terror surged through her body. Beads of cold sweat rolled down her face like tears and she knew she was going to be sick. The room swayed frighteningly and Natasha hugged Kit so she would not fall off the platform. Then darkness came.

The rocks beneath her were unaccountably soft and she could hear distant voices and subdued beeping noises. This was a strange dream. Then hands touched her body and panic exploded in her mind. She writhed sideways, lashing out with her fist, and half-fell off the bed to land heavily on the floor. Faces stared at her, voices spoke to her. Natasha realised two things which increased her fear. They had taken her knife, and Kit's bed was surrounded by people. *They were taking her clothes off.*

Snarling, Natasha hurtled across the intervening distance to Kit, scattering medical staff on the way. The people around the bed backed off, all but the one called Jonson who stayed to press something metal which hissed against Kit's throat. Natasha flung herself on him, a kicking, scratching, biting whirl of blazing, furious terror for her friend. He did not retaliate with blows, but merely raised an arm to protect himself from her teeth and nails as he retreated from her, still talking reassuringly.

Natasha almost passed out with the pain that crashing into him had caused her arm, and her terror increased even more at what she had done. She pressed herself against Kit's bed, bitter in the certainty that even if she died defending her friend (as she was fully prepared to do) it would not be enough to save her. She should have killed them both when she'd had the chance.

Blood dripped from a bite-wound on the doctor's arm. Incredibly, though, he did not beat her, he did not even shout. Instead all the people in the room began to talk to her. They coaxed and pleaded, they told her over and over again that Kit was very sick and they only wanted to help. They asked her name, they offered her food, they told her the other kids were asleep in a room next door and didn't she want to see how well-cared for they'd been? They said they would stop her arm hurting.

Natasha did not speak. Their words did not make sense to her. She felt sick and dizzy and terribly afraid and her arm was agony. Her exhaustion precluded any attempt at rational thought. Her first priority, always, was to protect Kit, and she reverted to that now, doing so in the only way she had ever known how - by allowing no-one near her.

Then at a murmured command from Ryan, their tactics changed. The group of people loosely surrounding her, making her feel so trapped, withdrew to the other end of the large room, leaving her alone with Kit. The nerve-racking discord of their meaningless sounds ceased; the confusion of people speaking constantly or simultaneously, offering conflicting ideas and advice was exhausting to someone who had never spoken to more than one person at a time.

Natasha watched them warily. Two people left the room altogether. Jonson leaned against a table while his arm was treated and bandaged by one of the others dressed in blue. Ryan spoke with him in low tones, and once Natasha heard the doctor ask, "When is the Captain expected back?" and Ryan told him, "Not for a couple of hours yet, I'm afraid." They both looked disappointed. The fourth person sat at a desk and worked at a screen with words on it.

Natasha felt slightly less pressurised after their sudden retreat, but she guessed they were hoping she would drop her guard if they left her alone. She was not fooled so easily. With determination born of desperation she battled against her body's unceasing demand to sleep, forcing herself to remain alert, to be acutely aware of the exact position of each person in the room at

all times, and to watch the three exits. Minutes dragged into hours. *Her name was Natasha.*

One of the doors opened and Natasha tensed almost rigid, expecting an onslaught of violence. A lone figure entered, dressed in a red uniform like Ryan's. Relief showed in the glances the medical personnel exchanged with each other as the newcomer's eyes swept the room, taking in the scene of the dirty, wild-eyed, injured child holding the entire medical department at bay, apparently even without a weapon, while the other child on the bed behind her looked alarmingly frail.

"I'd like to make a report, Captain," said Jonson, stepping forward.

An eyebrow arched enquiringly in response. "I think you had better."

The two left the room together, and Ryan followed them out. Natasha watched the remaining two occupants carefully.

Several minutes later the Captain returned alone and nodded to the officers. "Clear the room, please."

The crisp order was obeyed instantly, even though they did not appear openly afraid of this Captain person. Natasha shifted her position uneasily.

The newcomer made no attempt to move near Natasha but selected a chair several bedlengths away, sufficiently distant to take the sharpest edge off her apprehension.

"You need have no fear, child. I know it's hard for you to believe, but there is no danger here. This is my ship and I will allow no harm to come to you or your friend." The tone was calm, the voice pleasantly low-pitched and the facial expression less stern than when the others had been in the room.

Natasha felt less threatened by such a quiet approach and faint curiosity stirred within her as she looked at the old lady sitting there so serenely, not at all upset or anxious as the others had been. She was tall and stately, sitting absolutely straight although her spine did not touch the back of the chair. The age-lines on her face did not detract from her elegant appearance. Her dark hair was lightly streaked with grey and gleamed in plaits twined around her head in an intricate arrangement. Natasha's hand reached unconsciously to touch her own dirty, unevenly hacked-off hair. She swallowed a lump in her throat, remembering what simple, genuine pleasure Kit had used to take in playing with her hair when it had been that length. Back before... She would love to see this creation. Natasha hoped she would wake up soon so she could. The lady's eyes were dark too, as she looked at Natasha.

"You are not being held here against your will," she said quietly. "You are free to choose to return to your planet if you wish." Natasha gulped faintly. "However, our scanners show that the planet is entering an ice age with abnormal rapidity, possibly due to the build up of volcanic dust in the atmosphere. Such a tectonically unsound planet should never have been reported as fit for colonisation; I am already making investigations into the survey team responsible. It would have been hard enough living here, even if the colony had remained intact. I have been to see for myself the city and the caves where you lived. We have brought all the

children aboard. As for the men," the Captain's voice suddenly hardened as she spoke of them, and a shudder racked Natasha's skinny frame, "they will be left there until Starfleet decides what is to be done with them. Probably another ship will be sent to deal with the situation. There is nowhere they can go."

"I hope they die!" Natasha declared viciously.

The Captain did not appear shocked. "It is understandable that you feel that way. Be assured that you will never suffer again as you did at their hands."

Natasha's gaze dropped in embarrassment from the dark eyes which saw so much.

"There is no reason for shame," the Captain said softly, with a depth of understanding in her voice such as Natasha had never imagined anyone in the world, apart from Kit, possessed. "What happened to you were things no-one should ever have to endure, child or adult. None of it was your fault."

"How do you know what happened?" Natasha whispered.

The dark eyes lowered to the faintly wrinkled hands suddenly clenched in her lap. "I know because it happened to me." Her face was shadowed with memories as she met Natasha's incredulous expression. "My early life was not unlike your own. I too suffered hunger and cold, and brutal treatment at the hands of others for many years. I know what it is like to have known only terror during childhood."

"But you're...you're a lady!" stammered Natasha, shocked.

A slight smile softened the austere face fleetingly. "Now, perhaps - I try to be. Seventy years ago I was a frightened, savage child, expecting only violence from everyone. Not so very different from you, I think."

Strong, unknown emotions raged inside Natasha. Disbelief, wonder, even a thread of hope. A desperate, nameless yearning. The tiniest beginning of relief from the burden borne for a lifetime. She could not speak.

The Captain raised an eyebrow. "I am trusting you with that information, child. There are not many aboard who know my story."

"I will never tell," vowed Natasha.

"Thank you. Will you trust me in return? I wish to help you." She waited patiently while the child considered this and was gratified at the eventual, hesitant nod. "That is good. I think perhaps you would feel more comfortable in a smaller room, would you not? With your friend, of course," she added hastily as she saw her clutch Kit's hand in sudden distress.

Then Natasha nodded, wondering how she could possibly know how exhausting it was trying to watch such a large area with so many entrances.

"Very well. Come with me."

Natasha followed her at a cautious distance, with many glances back over her shoulder at Kit's still form. The Captain opened the

door to a small room which held more of the strange medical equipment and two narrow beds. Natasha watched her slide the two beds together against the wall. Just as if she *knew* you had to have a wall at your back while you slept.

"Now may I bring your friend in?"

Warily, Natasha gave her consent and shadowed her closely as she returned to sickbay and gently gathered the frail child into her arms. The Captain glanced down at the pitifully thin face, the skin stretched translucent over brittle bones, and muttered some oath in another language. She saw the anxiety on Natasha's face at her elbow and said, "She is lucky to have a protector as brave and loyal as you."

"She is my friend," said Natasha, as if that explained everything. "I look after her."

She laid the child carefully on one of the beds. Natasha climbed up onto the next one and automatically took Kit's hand in hers.

"This shall be your room," the Captain told her gravely. "No-one will enter without your permission - when they require admission they will sound the door chime thus." She demonstrated and a musical note sounded softly in the room. This was as much for her crew's benefit as for the child's; she had no wish for her staff to be attacked by a child startled from sleep in a strange place. "You must permit access to medical personnel whenever they request it. Do you understand?"

Natasha fidgeted uneasily.

"I require your word that you will allow the doctors to tend to your friend, and to you. She is very sick and needs their help. They are good people, skilled in the science of healing. You may trust them."

Finally, Natasha nodded reluctant agreement. The Captain's dark eyes shone in response, as if she was pleased. Natasha found that she wanted to please this quiet lady who understood so many things without being told, who had not tried to touch her or even be near her, who did not smile all the time to confuse her, who explained everything so clearly.

"When did you last eat?" she was asking now.

Natasha twisted uncomfortably. "I had to look after Kit," she explained defensively. "I couldn't leave her to hunt."

The fine lines around the lady's eyes deepened. "I meant no criticism, child. I will fetch you a meal."

She left the room and Natasha turned to smooth Kit's hair off her face, whispering reassurances to her, supposing vaguely that food would not arrive for hours yet, what with hunting and making a fire. No-one had ever hunted for her before. She was amazed, therefore, when the Captain returned only moments later with a tray bearing a small plate of appetisingly steaming stew, a dish of fruit and a glass of white liquid. The tray was placed in front of Natasha and a strong wave of dizziness washed over her at the sight and smell of the food. She pushed the tray away and averted her face.

"What is wrong?" came the concerned question. "Is it not to your liking?"

"I have nothing to trade for food," whispered Natasha in an agony of embarrassment.

She glimpsed some terrible pain on the lady's face as she turned it away briefly, but her features were quite composed again moments later when she spoke with quiet intensity. "Hear my words, child, and believe them. Food, warmth and clothing are the natural and inalienable rights of all children under the Federation's protection. You have been under that protection, and Starfleet's, since the moment you arrived on my ship, and you will be for always unless you decide otherwise. You will never be hungry again."

Natasha stared at her wide-eyed. It sounded like the dreams she and Kit used to share. Could it possibly be the truth? She scooped up a handful of the stew. Gravy dripped between her fingers and down her chin. It was the most wonderful food she had ever tasted. Then the lady reached across and offered her a metal implement from the tray.

"This is called a fork," she said gravely. "It is used to transfer food from the plate to the mouth."

Natasha took the fork, holding it awkwardly in her left hand and made a creditable attempt at using it as she was shown, dropping no more than a third of each load onto the table. She stopped eating less than half-way through and carefully arranged what remained on the plate into a neat pile.

"Do you not wish to finish it?" enquired the Captain, raising a puzzled eyebrow.

"It is for Kit," explained Natasha, adding earnestly, "I will teach her to use the fork."

"Child, this is *your* meal. Kit may have one just like it - or anything else she prefers - when she awakens. Later I will show you how to operate the food processor so that you may fetch meals for both of you whenever you wish."

Natasha lifted a suddenly shaking hand to rub her forehead tiredly.

"I know it is all very strange to you, but you will become accustomed to many of the changes sooner than you can imagine."

Natasha continued with the meal, savouring every mouthful, and the Captain did not need to caution her to eat slowly as she had thought she would; evidently the child had learned through experience the danger of eating too fast on an empty stomach. By the time she'd finished, her eyelids were drooping heavily but she kept forcing them open.

"Now," said the Captain matter-of-factly, "one of the doctors will come to strap up your arm and stop it hurting. I will show you how to use the showers so that you may clean yourself. The nurses will wash Kit; if you wish, you may stay with her while they do so, although there is no need. Her condition will be assessed, she will be given medicine and made comfortable. Then they will leave you alone with her to sleep. Is this acceptable?"

Natasha made herself nod. Intellectually she was beginning to believe they had reached a safe place, but a lifetime's instinctive fear of adults would not be overcome easily and she loathed the idea of them touching Kit.

"What do you wish for most, child?" asked the lady unexpectedly.

"For Kit to be well," answered Natasha simply.

"And for yourself?"

Natasha gestured helplessly. She had never considered what she wanted. Then she found herself studying the slim figure with the shining hair and calm face. "To be like you," she said shyly.

"So little?" A faint smile curved the lady's lips. "You can be, if you choose."

"How?" asked Natasha, the question burning in her eyes. "How did you?"

The Captain's expression became distant as she remembered. "I had a wise, patient, kind teacher whom I came to trust and revere - and still do. He gave me the best possible start. And then, when I was old enough, Starfleet training gave me the discipline and security I needed. I have had a very happy career." She looked into the eyes of the child who reminded her so vividly of herself at the same age. "It is possible to live a normal life after such a start as we have both had. You must believe that. I will be your teacher, if you wish it."

"I do," breathed Natasha.

"Then it will be so. As Humans say, 'Today is the first day of the rest of your life'."

Natasha considered the words and a smile spread shyly over her face. She liked that idea.

"Can you bear to face the medical staff now?" the Captain asked her.

Natasha squared her shoulders resolutely and nodded, knowing she must.

Then the Captain tilted her head enquiringly. "May the teacher know her pupil's name?"

Natasha drew herself up straight. With grave dignity, she said, "My name is Natasha."

The lady's hand rose in a paired-fingered salute. "Live long and prosper, Natasha." Slender fingers tucked a stray hair behind an elegant, pointed ear.

"My name is Saavik."

She screamed and screamed as she never had at the time. She was curled up tightly, pressing against the wall. She could hear someone screaming and she thought it was Kit and she couldn't reach

her and she couldn't bear it, so she clamped her hands over her ears to shut out the awful sound, and still she couldn't stop screaming.

The door opened and light flooded the room and help was here in the form of the Ship's Counselor. Dressed in white silk, her dark hair tumbling in curls over her shoulders and bringing a scent of sweet, alien flowers, Troi knelt down to gather the terrified security officer into her arms. She held her close, rocking her gently and speaking softly to her, and the screaming abated to a painful, gulping sobbing.

"I felt your dream, Tasha, but it's gone now. It's all in the past, a long time ago. You're safe here, you don't have to be afraid any more. Everything's all right, Tasha."

The younger woman clung to her, trying to concentrate on the gentle voice, holding onto it through surging waves of terrifying memories which would not release her. Tasha, Tasha. Deanna's soft tone and exotic accent gave her name a whole new sound, and in the background the familiar ship's noises were a soothing lullaby. The Counselor held the sobbing woman, feeling her become gradually calmer in the warmth and security of her arms, desperate for the comfort which she had needed and never had as a child. The dreadful trembling lessened and Troi smoothed the cropped hair back from the tearstained face.

"It never goes away, Deanna," Yar whispered brokenly. "I can't ever forget." She never described her dreams or spoke of her past to the Counselor, feeling that someone so beautiful and gentle and graceful would be horrified and disgusted by the kind of life she had lived, and would think less of her because of it. What she did not realize was that as Ship's Counselor, Troi had the same access to confidential personnel files that the Captain and Chief Medical Officer had, and knew as much as anyone about Yar's background. She knew even the saddest and most closely-guarded of her secrets; that as a result of the serious internal injuries she had suffered as a child, she could never bear children. She sensed Yar's reluctance to talk to her and guessed the reason behind it, and respected her wishes, never pushing her. She had learned that comfort and reassurance were what was needed most at these times when her past haunted her dreams.

"You can't deny it happened, Tasha," said Troi softly, stroking the spiky hair. "It's part of you - as everyone's past is part of them; you must try and accept it. The nightmares are coming less often now, aren't they?"

Yar nodded drearily; Deanna was right, it had been several moons since the last time. Then, without warning, there were tears in her eyes again, and Troi could feel sadness and grief overwhelming her; loneliness, a great sense of loss. Quieter emotions than the earlier panic and terror, but just as painful in their way.

"What is it?" the Counselor asked gently. "Who do you want?"

Yar's eyes squeezed shut. "I want Kit," she whispered. "I miss her."

"Who's Kit, Tasha?"

The security officer twisted around in Troi's arms to face her, eyes widened as if in surprise that anyone could not know. "Kit was

my friend," she said simply. My friend who died in my arms on the Challenger. My friend who struggled bravely to survive through all the bad times but didn't have the strength to live for more than a few weeks after we were rescued. My friend who dreamed with me about our future in a beautiful world but couldn't live long enough to share it with me, but who died warm, well-fed and free of pain, and at peace because I promised her to enjoy it for both of us after she was gone. I do enjoy it, Kitty; I love my life here as part of this very special group, where friends care for me, and I for them, and I would give my life to protect them, but I still miss you so much.

Troi's arms tightened around her companion in silent sympathy. "Will I do as a substitute?"

Yar smiled through her pain. "You are my friend, Deanna, you're not a substitute. I'm very grateful to you for... everything. But you see, Kit was... she was my first - my only - friend before..." Her arm moved in a vague gesture which meant the warmth of the room and the luxury of her possessions it contained, the security of the ship which was her home, the glory of Starfleet and the Federation which was her life now.

"I think I understand." Troi held her a while longer, neither of them speaking, and she felt sleepiness stealing gradually over her charge as the horror and the grief faded away... until the next time. Then Troi coaxed her up onto the bed and drew the sheets over her. She sat on the edge of the bed and took one of Yar's cold hands in hers, resting the other on her forehead.

"I'll stay with you until you sleep," she promised, as she always did, "and you won't dream again tonight, dear Tasha."

At last Yar smiled her thanks and relaxed towards sleep under her soothing touch. She was safe now. Natasha with the long hair was from another life.

Tasha. Her name was Tasha.

