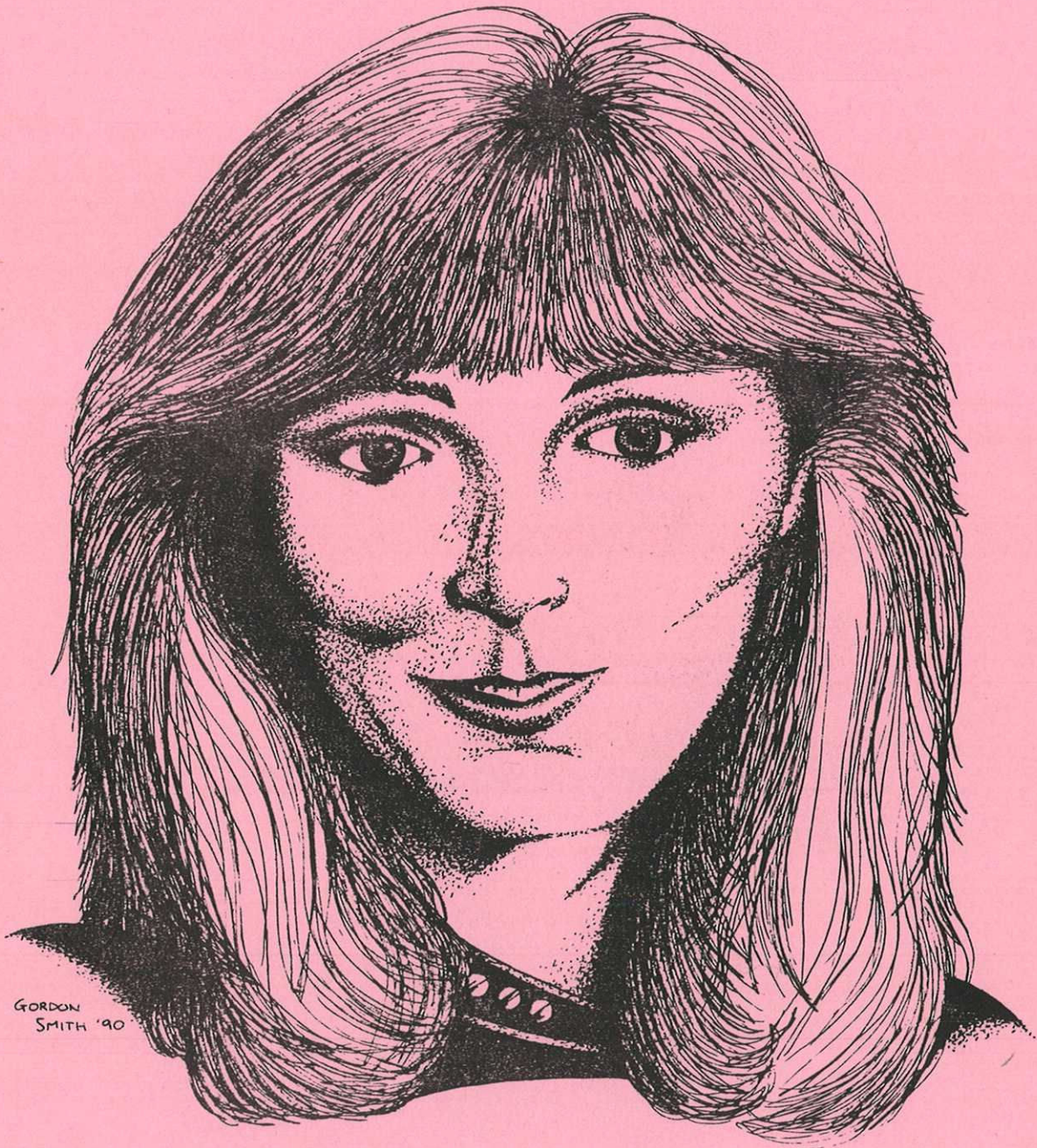


Scotpress

Make It So 10



a
Star Trek
fanzine

CONTENTS

Pipeline	by Lisa Dearnley Davison	P 3
Visions	by Margaret Connor	P 16
Invisible Fury	by Margaret Connor	P 17
A Death of Value	by Oriel Cooper	P 28
Friendly Spirit	by Helen Connor	P 30
Comment/Replies	by Helen Connor	P 40
Past's Hidden	by Sally Woods	P 41
The Tinkerbell Experience	by Gaile Wood	P 65
Data or Lore	by Helen Connor	P 82
The Firemaker	by Matthew Conway	P 83

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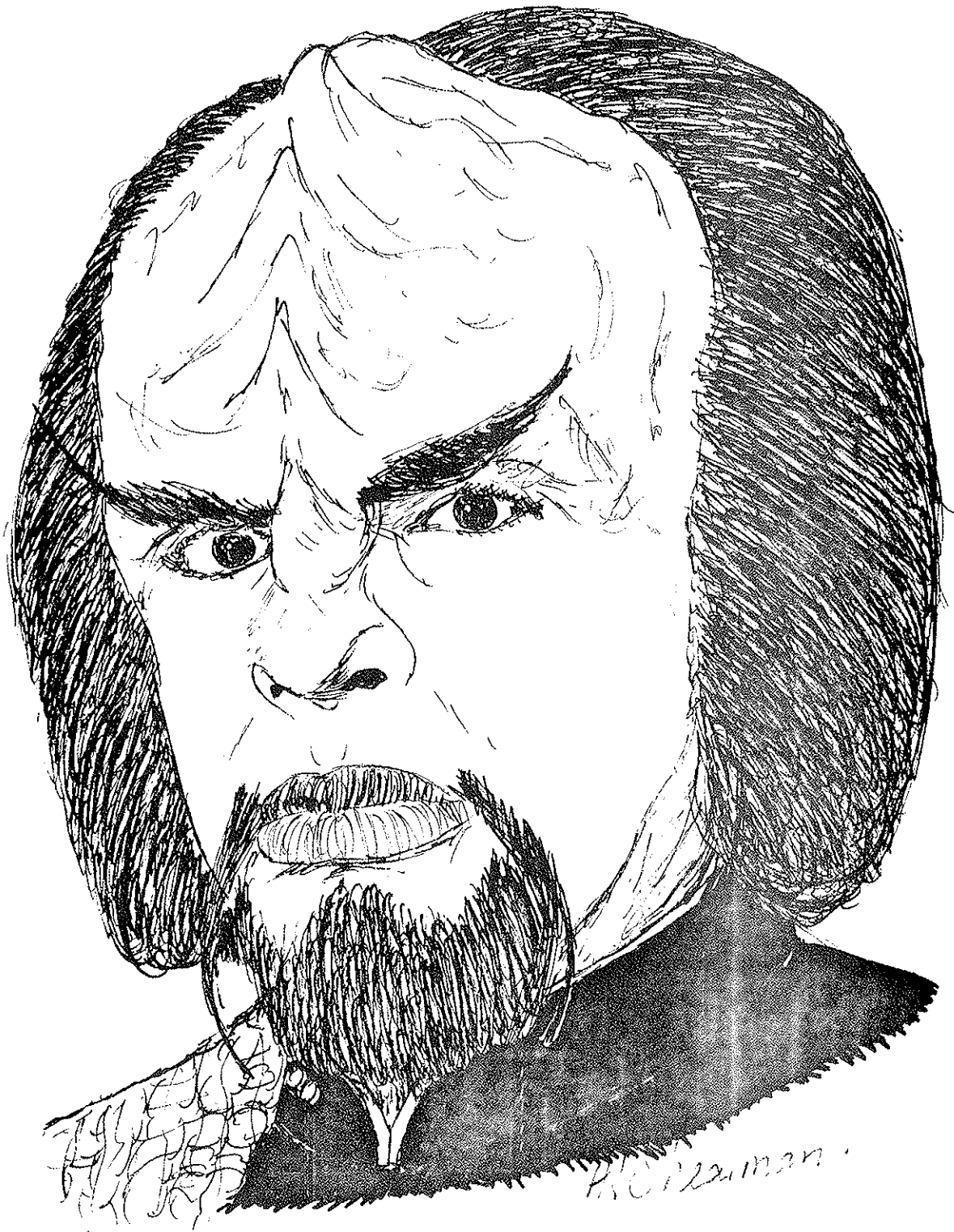
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ScoTpress - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini, Janet Quarton & Shona



PIPELINE

by

Lisa Dearnly Davison

The away team materialised on the planet. After signalling the Enterprise they moved off along the river. Thirty minutes later, the team approached the outskirts of the city.

Finally I can see the city. We must be well within the force field now. I haven't seen any of the so-called rebels. There's been no contact with the Enterprise either. The field must still be in place or the Captain would've told us to return. He won't give in to their demands, though. We should be nearing the tunnel outlet over the river soon. Riker will probably go with Data. I feel sorry for them. I wouldn't want to go down those dark tunnels. Data has to, though. He's got no choice as he's the only one who'll be able to break the access codes on the generator and shut it down. I'll probably be assigned to go with Worf. We'll have to find the Federation delegates before the time span elapses. Not that it will be any easier than finding the generator. Data managed to locate where they were before the field went up. God knows if they're still there. ...That looks like the outlet down there on the bend. It looks tiny! Data will be lucky if he can get in there.

"Okay, there's the outlet. Tasha, you go with Data. Worf, you'll come with me."

"Data, sir?"

"Do you have a problem with that, Lt. Yar?"

"No, Commander."

"Good. You have six hours twenty-five minutes to knock out that field generator. When you've done it, you should be able to contact the ship. Beam up straight away, we'll worry about the delegates."

"When will we know you're in place, sir?"

"We should be able to keep in contact, Tasha, since we're inside the force field."

"Oh."

"The individual city force field only scrambles low power-high complexity electromagnetic and tachyonic energy which includes transmissions and transportations through the field, not either side."

"I didn't ask you, Data!"

Uh oh. Now I've put my foot in it. That little outburst will surely get everyone's attention. Riker will probably report it to Deanna when we get back. There's gonna be a lot of questions which I don't want to answer. Damn. How could I be so careless? I've

never allowed my feelings to get in the way of my job before, why now? I shouldn't have questioned Riker's assignment. Or snapped at Data. Too late now.

"Tasha?"

"What? Oh, sorry. Yes, Commander?"

"What's the best way into the Space Trade Centre?"

"Umm..."

"You did study those maps, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir! There are three options. The main front doors which will be heavily guarded, the back entrance which will be equally guarded or through the underground tunnels which run underneath the Trade Centre."

"Where's that? No, wait, I've got a hard copy of the map here somewhere. Ah yes, here it is. Show me."

"Here, sir. If you go down that hole there - it will have a metal cover over it - follow the tunnel to *here*, then turn left and go up at this point. You should reach a metal grate which leads up into this room *here*. That will put you about two floors below where the delegates were last seen."

"Good, we'll take that route."

"Sir, I must protest. It is against a Klingon's honour to sneak in!"

"Your protest is noted, Lieutenant, but you are a Starfleet officer, which means we have to get those delegates out with the least possible risk to them and to ourselves. Data, contact me every 30 minutes. We now have six hours, 12 minutes left. Everyone knows what they have to do? Let's go."

Riker and Worf continued along the river towards the city. Data and Yar started their climb down the embankment.

Data does this so easily. It's pretty slippery down here. I don't know how Data keeps his balance so well. If I'm not careful I'll end up in that river. Now I can see why Riker sent me. The outlet is tiny. It would have taken Riker ages to work his way through that. Worf wouldn't have stood a chance. Data's gonna find it hard enough as it is. Data can go first. He's got the torch. ...How on earth did he get through this? It's tight, even for me! It's widening out a bit. Ah, we're through.

"Give me the torch, Data."

"We should be able to walk upright for most of the journey."

"Most?"

"As we approach the pipes leading to the building housing the generator, the pipes become narrow once again."

Yuck. There is something wet inside my boots. Ugh, this is definitely not the best away mission I've been on. And definitely not the best company, either. I suppose it had to happen

eventually. After all, I've been trying to avoid him for the past three weeks. I wonder if he's noticed? I wonder if he even remembers, or if my command wiped his memory banks? I won't forget that look he gave me when I told him it didn't happen. He looked so confused. Damn, there I go again. I must concentrate on the mission. The slightest slip up could spell disaster and we have to get the delegates out of here before the government carry out their threat. It's so dark. And damp. The torch barely gives us enough light to see by in here. And it echoes. This place gives me the creeps. I'm glad we won't be coming back this way. I dread to think what these tunnels were used for.

"These tunnels look like old 20th Century storm drains."

"Old what drains?"

"When I accessed my files on early 20th Century Earth City Architecture, there were many pictures that showed drainage systems, very similar to the design of this one. Many were used to carry excess water away during heavy rainfall."

"Is that all?"

"No. There were many other types of drainage systems which carried..."

"Don't tell me. I don't want to know."

"But it is very interesting. They were also used for..."

"I said I didn't want to know!"

She is angry with me. I wonder if I am in error. She was not pleased that Commander Riker assigned her this task. I wonder if that is my error also. It is as if she is trying to avoid me. Why would she do that? No, it is simply that our duties have been varied. Tasha would not try to avoid me. She has no reason to. Has she? I do not recall Doctor Crusher informing us of any side effects of that antidote for that strange intoxication which infected the ship 3 weeks ago, and yet her behaviour is somehow changed. I should inform the Doctor or the Counselor of this strange behaviour. However, that problem must wait. The water seems to be rising although the tunnel has started to descend. It is nearly time for me to contact Commander Riker. I have noticed some strange markings on the walls at various intervals. I will mention it to Commander Riker in my report. It would be most useful to stop and examine one of these markings.

"Tasha?"

"What now, Data?"

"We have passed a number of markings on the walls. I would like to stop and examine the next one before I make my next report to Commander Riker."

"Okay, but you better make it quick. We haven't got long."

"We have five hours 15 minutes and 33 seconds left. Here are some of those markings."

"I've seen those markings before. They mark the entrance or exit to the tunnels."

"I do not see any doors."

"They are not doors, Data. Look above you."

"Metal covers! How did you know what the markings represented?"

"When I was younger I saw many of these."

"When you were at the colony?"

"Yes. You need to contact Commander Riker now."

"Of course. Lieutenant Commander Data to Commander Riker."

"Riker here. Go ahead, Data."

Oh yes, I remember those markings. Only the drains weren't covered. That was how the rape gangs would trap you. They would drop down in front and behind. You'd have nowhere to run, nowhere to go, that's why I tried to stay above ground. In the ruins. It was colder but harder to corner you there. We must be about half way by now. We're wasting so much time just walking around the city, but Data said there was no other way of getting in. Data. He's probably so confused. I keep snapping at him. He probably thinks it's all his fault. Why is everything always so complicated? ...There I go again. I must keep alert. I must keep my mind on the mission. We have to reach that generator. We'll be able to beam the delegates out of danger once it's shut down. I wonder why the people have suddenly turned against the government? The talks were going so well. Not that the Federation will agree to arm them. The Federation won't agree to blackmail. The government probably just wants the technology anyway. All this 'rebel' talk is just an excuse. I wouldn't be surprised if it was an argument about weapons that got us into this mess. I wonder how far we've got?

"We are 3.02 miles away from the generator installation."

"How long until we reach it?"

"If we continue at this pace, without obstruction, we will reach the installation in 49 minutes 33.45 seconds."

"That's not long."

"We then have to crawl along 96.8 meters of narrow piping."

"Please tell me you are joking."

"I am not joking. However if you wish me to tell a joke, I have several thousand in my memory banks. Such as...."

"Not now, Data. And don't give me that look either. Now is neither the time nor the place."

I have upset her again. I should not take what she says too literally. I must learn to tell the difference. She did not like me inquiring about her past. Is there nothing I can do or say that will not upset her? I wish she would talk to me. There is very little to do down here until we reach the installation. Maybe that is why she is behaving so strangely. There is nothing for her to do here. There has been much to do since we monitored the collapse of that red supergiant, followed so closely with that serious plague

outbreak on Styris IV. At least I can process some of the data we gathered. There was so much to learn from that supergiant. And there was also that strange effect the shift of gravity had on water molecules, causing everyone aboard the ship to act as if they were intoxicated. That was a strange occurrence. My systems have never failed like that before. I have never been intoxicated. I cannot become intoxicated, and yet I too was affected. The Captain was not happy that I could no longer perform my duties. However I could... No, that never happened. Or that was what I was told. I wonder if that is why Tasha is acting this way? Perhaps she has been avoiding me. She is probably what Humans call embarrassed. That is something else I cannot begin to comprehend. I wish I knew what was wrong. Perhaps then I could somehow make amends for the problems I have caused.

"Data. It's about time to make another report."

"You are correct. Lieutenant Commander Data to Commander Riker."

"Yes, Data, what is it?"

"Sir, there have been no occurrences down here. We are proceeding as planned. We should reach the outside of the installation in 41.28 minutes."

"Good. We are approaching the back alley where the metal cover that Yar pointed out is. Do not make further contact until you are in position. Riker out."

"Sounds like they're in the thick of it."

"Inquiry. 'Thick of it'?"

"It means they're in the middle of the action, where everything is going on. Unlike here."

"You are not pleased with the assignment?"

"No. There's nothing to do here. I should be up there. It's what I'm trained for, not skulking around in dark, damp tunnels."

"You are angry with me also."

"No, not you, Data. Myself."

"I do not understand."

"At the colony where I grew up, I often had to live in tunnels similar to these. One wrong turn could mean death at the bottom of one of the deep shafts."

"I am sorry."

"Don't worry. I need to get over my fear anyway."

"What were those tunnels like?"

"Dark. Very dark."

"Oh."

We seem to be walking miles. These tunnels are endless. I

hope we don't miss our turning. This torch is hopeless. It just seems to be getting darker. No. The torch hasn't changed. It's just the light playing tricks on me. At least the water level is dropping. We must be going uphill. I wonder if that means we're leaving the city? ...It's getting colder. Much colder. I wonder if Data can feel the cold? Or the damp? Brrr. I wish I'd brought one of those field jackets. Mind you, I'd never have been able to squeeze through that pipe wearing one of them. Data's quiet. He's either thinking about 20th Century architecture or digesting the information I've just given him. He'll probably report that to Deanna, too. It's just a childish fear. That they're watching, waiting. Damn. You really are going to scare yourself if you carry on like this. Must think about the mission. What do I have to do? Firstly, we have to get to the generator room without being caught, where I have to take out the door lock once we're inside, making sure no one can get in. Secondly, monitor personnel shifting around the installation. See what they're up to and make sure no one comes through the door. Thirdly...

"We are almost there."

"Sorry. What did you say, Data?"

"We are approaching the tunnel which will take us to the installation."

"When will we reach that narrow pipe?"

"Roughly 11 minutes, 43.45 seconds."

"That's a rough estimation?"

"I..."

"Never mind, Data."

I'm doing it again! Why do I keep snapping at him? If he wasn't suspicious about my behaviour before, he will be now.

"Data. Have you noticed the drop in temperature?"

"Yes. We have been moving towards the hills on the edge of the city, where the generator installation is located. Since we entered this area, not only has the temperature dropped, but the pathway has risen and the rock formation from which the tunnel is formed has also changed. The pipe we will be taking leads through part of the cooling system of the installation. When we reach the ventilation shafts, we will find the generator easy to locate."

"Ventilation shafts?"

"Yes. Some of them are up to 20 feet deep. Tasha? Are you feeling ill?"

"It's nothing. Just the cold air."

Ventilation shafts! If I get out of this alive, I'm going to kill Commander Riker. This is getting ridiculous. First these tunnels. Then those markings. And now ventilation shafts. It couldn't get much worse.

"Tasha. We are going to have to hurry now."

"Why? I thought we were doing fine at this pace."

"In 14.45 minutes, the installation flushes out its cooling system, replenishing it with water from the river which flows through the hills."

"So?"

"When they do, they will flush the hot water down the pipe and through these tunnels."

"So why don't we find a nice dry ledge and wait it out?"

"When 1,023 gallons are emptied down the pipe, nowhere will be left dry, and you would not survive the heat. The water will reach approximately 95 degrees centigrade."

"Ah. How much longer before we reach the pipe?"

"2.06 minutes."

And I thought it couldn't get any worse! Whose big idea was this anyway? It's all right for him. He's insulated against excessive heat. I'm gonna fry. Or drown.

Yar and Data reached the pipe. Data stepped forward to enter the pipe first, but Tasha pushed him aside.

"I'll go first."

"But you do not know the correct shaft to take."

"You can tell me when we get there. How long have we got to make it to the shaft?"

"11.31 minutes."

"Let's get going, then."

I do not understand why Tasha wishes to go first. If we do not reach the shaft in time, I might have been able to block the water. This pipe is not as narrow as the first one. Tasha has slowed. We must continue at a steady pace or we will not make it to the ventilation shaft. I will have to tell her that we need to move more quickly. That is better. At this rate we will make it with 1 minute 21.6 seconds to spare. The temperature of the pipe is rising. They must be getting ready to flush the system through. I hope I calculated the time correctly. I would survive, but Tasha would not. We have 6 minutes and 23 seconds left. The pipe has gone dark. Has Tasha put out her torch?

"Damn, the battery has gone. I'm sure they were fully charged."

"Tasha. It is important to keep moving quickly. We have little time left."

He's right. I'm going to have to feel my way along - in the dark. It's so dark! What if we miss the shaft? The air is getting stuffy. What if we fall down it? It feels like the walls are closing in. What if we don't have enough time? ...I've got to stop thinking like this and keep moving. We have to reach that generator or the diplomats are as good as dead... and probably Riker and Worf,

too. The government won't take kindly to 'spies'. ...Data's so close to me. If I didn't know better I'd say he was nervous. Deanna once said he was capable of feelings - just like the rest of us. He can't be too worried, though. He'll be okay. It's getting uncomfortably warm in here. At this rate I'll suffocate before the water hits. I've got to stop thinking like this! ...I'm slowing up again. Letting my mind wander too much. I must keep up the pace. We can't have long left.

"We are nearing the shaft, Tasha."

"Okay. Roughly how far?"

"About 9.63 meters in front of you, on your left."

"How much time have we got?"

"3.46 minutes."

"We should just be able to make it."

"5.78 meters to go."

"Data! Just tell me when we get there. I don't need a distance check every 2 seconds."

"I am sorry."

"No, it's my fault. I'm sorry, Data. The heat in here is making me edgy."

"The temperature is rising steadily. They are getting ready to flush the system. The shaft is just in front of you."

"Where? I can't see it."

"Go forward 1.46 feet and it is directly on your left."

"Here? No, wait, I've got it. How much time have we got?"

"1 minute 56 seconds."

"Okay, what now?"

"We should be at the base of the shaft. Go through the opening and there should be a ladder in front of you."

"Are you sure?"

"I... "

"Never mind, we don't have a choice. Here goes. Good grief, it's narrow! Yes! Here it is."

"Good. Climb up to the next opening. I will follow you."

"Okay, I'm climbing now. I still can't see anything. How much time have we got, Data? Data?"

"I am having slight difficulty getting through the opening. No! Do not come down."

"Data! Come on. You've got to get through. You won't last 5

seconds."

"Actually, when the water reaches me in the pipe, I will last 4 minutes 35 seconds. You will be safe up there."

"Dammit, Data! Come on! Don't leave me here. I don't know what to do. I can hear the water coming. Data! I can't see you! Where are you? Data!"

Water started to cascade down the pipe. The steam rising was scalding but Tasha stayed where she was.

"Data. Reach out. Grab my hand."

"Leave me here."

"No! Grab my hand. Now! Okay, I've got you. I can feel you coming free. Almost there. Got ya! Come on. Climb. Damn, I can't see a thing."

"Tasha, I am free! Start climbing, I am right behind you. Through that opening on your right. No, over there. That is it."

"Data, are you all right?"

"Yes, Tasha. But you are not."

"Me? I'm fine. You were the one in boiling water."

"You have scalds on your face and hands from the steam."

"I can feel them. They're not too bad. Nothing Dr. Crusher won't be able to sort out when we get back. What about you?"

"Most of my sensor pads have shorted with the heat. But they can easily be fixed when we return to the ship. Why did you stay?"

"I couldn't leave you. You are a member of the crew and my duty is to protect your life."

"But I am an android."

"And you are also a very close friend. Come on. We must reach that generator. We can't have much time left."

"We have 3 hours 43.56 minutes left before the government kills the hostages. If we follow this shaft, we will reach the room housing the generator in 18.36 minutes. We must go very carefully now. Many of these ventilation shafts run parallel to rooms and we do not want to be discovered having got this far."

"You can say that again!"

"We have 3 hours 43....."

"It's just a figure of speech, Data! Come on. Which way do we go."

"This way."

I couldn't just leave him to die. He would've been in so much pain. Especially if what Deanna says is true. And I believe her. I know he has feelings. It must have hurt him so much when I said

it didn't happen. I saw the confusion in his eyes. Why did I say it? That look he gave me. I wish I could take those words back. Start again. I'll tell him when we get back. I'll try to get to know him better. I'll... What was that?

"Data? Did you hear something then?"

"It was voices. We must be nearing the generator room."

"How much longer?"

"Approximately 4.03 minutes."

"When do we have to call Commander Riker?"

"When we are ready to shut down the generator."

"We must be pretty close now."

"Yes. There is approximately 10.6 metres to go."

"Have you any idea how many guards there are posted in the room?"

"There are four guards in the room and two outside in the corridor."

"That's going to be tricky."

"We are nearing the grating. Let me go first. I will be able to remove two of the guards if you can take the other two and secure the door."

"Okay. Data?"

"Yes, Tasha?"

"Be careful."

Data reached for the grate. It gave way with one push. He jumped through, Tasha following behind. However, one of the guards managed to raise the alarm before Tasha could stop him.

"Data! I'm going for the door. Cover me."

"No, Tasha! Stop!"

"I've almost got it. Ahh! I'm hit!"

I've got to get that door shut. God it hurts! Almost there. Come on, shut, damn you! Nearly! That's it. Got to seal it. Can't quite reach the lock.

"Data. Blast the lock."

"The door is sealed, Tasha. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine! Shut down that generator. I'll call Commander Riker."

"Are you sure you are all right?"

"It's just a flesh wound, Data. Get to work on that generator

before they get through that door."

"They will not have enough time. Accessing now,"

"Lieutenant Yar to Commander Riker. Come in, Commander."

"Riker here. Are you all right, Tasha? You sound - "

"I'll be fine. Data has started to access the generator control computer now. If you don't hear from the Enterprise within the next two minutes, we've failed."

"We're with the diplomats now. Good luck you two, Riker out."

"How are you doing, Data?"

"The computer has started the countdown. I must concentrate on this."

"Sorry, Data."

59, 58, 57, 56, 55, 54....

"Three digits to go."

40, 39, 38, 37, 36....

"Two."

"Come on Data. You can do it."

29, 28, 27, 26, 25, 24, 23....

"One more."

19, 18, 17, 16, 15, 14, 13, 12, 11, 10, 9, 8, 7, 6....

"Override access code complete."

"Data, you did it!"

"The computer has initiated the shut down sequence. We have two minutes 33.45 seconds before the soldiers gain access to this room, and you need medical attention. We should exit immediately."

"Better make it fast, Data, they're almost through it now."

"Lieutenant Commander Data to Enterprise. Two to beam up."

"We have your coordinates, Lieutenant Commander Data. Prepare to be beamed aboard."

The two re-energised on the Enterprise, just as Tasha passed out.

"Dr. Crusher to transporter room 6 immediately."

"I'm on my way, Data."

I hope Tasha is all right. She has lost a lot of blood. It seems to be more than a flesh wound. Where is Dr. Crusher? There is so much blood. If I could only stop the bleeding. She saved my

life. I...

"Data! What happened?"

"She received a wound from one of the soldiers guarding the generator, Captain. Dr. Crusher is on her way."

"I want a full report when you're ready. Commander Riker and Lieutenant Worf are already aboard with the diplomats."

"Yes, sir."

The transporter rooms door opened to admit Dr. Crusher with an emergency medic team.

"Data, what happened?"

"She passed out from loss of blood, Doctor."

"You two, get her up to medical immediately. You too, Data, you look like you need some work too. Lt. La Forge to sickbay immediately."

"Will she be all right?"

"Of course, Data. The burns are only minor and it's only a small wound despite the blood."

I feel so dizzy. My leg hurts. Did we get out? Where are we? My head hurts. Why is it so noisy? Ahh!

"She's coming round, Doctor."

"Thank you, Ensign Tomas. Tasha? How do you feel?"

"My leg hurts a lot and I feel a bit dizzy. Apart from that, fine. How's Data?"

"He'll be all right. I've sent for Geordi. He'll meet us in sickbay, which is where I'm taking you now."

"Did Riker and Worf make it back?"

"Yes, they came in about a minute before you with the eight diplomats. They all seemed unhurt. I never got a chance to see them since Captain Picard ordered them all to the observation lounge. You lie still, we're almost there."

I feel so light headed. Must be from the blood loss. I nearly lost it back there. I should have known better. It hurts. We had to get that door closed. There was no other way. I wish Beverly'd give me something for the pain. We would never have got that generator shut down with the door wide open. The place would have been crawling with soldiers in seconds. Damn, it hurts so much. It was a stupid move. Data's face when I went for the door. I've got to say something to him. If he hadn't got that door sealed, we would've both been dead. I wonder how he's doing?

"Ouch! That stings!"

"What do you expect with those burns? We've got to get them cleaned up. It looks like you two were crawling through a sewer."

"Don't remind me. Ahh! Watch it, that hurts! How's Data doing?"

"Geordi's just finished fixing his sensor pads. Here, this should help for a while."

"What is it?"

"A mild sedative. It'll help you rest and give me some peace while I clean up that wound. It'll work in a couple of minutes. Don't go anywhere."

"Ha. Ha. I'll just go for a quick sprint down the corridor and back."

"I know you stubborn types. You always think you know better than the Doctor."

"Well, at the moment, you get no arguments from me."

"I'll be back in a couple of minutes when that sedative has taken effect."

The Doctor left the sickbay and entered her office to make a summary report to the Captain.

"Data?"

"Yes, Tasha?"

"I just wanted to say...."

What? That it happened? That you think you love him? That he's a great friend? That you want to get to know him a little better? What?

"....I just wanted to say thanks."

"It is I who should thank you, it was you who saved my life, Tasha. Tasha?"

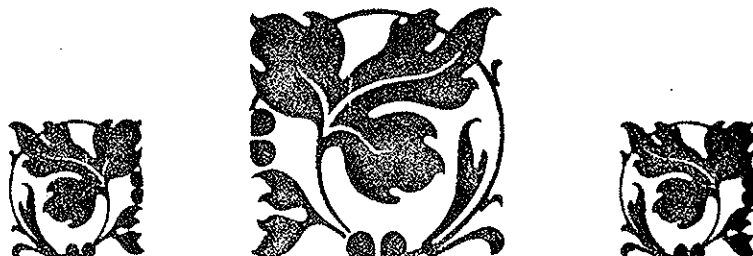
"She's asleep. If you want to say any more you'll have to wait until she wakes."

"I must make my report now. Please inform me when she wakes, Doctor."

"Don't worry, Data. I will."

"Captain Picard to Lieutenant Commander Data. Please come to the observation lounge immediately."

"Lieutenant Commander Data here. I am on my way, sir."



VISIONS

Now is the marriage
Of Wyatt and Troi.
A wondrous occasion
But very little joy.

The Captain isn't happy,
Will Riker is upset.
Deanna seems quite shaken -
Still no answers do we get.

A strange vessel comes to Haven;
It brings danger now it seems.
There must be a solution
Yet we can't go to extremes.

While opening communications
We receive a great surprise.
The woman in Wyatt's dreams
Is right before our eyes.

Wyatt seeks out Lwaxana,
For her advice he asks.
She says it's very simple boy,
His feelings confirmed at last.

Deanna's most unsure
Of what she reads from Wyatt.
Should she try to stop him?
He gives her no time to try it.

Wrenn welcomes Wyatt,
He isn't much surprised.
Arianna always knew
Her dream'd materialise.

Mrs. Millar's quite distraught,
Mr. Millar has more tact.
Deanna has to tell them
There's no beaming Wyatt back.

The Tarellians are leaving Haven,
The families are on their way.
The Counselor's still present
And with us she will stay.

Margaret Connor

INVISIBLE FURY

by

Margaret Conner

The Enterprise was en route to Sigma Ceti 125 at warp four when an unknown external force pulled her out of warp. Shuddering like a bucking bronco from the rodeos of old Earth in days long gone by, she shimmered into impulse power. The klaxons accompanying the Red Alert pierced every corner of the ship as the crew rushed to their stations and civilians to their quarters.

As Counselor Deanna Troi hurried along the corridor toward the turbolift she caught sight of Commander William Riker ahead of her striding purposefully in the same direction. Both were technically off duty but were automatically summoned to the bridge when the alert sounded.

Troi gasped softly in surprise as a presence brushed briefly past her mind. The contact lasted only seconds and she was sure it was not anyone aboard the Enterprise. Her pondering was abruptly interrupted as she burst into a run on seeing Riker halt suddenly and then crumple to the floor gasping.

"Bill, what's wrong?" she asked kneeling beside him. "What happened?"

"Something hit me," Riker replied between gritted teeth. "Think... ribs are broken."

Falteringly and cautiously Troi helped him to his feet. "I think we had better get you to sickbay." She received no arguments as they entered the awaiting turbolift.

On the bridge Captain Jean-Luc Picard had ordered a complete scan of the surrounding area. It took a tremendous amount of energy to break a ship out of warp, yet all that seemed visible on the screen was the normal star-filled vista.

"Nothing on sensor scans," Worf rumbled from the rear of the bridge.

"Confirmed, sir," Tasha Yar affirmed from her station directly behind the Captain's chair.

"A Galaxy class starship does not drop from warp four to impulse power in less than two seconds without something causing it!" Picard snapped angrily at the bridge in general. "I want that cause found. Do I make myself clear?"

A round of hasty, "Aye, sirs," greeted his statement and personnel bent to their tasks.

"And where in hell are my First Officer and Counselor?" he

muttered to himself. "Commander Riker, Counselor Troi to the bridge on the double." This was definitely not going to be a good day.

Instead of the expected acknowledgement, Doctor Crusher's voice came over the bridge communicator. "Sickbay to bridge."

"Picard here," the Captain answered, still somewhat testily.

"Captain, Commander Riker and Counselor Troi are here with me. I shall be detaining them and would ask you to join us as soon as possible."

Picard was daunted and the anger in his voice changed to concern. "Are they injured, Doctor?"

"The Commander has sustained a few minor injuries, however..." She hesitated. "I would rather continue this discussion in person."

"Very well, Doctor. Picard out."

Seeing that his presence was not required on the bridge he left the conn to Lieutenant Commander Data and headed toward sickbay.

Picard found Dr. Beverly Crusher and Counselor Troi in the Doctor's office, apparently arguing.

"Ladies," he said, startling them as he entered. "Am I to assume that your patient is recovering, Doctor, and that is why you have time to engage in this argument?"

Both women blushed, but as usual Crusher had an answer for him.

"The Commander will join us shortly, and we were not arguing, we were discussing the circumstances surrounding his injuries."

"Circumstances?" Picard was puzzled. "I assumed Riker was injured when the ship was pulled out of warp."

Crusher and Troi traded glances before Troi answered. "I was on my way to the bridge as ordered. Bill - I mean Commander Riker was just ahead of me. Something brushed past my mind and as I recovered I saw the Commander fall. He said something hit him."

Crusher was obviously annoyed. "Surely something solid enough to give the Commander two cracked ribs and considerable bruising would have registered as an intruder?"

Until half an hour ago Picard would have readily agreed with her, but the force that had stopped the ship still hadn't been identified.

"Doctor, have the Commander join us in the Observation Lounge. Your presence is also required, as is yours, Counselor." He turned and left the office, giving neither of the officers any time to reply.

Back on the bridge Picard was greeted with worried and agitated faces. Even Data seemed more perturbed than intrigued.

"Captain," Lt. Yar greeted him. "We have run every test in the manual plus a few of our own and still we've come up with nothing."

There is nothing out there." Yar was no different from the rest of the bridge crew and the frustration was evident in her every move as well as being written on her face.

Riker's appearance in the Observation Lounge did not improve matters either.

"Nice to see you have recovered, Number One. Care to speculate on what happened to you?" the Captain inquired.

Riker seemed confused and unsure. This was a side of him that few people ever saw, and it was not one Picard was familiar with.

"I'm not sure, sir," he began hesitantly. "I was headed toward the turbolift when..." He paused again. Shrugging his shoulders, and wincing at the pain it created in his still tender ribs, he continued, "Well, as if someone of Worf's strength hit me."

Picard glanced at Troi. "Counselor, you said you felt a presence. Could it have been that which attacked Riker?"

"The presence I sensed was confused and felt slightly malevolent," Troi answered, picking her words carefully as she recalled the emotions she had experienced. "But whether it could actually physically attack someone I don't know."

This was getting them nowhere. Regardless of what they did they seemed to end up back at square one. A thought struck Picard, one he realised he should have considered earlier.

"Is there a chance of Commander Riker's attack and the ship being pulled out of warp being connected?"

It was a question no one could answer properly.

"Until we know more about it, there's no way to prove if they are or not," Riker informed him.

"All right, let's try warp speed again." Picard headed to the door, concluding the meeting. "And Counselor," he said turning toward Troi, "I expect you to inform me the moment you sense anything, malevolent or otherwise." Troi merely nodded her head in acknowledgement as she and Riker joined Picard on the bridge and Crusher returned to sickbay.

Final checks on the engines and sensors provided no new information so they attempted warp speed again. They had no sooner attained warp one than they were dragged unceremoniously back into impulse again.

Troi gasped, "Captain, it's here again."

Riker leapt to his feet as if sensing something behind him.

"Commander!" Geordi shouted jumping to his feet.

His warning spun Riker round to face him. Suddenly Riker was jerked off his feet and slammed into the wall. At first they all stood looking at him in amazement. It was obvious he was being attacked but there was nothing visible.

"Mr. La Forge, tell me what you see!" Picard ordered.

"Sir, they're registering on the ultra-violet wave lengths - "

"They?"

"Yes, sir, they seem connected but I can't tell how."

Yar and Worf, now assured that there was indeed an intruder, tried to interpose themselves between the unseen assailant and Commander Riker, offering him some assistance, but the intruder merely passed straight through without even touching them and continued its attack. Geordi tried to snatch Riker out of the alien's path. As soon as he touched the Commander he screamed and was thrown back, blue electrical sparks gyrating around his visor. For a moment he could see nothing. He hit the floor with an alarming thud, but seemed to recover almost immediately. Data also grabbed at the Commander. Upon contact sparks and flashes streaked up and down his arm and hand. With the limb inoperative he was forced to retreat.

"Stay back!" yelled Riker, struggling for breath. "It's only interested in me."

Picard had been watching carefully. "Everyone stay where they are," he ordered. "The alien's activity seems to increase with each attempted rescue."

As suddenly as the attack had begun it finished. Staring at Riker as the alien released him from its grip, Picard realised Riker was no longer breathing.

"Sickbay, emergency on the bridge!" he shouted as he launched himself at his stricken officer.

While Crusher and her med team rushed Riker to sickbay, Picard and the rest of the bridge crew discussed the situation.

"Are you sure there were two of them, Geordi? I only sensed one entity," Troi quizzed La Forge.

"It looked like two entities that were joined in some manner, but I couldn't get a close enough look to figure it out." La Forge was so sure of his visor display that no one chose to doubt him.

Picard stared at each of them in turn, trying to assess the situation. "I think this second incident more or less proves that it is the same entity attacking the Commander and preventing us from leaving this area."

"But why?" Yar asked the obvious question. "Why stop a starship and attack only one person?"

It was something they had all asked themselves but no one had any answers.

"Lt. Worf, have the ship's sensors re-tuned to the wavelengths Mr. La Forge was able to see the intruder on." Worf nodded and immediately bowed to the task. "Lt. Yar," the Captain continued, turning to his Chief of Security, "I want you to arrange teams and if necessary search this ship from stem to stern. The intruders can't just have disappeared. Find them." He paused. "Mr. Data, you have the conn. Counselor." Indicating that she should follow

him he left the bridge, heading for sickbay.

Sickbay itself was very active with major and minor injuries. Many people had been caught off guard by the ship's abrupt changes in speed and it had taken a few seconds for the internal gravity to catch up, though thankfully not long enough to turn anyone into strawberry jam.

When they first entered there was no sign of Dr. Crusher. A nurse informed them that the Doctor would be joining them in her office shortly.

It was a very puzzled and perplexed Beverly Crusher who entered her office half an hour later. "I've never seen anything like it," she almost muttered to herself.

"Like what, Doctor?" Picard demanded, curious at her tone.

"Riker's uniform is completely intact. There is not so much as a bruise or an abrasion on his skin and yet I've had to regenerate almost every major organ and nerve ending he's got."

There was a prolonged silence, as each of the three officers exchanged glances of disbelief.

"What is Riker's condition now?" Picard asked, breaking the tense oppression that had descended.

"He seems stable enough. I'm leaving him in the intensive care unit as a precaution."

Troi did not seem reassured by what the Doctor was telling them. Even though Commander Riker was in another room she could still sense his distinct presence. "Beverly," she began, hesitating as if she already knew the answer she would receive and didn't like it, "what are his chances of surviving another attack?"

The Doctor sighed heavily. "Another attack as severe as the one he sustained on the bridge would almost certainly kill him."

"Captain, we must discover more about these aliens," Troi began.

"I am well aware of that, Counselor!" Picard snapped angrily.

"I am sorry sir, but you don't understand," Troi began again. "I sense a greatly malevolent determination and the Commander is losing his will to live already."

Picard irritatedly slapped his communicator. "Mr. Data, have Lts. Worf and Yar turned up anything?"

"Negative," came Data's answer in his usual clear-cut tone. "However, Mr. La Forge has a suggestion which may help us temporarily."

Troi and Crusher exchanged hopeful glances as Picard ordered La Forge to meet him in his ready room to discuss his proposal and its feasibility.

"Well, Mr. La Forge?" Picard asked as they walked into the room.

"I would like to set up a modified sensor unit in Commander Riker's room to monitor the surrounding area." He paused before adding, "If the entities are in the area we should be able to get a more detailed analysis of their coupling and devise a way to break it."

This was not really what Picard had hoped for. Geordi's idea depended on another attack - one Dr Crusher wasn't sure if Riker could survive.

As if sensing his Captain's thoughts, Geordi answered, "I'd rather we could solve this without risking Commander Riker, but it's the only way I can come up with."

Picard stared out at the stars. Usually the sight comforted him and helped him to make decisions, but with Riker's life involved nothing was going to do that this time.

"Agreed, Lieutenant, make it so." He paused before heading toward the door. "I shall inform Dr. Crusher personally as it is her department it will affect."

"I don't like this," Crusher stated adamantly. "We're supposed to be trying to prevent another attack, not invite one."

"We don't have a choice, Beverly," Troi cautioned her. "My empathic abilities describe too limited a picture for us to stop them."

Some two hours later Data and Geordi had assembled and fitted the mobile sensor units in place in various parts of the room. All was very quiet and still in sickbay as they waited apprehensively for the entities' next attack.

When the attack came they were surprised at the limit of its strength and duration.

"I now agree with Lt. La Forge, sir," Troi suddenly stated. "There are definitely two entities; they are fighting each other."

"Fighting each other?" Picard answered sceptically.

"Yes sir, one is definitely malevolent and trying to kill the Commander, the other is determined not to let it," Troi affirmed.

The other officers were surprised at how quickly the attack finished. Instead of the entities gaining in strength and applying the final touch to kill the Commander, the attack was much weaker and not as prolonged, as if confirming what Counselor Troi had been telling them.

Geordi's visor picked up some interesting details that the others couldn't see even with the sensor unit.

"Captain, one of those entities appears to be humanoid in shape," he exclaimed as Security were checking the area for signs of

the intruders and Picard stood at the end of Riker's bed waiting for the Doctor's report.

"A humanoid shape, but not Humar?" Picard asked.

Geordi hesitated slightly, marshalling his thoughts. "The limbs and body, if you can call energy impressions a body, were comparative to a Human's in size, but the whole aura seemed to be encased in a type of lizard skin pattern."

"Hed-naar," came the weak reply from the bed. Commander Riker was conscious, but because of the beatings he had taken movement was still out of the question and talking seemed to exhaust him.

Picard approached his injured First Officer studying his perspiration damp hair and his wax pale skin; but the sparkle had begun to reassert itself in his eyes.

"Hed-naar, File 729 Naar-circ," Riker panted, the strain bringing a slight flush to his cheeks.

"Rest now Commander," Dr. Crusher said, as much for his benefit as for the Captain's. "Concentrate on healing. Leave the detective work to us." She turned smiling at the Captain.

"Conference evaluation in thirty minutes," the Captain ordered, marching from sickbay.

By the time his officers gathered in the Observation Lounge Captain Picard had been able to apprise himself of the contents of the file Riker had mentioned.

The USS Hood had been sent to conduct diplomatic negotiations between the two main life-forms on the planet Naar-circ. An away team, headed by the newly promoted First Officer, had the responsibility of escorting the Zodgrian Ambassador Prid-naar to the treaty zone for talks with the Hergmazon Ambassador. The details of their route had been leaked by a Hergmazon spy in the Zodgrian capital. The party had been ambushed and only the First Officer and Ambassador Prid-naar had been alive when the Hood beamed them aboard. Unfortunately, despite the ship's extensive medical facilities, the Ambassador died three days later. When Hed-naar, the leader of the Zodgrians, had learned of her death he had banished all Federation members from the planet. Prid-naar had been his only daughter and he had vowed revenge on the man he held responsible - the Hood's First Officer, Commander William T. Riker.

After briefing his staff on the abortive mission to Naar-circ, they all sat in stunned silence.

"But how could a humanoid change so much to become this form that is attacking Riker?" asked Dr. Crusher.

No one seemed to have an answer for her. It seemed highly improbable, but the image Lt. La Forge had seen matched Hed-naar's description.

"Captain, that might explain it," Troi began, a puzzled look on her face. "During this last attack I felt an emotional struggle. The stronger malevolent one I have been sensing all the time, but there was an undercurrent that I'm not sure I really understood."

Picard walked slowly and deliberately round the table and approached the Counselor, trying not to put any added pressure on her. "What type of undercurrent, Counselor?" he asked.

Troi's forehead creased into a frown as she tried to put the feelings her empathic abilities had allowed her to experience into the concise words she knew the Captain was waiting to hear.

"If it had been a familiar species I would have said they were feelings of guilt or sorrow," she began. "But I can't be sure; they are so different from what I've previously experienced."

"Captain," Lt. La Forge's voice sounded over the intercom. "Mr. Crusher and I believe we have found a way to separate the beings."

"Very good, Mr. La Forge, I will join you presently," Picard replied, turning toward the Counselor. "Counselor, do you think separating these two entities will make any difference?"

All eyes turned on Troi, awaiting her answer.

"I believe it will limit the power the malevolent one can use to strike against the Commander," she replied.

The Commander, she thought to herself, How formal we all are. It's Bill we're talking about. I've never heard his rank used so often before in one day by his shipmates. Are we that scared of losing him that we're trying to distance ourselves by not using his given name?

She sat up straight and studied her fellow officers, picking up their individual emotions. Picard's determination was the strongest of all. Dr. Crusher was sitting quietly in the corner. Deanna knew that to lose a crew member was her biggest fear and she would not let go of Bill easily. Worf and Data were never easy for her to read. Data had few emotions and Worf concentrated so hard on shielding his feelings from everyone, though most of all from her. From Tasha Yar she sensed a feeling of suppressed guilt and this troubled her. What had she to feel guilty about? When Picard dismissed the briefing she asked the young Lieutenant to remain.

"Tasha, what's wrong?"

Yar looked at her in confusion at first and then realised to what she was referring.

"Oh Deanna, it's nothing. Just something I'll have to learn to accept."

Now Troi was really curious. "I am talking of your feelings of guilt."

Yar laughed a quiet contained laugh. "So am I." She paused and then explained. "Every time something or someone breaches Enterprise Security I feel responsible and blame myself..."

"But this wasn't your fault!" Troi interrupted.

"I know, that's what I mean. I have to learn that there are some things that no amount of preparation can prevent. So don't worry about me, Deanna, I'll get there eventually."

Both women were visibly more relaxed as they left the Observation Lounge.

Picard stood back and watched Lt. La Forge and Acting Ensign Wesley Crusher assemble their new device in the sickbay cubicle where Commander Riker was quickly regaining strength. Picard had spent the last few hours in Engineering with the two young officers. They had explained the device to him as they constructed it but he was still unsure as to how it worked. Well, as long as it helped to solve their current problem it didn't really matter.

Troi sat beside Riker's bed just talking and keeping him company.

"I know you're sensing my fear, Imzadi," he admitted ruefully. It was hard for a man like Will Riker to admit when he was afraid.

"I would be worried if you weren't frightened after everything you've been through," she assured him.

Suddenly she gasped. "It's back."

Riker stiffened, Geordi activated his device, and Troi, Picard, the Doctor and Wesley all stood tensely observing the room.

Before the entities could begin their attack properly there was a loud hum, a flash of colours and a vibration so strong it could actually be felt by everyone in the room. There was a loud screeching noise and through the mobile sensors they were able to see one of the entities dissipate. Then everyone stood stock still as they heard a voice in their heads.

"I am Ornac of Prisa Delta 70; thank you for releasing me."

Data checked his tricorder. "Captain, it is the entity."

"How is it that you are able to contact us now?" Picard asked.

"While I was connected to the other my powers were concentrated on trying to prevent him from doing any permanent damage. I am most distressed at what I permitted to happen. Will the Human live?"

Picard nodded, answering, "Yes," as Troi approached him.

"Captain, I no longer sense any malevolence. It disappeared with the other entity." She turned toward the entity and asked, understandingly, "But how did you get caught up with it?"

Ornac seemed to shiver briefly. "I came across him while I was observing the beings on the planet you call Naar-circ. He promised to show me a race with such a varied race of emotions and ambitions that it would take me a millennium to observe and understand them. Unfortunately once we were joined his anger and need for revenge were too strong for me to control, and thus I was forced to participate in his violence, much as I abhorred it. I should have listened to my elders and never risked joining with an alien race."

Picard looked at Troi, "Elders?"

"Yes, Captain," Troi agreed, beginning to smile. "Ornac is a child."

"Mmm. It's just a pity that we cannot apprehend Hed-naar for all he has done," Picard retorted.

"Captain," Ornac assured him, "Hed-naar is not dead, his essence has merely returned to his body on Naar-circ. Now I must depart, but I promise you, sir, no instance like this shall ever happen again." And with that the entity slowly faded and then completely disappeared from sight.

"Dr. Crusher, how is Commander Riker?" Picard asked.

"Physically he seems to be improving rapidly. As for his mental state, you'd have to ask Counselor Troi," the Doctor replied, pointing toward the bed where Troi sat talking with Riker, a reassuring hand on his arm. Both were colivious of everyone else in the room.

"I take it you agree with the Doctor's prognosis, Counselor?" Picard asked, startling her.

"Oh! Er, yes sir," she said, blushing. Riker merely smiled and turned his head away from them.

For the first time in what seemed like a long time the officers had a chance to relax and a genuine reason to smile.

It was four days later when Commander Riker reappeared on the bridge to resume his duties again. Although still pale and somewhat shaky he had been declared fit, and Dr. Crusher had been only too glad to release him from her sickbay before she added to his injuries. Picard was glad to see that he seemed to be his own good natured, self assured, confident self.

"Ah! Number One, it's good to have you back on the bridge. Your presence has been greatly missed," the Captain greeted him.

"Thank you, sir. Lieutenant Commander Data has been filling me in on the resolution of the Hed-naar case," Riker responded. "I am glad that the Boston was sent to apprehend him. I don't think I could have trusted myself if I came face to face with him."

Picard nodded, adding, "I think that is a sentiment shared by quite a few of the crew."

Riker sat for a moment staring at Lt. La Forge sitting in his customary seat at the conn.

"Has it ever occurred to you, Captain, that Mr. La Forge may have missed his true calling?" he commented.

"Yes," Picard agreed. "I am considering contacting Starfleet Command in connection with a transfer to Engineering, after I have discussed it with him, of course. With Lieutenant Commander Argyle's departure we are in need of a new Chief Engineer who has a strong inventive streak."

"Such a measure would also require a promotion," Riker added, "and I don't think anyone deserves it more."

"Agreed, Number One," Picard stated. "Agreed. Mr. La Forge, set course for Magna Valeta 7, warp four."

"Course set, Captain," came the answer from the conn.

Picard nodded to Riker who simply said, "Engage."



A DEATH OF VALUE

by

Oriel Cooper

For a long moment after Lt. Yar had exited his ready room, Captain Picard sat motionless. The day had been full of shocks. First the inexplicable appearance of the Enterprise 1701-C with her badly wounded crew - those who had survived the Romulan attack. Then Guinan's astonishing statement that something was wrong, that this time-line should not be, that the twenty-year war with the Klingons should never have happened. And now, finally, Tasha's bald statement -

"I should be *dead*."

Guinan had felt it necessary that she should know this frightening information, which must have shaken the young officer to the core of her being - as it did him! How did Guinan know this? It was a very heavy burden to place on young shoulders. But he had known the unusual hostess a long time and had come to realise that she knew far more of what went on around her than others did. She must have been certain that her comments to Tasha would precipitate some sort of action on her part and it had certainly done that! Captain Picard valued his Tactical Officer highly and she would be of great help to the 1701-C when she voluntarily returned to the past of twenty-two years ago, yet his heart ached at the thought that Tasha would almost certainly die - along with the rest of that crew. He understood her wish for her death to mean something. He hoped that when his own time came - which might not be too long now - he too would die with honour doing something worthwhile. It would almost certainly be in battle; the war with the Klingon Empire was going badly for the Federation. Maybe, just maybe, the 1701-C *would* survive and save that Klingon outpost. Perhaps then there would not be a war...

The Captain returned to the bridge, the heart of the huge warship - what was it Guinan had said?

"*There should be children on this ship.*"

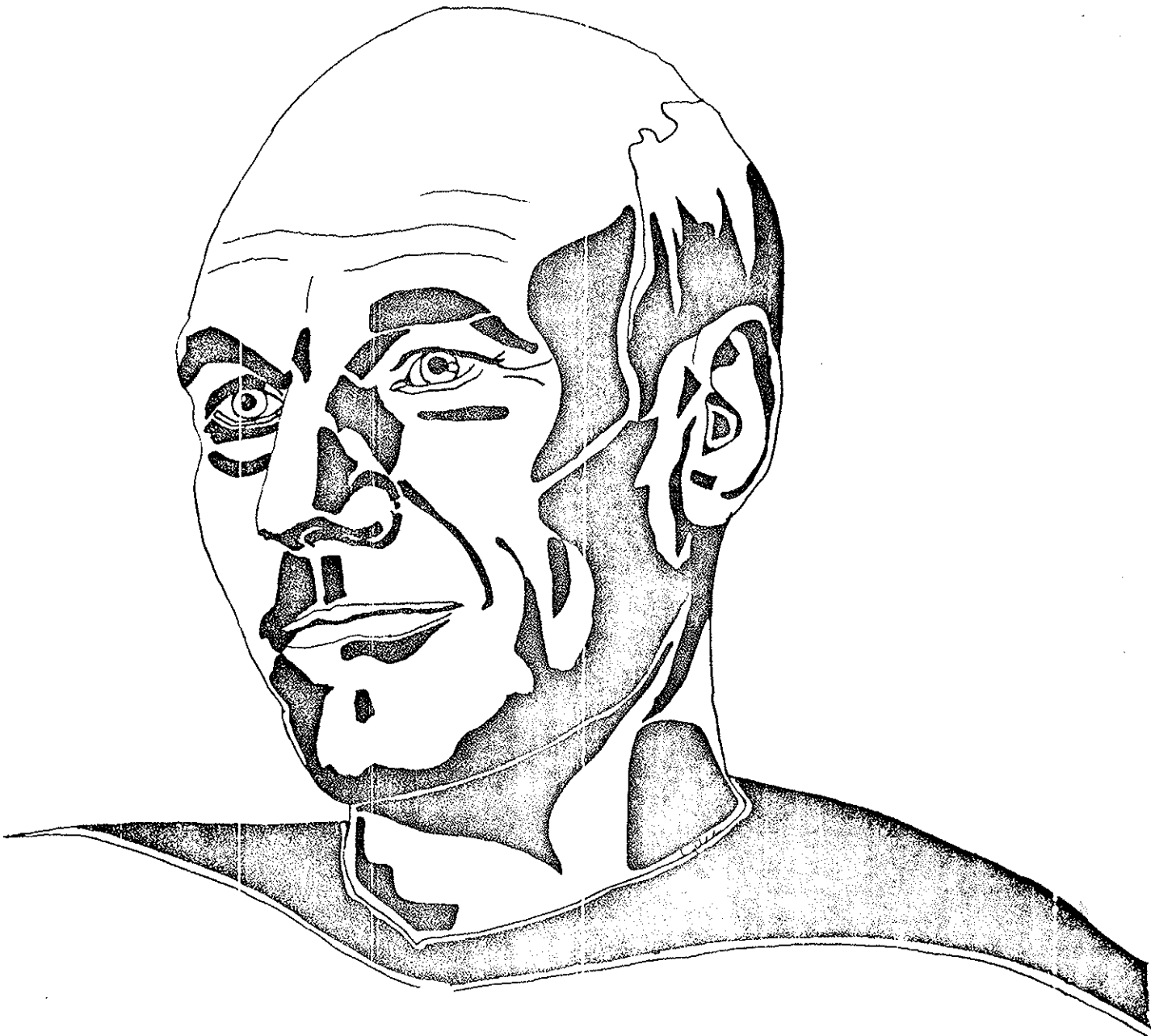
He mentally shook his head at such an outlandish idea. Six thousand marines seemed to be of far more use to him! He returned his thoughts to the matter at hand. The 1701-D must provide cover from the enemy while her predecessor returned through the rift in time and restored the correct time-line. As if on cue, three Klingon warships de-cloaked and immediately opened fire. The ship reeled under the concentration of energy before launching phaser and photon torpedoes of her own.

With agonising slowness the 1701-C moved towards that weird time rift. Her escort, outnumbered, received heavy damage, but Picard would not - could not - quit. He felt he owed it to that unknown future that would be restored and the billions of lives that would be saved. But Tasha - she had sacrificed her life in this time to help restore a future in which she would die. That was the

courage and dedication showing that Picard had always seen in her, from the moment she had arrived, straight from the Academy. Even now, in the midst of battle, part of his mind privately saluted Lt. Yar.

A sudden violent explosion behind him caused him to spin around in time to see his First Officer flung to the deck. A glance was sufficient to show him that Riker was dead. The Captain vaulted the barrier to the tactical station and systematically fired everything remaining at the Klingons as the 1701-C slowly disappeared from view. The Bridge was on fire, but Picard never faltered. Tasha was not the only one who wanted a worthwhile death.

It would not be long now...



SHER

FRIENDLY SPIRIT

by

Helen Connor

Captain's Log

"There has been an increasing uneasiness among myself and other members of the bridge crew over the past few hours. The first sign was when Counselor Troi informed me of her sensing the presence of someone standing near her on the bridge; however, on looking at the source of this essence, she saw no one. She has insisted that she feels no hostile intent - indeed, the being is emitting a sense of confusion and restrained fear. The Counselor has also stated that there seems to be something familiar about this presence, but is presently unable to discover exactly what this might be.

Since that time, I myself, Commander Riker and, even more strangely, Lieutenant Worf - who is not renowned for sensitive feelings - have all felt as though something or someone was watching us."

Picard's log was abruptly interrupted as a very agitated Lieutenant Commander La Forge entered the Ready Room.

"Captain, I've just seen Tasha!"

Picard moved quickly from his seat, concern showing in every movement.

"I know, Captain," La Forge whispered. "Tasha's dead, but I swear it was her."

Picard, who had been about to contact Dr. Pulaski in Sickbay, paused as he thought of the log entry he had just made. Could La Forge be suffering more severely from this presence he and the others had been experiencing, or could this latest incident help point the way to an explanation of what had been happening?

"Sit down, Geordi." Picard tried to relax the present situation. "I do not think you are alone in your confusion. I think it's time these past few hours were reviewed and we got some others in here to add to the ruminations." So saying he pressed his communicator.

"Counselor Troi, Commander Riker and Dr. Pulaski report to my Ready Room."

Troi and Pulaski, who had been sitting in the Doctor's office discussing the strange feelings experienced by various members of the crew and in particular Troi herself, threw each other a thoughtful glance as they headed toward the bridge.

Commander Riker on the bridge had noted La Forge's entrance to the Ready Room and was not surprised to hear the summons. Leaving Data with the conn he strode purposely to join Picard and La Forge

Once all were seated Picard looked steadily at each of the group before opening the topic utmost in all their minds.

"As you all know the past few hours have been rather strange and tense, particularly among the bridge crew. However, this now seems to be spreading to other departments of the ship. Lieutenant Commander La Forge has just informed me that he has seen Lt. Yar."

Everyone looked at the Lieutenant Commander.

"I know it sounds strange, but I did see Tasha. I checked my visor hoping there would be a mechanical fault I could blame this on but there's nothing wrong. All I can say is *I SAW TASHA!*" La Forge sat staring at his clasped hands.

"Yes," Troi breathed softly, turning to face Picard. "That's who I feel. I said I thought I knew the presence, but I had never considered Tasha as she was dead."

Riker leaned back in his chair. "Captain, if what we have been experiencing is feelings and visions of Tasha, why now?"

Picard replied, "As you say Number One, why now? It has been some time since her death."

The expressions of some of those in the room turned to sadness and others to anger as they each remembered Tasha's death.

"I believed the grief and anger experienced at the time by us all had run its proper course," Picard finished, turning towards Troi and Pulaski for confirmation.

Both nodded their agreement as Dr. Pulaski stated, "I read Dr. Crusher's report concerning that and she stated that, although it had been a very difficult time because Lt. Yar was well liked and respected by many on board and her death in that manner had been a brutal blow, both she and Deanna kept careful watch and both reported that everyone eventually overcame their grief in their own way and time. I would therefore say that this is not caused by a build up of emotions, nor do I think anyone on board is vindictive enough to try to cause these effects."

"Then there must be some outside influence working on this. But who would be insensitive enough to do it?"

"Q!" Riker snapped the name out. "It wouldn't be the first time Q has manipulated us for his own ends."

As Riker finished speaking, Data entered the room.

"Captain Picard, I must report myself unfit for duty. It must be a fault in my positronic brain," he stated.

"Why do you think that?" Picard asked.

If Data could look embarrassed he did so now. "I have just seen Lt. Yar."

"That does it!" snapped Picard, "I'll be damned if anyone or anything is going to manipulate my crew in this manner. Doctor, Counselor, I want you to update all these unsettling happenings and review all those who were most affected or close to Lt. Yar. La Forge, get back down to Engineering. Set up teams and look for any possible malfunction in the equipment, especially the Holodeck, which could be causing this. Data, Number One and I shall check out the computer and any other possibilities which may occur to anyone. I want this stopped and I want it stopped now."

The Ready Room emptied as each set off to fulfil their Captain's instructions.

As Picard and his team began searching for a way of dealing with the situation, the name 'Lt. Yar' began appearing in the various sections of the computer. As more information appeared a memory circuit within the main computer was activated and Picard found himself being informed by Riker, Pulaski, Data and Troi that there was a personal message for him which could only be heard on the link in his quarters.

Annoyed at having to give up time in finding the cause for the present unease on his ship, but intrigued as to what the message could be and who had placed it there, Picard headed for his cabin.

Once inside he immediately instructed the computer to reveal the message. A vaguely familiar voice stated, "As this message is now being delivered I can only assume that you or some of your crew have seen Lt. Yar in some ghostly form when she should not be on the Enterprise at all. Your attempt to find a reason for this has activated a pre-recorded programme and you are now hearing me, Dr. Sangster."

Picard's features took on a thoughtful look at the name stated. Freezing the computer message he thought back to Dr. Sangster and his arrival on board the Enterprise.

"Doctor Sangster is regarded very highly by others in his field," Picard informed Riker as they made their way to the transporter room.

"I'm sure he is, sir," Riker replied a little dubiously. "But couldn't someone else have been assigned this milk run? After all, we're just recovering from Lt. Kosinski's little tour of the outer galaxies - and now we have someone else with bright new theories to try out."

"Quite so, Number One, but at least he's not going to try them out on this ship. Whatever his new theories are, he has the Federation Council rather jumpy; that's why we've been chosen. Look on it as a compliment to the Enterprise and her crew," Picard stated as they entered Transporter Room 3. "Are our guests ready to beam up, Chief O'Brien?" he continued.

"Yes, sir."

"Energise."

A small group and a man-sized unit appeared on the platform.

"Welcome aboard the Enterprise. I am Captain Picard and this is my First Officer, Commander Riker."

"Yes, yes, but where is the security team?" demanded a small agitated man, jumping down from the transporter platform and heading directly towards Captain Picard.

Grey, thought Picard. The word seemed to leap into his mind.

Indeed it did describe the man in question aptly. Not only were his coveralls, shoes, eyes and hair grey but his complexion also appeared to have a grey hue.

"Calm yourself, Garu. I'm sure the Captain has everything in hand, and anyway we did ask for as few people as possible to be present at our beam up. I am Dr. Sangster, Captain, and this is Garu, my assistant, friend and self-appointed father."

Picard and Riker looked past the grey man to see the speaker.

Doctor Sangster was a slim, young-looking man with blond hair and intelligent eyes.

"Indeed," Picard stated. "Commander Riker has arranged for a security team to escort you and your equipment to your arranged quarters."

"See, Garu, all is in hand," Dr. Sangster continued. "The other members of my select group. Dr. Sezak, Engineer Elanmar and her assistant Dannoch."

The remainder of the group stepped down from the platform and came to join the others at the transporter console.

An odd group we have here, thought Riker as they waited for the security team to arrive and escort their guests to their cabins. The overly agitated Garu, the intelligent and youthful Dr. Sangster, an imperturbable Vulcan, the rather attractive Engineer Elanmar and her rather nervous assistant Dannoch. Well, here's hoping they don't want to try out Sangster's pet project before we reach Vulcan. And why Vulcan anyway? There are other extensive research bases on several other planets between here and Vulcan!

A similar thought had crossed Picard's mind; he had even queried that very fact, but the Federation echelons wouldn't even tell him anything about the cargo they were transporting, never mind what it did.

At that moment Lt. Yar and Security Officer Yansing arrived in the transporter room.

"Ah, Lieutenant, please escort Dr. Sangster and his group to their quarters along with their equipment," he ordered.

Picard's thoughts returned once more to the present. Strange how a name could conjure up so much, and stranger still that Tasha had been involved so much in the events at that time.

All had gone well for two days. Lt. Yar had insisted on unscheduled checks on Dr. Sangster's equipment to prevent any interference or sabotage, however unlikely it may have seemed.

Wesley Crusher and Data had become involved in several discussions with Dr. Sangster, while the engineer and her assistant toured the Enterprise with Chief Engineer Argyle and took great interest in its equipment.

Strangely enough, after everything had been arranged Garu sought out either Dr. Crusher or Counselor Troi for conversation. It seemed he was well qualified in the area of psychology and once he was reassured that all was well he seemed to settle in quite happily.

It was during one of her evening checks that Lt. Yar heard a noise coming from within the secure area containing Sangster's unit.

After contacting Picard, who was on the bridge, she moved cautiously towards the door of the room. The doors swished open and Yar saw Engineer Elanmar apparently working on the unit. Yar was slightly reassured until she realised that there was no sign of the Security Guard who should have been in attendance with the engineer and who had been ordered to alert either the Lieutenant or one of the senior officers of any entry to that room. At that moment Elanmar turned and saw Yar. There was a loud hum and a sudden surge of energy.

When Picard, Riker and a security team arrived at the area they saw the opened door and the Lieutenant's body lying just inside the entrance. Within the room, the unit hummed gently.

Running footsteps indicated the approach of Dr. Sangster and Garu.

"What happened? Why are all these people in this area?" Garu shouted as he moved quickly along the corridor.

Picard turned swiftly towards the two men as they approached.

"Lt. Yar reported she was investigating a noise from this area and now she is lying severely injured. Instead of demanding what's happening I think you should be telling me why I was not informed of the danger of this weapon you have brought on board," snapped Picard.

"Weapon? This is no weapon!" Sangster snapped back just as angrily.

He found himself being pushed aside as Dr. Crusher made her way to Yar's side. She, like Sangster and Garu, had been summoned to the area by a swift call from Commander Riker.

"How is she?" Riker asked Crusher from his position on the other side of Yar.

"I don't understand this!" replied Crusher. "I can see no wound; her heart is steady, all vital signs appear normal, but I can't get her to respond. Let's get her to sickbay till I can carry out a more detailed examination."

A short while later Dr. Crusher reported to Captain Picard in the Ready Room.

"I can't find any physical injuries or wounds. It seems as though her mind, her being, has just gone. I know of no weapon, machine or being that could cause this. It's entirely new to me."

As she finished Picard looked towards Doctors Sangster and Sezak who, along with Riker and Data, had been summoned to the Ready Room to discuss the cause of Yar's present condition.

Picard spoke softly. "Entirely new, Dr. Crusher. The only new development on board this ship is Dr. Sangster's unit. Would you care to comment, Dr. Sangster?"

It was Dr. Sezak who answered. "Dr. Sangster's unit is not a weapon, Captain. However, your conclusion is quite logical and correct. Lt. Yar is suffering from the effects of the device and I can only deduce that she was affected by the unit during its unauthorised use by someone on this vessel. Let me further reassure you that we can and will return Lt. Yar to her previous good health."

"Unauthorised use," snapped Riker. "You mean espionage. As none of the crew - including the Captain and myself - have any knowledge of what this device is, it must have been carried out by one of your group, and you now expect us to allow you to experiment further on Lt. Yar?"

"Easy, Number One. If, as Dr. Crusher has stated, she does not know the cause or cure for our Security Chief's present condition -" Picard's quizzical look was answered by a sorrowful nod from Crusher - "then we must allow Dr. Sangster the opportunity to repair the damage his device has caused. Also I can see no reason why Dr. Sangster should try to steal his own unit, as it was he who informed the Federation Council and the Vulcan Science Academy of its existence."

"Logically deduced," remarked Dr. Sezak. "If you will permit Dr. Sangster to revive your Lieutenant she may be able to help provide the answer as to who the individual was in the secured area."

Picard paused for only a moment before saying, "Agreed."

All eyes turned to look at the young scientist who had not spoken for some time.

Dr. Sangster had been subdued since finding out the cause of Yar's condition and now sat quietly at the table in the Ready Room with a very downcast expression.

"Well, Dr. Sangster," asked Picard. "Will you attempt to revive Lt. Yar?"

Sangster lifted his head slowly and looked guiltily at the Captain. "S-s-sorry?"

"I said will you tend to the Lieutenant?" Picard stated a little more gently. After all, Sangster had not meant this to happen and should not be blamed for the misuse of his genius.

"Yes, yes of course I'll help her. It's simply a case of returning her mind to her body." Sangster began to speak a little more agitatedly. "But then she wasn't prepared. We'll... "

"I suggest you and I discuss the rest of the retrieval process on our way to collecting the unit and taking it to sickbay," interrupted Dr. Sezak calmly.

"Gentleman, I don't mind what you discuss. All of this can be dealt with once you have tended to Lt. Yar. Dr. Crusher, please go with Doctors Sangster and Sezak. Security Officer Yansing will go with you. Number One, organise security surveillance for the other members of Dr. Sangster's team and tighter security round sickbay and the device when the doctors have finished with it."

Sometime later Picard entered Sickbay to find Lt. Yar arguing with Dr. Crusher.

"I assure you Doctor, I am fine, and I should be seeing to placing Engineer Elanmar in a security cell."

"What is it with all you people? Every time one of you is involved in an accident you'd think I was putting you on a death bed rather than a diagnostic table," returned Crusher.

"Ah, Lieutenant. Delighted to see you returned to full health again, and I am sure your department is quite capable of incarcerating Elanmar, as I presume your earlier comment means it was she who used the device on you," Picard stated, calming the scene before him.

"Yes, Captain," a rather abashed Lt. Yar replied. She realised she should not have been arguing with the Doctor - after all it was Dr. Crusher's duty to ensure the health of all on board. "Sorry, Doctor, but I really do feel fine, just a little confused. It really was quite an experience. I seemed to be... "

"A moment please," the calm, quiet voice of Dr. Sezak interrupted. The others had not even noticed him standing in a corner of the room. "Captain Picard, as all details of Dr. Sangster's work are completely classified I am sure you will understand why Dr. Sangster and myself should de-brief Lt. Yar after her experience. We shall, of course, wait until you and Dr. Crusher are assured that the Lieutenant has suffered no physical or mental injury."

Dr. Crusher just stopped her lower jaw from dropping and leaving her looking like a fool. Yar looked from one to the other, wondering just what was going on, while Picard took tight rein of the anger that had been growing ever since this incident had happened.

It had been bad enough being sent off on a mission with little information, but to have had a member of his crew affected by a device which no one knew anything about was infuriating.

"I'm sure, Dr. Sezak, you understand our concern over this incident," Picard finally said with outward calm. "Surely it would be acceptable for either myself or Dr. Crusher to sit in during your discussion with Lt. Yar. We both have high level security clearance and have encountered other incidents which were of great concern to the Federation."

"It is not possible, Captain Picard," Dr. Sezak continued in the same calm manner he had revealed since coming on board. "Dr.

Sangster's device is presently under review and this unfortunate circumstance will help provide information into its future use. If you wish you may contact Starfleet Command should you believe I am acting outwith my authority."

Picard mentally slumped. He had already contacted Starfleet in the hope that there might be some loophole he could have used to help provide some sort of support for the Lieutenant after her recent injury, but he had already been turned down.

"Very well, Dr. Sezak, but I want Lt. Yar checked over again by Dr. Crusher as soon as you have finished."

With Picard's permission given Lt. Yar and Dr. Sezak headed towards the already secured Observation Lounge, where Dr. Sangster was already waiting.

Jean-Luc Picard could feel the echo of that anger even now as he ordered the computer to proceed with its message.

"I programmed this message into the computer after the debriefing session with Lt. Yar and Dr. Sezak," continued the voice of Dr. Sangster. "At the time I can remember you were most perturbed when I and Dr. Sezak stated that we were unable to give you any information regarding the incident with Lt. Yar. However, once you have listened to this message you will understand our reluctance.

"Firstly I shall allow the Lieutenant to describe what happened to her after she was struck by the beam from my unit."

"Captain Picard, I was unsure how to go about this so I shall relate it as though I was giving you a formal report," Tasha began. "After I stepped into the Security area I was struck by a beam similar to the blast from a phaser. I don't know how long everything was black but when next I saw light I was on the bridge of the Enterprise, only I wasn't there. It's difficult to explain. When I spoke to you or anyone else on the bridge they didn't hear me; it also struck me that I seemed to be floating. At first I thought it was the effect of the beam but then I looked down at myself and it was then I thought I was either mad or dead. There was no body. I can't explain the next few minutes. I think I must have gone insane or had a mental fugue. All I know is that some sort of sanity or consciousness came back.

"If this was being dead then there was life after death, for I was present on the Enterprise even if my body was not. I also discovered I was able to move in this spiritual state. I moved towards Counselor Troi and she seemed to sense a presence. After a while my spirituality must have strengthened as I noticed when I moved nearer to people they reacted by looking round expecting to see someone.

"Gradually becoming calmer and accepting that I must be dead, I decided to explore the ship. Floating through the corridors and into different areas I became more certain I was dead as I found no sign of my physical body anywhere. Had I been thinking clearly I should have gone straight to sickbay or to the holding area for the dead to see if I was there. However, I did not get that far in my wandering. As I was passing, literally, through Engineering I came face to face with Lt. La Forge. I did not expect his reaction. Up

till then everyone had acted as though they expected to see someone standing near them. This time, however, La Forge actually pointed straight at me, slumped against the wall and looked as though he had seen a ghost. Then he rushed off somewhere.

"When I looked again at where my hands should be I could see the faint shape of them and the rest of my body. Not only could I see them, I could see through them. No wonder Geordi - sorry, Lt. La Forge - thought he had seen a ghost. Realising that I was becoming more substantial I began to wonder if I really was dead - after all I had no idea what Dr. Sangster's device did. Perhaps it was some kind of delayed transporter. As this thought took substance in my mind I became calmer and began to think more clearly. If I had died why were there differences in the Enterprise I had just left and the one I was presently haunting? They were not great differences, but they did exist. Firstly Commander Riker had grown a beard. Not just the first signs of a beard, but one which obviously took time to develop. Surely if I had died it would not have taken this long for me to leave my earthly body behind. Secondly Lt. Worf had changed from Command Red to Gold, and while in Engineering I had seen Lieutenant Commander La Forge, also not in Command Red and obviously in command of this section.

"With these changes and the fact that I was becoming more 'solid', surely I wasn't dead or dreaming. Why would I have made such alterations in a dream? Adding this to the growing idea that this might be a possible effect of Dr. Sangster's unit I became more anxious to find some way of contacting someone without causing alarm. I went to find Lieutenant Commander Data, being careful to avoid other contact and looking for Dr. Sangster or Dr. Sezak to ask them what was going on. I found no sign of either of them or the device. This fact was also of interest. Surely there had not been time for the Doctor and his group to have left the Enterprise?

"TIME. It took time for someone to grow a beard. It took time for a person to transfer from one department to another and to progress in rank. Had I passed through time? But where was I in this different time? Was I on a mission? Had I left the Enterprise? That was something I had not given any thought to at any point so far. Yes, I must have moved through time. I found the Lieutenant Commander on the bridge and waited till the other crewmembers were busy at their stations. I moved towards Data. I was again surprised by his reaction. Our usually calm Lieutenant Commander did not stop to question me. Instead he turned towards the Ready Room and vanished inside. The next second I felt as though I were being pulled towards something. I woke up to find myself in Sickbay with Doctors Crusher, Sezak and Sangster looking down at me."

Once more Picard heard Dr Sangster's voice. "I shall now tell you everything we said to Lt. Yar after hearing her story."

"My device is an experimental time displacement unit. When Lt. Yar was struck by its beam she was moved through time, but only her essence or katra should have been affected. Unfortunately she had not been prepared for participation in this event and so her essence and physical body tried to join together again and this caused the ghostly apparitions.

"It was also at this point that Lt. Yar told us of her conclusion that she had passed through time. I attempted to pass it off as a dream or hallucination brought on by the effect of my device, but your Lieutenant was most adamant and her deductions so

logical, a skill Dr. Sezak said could have been enhanced by the separation of the Lieutenant's mental capacity from the encumbrment of her physical body and all the senses and distractions this causes. He also stated that any attempt to convince Lt. Yar that she had been hallucinating might cause some psychological or emotional problems to the Lieutenant, if not now then at some later date. At this time we explained to her what the device was.

"Upon checking the device Dr. Sezak and I concluded that the Lieutenant had indeed been sent into the future and the details and descriptions she gave were of future happenings. This proved to be of great concern to Dr. Sezak, who convinced both myself and Lt. Yar that she should say nothing of the incident. There was the possibility that people who knew they were going to be alive and well at a later time might be more reckless in their dealings with a dangerous situation, which in turn might bring about their early death and affect the future in some way.

"It was the danger of this happening that helped us convince Lt. Yar to say nothing of her experience, despite her great respect and liking for you. This was also the reason Dr Sezak used his authority and prevented any divulgence of the true facts of the incident.

"You may be wondering why I am telling you all this. It is possible for several reasons. Firstly, as you are hearing this message nothing the Lieutenant saw or related can affect the future as her appearance is now in the past. Secondly, Lt. Yar was concerned as to the reaction of the crew members involved, so she felt it only right that you receive the explanation as quickly as possible, and, as she could see no evidence of herself on the Enterprise and did not know the exact time the event took place, she would be unable to inform you immediately of what had happened and therefore requested some form of message to be made available.

"Finally, after the incident, Dr Sezak and I realised that a time displacement machine could be used to create great difficulties. Various species have found ways of travelling in time, some by accident, some to escape a disastrous present, but all of which incur some danger to those participating. The possibility of having a device which permits safe and frequent access to time is too great a threat even when compared to the possible benefits I had hoped to provide. It has therefore been decided that the device be dismantled and all details destroyed.

"Engineer Elanmar and her assistant Dannocho do not have enough knowledge to build another. Garu and I intend to work at the Vulcan Science Academy, and, as few others know such a device was invented, there is little risk.

"It is believed that you will only tell those with a security rating high enough to be told, and, as there is little hope of anyone using my knowledge to build this device again, it would be more beneficial for you and your crew to understand recent events, thus allowing you to proceed with future missions as you have been."

Picard rose from his chair and strode to face his aquarium. So they had seen Tasha's ghost, but not in the way they had thought. Well, if one could separate a person's essence from their physical body and set it free perhaps Tasha's friendly spirit still pervaded the Enterprise. It was certainly still with those who knew her best and it would always remain with them. Now to tell the others what had happened.

PAST'S HIDDEN

by

Sally Woods

The rain and thunder came early that year.

As a fading summer on the fourth planet of the Sella system flickered its final glow, the planet's cycle again returned to the bitter nights and rainy days of winter.

On Caspra, the farming settlement of Remus 12 had been one of the first settlements to be established on the then newly colonised planet.

Slowly the 100-strong settlers built and farmed their growing acres of prosperous land. The crops and wheat sprang up along the river banks.

The first years were the hardest; the land, although agriculturally sound, still had to be ploughed; the wheat had to take.

Gradually the fruits of their labour enabled Remus 12 to trade with other settlements for such things as goats, cows, sheep, all herded together in specially built corrals. Everything was going well for the colonists, every family prospered, but none more than the Laine family. Father Aaron had persuaded his wife Kath to break from their stale life on Starbase 35; he promised her a new life, never having to suffer again the dreary civilian posts he had held on the Starbase. Uprooting his family, he joined the exodus. For six-year-old Shannon, this was her first big adventure.

Caspra was a place to explore for Shannon and her brother Alex, five years older than herself. It was exciting, the mountains, the air she felt filling her lungs, and the vast open spaces such as she had never experienced on Starbase 35. As the years passed Shannon and Alex enjoyed their freedom.

As Alex was drawn into the world of farming, Shannon found herself drawn to the horses, eventually becoming an accomplished horsewoman. Another of her abilities was to make friends easily. One was Luke, a boy from a neighbouring settlement; it became obvious he was more than just a friend as they were drawn closer to the life of the main settlement. Here they enjoyed the bars and the entertainment, and here Shannon got her first reminder that a harsh world still had a way of drawing you into its web.

The laughter rang out in the bar: across the floor, the illegal Orion wine, taken from one of the many Orion traders who frequented the bar, tasted sweet to her lips as she downed yet another glass.

Refilling her glass, Luke kissed her gently on the lips.

"No more," she whispered. "Wine, I mean."

She laughed. He laughed and kissed her again. "It's supposed to arouse the senses," he said.

"I know what it's supposed to do, Luke," she said. "If I didn't know you better, I would say you were trying to get me drunk."

"Never," he said smiling. "You're too shrewd for me, Shannon Laine, that's why I love you so much."

She smiled as she ran her fingers through his dark hair.

The sudden opening of the door made her jump.

Murray, another local, entered, his face aghast, his heavy breathing a sign of his hurry to inform them of what he had seen.

"Remus 12! They're attacking Remus 12!" he shouted.

His panic-filled words chilled her. "Murray, what's happened?"

"It's burning," he said tearfully. "They're burning your home."

She jumped to her feet, pushing past Murray. In the courtyard, the smell of burning was evident.

Climbing the hill, she could see on the horizon the large cloud of black smoke rising into the air, and with went it her peaceful life.

The land speeder crossed the land toward the growing cloud; in her heart she felt the pain swelling up. It also told her that it was just a mistake, Murray had made a terrible mistake! Everyone was fine!

But her head told her other, wilder, things.

The land speeder crossed the ridge. Below was the sight of the blazing settlement; dwellings on fire; a field of wheat blazed as the land speeder slowed to a halt.

She turned to Luke. "Why are we stopping?"

"That's why," he said, pointing to the Orion shuttle standing in the centre of the settlement. Several Orion traders scurried about, taking what possessions they could find.

She jumped from the land speeder. Luke had to restrain her from going further. "Let me go!" she screamed.

"It's too late," Luke said, seeing the smouldering dwellings.

"We have to help! My parents are - "

He shook his head. "You'd only be killed as well."

Tears filled her eyes as anger, frustration and then sadness overwhelmed her. They watched as the odd assortment of rough

looking Orion traders packed their shuttle with everything they could carry.

As the shuttle took off, finally fading into the evening sky, other settlers came over the surrounding hills, all witnesses to the burning settlement: all wanting to help.

There was not much anyone could do; who that were left alive had been badly beaten or burned by the raging fires.

Frantically, Shannon searched for her family. She knew they were here! Her home had been destroyed; it was still smouldering. Shannon carefully entered the shell of the dwelling. Inside, amongst the debris, two bodies; her parents clung together, in death as they had been in life.

Shannon felt pain as she dropped to her knees. A scream echoed throughout the settlement.

Luke ran into the dwelling. He saw her parents. "I'm sorry," he said, taking her hand. "There's nothing we can do for them, except give them a decent burial."

She suddenly pulled her hand away, standing. "Alex."

Searching amongst the dead and wounded, she was devastated when she saw the limp form of Alex, a blaster wound peppering his chest. Another man told her later how Alex and a few of the younger men had resisted the Orions, fought them until the last one of them was dead. She could be proud of him.

Luke found her later, sitting at the top of the hill, staring out into the vast sky.

"He didn't deserve this. None of them did."

"There's nothing you can do."

She looked down at the scene below, at the still smouldering buildings, the dead still being buried. She looked at him, determination in her eyes.

"Justice, Luke. I want somebody to pay for this. It's not over yet - far from it."

As she turned her eyes back to the darkened sky, Luke realised he didn't know Shannon any more; not this one anyway.

* * * * *

The features were the same: the high cheekbones, the blonde hair trimmed short, and the eyes still full of determination.

Six years had passed since that tragic day on Caspra, which only seemed like yesterday to Shannon Laine. After leaving Caspra with Luke and a few friends, she had travelled across the galaxy, going from place to place, slowly building up a reputation on the underground network as one of the best smugglers around. Contraband cargoes, illegal dealings... always looking for that familiar face, until finally she found what she had been searching for.

Micra-Alpha, a non-Federation outpost housing some of the more unsavoury characters, was where Shannon's past caught up with her.

The same Orion traders that she had seen on Caspra were regular visitors to the cafe-bar. The relaxed laws allowing the continued activities of the various groups to carry on unhindered meant it was easy for her to move around the outpost without arousing suspicion.

From the bar, Shannon watched and waited. If her information was right, they should be making an appearance there tonight. Yes! Sweeping in the Orions laughed and joked as they made their way into the bar's back room.

Shannon nudged Luke.

He shook his head. The bar was too crowded; too many innocent people could get killed. His protest fell on deaf ears. She rose to her feet, smiling. Welms joined her; both walked toward the back room.

The Orions laughed and sipped at the wine. They were enjoying the appearance of the Human female, who excited them enough to make a joke about her. She smiled as if she understood them.

"Gentlemen," she said through a clenched smile.

None of the Orions moved for a second. Then the taller one stood and held out his hand for her to join them. Again she smiled and reached for his hand. Taking it, she also pulled from her tunic the blaster, and fired directly into his chest. The Orion fell.

The other Orions jumped to their feet, their blasters drawn, Welms burst in behind her, the weapon beam striking two of the Orions. A third, advancing, was felled by Shannon.

Luke hurried into the room. "Let's get the hell out of here," he screamed.

Welms pushed past him, hurrying away. Shannon stood still, almost rooted to the spot. At last she had what she had set out for - justice.

"Shannon, let's go! Nobody here is going to appreciate what you've just done here. They may be criminals and smugglers, but they don't enjoy seeing their friends killed like this."

He pulled her out of the room, through the crowd that had started to gather, unsure of what had happened. When he finally discovered what had happened, the Outpost's governor sent a message to Starfleet, afraid of what the Orions might do to his outpost if the girl was not caught and dealt with. He pleaded with them; they agreed that the girl's actions were wrong. Once caught, she would be dealt with accordingly.

After the incident on Micra-Alpha, Shannon didn't enjoy the occupation she had carved out for herself. The deaths of the people responsible for her parents' murder satisfied her. All she wanted to do now was continue her life.

But the Federation was not one to forget so easily; word spread around the galaxy of her exploits on the Outpost. Everyone, it

seemed, wanted the bounty on her head.

On Gamma 3, the bounty hunter caught up with her; in the ensuing gun-battle, Shannon was seriously wounded and Welms and Luke died.

Twelve weeks later, on the Federation Starbase 56, Shannon, recovered from her wounds, waited under guard in the medical unit. The hearing that followed would determine if she was fit enough to stand trial back on Earth for her numerous crimes and for the deaths of the Orion traders.

She sat in the cold detention cell where the four solid walls and the hard slab bunk, completely different surroundings, greeted her arrival from the medical unit.

Gray overalls replaced the white surgical gown.

There was a swish as the door slid back. A man wearing a red tunic entered. His severe appearance and the small hand unit he carried identified him as the man who had been given the task of defending her.

"Miss Laine, I am Lt. Wayne. My office has asked me to take up your case."

That stiff manner would never win you any popularity stakes, she thought, as he sat beside her. "I wouldn't want to waste your time, Lieutenant," she told him. "I'm not worth it."

He raised an eyebrow. "The details of your case are very interesting. The deaths of your parents and your brother on Caspra would certainly encourage any Federation court to be sympathetic about the murder of the Orion traders on Micra-Alpha; however, your history of carrying illegal cargoes makes your case a tough one to win."

She slumped back. "What happens now?"

"A judgment council will determine your state of mind and assess if you are sane enough to stand trial."

She smiled. "I'm not mad, Lieutenant," she said. "Just someone who wanted justice."

The Starbase conference room was hastily arranged for the hearing. Judge Michaels, more used to dealing with cases of a less serious nature, feeling the after-effects of a long shift following a domestic disagreement, sat behind the large oak desk; to his right sat the Starbase's Commander, O'Connor, and to the judge's left sat a civilian marshal, her job in all of this to record the session.

Behind them a large video screen gave everyone a clear view of the proceedings.

Accompanied by two security men, Shannon was led into the room, the drab overalls replaced by a more suitable blue pant-suit. The wrist bracelets were removed and she was seated before the oak desk.

The clerk stood. "Please state your name for the record," he asked her.

Placing her hand on the chair's recording pad, she spoke clearly. "Shannon Laine."

The computer confirmed her hand print and her voice before the clerk continued, "Shannon Laine, you have been charged with six acts of smuggling and the wilful murder of Orion traders on the planet Micra-Alpha. How do you plead on these charges?"

She stood. "Guilty."

"Sir, my client wishes it to be know that she is pleading guilty and will offer no defence."

After speaking to his colleagues, Judge Michaels spoke. "Miss Laine, this is a most unusual statement. This is only a hearing to determine if you are to be returned to Earth for a more complete trial. You do understand this?"

She nodded.

The Judge went on, "Has Miss Laine recovered from her injuries?"

The Chief Medical Officer of the Starbase stood. "Yes, sir, Miss Laine's injuries are now sufficiently healed for her to be taken from this Starbase."

"Very well. Shannon Laine, you will be taken from this Starbase and returned to Earth, where you will be dealt with in due course. This hearing is concluded."

"Chief Medical Officer's Log, supplemental. Having been on assignment for the past few weeks, the Enterprise has finally been assigned to Pacifica for a few days rest and relaxation. Taking this chance, I have requested that the senior bridge crew report to Sickbay for routine medical checks."

Dr Beverly Crusher smiled as Captain Picard replaced his tunic then waited as Crusher ran the results through the medical bank.

"How is it?"

"As usual, Jean-Luc, a perfect result," she said, turning to face him. "All I could ask is that you take more time to relax."

"Sorry, Doctor, this job allows me very little time to relax."

"Perhaps when we arrive at Pacifica, you and I could find time to explore. There is a place I know - Jack and I used to go there when we were younger. I'd like to show it to you."

Jack Crusher, Beverly's husband, Picard's friend. It had been Picard who had introduced them many years earlier, when he and Jack had been the eager young explorers ready to take on the universe.

When Beverly picked Jack over him and their third musketeer

Walker, Picard was pleased if not a little sad.

Now, years later, serving with her aboard the Enterprise, Picard realised what a lucky man Jack Crusher had been.

"I'd like that, Doctor, but my time is limited even there."

"And if the Doctor orders it?" Crusher said, knowing that she alone could outrank the Captain, if necessary, in medical matters.

He smiled. "Then the Doctor doesn't understand."

Crusher smiled, replacing the medical tricorder on the desk, its red glowing on-off switch flickering until she finally switched it off.

"I understand you were with your mother on Betazed?"

Counselor Troi, standing by the desk, smiled, her dark, stunning looks making her one of the most beautiful women in Starfleet. "Being with my mother," she said dryly, "was never relaxing, Beverly."

Images of the Captain attempting to avoid the advances of Lwaxana Troi, Daughter of the Fifth House of Betazed, during her first visit aboard the Enterprise still brought smiles to the Doctor.

"Captain Picard still views that as a lucky escape," Troi said.

"A very lucky escape," Crusher agreed.

"What?" Commander Riker said as he hopped off the treatment couch.

"You're overweight, Will. I want you to take more exercise in the gym," Crusher said as the Commander walked behind her to the small office she occupied. He sat in the chair opposite her.

She used the medical desk top computer to log her findings before looking directly at her patient. "A1," she said.

Worf growled. Crusher wasn't sure if that was a good sign or not; the Klingon's unknown personality was something she had not fully mastered yet.

She picked up the chart from the desk and walked out of the office. Lt. Tasha Yar sat on the treatment couch, her bare arm stretched out as the medic used the small laser grip to erase the wound from Tasha's arm.

She watched as the scar faded. Finished, the medic walked away, leaving Crusher to examine his handiwork. "How does it feel?"

"Better," Tasha said, reminded of the pain the wound caused

these past few weeks.

"Next time you go head to head with a Marova Warrior, make sure you come off on top," Crusher said, crossing to the table. Filling the hypo she returned, taking hold of Tasha's arm. The hypo emptied into her arm.

"I'll need to see you again tomorrow for another shot."

"Fine," Tasha said, jumping from the treatment couch.

As she picked up the medical tricorder, the prone form of Lt. La Forge concerned her. The last of the bridge crew to be seen, he had earlier complained of headaches, sweating and nausea. Now the test results in the tricorder matched none she had ever seen before. The high blood pressure, coupled with the other symptoms, was abnormal.

La Forge was obviously in some discomfort.

"How long have you been like this?" she asked.

"Two, three days," he whispered, "ever since Satura 5."

Crusher checked her tricorder again; the results were the same. She reminded herself that La Forge and Riker were the only two who beamed down to Satura 5, but Riker's test results had shown no abnormalities.

"What is it, Doc?"

"I'm not sure. I need to run more tests, Geordi, so I'm confining you to Sickbay until I can determine its origin. I'll inform the Captain," she said, walking away. She hoped it wasn't serious enough for her to have to cancel the crew's visit to Pacifica, but could she risk the infection spreading?

Leaving Geordi, she walked out of Sickbay.

In his private ready room, Picard sat on the cushioned couch reading, the book a present from Admiral Decker, chronologically listing all the ships previously named Enterprise. Picard found the book interesting, but it seemed that every time he picked the book up the door announce was activated.

"Come," he barked. *Will I ever get past chapter two?* he thought as the familiar form of the Doctor entered. Her expression made him forget about the book. He stood. "What's wrong?"

She placed the computer disc on to his desk. Her silence, unusual for her, concerned him.

"It's Geordi, Captain," she said. "I'm having to confine him to Sickbay for the time being."

"Oh."

"He seems to have contracted something from Satura 5."

"*Something*, Doctor?" he said, hoping for a little more

information from her.

"His test results were abnormal. He has discomfort, headaches, sweating and very high blood pressure. However, I'm not sure that Satura 5 is the cause of the problem."

"What about Commander Riker? He was with the Lieutenant. Does he have any of Geordi's symptoms?"

She shook her head. "That's why I'm not sure Satura is the problem. But it worries me. If the Commander *has* also picked up something, the delay in the symptoms showing up and the failure of my tests to reveal anything could cause problems if he was to take it down to Pacifica, or if any of us was also infected without knowing it, we could do the same."

"Doctor, could it get loose on my ship?"

"Unlikely. I've activated the decontamination field around Sickbay; no-one is allowed inside without my permission until I'm sure of what I'm dealing with."

"I understand Doctor," Picard said interrupting her. "We still have another 34 hours before we orbit Pacifica; perhaps you will have an answer by that time. I do not wish to have to cancel shore leave unless the risk is absolute."

"I'll run some more tests, Captain; there must be an answer."

"Do whatever is necessary," he said.

As Crusher left his ready room, Data's voice filled the room.

"Captain Picard."

"Go ahead, Mr. Data," Picard said into the air.

"We are receiving a distress call from the planet London in the Galen 7 sector."

Picard sighed, replying, "On my way, Mr. Data. Stand by."

The Bridge was a hive of activity as Picard strode from the ready room, heading towards the command chair. Riker, already running a check on the display panel, turned to him as he sat. "London, Number One?"

"A newly terraformed world, sir. The colonists have only been inhabiting the planet for six months."

Picard frowned. "Mr. Data, do we have the nature of the distress call?"

Sitting at Ops, Data turned to face the Captain. "Earthshock, Captain. Apparently it has devastated the complex. There are many injuries and twelve dead, sir."

"Estimated time of arrival?"

"Two hours, Captain," Ensign Sigh said.

Picard turned to Troi. "Counselor, you will join me in the observation room? You have the Bridge, Mr. Data."

"Aye, sir," Data said, rising to take the command seat from Picard as he and the others exited. Data's post was taken by an ensign.

London: newly terraformed, a colony of scientists, researchers and engineers, all wanting a piece of this new planet. In the desert landscape here the dwellings had sprung up slowly as the colonists built their new homes.

Felix Rodgers had always had a dream that he would help create a new place where life would begin a new fork in the already vast universe.

A man of later years, well rounded and grey haired, he had considered the opportunity London offered him too good a chance to miss. Packing, he was one of the first to arrive at the London colony. Put in charge, Felix selected his team with care.

The young woman with the dark hair seemed an ideal choice for ground communications, her skill at radio frequencies and unlimited knowledge of certain illegal insights suiting Felix well.

She had come a long way since the incidents on Micra-Alpha, the dark hair covering her real hair colour helping to conceal her true identity.

Shannon Laine had become Sam Tyler, radio specialist, friend and confidante of Felix, a well liked personality on the colony.

Her past was buried.

Her room was on the south side of the complex. She had been on duty all night and was looking forward to getting some sleep. Her job, while occasionally quiet, was never boring, and the fact that next day she was to lead a team out into the field for Felix made her sleep even sounder than usual.

She dreamed of a past no longer possible as the sound of the heavy thunder seemed to get louder and louder. *No-one told me that there was a storm brewing*, she thought as the roar finally woke her.

Thunder that suddenly seemed to shake the room ferociously.

Thunder? That felt like the whole complex was being overturned.

Shannon stumbled from the bed, swaying as the room again rumbled heavily, the force throwing her from side to side like a rag doll. Hitting the wall com-panel, she asked, "This is Sam, what the devil's going on?"

"Earthshock."

"Sam!" a second voice called.

"What's happening?" she asked.

"Get to the main control room, we need you," Felix's concerned voice called out.

"On my way," she said, reaching for the blue flak-jacket. Pulling it across her shoulders, Shannon hit the exit button, and left her room.

The outer corridor was a mess as people scurried to their quarters, some checking on their families while others headed toward the main control room to help as parts of the walls crumbled, falling in their paths. The corridor outside the main control room had taken most of the earthshock's force; the ceiling had collapsed, almost burying the main entrance. A few personnel were attempting to lift the heavy stone from the doorway as she came up. An after-shock shook the complex. Balancing herself against the wall, she stepped over the fallen debris, entering the main control room.

In near darkness, Shannon sought out Felix as others attempted to regain some kind of normality to the complex.

"Sam!" Felix cried out. "Over here."

Relief crossed her face as she spotted Felix leaning over the main communication's board where a second man was trying to reconnect the panel's main wires.

"Felix, thank God you're all right. This wasn't supposed to happen. I thought they said this planet was safe."

He shook his head, a slight trickle of blood running down his cheek. Unconsciously he wiped it away.

"You're hurt."

"There are others hurt worse than me, Sam. Please try and get everyone together."

She nodded.

Gathering together those that were unhurt was easy; many of the other colonists had been asleep when the earthshock had hit, and some still trapped in their quarters were a lot harder to reach. Making the mess hall into a makeshift sickbay, Shannon worked frantically to help free those trapped.

In sickbay, others attempted to do jobs they hadn't been trained for. Eventually, as Shannon rested, Felix came across to her, his face a mixture of pain and relief.

"How many dead?" he asked.

"Twelve, and six more are missing," she said. "It could have been worse."

He sighed.

A man appeared, making his way across to them. "I managed to get a signal off about twenty minutes ago. A Federation Starship just answered, they're on their way now."

Felix laughed. "That's terrific." He pulled Shannon to her feet. She smiled weakly.

As he followed the man out, Shannon walked across to the row of gurneys. A small child suffering from head injuries smiled at her. Shannon took her hand.

Her face was etched with concern that had little to do with the situation. The free days were possibly over now - twelve years of running, hiding and lying finally at an end once the Federation Starship arrived.

* * * * *

"As you can understand, there is great urgency in this mission; a second earthshock could finish off the complex, and a lot of lives could be lost," Picard said.

Troi looked around the table at the intense faces.

Dr Crusher spoke first. "I don't understand how the terraformers could make such a mistake, Captain."

"Not necessarily a mistake, Doctor, a miscalculation concerning the stability of the planet's surface. An earthshock could happen anywhere at any time."

Picard turned to face Riker, sitting to his left. "You will lead an away team. Dr Crusher will bring a full medical team."

"Captain," Data's voice broke into their discussion.

"Yes, Mr. Data?"

"Sir, scanners indicate an ion storm developing over the planet. Complete communications blackout in three hours."

"Damn! Thank you, Mr. Data, stand by. That complicates matters."

Troi looked around the table at the long faces. "I don't understand. What happens if the ion storm covers the planet?"

Riker turned to her, his eyebrows raised. "Total seclusion, Counselor. All transporters and communications would be severely affected, making a rescue attempt even more hazardous."

"That's why we must move quickly," Picard said.

As Crusher collected the gear from Sickbay, her team of medics prepared the equipment needed. She had time to look in on Geordi, who still lay in the isolation section of the Sickbay, his symptoms still strong. The nurse walked across to her.

"How is the lieutenant?"

"Still the same, Doctor; everything we tried has no effect on his symptoms. I'm afraid, if the fever doesn't break soon... "

Crusher waved her hand. "Thank you, Nurse."

She was puzzled. Every test had been run, every answer had proved inconclusive. There was one result pending, but for all

their sakes she prayed it wasn't that.

"Doctor."

She turned to see Picard standing in the doorway of the isolation section. He looked concerned. "How is Lt. La Forge?"

She shook her head. "I'm concerned. His condition is worse than before, and everything we have tried seems to have no effect on it. I've run some tests, all negative; there's only one possibility I haven't had a result on yet - Eseas plague."

Picard looked worried at her suggestion. "On my ship?"

"I'm not sure, Captain, but Eseas is the only thing my tests haven't ruled out."

"When will you know?"

"Soon," she said. "Then we will worry."

"Doctor," Riker called.

The First Officer stood by the entrance to the sickbay, his hands holding each side of the door frame, supporting himself.

"Will!"

"Number One, what's wrong?"

"Don't know, sir. I suddenly felt dizzy, and I have a headache."

Crusher, supporting one side while Picard supported the other, led Riker across to the treatment couch, onto which he was gently lifted.

"Doctor?" Picard said.

As she ran the small tricorder across Riker, her frowning expression gave the Captain an idea of what was ailing his First Officer. "Is it the same as before?"

"Commander, is your headache coupled with nausea and sweating?"

In obvious pain, Riker nodded.

Taking the Captain's arm, Crusher led him to one side. "All symptoms match those of the Lieutenant. Will has obviously contracted the same infection as Geordi."

"Eseas?"

"It's beginning to look that way, Captain."

Troi's concerned features peered through the glass as Crusher and her staff ran more tests on the two sick men. The isolation ward was sealed off in case of further infection.

Wringing her hands tensely, she didn't hear the door swish open as Picard joined her.

"How is he?"

She turned to face the Captain; his look was just as anxious. "Beverly's running more tests, but she's fairly sure it's Eseas plague. Captain, there is no cure for it."

The swish of the isolation door turned Picard's attention to the Doctor, who removed her gown and mask before stepping through the second glass door.

"Well, Doctor?"

She sighed. "The tests are conclusive. It *is* Eseas plague. The Commander and the Lieutenant must have picked it up on the planet. Fortunately, neither has been aboard more than 12 hours - Eseas needs at least 24 hours and a confined area before it spreads."

"Then there's no chance of any of us getting it?"

"No, Deanna, I have an antidote prepared. My staff will ensure everyone is vaccinated against it. We should have no problems."

"And the Commander?"

"Eseas plague has no cure," Crusher said.

Troi was puzzled. "The antidote?"

"Only works to prevent the body from contracting the plague. Once it enters your system, the antidote works like any other normal vaccine, fighting off any disease you might pick up, but it doesn't work the other way round. We cannot fight Eseas by giving them the antidote after they have contracted it."

"So what can you do?"

"The only thing we can do is hope they recover by themselves."

"What are their chances of doing that, Beverly?" Troi asked solemnly.

"About thirty per cent," Crusher replied.

"Captain Picard to transporter room 3," Data's voice announced.

"On our way, Mr. Data," he said. "Doctor, you will be remaining on board?"

"No, Captain, there is nothing I can do for them here. My staff is well briefed; Dr. Selar can cope here, and I am more needed on the surface now," she said bluntly.

Picard nodded. "Agreed."

As they entered the transporter room, the medical rescue team faded from the transporter pads. Picard and the two women walked across to join Lt. Yar as she took position.

"Mr. Data, you have the con. Keep the Doctor informed of any radical changes in the condition of her patients, understood?"

"Yes, Captain. Sir, the ion storm has moved closer and will envelop the planet within the next two hours."

"Thank you, Mr. Data. We hope to be out of there by then. Energise when ready, Mr. O'Brien."

Picard took his place beside the others. O'Brien activated the transporter beam, the tubes shimmered and then the four were gone.

The patterns across his eyes were wild and exciting as the shapes of the Enterprise's familiar transporter room were replaced by the unusual structure of the London complex. A man stepped forward as they appeared. His smiling face matched the greeting of his outstretched hand. "Welcome to London. You must be Captain Picard."

"Captain Picard of the USS Enterprise. It is good to see you."

"Felix Rodgers," the man said, introducing himself.

"How many of you are there?" Crusher asked.

Felix looked at the Chief Medical Officer inquiringly.

"Chief Medical Officer Dr. Crusher," Picard said.

"Doctor, there are twenty-one of us here, alive, although some are injured - mostly broken bones. The rest are either dead or missing.

"I'd like to start getting them up to the ship, Captain."

"Mr. Rodgers, we will start beaming your people up to our ship immediately. There is an ion storm forming as we speak; we will be unable to leave if it breaks. I don't fancy getting stuck here - a second earth shock could destroy this complex altogether."

In the background, Shannon watched as Felix spoke to the new arrivals. All looked pleasant enough, but if she was recognised....! Felix waved her over.

"This is Sam Tyler. If it wasn't for her we would have been in a worse state. She will help you gather in our people."

Shannon smiled. Tasha looked at the girl with some interest.

"Lt. Yar, make a complete check of the complex. I don't want to leave anyone behind."

"Aye, Captain," Tasha said, walking off.

"What would you like me to do, Captain?"

"You may help me," Troi suggested. "The children must be frightened. We must get them beamed up to the ship as quickly as possible, and they know you."

"Okay," Shannon said.

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The corridors of the complex were silent and empty. Those who hadn't fled had at least found their way to the main control room from where they would beam up to the Starship that had become their saviour.

Carefully checking the personnel quarters, Tasha found her search made even more poignant by evidence of the hurried departure of the families: the half eaten food, the hot coffee pot overturned by the earthshock's force, the unmade beds - all signs of a destruction none of the colonists were expecting.

"Lt. Yar."

Tasha tapped her combadge. "This is Yar, go ahead Captain."

"Have you found anyone else?"

"No, sir, the quarters are all empty."

"Return to the main control room."

"Aye, sir."

Picard again tapped his insignia. "Commander, stand by to receive more wounded."

"Ready, Captain," Data's voice replied.

"Energise."

The six figures standing together shimmered as the transporter took five of the more seriously injured colonists back to the Enterprise, one of the Doctor's medics accompanying them. Shannon and Troi, who had been seeing to the children, came across.

"We have run a status check, Captain, all personnel are accounted for, except for sixteen who are still missing," Shannon said.

Troi couldn't help feel something was still bothering Shannon. The feelings she had sensed earlier were much greater now.

"Something bothers you, Sam, something about our being here now."

Shannon looked at Troi, unsure of what to say. Both women's conversation was interrupted by the appearance of a woman who seemed to have been crying. Her voice was riddled with worry. "Sam, please, you have to help me find Alica. She is missing."

"Missing?"

"Yes, she was here, but I was helping the others, and when I turned back she had gone. Please help me find her!"

"Okay, you stay here, we'll find Alica for you," Shannon told her.

The woman nodded.

Troi and Shannon moved through the corridors carefully, stepping over the fallen debris as they entered what used to be the recreation area. Shannon picked up a rag doll. "Alica's."

"Troi?" Tasha called as she approached them.

"We have a missing child."

"Where?"

"Somewhere in this area," Shannon said, holding up the doll.

His hands crossed, Picard paced the control room. It was unlike Tasha to fail to return as she had acknowledged - and now Troi and the young woman had vanished in search of a child who didn't have the sense to stay where it was safe. With only a handful of them left, he wanted to return to the ship as quickly as possible. Data had already warned them that another earth shock could hit, and the ion storm was almost upon them.

Crusher came across, her hands stained with blood, her tunic dirty and torn. "That's it, Captain, every one of the colonists is on board." She gestured at the two remaining medics. "We're the only ones left now."

"The Counselor and the Lieutenant are missing. They went with the young woman called Sam to find a missing child." He tapped his insignia. "Counselor."

"Captain."

"We are waiting for you. We have to leave now."

"We're in the sub-basement level. We think the child may be hiding here."

"Captain." Tasha's voice filled the control room. "I suggest you and the Doctor leave now, and we will beam up as soon as we have the girl."

Picard looked at Crusher. "Doctor, you and your medical team must leave now."

She shook her head. "No. My men will beam up, but I'll wait with you. The child might be hurt, in need of immediate attention."

Picard nodded. He knew it was no good arguing with her.

The room in the sub-basement level was dark, most of its lights broken in the first earth shock, but as the three entered, a slight whimper was heard. Shannon recognised the small child cowering in the corner of the room.

"Alica."

Shannon swept the crying child into her arms. "It's all right, we are going to get you out of here."

Then as they started back toward the door, the whole floor

shook, the walls began to crumble away. "Earthshock," Tasha shouted.

The rumbling began to get louder as the single light that had illuminated the basement finally flickered out, plunging the room into blackness. As quickly as the noise had begun, the complex again was silent.

"Tasha. Tasha?"

Troi's call received no answer from her friend. Shannon, covering Alica, sat up; the child was fine. Troi turned to Shannon. As their eyes adjusted to the dim light filtering through the upper part of the almost-blocked doorway from the corridor, the women saw what had happened to Tasha; she was buried under a pile of fallen ceiling.

"Oh my God."

Troi scrambled across to where Tasha lay unconscious. She began to clear away the plaster and dust. Shannon moved across to help.

Crusher looked at the bleeding leg. Picard grimaced as she began to wipe the splinters and blood from the wound, pushing the beam away as far as she could. She cleaned the injury.

"How does it feel?"

"Sore."

"It's not broken, Captain, but it may have a slight crack... Crusher to Enterprise."

There came no reply, just silence.

"Ion storm?" Picard suggested.

She tried again; still no reply came back. She shook her head.

"It appears we did not hurry enough, Doctor."

Shannon stopped the bleeding on Tasha's left arm with a crude bandage made from her tunic. Tasha, awake now, smiled, some relief in her face as she was helped to her feet. "Best you don't move it too much, it could be broken," Shannon suggested as she returned to the quietly whimpering Alica.

"How does it feel?"

"Hurts like hell," Tasha said, trying to smile through the obvious pain.

"You look as if you have had some practice at this?" Troi remarked to Shannon.

"I have seen things in my life that would span six people's lives twice over."

"You don't seem old enough?"

"Don't let looks fool you, Counselor," she said, noticing Tasha's puzzled look. "Something wrong, Lieutenant?"

Tasha sat down again. "I'm not sure, but I think we may have met before?"

"Oh."

"Your name... Sam, that's not what you used to be called. Your real name's... Shannon Laine, the girl smuggler, the one from Caspra, the girl who started the Orions' hostility toward us."

"It wasn't quite like that."

"Shannon Laine? I don't understand," Troi said.

"Shannon Laine, Counselor, killed the Orion traders who murdered her family on Caspra. She was hell-bent on revenge, only when she finally got that revenge, it wasn't as sweet as she had imagined."

"But how did you get here?" Tasha asked.

"After I was caught, I was sentenced to life imprisonment on the penal colony of Xeous. The ship I was travelling on was infected with the plague Eseas; we had no other choice but to put down on an unpopulated planet, for no-one would take us." She sighed. "Eventually those that were sick died, leaving only a handful of us left out of 70."

"You never contracted it?" Tasha asked.

"Oh, I got it - we all did eventually. I was lucky enough to survive it. A ship eventually came and took those of us who survived off that God-forsaken planet; they didn't know who we were, they thought we were survivors of a crash, and so I was able to slip away. As far as I know, the authorities never knew we had landed, and believed we all perished."

"If you have had Eseas, then you can help our two friends! They have Eseas."

Another shock rocked the place.

"Aftershock," Shannon said, "like before."

Crusher walked back across to where the Captain was resting.

"No sign of Tasha or Troi," she said.

"They were in the sub-basement level. Try the communication link."

Crusher tapped her insignia. "Deanna."

"Beverly, where are you? We need you - Tasha's been hurt."

Picard interrupted. "How bad is it, Counselor?"

Troi replied in a concerned voice about Tasha's injury to her arm, and her diagnosis of its being fractured was confirmed by Crusher as she listened to her friend's description of the injury.

"Don't move her, I'll be there as soon as I can," she said, turning her attention back to the Captain, who stayed seated as the leg gave him more pain.

He smiled, "See what you can do, Doctor. I'll be fine."

Data walked from the science station across to the worried Wesley, his attention diverted from the tactical station, concerned at the lack of communication from the away team on the surface.

"Wesley?"

The flashing of the station, unseen by Wesley, signalled the break through they had been waiting for. Then Wesley saw it too...

"Ion storm has cleared the planet, Commander. We have communications. Data, do you think they will have survived the shock?"

Data placed a reassuring hand on the young man's shoulder.

"It was not as strong as the first one."

"Hailing frequencies re-established," Worf growled.

"Captain Picard, this is Commander Data."

Picard's voice boomed back, "Welcome back, Mr. Data."

"Sir, is everything all right?"

"No, Mr. Data, I need you down here."

"On my way."

As Data strode from the bridge, Worf took up senior position.

Crusher stood by the entrance to the sub-basement level, where bricks and debris blocked the entrance. Unable to move anything, she touched her insignia. "Captain, the entrance is blocked. I am unable to effect any type of rescue by myself."

"Stand by, I'm sending Data to you."

The form of Data slowly appeared before her. His blank expression as he walked up to her made her smile slightly. "Data!"

"Yes, Doctor, I am here to assist you."

She turned to the blocked entrance. "Tasha and Deanna are trapped inside. The Lieutenant is hurt; we have to get inside."

"Please stand back, Doctor."

Data took hold of the debris, tossing it aside with ease.

Bricks and plaster were no match for the Commander's strength as he cleared the entrance enough for them to squeeze inside the room.

Troi, surprised to see them, approached first.

"Data."

"Counselor."

Data joined the Doctor as she examined Tasha's arm as best she could in the dim light. Tasha smiled as Data showed concern.

"I'm sorry I had to make you work so hard."

"You did this well," Crusher said referring to the crude bandage.

"Thank you," Shannon said.

"Doctor, the Captain. Is he all right?"

She smiled and nodded.

Troi looked at Shannon, who realised what the Counselor wanted from her. "Doctor, you have people on your ship with Eseas plague?"

Crusher looked at Shannon and then at Troi and Tasha. "Yes."

"Doctor, I had it many years ago. I would like to help you."

Troi smiled.

"Data to Enterprise. Stand by, Mr. O'Brien. Let's get the Captain."

From the observation room, Picard watched as Crusher re-examined Geordi and Riker. Both men were sitting up, both with the familiar look on their face, as the replicated antibodies from Shannon's blood finally fought off the Eseas plague.

Tasha walked into the room. "How are they?"

"Better. The Doctor says that another two days and they will be fit for duty again."

"Sir, about Shannon... "

"Ah yes, the girl. She *is* a wanted criminal; we should do our duty."

"Yes, sir."

"But as I understand it, she had a reason for her crime; and she has helped all of us. Without her, Riker and La Forge would have died and you would have bled to death."

"Sir, I read the file on the shuttle's disappearance. As far as the Federation is concerned, all prisoners on the shuttle lost their lives. Shannon Laine died when that shuttle was declared lost. Sam Tyler deserves the chance to help Rodgers and the others rebuild the colony."

"Lieutenant, are you suggesting we let the girl rejoin her friends?"

Tasha nodded.

Shannon walked with Tasha to the transporter room on deck three.

"I'm glad your friends are going to be all right."

"Thanks to you."

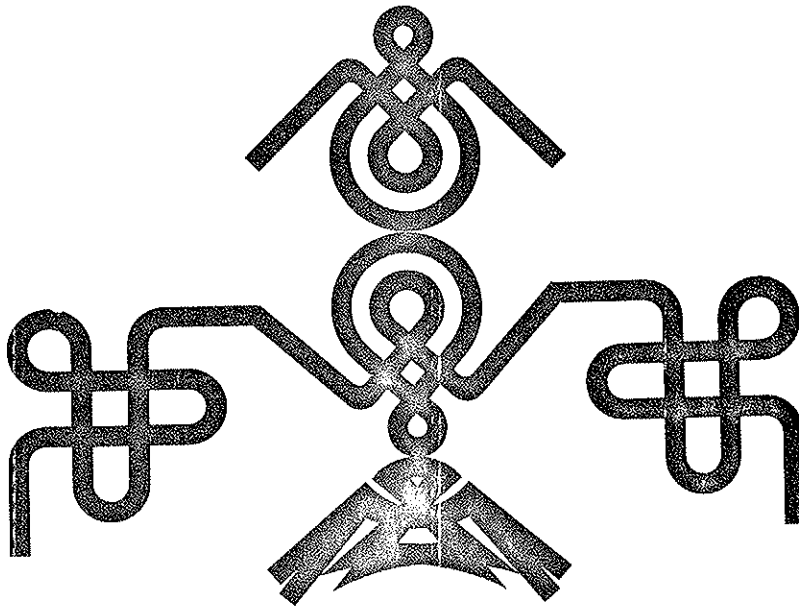
"And I'm glad you convinced your Captain to allow me the chance to return to the planet with the others. I feared he would return me to the Starbase. I know what I did was wrong and that I should have been punished for it, but we all do things that are wrong when we love someone."

Tasha smiled as the transporter doors opened.

"Your planet will be free from the earthshocks now - our engineers have ensured that the fault will not move again. They will stay with you as you rebuild the complex. Goodbye, Shannon. Perhaps some other time we will meet again - and don't worry, your past is safe with us."

Shannon stretched out her hand. The two women smiled at each other before stepping into the transporter room.

The doors slid shut.





THE TINKERBELL EXPERIENCE

by

Gaile Wood

Thick grey fog surrounded Data on all sides, curling in wisps and tendrils about his hands and arms. He was unable to see his feet; in fact his vision seemed to be limited to a very small area indeed, no more than one metre in front of his nose.

A part of him was busily trying to analyse this situation he had found himself in, and another was concentrating on how he might have got here. Wherever *here* was.

Carefully, Data moved one foot by sliding it along the ground, cautiously feeling his way. The ground appeared to be solid, and he decided an increase in pace would be in order. Data reflected that if he had been Human he would probably be worried; as he was an android he was saved from that unnecessary problem. However, he was intrigued. One moment he had been on the bridge, and then he was not.

Ahead was more thick grey stuff - a miasma of shifting shapes, and silence which was deafening. Data had never quite understood that metaphor before, but now he felt he had gained some further insight into the impreciseness of Human speech.

He was so busy concentrating on the mechanics of moving that he nearly missed the oddity in the uniformity of this grey universe he found himself in. He tripped over something in his path.

Landing face down, Data observed to himself that the grey appeared to go downwards also. "Fascinating," he breathed.

A voice interrupted him. "Data, is it you?"

The voice sounded both uncertain and bewildered. Data got to his hands and knees and felt around through the murk, managing to come into contact with a solid object. His hand told him it was a leg, or - more correctly - a calf.

He felt his way further up the leg and encountered a hand which gripped his wrist powerfully and dragged him up to face level. "Commander Riker! Are you impaired in any way?"

Riker considered the question. "No, I don't think so, Data. Uh... You don't have any idea what the hell is going on, do you? Where in God's name are we?"

The android applied his positronic netways to the inquiries. "I am at present working on a premise for both those questions, Commander."

He helped Riker to his feet, which proved to be more difficult than it seemed. The mist wanted to hold on to the Human and stubbornly resisted Data's efforts. Eventually it gave way with a

deep sucking, tearing sound - it split.

"Ugh!" said Riker, regarding the slime dripping wetly from his body. He brushed himself down; pieces of rotted uniform came away in his hand. "Good grief!" he exclaimed.

"It would appear that the fog we at present find ourselves in is able to digest the material of your uniform, Commander - "

"Yeah," agreed Riker, cutting the android off with a touch of impatience. "I'm just glad it doesn't seem to want to digest me." He looked up, squinting at the horizon, trying hard to see through the greyness, and shook his head. "How about you, Data? Has it affected you in any way?"

Data considered the question briefly. "No," he said at last, after what had to the Human seemed an interminable silence. "All my processors appear to be functioning correctly, and I have concluded this is no hallucination but, in fact, real." This did not elicit the response Data expected, and he regarded the Commander curiously.

Riker was quiet because something very peculiar was happening. He watched with awe as the rotted parts of his uniform began visibly to repair themselves. The synthetic material began to weave itself into existence again, appearing fraction by fraction until the holes in his clothing were nothing but tiny pinpricks, and then not there at all.

"Real, you say," the Commander said, and held out his arm for the android to look at. His voice full of patent disbelief, Riker went on, "Are you certain we're not hallucinating, Data? I mean, are you absolutely certain?"

"Not absolutely," Data began cautiously, "but the probability of my being correct is 93.835%."

"Good odds, then?" remarked Riker, who was still goggling at his good-as-new uniform.

"Very."

"Okay," said Riker. "If you don't know where we are, have you been able to ascertain whether any other crew member is here?" The android started to speak, but a quick gesture from the Commander forestalled him. "What was that?"

"What was what?"

Riker stared at Data. "That light! It came from over that way." He raised his hand and pointed it past Data's nose. "Well," Riker continued, "standing here won't bring it to us, Commander, so we might as well go and face what ever it is - or *whoever* it is."

The Human loped off in the direction he had indicated, and Data was forced to hurry after him. He had not seen any light and wondered whether sensory deprivation could work this fast on Human senses - although he could not determine accurately how long Commander Riker had been present in this place.

"Over thataway, Data," Riker stated as he drew to a halt.

Data peered through the gloom, and saw something at last. As soon as it had registered in his brain, it disappeared. "Most

peculiar. It has just vanished, Commander - "

"And reappeared over there, my friend," Riker jerked his head in a different direction. "Someone is playing will o' the wisp with us."

Data started to ask something, but was again stopped by the Commander's sharp, "Later."

Riker headed off once more, his stride sure and strong, then he stopped, confused. "'S gone again, Data. Can you see it?"

The android rotated slowly through 360 degrees, and something caught the corner of his eye. He experimented by moving towards it indirectly. The light stayed in the position he had seen it.

"It would seem, Commander, that by following the light as if we do not actually see it, it will precede us. If we look at it directly, it changes position."

"I see," said Riker, and followed Data's lead. "Damn odd," he muttered, but kept close to the android.

As they moved onwards the fog seemed to begin to thin, becoming less like toffee, more like syrup, then flowed round them, and they were better able to see where they were going. Underfoot was wet ground which slurped at their boots with noisy relish, spattering them with thick greenish-grey gunge. The light was getting better too.

Something to the side of the path they stood on attracted Data's attention. A shadow? No, two shadows which seemed to be familiar. Ever curious, the android moved towards the anomaly and found himself grabbed roughly by the throat and held with considerable force. Riker tried to interfere, but found himself grappling with the second shade which also had a familiar feel.

Hoarsely, Data said, "I believe you will find restraint unnecessary, Lieutenant."

The arm around his neck relaxed rather suddenly, and a deep, surprised voice spoke in his ear. "Data? Sir?"

"Yes," replied Data, and tested his neck gingerly where the Klingon's grasp had been strongest. "Commander Riker is also present. We have been following that light." He pointed, and Riker realised his opponent was none other than Geordi La Forge.

"It's good to see you two!" exclaimed the engineer gratefully. "Worf and I have been stuck in this fug for... " He shook his head. "Well, it seems like hours anyway."

"From which direction have you been travelling?" Data inquired, checking to see they had not lost sight of the will o' the wisp. He noted thankfully that it appeared to have stopped a slight distance away from the four of them, and seemed to be... waiting? Hovering, at least, and staying in one place.

"They all look the same," the engineer admitted. "We've not been able to find out a damn thing, and my VISOR is next to useless in this fog."

This piece of information interested Data greatly. "Are you

able to give us any information regarding the nature of our surroundings, Geordi?"

La Forge shrugged expressively. "Just fog, and more fog. Does seem to be completely inert, though."

"Are you armed, Worf?" asked Riker pragmatically. The conversation had been fairly interesting, but now he needed to get to the bottom of the mystery and back to the Enterprise. A phaser could be an important piece of equipment if wherever they were turned out to be hostile.

The Klingon grunted assent, and made a move towards the pathway Data and the First Officer had been on, and hence towards the light.

It promptly danced out of his direct line of vision, and reappeared at a spot some 50 degrees or so from where it had been, and a little higher in the air. "Sir?" he asked.

"Do not look at it directly," informed Data. "To do so makes it change direction, and it does seem to want to lead us somewhere."

"We haven't seen that before, have we, Worf?" said La Forge, trying hard to follow his friend's instructions. It was proving extraordinarily difficult; the light seemed to have something which almost compelled you to watch it, and it was very lovely. *Odd*, he thought as he watched it from the corner of his eyes, *but I'm still not getting any input from the VISOR I could regard as out of the ordinary, and that thing is definitely there.* Geordi opened his mouth to speak, but Riker got there first.

"What do you see, Geordi?"

"Nothing," he replied. "A great big fat nothing. Zilch."

"To borrow a phrase," said Riker, "curiouser and curiouser." He rubbed his beard thoughtfully, and gave a curt nod. "Okay. It wants us to follow, so we follow." He held out a hand to Data. "Lead on, MacDuff."

Data stepped onto the pathway, thought, stopped and addressed the Commander. "Sir," he said, "you are misquoting. That should be 'Lay on, MacDuff; And damned be him that first cries, *Hold, enough!*'"

"Thank you," interrupted Riker. "If you wouldn't mind, Commander, I think the Shakespeare lesson could wait."

"Yes, sir," responded the android evenly, and set off at a tangent to the wavering light.

As they moved in the direction the light wanted them to take, it did start to become clearer. The heavy mist began to part and thin, first in patches, then as if great spoonfuls had been taken up and eaten. Under their feet the ground also became drier, stopped trying to swallow them and acquired a sparse covering of green. The transition to habitable space was marked by a faint resistance.

"Someone's going out of their way to be a lot friendlier, Commander," observed La Forge drily.

"Hmm," said Riker; he was sceptical.

The fog finally gave way to a not unpleasant vista of deep green trees with flat tops, making them look rather like a childish idealisation of how trees should look. A sun, or at least, something that appeared to be a sun, shone in the weak blue and grey sky; dim, almost but not white, nor yellow either. It began to rain - not a gentle rain but a solid steady sheeting of water which ran from their bodies and dripped down into their boots, finding all the crevices of their bodies.

Worf shook his sodden hair out of his collar and scowled furiously. The water trickling down his back was not improving his temper in the slightest. "It's bizarre that here it's wet - " he uttered this in disgust " - and there it's dry." Narrowing his eyes suspiciously, he glanced round and stalked about the open area they had found themselves in. "Where is it?"

Data blinked rain out of his face, and tried the slight shift of his eyes which had proved so successful in bringing the glare to his attention before. "It has gone," he announced.

They all heard the noise of tinkling laughter, and Worf growled angrily, spinning round to confront the maker of the noise. He did not find the instigator, and turned slowly, puzzled, back to his companions. Each of them had turned in a different direction.

"We are being toyed with," the Klingon said with clear irritation, and loudly.

"Don't think they missed that, Worf," remarked La Forge, and joined his friends in searching the small copse and the open meadow.

They all spent some time futilely creeping around trees, looking under stones and peering into the middle distance. All their efforts were in vain, as their invisible companion did not want to be found yet and the light, delicate laughter shadowed each of them. The only one not even remotely annoyed by the phenomenon was Data; the others were rapidly losing all patience.

"At least it's not cold," said La Forge at last. He sat on a fallen tree trunk, and wiped ineffectually at his wet face. The rain dripped off the end of his nose, and splattered on his drenched uniform.

"I," said Worf, joining him and running his hand through the length of his hair, managing to squeeze out a fair amount of rain before it travelled into his uniform, "do not like water."

These words were scarcely out of his mouth when the rain stopped, and they all began to steam gently as the orb in the sky started to beat down on them. Riker exchanged incredulous looks with his companions, and shut his mouth with a snap when he realized it was hanging slightly open.

"What happened?" he asked.

"You didn't like the rain," a sulky voice said. "I do, an' now you've gone and spoiled it."

"Data?" Riker turned to the android, who was staring at an apparition hanging in the atmosphere slightly above his head.

She - it had the appearance of a small humanoid female - fluttered on delicate, membranous wings; a slight blue nimbus

surrounded her and her hair shrouded a body of similar hue. She had elegant feet, slim and five-toed, neat legs, and a pert face with tilted exotic bluebell eyes, fringed by navy lashes. The curved bow of a mouth was downward slanted in an expression of sullenness.

As they watched, stupefied, she flew, darting to stare first at Riker, and then at La Forge. Finally she hovered in front of Worf, and flitted away when she had looked her fill.

Returning to Data, she spoke again. "You're not like them, are you? You're a... a toy, a thingummy-bob, a wotsit." Glaring at him, she extended a small five-fingered hand and tweaked his nose viciously; her wings stirred his hair and set the air to jangling sweetly.

Startled, Data reacted by drawing sharply away, and put up an arm to fend off any further attacks on his person.

"He's not a thing," Riker spoke up sternly, his patience all but gone. "Who are you, and where are we?"

She glowered like a petulant child sticking out a tiny bottom lip, then the tip of her tongue appeared and she gave him a resounding bronx cheer.

"Charming," remarked La Forge. "Looks cute, but she sure ain't."

"What is it?" Worf managed to shake off the disbelief he was feeling.

"Well, looks like a fairy to me," Geordi replied in answer to his friend. "At least, it looks like all the fairies I've ever read about before now. But they don't exist, do they?" He sounded confused.

"Do you see her?" Riker asked curiously, recovered from the rudeness of their minute hostess.

"Sure," said La Forge. "Kind of solid, like she's more real than we are."

The fairy laughed her tinkling laugh, and fluttered around their heads making a miniature storm cloud appear above each of them. Tiny flashes of lightening and angry grumbles of thunder crackled above them, and then their personalised storms emptied themselves and they were even wetter than they had been before.

Worf gritted his teeth, and spoke through a tightly clenched jaw, ignoring the delighted antics of a happy fairy. "Then it is a mythical creature, and is a figment of my... *our* imagination."

The object of their discussion stopped her convoluted circling and landed on a rock. She stamped her foot in a fury, sparks flying from her heels. "I am real," she spat, and stamped both of her feet again. "I'll show you just how real I am. I'm realer than you, you thingy, you... *mortal*, you."

"Bad tempered, isn't she," Riker said after he had observed the fairy throwing a tantrum in response to Worf's remarks.

"Fairies - " Data watched the small humanoid with keen interest " - are notorious for their fickle emotions."

"Untrustworthy, huh?" Riker nodded, and tried to talk to her once more. "Miss... Er... ma'am, can you tell us where we are and who you are - " He broke off and ducked as a bolt of blue headed past his ear and towards the Klingon. Worf saw it and flung himself out of its way, landing in a pile of something that had not been there a moment ago.

"What the hell?" the First Officer inquired, and drew away from Worf when he approached them. "Phew, what a stink."

Worf regarded the hysterical fairy with loathing, and brushed the worst of the mess off as best he could.

"You seem to have landed in - " Data began, intent on the way the engineer backed away hurriedly as the Klingon drew near.

"Shit," said Worf succinctly, and wrinkled his nose fastidiously.

"Who's real now?" the small blue one shrieked, tumbling through the sky in an agony of ecstasy at her prank.

"Fickle," continued Data without a pause, "and cruel."

"Please, my lady," began Riker again, "if you could let us know - "

She sniffed in disdain, settling down again on the rock. "I might." Seeming bored, she dried them and cleaned Worf at the same time, with a negligent wave of her hand.

Riker and his companions approached the rock with a good deal of trepidation, standing as close to the fairy as they could without antagonising her. She preened herself; first her wings, then produced a miniscule comb for her deep blue hair. She pretended enormous interest in the knots and tangles her nimble fingers were finding, but she could not stand their scrutiny for long. Rising into the air, she strutted arrogantly in front of them with her tip-tilted nose pointed towards the sky.

Watching these antics aggravated the officers, and Worf ground his teeth audibly. "Sir!" he protested.

"I know, Worf. There's nothing I'd like better than to tan her backside, but she does seem to have some pretty unusual powers. I don't think rubbing her the wrong way would do us any good, and we - " Riker was rudely interrupted by a snigger. He turned his attention back to the fairy. "Yes?"

Smiling winningly at him, she flew closer to him. "You're pretty, man thing," she said. "Do you think I am?"

Riker raised his brows in surprise, and could practically hear La Forge and Worf's eyes rolling heavenwards. He *did* hear Geordi mutter, "Good grief!"

Ignoring them, he plastered on his best smile. "No, you're not pretty - " He went on hastily as he saw the thunder start to mar her features. "You are beautiful. Gorgeous, ravishing. A drink of water to a thirsty man; as lovely as the night - "

"Not the day?" she asked suspiciously, but hovered within arm's reach.

"As the day," he agreed hurriedly, and stepped closer to her. "As the flowers. As lovely as a blue moon - "

"Oh!" she exclaimed. Then she smiled and put her hand into his. "How did you know my name? Did you guess? I bet you did." She scowled at the others. "They'd never have known."

Coming yet closer to him, the fairy settled herself on Riker's shoulder - a wisp of a creature, fragile as dandelion fluff - and ran her fingers through his hair and down his cheek. "Sooooo pretty," she murmured, and, unseen by him or the others, she leered, taking the strands of his hair and passing them through her teeth.

Assailed by the fragrance of flowers and sun-dried grass, Riker gathered his wits enough to ask, "Blue Moon? That's your name?"

Nodding, Blue Moon rested a cheek against his face; she started to kiss him with relish. "Good enough to eat," she said, snuffling at his skin, licking intently.

La Forge hid a grin behind his hand. "Seems the Commander has a conquest."

Data tilted his head, fascinated, and Worf curled his lip, revolted.

"Would you like to meet my sisters and brothers?" she asked guilelessly, all innocent wide open eyes.

"Well..." began Riker, and cleared his throat. Blue Moon started to fidget and grimace. "Yes, I'd love to." He continued to ignore the looks being sent in his direction by his friends; he felt out of his depth now - strangely uneasy.

Clapping her hands together loudly, the fairy launched herself effortlessly from her resting place, heading swiftly towards the trees. Blue Moon stopped and spun round, gyrating happily, and was joined by a profusion of glittering, darting, scintillating bodies of a myriad different shades. More blue, then gold, green, lemon, red, pink, silver - all the shades of the rainbow and more.

The fairies clustered into a gleaming ball around their sister, spiralling higher and higher into the heavens, their wings bright and flashing in joy, slender limbs and bodies entwined. The bliss of their meeting was a siren's song.

"Remarkable," said Data.

All of them watched with sharply differing feelings. Riker was suffused with delight, La Forge was as intrigued as Data. Only the Klingon was not charmed by the display.

As quickly as it had begun, the fairies separated and flittered to the four officers. They were all subjected to intense, sometimes cruel, scrutiny. Tiny fingers reached out and pinched tender fleshy parts; sometimes poking into orifices not designed for small hands to delve into.

"Commander, please - " Worf swatted at a persistent lemon gadfly to send him tumbling - "ask her to ask them to control their curiosity. I do not - " he looked towards his commanding officer almost pleadingly - "wish to hurt them, but..." He trailed off, continuing to swat.

Riker was no less bothered by Blue Moon's sisters and brothers than his comrades. "Blue Moon, please ask them to stop this, will - " He broke off, startled. The pinching and poking had stopped as though it had never even started.

Adjusting his uniform, Riker smiled thankfully at the small blue one as she resettled on his shoulder. "Thank you," he said gratefully. Blue Moon sighed happily, basking in the sun of his gratitude, and with a wave of her hand sent her sisters and brothers to settle in a loose circle around the Enterprise officers. Data, who had taken the opportunity for a bit of exploration, was hurried back to where the others stood.

Riker decided to try to ask the important question again. Stroking her hair, he said softly, "Where are we, and how did we get here?"

Blue Moon's wings trembled in an agitated manner; the sound of them rustled in Riker's ear as skin over old, dry bones. A stubborn expression appeared on her face, making her features mulish. "You want to leave me, don't you?" The tone of her voice was accusatory. "Well, I won't let you go, so there, pretty man!"

"No," lied Riker quickly. "You've got it all wrong, Blue Moon. We - I - don't want to leave you. I just want to be sure our other friends are all right - that they are safe too."

"Huh!" The fairy continued to sulk. "You only want to know because of that she." With this cryptic comment, Blue Moon flounced from the Commander's shoulder and headed for her relatives.

Riker jerked his head to his companions and they joined him on the fallen tree. Raising a brow, Riker asked, "Any ideas, gentlemen?"

Behind them they could hear the sound of dozens of small voices whispering and giggling. There was a lot of tomfoolery going on amongst their hosts.

"While you were gaining Blue Moon's trust, Commander," Data began, disregarding the muffled comment of La Forge and Worf's snort. "I made an effort to go beyond the confines of this area in which we find ourselves. The fairies made strenuous efforts to ensure I stayed precisely where they wanted me to by using those tactics they have so ably demonstrated - "

"You mean, they bullied you back to here," said La Forge.

"I believe I just said that, Geordi," Data replied earnestly, then went on. "Before I was ushered back to the meadow, I was able to find out that there is a force field at the perimeter of this area."

"Interesting," said Riker. "Now, is it for keeping something out, or us *in*?"

Captain Picard sat in his usual position, leaning back in his chair - an attitude of relaxation. Troi, to his right, echoed his posture, one leg crossed over the other, and she rested her head on a hand.

The viewscreen was working. It showed a bemused quartet of officers, surrounded by fairies, trying to decide what had happened to them, and why it had happened to them.

Troi's eyes were dead, as were the Captain's, and everyone else on board. Only their minds remained fluid with thought and the movement of electrical impulse; only their minds alive in the prisons of their bodies.

"Unknown," replied Data.

"Have you been able to find out anything, Geordi?" Riker directed his attention to the engineer, who was frowning at Data.

La Forge considered. "No," he replied shortly. "I'd like to get a closer look at that force field." Glancing at Worf, Geordi continued, "How about a distraction? Could you rig one with the phaser?"

"Possibly," Worf conceded. "What did you have in mind?"

"Well..." La Forge started to think out loud. "More of a demonstration actually. We don't want to get them mad - I've got a feeling that mad fairies could be real nasty."

Worf narrowed his eyes, and regarded the fairies with distaste. "We've seen a few parlour tricks, and nothing else, Geordi. Nothing to indicate they are truly dangerous." He thought about it. "Though..."

"Yeah," said La Forge. "My thoughts exactly."

Riker added, "Worf and I cause them to look the other way, while you and Data go take a look at the..." He fell silent as their miniscule blue hostess approached them again, a simper on her lips.

Blue Moon sang a few sweet, high notes in a lilting voice, and La Forge started in surprise. *What the hell happened then?* he mused, but the sound of the blue fairy's voice swept such considerations from his mind. But it niggled at him, he knew he had seen something - something at last from the VISOR.

"You're here because you wanted to be," she said without introduction, nonplussing them completely. "You wanted to be here."

Worf stared at Riker. "I have no such recollection," he said.

"Nor me," added La Forge, and eyed Blue Moon cautiously.

"How do you mean?" Riker asked. "How did we want to be here?" *This should be interesting,* he thought.

Pouting again, the fairy used a sweep of blue sparks to make Worf move himself - she nearly set fire to him - and swanked to take his spot on the trunk. "You don't remember," she accused him crossly. "You were thinking about Peter Pan. I heard you."

"I was thinking about..." Riker frowned in an effort to remember; he bit his bottom lip because his recollection of what had happened prior to appearing in this place was hazy. Shaking his

head, he said, "Even if I was, that doesn't explain what Worf, Geordi and Data are doing here."

Blue Moon squinted at him, a crafty expression showing in her eyes. "Them! They're not important, pretty man. They're here 'cos you wanted them. You like them." The bow mouth curved upwards, but tightly shut. It was not a pleasant smile, but rather a grotesque mockery of one, and did not reach the fairy's eyes. "Besides, 'cept for that one - " she tipped her head regarding Data under lowered lids, the gleam of her eyes dragging their attention closely to her " - they're tasty too."

Worf moved closer to the fairy. At this rate, he might be able to get away with not using the phaser to distract Blue Moon's attention; he could save it for something more important - perhaps to save their lives if it came to that.

"I did not think of any such things," he stated, planning to annoy her; his feeling was that that would be exceptionally easy to do. His premise was correct.

Blue Moon stood, hands on hips, backside thrust out. "Stupid!" She punctuated her words by stamping her foot; she hissed them out from tight lips. "Stupid! Stupid *thing*."

While she was ranting, Worf saw from the corner of his eyes Data and La Forge head towards the edge of the meadow, and disappear into the trees. The other fairies had momentarily forgotten there were more people than the two they could see, and had gathered closer in the hope of seeing their sister deliver some sort of retribution to the Klingon. Such were their sadistic little souls.

Data led the engineer to the place where he had found evidence of the force field. Getting to his knees, the android dug a shallow pit in the ground with his hands, moving steadily outwards towards the fog which writhed beyond.

Hunkering down to Data's level, La Forge frowned then extended a hand to help with the excavation. At the edge of the hole was a sharp delineation of where the field started; he scooped a little more of the heavy soil away from the field.

"Goes all the way down, Data. Well, whaddaya know," he said, settling heavily on the ground. Making thoughtful little noises to himself, the engineer rose and moved further along. "Hmm," he gestured to Data, who rejoined him. "More of the same."

They both pressed the palms of their hands against the obstruction, and it flared brilliantly where they had touched it, a coruscating rainbow effect which remained even after they had removed their hands. As they watched, the rainbow spread from the initial contact point, extending rapidly upwards to a explosive display of colour.

"If they don't see that," La Forge muttered to Data, "I'll eat my hat."

Data opened his mouth.

"No," said La Forge quickly. "Let's go before they come looking for what did that." He pointed at the force field.



They hurried back to where they had left Riker and Worf, trying to sneak back without their absence being missed.

Worf was being subjected to yet more humiliating examinations of his person, and Riker was held at bay like a rabid animal. Every time he made a move to help his comrade, he was threatened by a group of little people all of whom had suddenly acquired small pieces of hardware which glinted efficiently in the light - miniature pieces of metal all honed to razor sharpness - and some were being used to prick at the First Officer; he had numerous small puncture wounds. From a slight distance, Blue Moon directed the operations of her cohorts, doing nothing to help Riker at all.

The Klingon was trussed like a chicken, bound with golden ropes which could be seen to tighten even as he struggled. They cut brutally into the bunched muscles of his body. However, unlike his Human companions, pain merely served to anger Worf more; but his rage delighted his tormentors, merely serving to prompt them to greater excesses.

As Data and La Forge watched in horrified fascination, the fairies materialised an apple and wedged it between the outraged Klingon's jaws. The laughter issuing from the mouths of the creatures was nothing like the delicate, pleasing noise they had heard from Blue Moon - this was purely vicious, malignant and spiteful.

Geordi, without giving any thought to his own safety, headed immediately to intervene in their abominable game. He managed to reach Worf's side, and began trying to tear off the bonds holding the Klingon.

The ropes were a complete shock to the engineer; his fingers gripped at them abortively, sliding past them as if they did not exist. How could this be? La Forge did not have the time to consider this peculiarity, and kept trying. He almost missed the information his VISOR was providing now the fairies had changed their bewitching song.

Data attempted to reach his friends; his efforts were in vain. The android was grabbed, and held by the unknown force they used to hold this place in existence. The fairy song swirled around him again, suddenly the sweetness of the clamour, enticing no longer, became sickly, cloying and putrid.

Struggling hard, La Forge shouted something to Data. "I know what it is, Data! I know!"

Riker fought his captors, and was bitten by a rose hued maiden; he stared appalled at the little creature as she seemed to swell with the taste of his blood in her mouth.

Every one of the fairies, including their sister Blue Moon, stopped whatever they were doing, and turned with bright, eager eyes to gaze hungrily at the First Officer.

"COMMANDER!" cried La Forge. "THEY'RE NOT WHAT THEY SEEM. THEY'VE BEEN BLOCKING MY VISOR. I SEE THEM!! COMMANDER RIKER - USE THE PHASER!!! THE FORCE FIELD, COMMANDER!!!"

"Oh no, pretty one," purred Blue Moon. "Not now, not now. To live we must eat, to eat, we must live." As she spoke, once more her form solidified, became the lovely creature they were familiar

with. "And you would not deny us our lives, would you, tasty little dish, now we know we can use you?" The creature licked her lips with an avid tongue. "And we do need you, I promise."

"But why?" The tones were torn in anguish from the Commander's throat. "Why do you want to eat us?"

"You taste - " the tongue flickered ravenously over drawn lips " - better than we do."

Blue Moon's voice changed, grew deeper, decay crept into it and, the damage done, Riker started to see for himself what it was they were fighting. Where it was they really were. What the true shape of Blue Moon and her sisters and brothers were. Hell licked at him, and so did her devils.

Straining himself to reach for the weapon, Riker found himself face to face with the creature who led the others in their attack. Her blue mouth hung open to reveal the needle teeth that made a mockery of the lovely face, and those gossamer wings had become the stuff of nightmares - a dragon's wings, all scales and heavy ridges, sharp claws gripping his flesh like a vice.

Blue Moon fastened her needle teeth into the First Officer's neck, sucking eagerly at the vein, and raised her head to howl in delight to her brethren. The blood in her mouth flowed and dripped, and a swarm of the things rushed to join her. The Commander went down underneath them, overwhelmed.

As the beasts began their feeding frenzy, Data found himself free from their song and able to act on his own initiative. He was forgotten in their hunger, and he managed to reach the phaser. His fellow officers were crawling with the fairies, an obscene multi-coloured death. There was no time to lose!

The android took the weapon, set it on its highest setting, and pointed it at the highest point of the force field. He fired, and kept on firing. *Hope springs eternal*, he thought. The inanity of the words struck Data forcibly.

Overhead, the colours of the force field mimicked those of the creatures below, serving not to disrupt it totally but to distract the things from their feeding, to allow enough leeway for the other three to attempt their escape.

Worf found his bonds had dissolved with the cessation of the song, and he wasted no time in reaching Riker to grab him and pull him away from the creatures crawling over his flesh. Data had Geordi and they supported each other as they rushed headlong for the fog, and for freedom; perhaps to reality and out of horror.

Still firing, covering his friends, Data forced the fairies to stay within their boundaries, and they found that the field had weakened enough to allow them through.

In a bubble of reality, the fairies gnashed their teeth in vain at the escape of their prey, baying at the confines of their limited existence.

Trembling, La Forge sank to the sticky, grasping ground. His skin was covered in still bleeding lesions, and his uniform was tattered. Worf and Riker were in a similar state, and the Commander rested on the ground as well. His forehead on his knees, Riker ran

his hands through his hair, wincing when they came into contact with innumerable slices and gashes the demon teeth had made in him.

The fog washed at them, surrounding them, covering them, hiding them from the things after their blood.

"Data," Riker's voice was a hoarse whisper. "Please tell me you know how to get back to the Enterprise."

Worf examined himself as they waited for the android to reply. The burn marks of the ropes still indented his skin, and he too was covered with the dozens of bite marks the fairies had left. He should have felt sore, there should have been pain of some kind, but he felt nothing. He watched his hand begin to heal. In a kind of wonder, he said, "Sir, look!"

"It's happening again, Data," said Riker, resignation colouring his tone.

La Forge raised his head, and watched the healing. With the first spark of interest, he spoke up. "You've seen this before?"

"Yes," Data turned back to his colleagues. "I believe I have solved the mystery, Commander, and I also think that if we head - " he turned slightly and pointed - "in this direction we will shortly find ourselves on the Enterprise."

La Forge glanced in the direction the android pointed. "Why that way, Data?" Although, the engineer was hopeful his friend was correct, he could not see why he would be. "They all look the damn same."

Data considered his reply. "There is a difference in the atmospheric content which I can discern easily now I am not within the fairies' sphere of influence." His companions just regarded him with scepticism, and he went on helpfully. "To you it would be best described as a difference in smell."

The others turned their heads in different directions to test his theory. Worf rumbled, Geordi and Riker looked surprised.

"So there is." Wearily, Riker nodded and rose to his feet. "Okay, show us, Mr. Data."

Once more the android found himself heading the contingent, and he moved sure-footedly through the murk, certain of himself and his solution.

It became thicker and thicker until they were straining hard against the pull of the stuff, and then... emergence into the bright and welcome bridge of the Enterprise. Home!

Captain Picard spasmed, and came to life as did the whole ship on their return. Smiling, he said, "Well done! Well done!" Then he directed the returnees' attention to the viewscreen, and on it they could see the true shape and form at last of those creatures who would have lured them to their deaths. Demons! Every one of them a horror from the depths of depravity. "You can see what you have prevented, gentlemen."

"Captain," Riker stared at the viewscreen and its occupants. "Commanders La Forge and Data have something interesting to tell us. They think they know how we got in there - " he smiled thinly,

massaging the sore spot on his neck which Blue Moon had left as her legacy " - but can it wait? I'd like to get the hell out of here."

Picard nodded. "I quite understand, Number One, and yes, let us by all means get the hell out of here." As they returned to their stations, the Captain spoke. "Ensign, Warp Factor Two. Mark 335.221."

"Course laid in, sir," she responded.

"Engage," said Captain Picard.

The observation lounge was very quiet as the bridge crew waited for Data to take a chair. The android seated himself and returned the steady regard of his Captain.

Picard leaned forward in his chair, and rested his forearms on the smooth top of the table, twining his fingers together. "I understand you know what happened and how you came to be in that place, Commander."

"It was not I, sir, who first became aware of the anomalies presented by our captors, but Commander La Forge. If it had not been for the VISOR, I do not believe we would have prevailed." Data sank into silent contemplation, unnaturally pensive.

"How so?" encouraged the Captain.

"I was unaware of their true nature also, sir. I did not... I was... unable to discern their true characteristics. It is not something I find easy to admit, Captain. I *should* have been aware of the duplicity." Data admitted this candidly enough, but all his colleagues were aware that this constituted great uneasiness on the android's part.

Picard eased back in his chair, and crossed his legs. "Data," he said coolly, "I think you are being too hard on yourself - " he glanced over at Troi " - and I think the Counselor will concur with me about this." At her nod and slight smile, he continued, "The creatures were contained in their own reality field, were they not?"

"Yes," agreed Data.

"How, therefore, could you have behaved differently if what you were experiencing was to all extent and purpose real? And it was real whilst you were in their sphere of influence, wasn't it, gentlemen?" Picard addressed La Forge, Riker and Worf as well as the reticent Data.

At the nods of agreement, Picard drew a sharp breath, satisfied, and released it quickly. "Good," he announced. "Please continue."

La Forge took up the rest of the tale. "It was when Blue Moon sang I first noticed something. Actually," he corrected himself, "it was before then. Just before she sang, before she told us... well, *lied* to us about how we'd come to be there." Geordi frowned, as if the telling caused him some distress. "Her voice wiped the memory of what she and the others were from my mind, and it wasn't 'til I'd got a good look at the force field that things started to add up."

The Captain tilted his head in an interested manner. "Indeed?"

Spurred on, the engineer clasped his hands and leaned forward. "Yeah," he said. "The fog beyond the reality we were in was being kept out by the fairies' power - magic - whatever you want to call it, because it was our time/space continuum - for them, a different dimension. If they'd come into contact with it - " La Forge parted his hands in an explosive gesture " - KAPOW!! No more fairies. Like those deep sea fish that get dredged up sometimes planetside."

"Disappointing," grunted Worf, expressing the feelings of the others who had been held captive. Realizing he had attracted everybody's attention, he folded his arms and finished by saying, "I did not wish to end my life as a meal."

"Yes," said Picard; he turned to La Forge and invited him to go on. "And...?"

"Firing at the force field caused their reality to start to fray, and ours to encroach on their space. If they had not allowed us to escape, they would have been sucked through to our dimension and exploded. As soon as we were our side of the dimensional plane - the fog - we healed, and everything got repaired." He shook his head slowly, and grimaced slightly. "Like it never happened. Their universe is on its way to extinction. Amazing. And a shame we couldn't study it closer."

"Would we want to?" asked Riker grimly.

"How did you get there?" Picard inquired curiously.

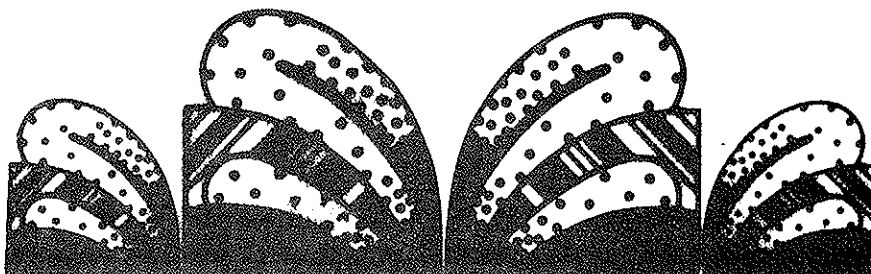
"We were pulled through," Data continued the explanation, "by an Oxpimen fracture which appeared on the bridge, and as the four of us were in close proximity - "

"Yeess," agreed the Captain, "I see that, Mr. Data. And it would also account for the loss of time everyone on board experienced - including myself."

"Yes, sir," said Data.

"We were fortunate." Picard eyed his staff, and pursed his mouth slightly. "We were very fortunate indeed."

The bubble of the 'fairy' universe continued to move away from the spot where it had met with the Enterprise and her crew, drifting through dimension after dimension. Eventually it might meet a space compatible with its cargo again. The space where it had just missed its last meal went about its own business, happily ignorant of the problems the fairies might, could, cause to other worlds, dimensions, places. But it would probably shrink further on itself to the inevitable end of an ancient reality, and there it would finish. Wouldn't it?



DATA OR LORE

Am I Data or Lore?
 Just wait a tick and see.
 Data, brother, I am perfect.
 Better than you, that's me.

Poor brother, so unHuman,
 Though you do the best you can,
 You sound so robotic -
 While *I* sound like a man.

Now brother, we're identical
 In how we look and work.
 But when it comes to ambition,
 You're just a total jerk.

It's a pity you're not perfect,
 As good at life as me.
 Oh well, I'll just remove you,
 Then I'll be you - you, me.

Dear Crystal Entity, 'tis me,
 Your ideal friend.
 Come and have some energy -
 These Human lives you'll end.

We work so well together,
 A perfect pair are we.
 Our lifespans together
 Make an eternity.

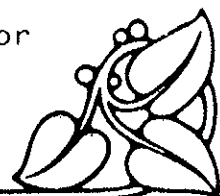
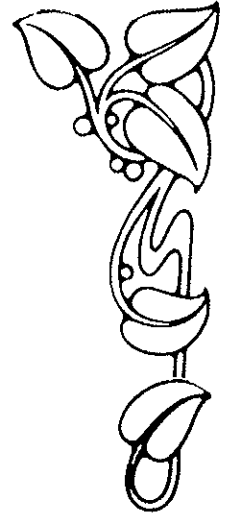
Oh Data, you're a bother;
 You simply can't stop me.
 You, the boy, the Doctor -
 A really troublesome three.

Still, it's quite amusing
 To watch you plot and plan.
 I'll just have to show you
 You're as fallible as a man.

It's sad I'll have to end like this -
 It really has been fun.
 But my true destiny at last
 Has finally come.

Wait -
 What's that look upon your face?
 Dear brother, you've just sent me
 Into spa.....

Helen Connor



THE FIREMAKER

by

Matthew Conway

HISTORIAN'S NOTE

This adventure takes place between the first-season Star Trek: The Next Generation episodes The Last Outpost and Where No One Has Gone Before, some time after the events chronicled in Code of Honor.

Captain's Log, Stardate 41401.3. The Enterprise is in orbit of a planet designated Alpheratz VII, a class M world discovered by long-range sensors during a routine scan of this star system. Upon our arrival here, we have further determined that the planet is inhabited by humanoid life forms on a technological level comparable to that of Earth some one hundred thousand years ago. An away team is being prepared for transport down to the surface to carry out a more detailed observation of our find.

As the transporter beam released its grip on the away team, a sudden gust of rain-laden wind served as a sharp reminder to the four officers that even a class M world could be inhospitable if they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. No amount of preparation could compensate for the effects of a rain storm, and the readily-absorbent fabric of Starfleet uniforms did little to improve matters.

Commander William T. Riker aimed a disenchanted glance at the black clouds that crept across the early morning sky above, silently cursed the transporter chief in a number of different languages, and looked around at the rest of the away team. Lieutenant-Commander Data and Lieutenant (j.g.) Geordi La Forge were exchanging a glance that seemed to ask exactly how they had both been so unfortunate as to be selected to explore this particular planet at this particular moment, while the expression on Lieutenant Natasha Yar's face alone was enough to make the First Officer glad that he had not been solely responsible for selecting the landing site.

"Away team to Enterprise," he finally announced with a tap on his communicator after making certain that everyone had arrived safely.

"This is the Bridge," replied the familiar voice of Captain Jean-Luc Picard. "Does everything check out down there, Number One?"

"Yes, sir, although we could have done with a little more luck in the weather stakes. I think we've arrived in the middle of the monsoon season."

"Agreed," said Picard, "but unfortunately time and tide wait

for no man, least of all a Starfleet officer, and our encounter with the Ferengi has left us with only twelve hours to spare to carry out this survey if we're to make the rendezvous with the USS Fearless."

"I understand, Captain," replied Riker. "At least the rain should mean that the Alphas in this area won't cause us too many unforeseeable problems. They're probably hiding somewhere dry and warm, and I can't say I blame them."

"Rather you than me, Number One. Keep us apprised, and good luck. Enterprise out."

The channel closed again, but not before Riker thought that he heard the faint sound of Counselor Deanna Troi's laughter in the background, a sound obliterated by an ominous rumble of thunder. The combination did nothing to raise his spirits as he turned to face the group that had assembled before him.

"All right, people," he said wearily, even more depressed by the heavy spots of rain that now began to fall from the sky in steadily increasing numbers. "Let's get this job finished so we can all go home to our nice, dry Starship."

"Phasers on stun," added Yar, checking the setting on her own weapon. "We don't want any surprises, but let's be ready if we do meet any."

As Data and La Forge copied the Security Chief's actions, Riker walked to the edge of the clearing in which the away team had materialised. A faint trail wound its way into the trees, gradually disappearing from view among the trunks until it finally vanished after a dozen or so metres. As far as he could see, nothing moved either on the trail or within the deciduous forest.

"Let's move out."

The wine-uniformed figure of the Enterprise's First Officer stepped cautiously onto the trail and into the dense network of trees, Yar just behind him, the Second Officer and the Helmsman following her. The rain was replaced by the rapid pitter-patter of drops striking the leaf canopy overhead, but no more water reached the ground. That sound, coupled with the wary footsteps of the away team, was all that broke the heavy silence covering the forest like a blanket.

After five minutes of steady walking, Data flipped open his tricorder and examined the miniature computer screen before checking his findings with La Forge.

"Commander," he whispered loudly enough to catch Riker's attention, prompting the First Officer to come to a halt and motion for the others to do the same. "It would appear that our tricorders are not functioning as they should."

"Not functioning? How?" replied Riker, somewhat underwhelmed by both this new development and, as time had passed, the whole away mission in general. He was far from at a loss to recall others more exciting, more comfortable, or more worthwhile than investigating a Stone Age culture on a soaking-wet planet while under considerable time pressure.

"Maximum reliable scanning range has fallen to below one hundred metres, while several sensor assemblies are completely

nonoperational," reported the android. "In addition, power usage has increased by nine point seven percent to power those instruments that are still accessible, reducing remaining usable time to sixteen hours, fifteen point three minutes."

"What's the cause?" asked Yar, removing her phaser from its pouch in anticipation of trouble as a result of this problem.

"It's got to be this storm," answered La Forge, gesturing up toward the wind and rain hidden by the treetops. "If the thunder we heard a few minutes ago is any indication, I'd say there's a fair amount of electricity charging the atmosphere right at this moment, more than enough to disrupt our tricorders."

"Great," drawled Riker, no longer even trying to hide his disillusionment. "So we're walking through a dark forest in the middle of a storm in order to observe a primitive life form with tricorders that aren't working properly. Right?"

"I believe that to be a fair assessment of the situation," agreed Data, "and, under the circumstances, does that not mean that we are incapable of properly fulfilling our mission?"

The three other officers looked at the android with expressions of surprise on their faces.

"You sound as if you've had enough already and want to get back to the Enterprise as soon as possible," said La Forge, echoing the thoughts of his colleagues. "You're going to tell me I'm wrong, though, aren't you?"

"If I understand what you mean by 'had enough' then yes," replied the Second Officer in a somewhat confused tone. "I was merely pointing out that we will be unable to observe the Alphas fully if our instruments are not functioning correctly. Is that not reason enough to return to the Enterprise until the conditions improve?"

"Indeed it is," said Riker with more enthusiasm than he had felt since beaming down to the planet. "First Officer to Enterprise," he continued with a tap on his communicator. "Are you receiving?"

"Loud and clear, Number One," replied Picard's voice over the subspace frequency. "Is something wrong? It's been only a few minutes since you initially reported in."

"Nothing's wrong as such, but the electrical storm down here is blocking our tricorders to the extent that they're almost useless. There doesn't seem to be any point in us staying on the planet until the weather gets better."

The channel was momentarily silent except for the crackle of subspace interference while Picard considered his First Officer's assessment of the situation.

"If things are that bad," said the Captain at length, "there really doesn't seem to be much point in your remaining on the planet, does there?"

"That's how we read things down here," agreed Riker.

"Very well, Number One. Beam back up. We'll just have to hope

for another opportunity to study the Alphas in the time remaining to us, otherwise Starfleet will have to send a different vessel to complete the task instead."

"Acknowledged, sir. Riker out."

The Enterprise's First Officer motioned for the remainder of the away team to group together. When he was finally satisfied with their positions, he tapped his communicator again.

"Riker to transporter room. Four to beam up."

"Aye, Commander. Energising."

Ten seconds later, the Starfleet officers were still standing in the forest, much to Riker's disgruntlement.

"Transporter room, why haven't we been beamed up?" he demanded somewhat testily of his communicator.

"The annular confinement beam is meeting with some kind of electrical interference, sir," replied the Transporter Chief's voice. "I can't get a modulation lock to dematerialise you."

"The storm," added La Forge by way of explanation. "If it's causing difficulties for our tricorders, it could easily do the same to the Enterprise's transporters."

"Great," muttered Riker under his breath as he calmed his temper. More loudly, he continued, "I presume you heard that, Captain."

"I did, Number One," came Picard's voice, "and short of sending down a shuttlecraft, it looks like you've got no choice but to stay on the planet after all. As long as the storm breaks at some stage over the next twelve hours to allow you to complete your observations and then beam up, will that cause any problems?"

Riker considered his answer very carefully, weighing his growing distrust of everyone and everything against what protocol and his rank would allow him to say. In the end, protocol and rank won a narrow victory.

"No, sir. We'll find somewhere relatively dry to wait until the storm clears up, then proceed with the mission when we can. We'll worry about getting a shuttle down here when the deadline for the Fearless rendezvous is a little nearer."

"Acknowledged, Commander. Keep in contact. Picard out."

The communications channel fell silent, as did Alpheratz VII with the exception of the rain, and neither Riker nor the other away team members felt particularly inclined to break that silence. Eventually, however, the First Officer decided that if they were going to have to stay on the planet, they could at least do so in better conditions.

"Data," he said at length, "can you get your tricorder to work well enough to find us somewhere to build a fire until this storm blows itself out?"

"One moment, sir," replied the android, adjusting the device's controls and examining a series of read-outs. "I believe so, but

this is not easy."

As Data tried to coax a semblance of normal operation out of his tricorder, Yar stepped up to Riker, a look of concern dominating her face.

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"I was wondering what safety precautions you think we should take when we set up camp," replied Yar, "especially as we're trapped on an unexplored planet and our equipment isn't fully functioning."

"What would you recommend?" asked Riker, well aware that the Security Chief would not have asked if she had not already formulated her own answer.

"A round-the-clock watch with tricorders scanning at their maximum effective range and phasers set to medium stun," stated Yar immediately, true to form. "If any Alphas do get near, we can't risk them seeing either us or the camp."

Riker considered her proposals for a moment, nodding his head slowly in agreement as he did so.

"Recommendations accepted, Lt Yar," he said finally. "You and Lt La Forge will take the first hour's watch on different sides of the camp to maximise tricorder range. If you detect anything even remotely suspicious, report back to Commander Data and myself. I shouldn't anticipate too much trouble, though. We're still a fair distance from the group of Alphas we were going to observe, and I can't see them travelling too far in this weather."

"Aye, sir."

As Yar moved over to La Forge to inform him of the decision that the First Officer had reached, Data finally ceased manipulating his tricorder.

"Commander," he announced with as much enthusiasm as Riker could ever recall hearing from the android, "I believe I have found a suitable camp site, bearing three-four-eight, range zero point nine kilometres."

"How reliable can that be?" asked La Forge, beating Riker to the question. "Nine hundred metres is a lot further than we were able to scan a couple of minutes ago."

"Indeed," replied Data, "but I was able to boost the sensor assembly signal strength for a brief while by drawing additional power from the tricorder's sarium crystal. This has unfortunately reduced total remaining usage time to fifteen hours, twenty-one minutes, forty-two point six seconds, but I believe that the sacrifice was worthwhile."

"It was," said Riker, orienting himself with the Second Officer's directions and, somewhat surprisingly, finding himself facing further along the trail that the away team had been following in the first place. As he started walking, he added, "Let's go."

II

The shadowy figure crept stealthily through the forest, his

bare feet making only the quietest of sounds as he pursued his prey, his eyes darting from side to side as they swept the ground ahead for the animal's tracks. All else around him was deadly silent, save for the rhythmic pounding of the rain against the tree canopy high above.

Even as he hunted, however, he knew that the food would do little to appease the anger of his tribe, for it was not hunger that threatened his position as chief. Rather, it was something that he could not stalk, could not catch, could not even touch. It was something that his tribe had possessed for many turnings of the moon before it had been taken away from them in a single moment, consigning them all to misery and him, in particular, to revilement because of his inability to retrieve it.

Tonight he was chasing meat, but his true quarry would prove as elusive as ever, and his power would wane a little more. It was now only a matter of time before he was challenged for the leadership of the tribe, and his challenger would have the support of a people no longer willing to tolerate the failure of their current chief. More important than the authority he wielded, however, was the stark reality of life, for the only way that he could be replaced would be after his defeat in mortal combat.

A sudden noise caught his attention, distracting him momentarily from both his thoughts and his prey. Although faint and indistinct, the sound had almost certainly been a voice, and the owner of that voice was on territory that had belonged to his tribe since time immemorial. During that same time, other tribes had only encroached upon its lands to steal or to conquer, neither of which would be welcome news to the hunter.

Deciding quickly that the threat of invasion was more important than adding another carcass to the tribe's food stores, he turned away from the direction in which he had been travelling and instead headed toward the sound's source.

The voices grew steadily louder, separating into those of four distinct speakers. However, so different was the language that the hunter could understand nothing of what was said, a fact that did little to bolster his hopes of discovering what designs this rival tribe harboured toward his own people. Nevertheless, he crawled the final short distance through the forest's densely-packed network of trees, coming to a halt only when he could see clearly into the clearing beyond.

What he saw caused him to catch his breath lest he betray his presence.

Arrayed in the clearing were four members of a tribe undoubtedly stranger than any that he had ever even imagined. They were clad in furs the like of which the hunter had never seen, brightly coloured furs of red and yellow that covered the whole body. Their skins varied from person to person - two like the hunter's, one dark brown, and one almost white. They were tall, but nowhere near as heavily muscled as the strongest members of the hunter's tribe. One wore an unusual blindfold over his eyes, yet he seemed able to see as well as his companions.

One of them was a woman, and a woman possessed of a fiery beauty unlike any that the hunter had beheld for many passings of the moon.

However, as the woman spoke - in a manner that the hunter would never have tolerated from his mate, nor any of his tribe from theirs, no matter how beautiful she might be - to the three males, one of them suddenly stood, a vaguely troubled look on his bone-pale face. Raising a strangely-shaped stone in front of him, he waved it around in the air for a few moments before shrugging his shoulders and sitting down again. The conversation that followed was totally unintelligible.

The hunter considered his options. Outnumbered four to one, attacking these strangers - stranger, indeed, than any that he had ever seen before - without help from the rest of the tribe would be foolhardy and, most likely, fatal. However, that they had encroached upon the tribe's territory left him little choice but to ultimately seek their deaths. To not do so would encourage other tribes to make war upon his people, and, besides, a victory against invaders would surely strengthen his hold upon the chieftainship, allowing him more time, if only a little, to find that which would guarantee his position against all pretenders.

He rose silently to a low crouching position, preparing himself for the long run back to the tribe's cave, where he would gather together the strongest males before returning to do battle with the intruders. However, before setting off, he cast one last glance back over his shoulder to make sure that the intruders were not also readying themselves to leave.

What he saw stopped him dead in his tracks.

One of the invaders, whom the hunter instinctively sensed was the leader of the others, removed a different stone from his furs, tapped it twice, and pointed it at a cluster of leaves and branches that had been piled in the centre of the clearing. An instant later, a bright orange light burst from the stone and struck the brush. Before the hunter could blink, the clearing was bathed in the warm glow of a crackling fire, to which three of the strangers drew closer, leaving only the pale-faced member of their band sitting further to one side, his expression betraying a degree of puzzlement once again.

This, the hunter ignored immediately. His plan to kill the invaders disappeared almost as quickly. Now, at last, he need no longer fear a challenge to his leadership of the tribe. Now, at last, he had within his grasp the quarry that had eluded him for so long. Now, at last, he could restore that which had been lost and had almost cost him his life.

The hunter turned quickly away from the clearing and began to hurry back to the tribe's cave, new ideas forming themselves in his mind. His future was safe. All that he had to do was somehow to capture one of these firemakers...

III

"A shadow?" asked Riker as he helped to finish destroying all traces of the camp.

"Yes, Commander," replied Data. "Although my tricorder was unable to determine exactly what it was scanning, it detected what I can only describe as a sensor shadow of some variety."

Riker scratched his chin thoughtfully as he digested this piece

of news from the Enterprise's Second Officer. The storm had lasted for less than an hour, stopping soon after he had ignited a pile of twigs with his phaser to provide some much-needed warmth for the biological members of the away team, and Riker's mood had taken a significant turn for the better. Now, however, he was beginning to suspect that everything might start going wrong again.

"Could this shadow have been one of the Alphas?" he said aloud. "Is there any chance one of the inhabitants of this planet saw us?"

"It is improbable," replied the android after the briefest of pauses, presumably while he was calculating the precise odds. "There is a residual sixty-four point four percent chance that the tricorder was malfunctioning as a result of increased electrical activity due to the storm. However, there is nevertheless a seven point seven percent probability that an Alpher did indeed observe us for a few seconds."

Riker continued to stoke his chin. As he contemplated the consequences of a possible violation of the Prime Directive, Lt Yar appeared from the far side of the small clearing, La Forge at her side.

"We've removed all indications that we were ever here, sir," she reported with the military briskness that befitted her position as Security Chief of a Galaxy-class vessel. "We can move on to the nearest Alpher location as soon as you're ready."

"Very good, Lieutenant," nodded the First Officer, having considered the situation as deeply as seemed worthwhile. "Commander Data has suggested that we might have been observed at some time over the past hour. Did either of your tricorders detect anything?"

Yar shook her head blankly, as did La Forge.

"But we hadn't been adjusting our instruments like Data did," added the Helmsman. "Maybe he caught something that the storm blinded the rest of us to."

Riker nodded slowly, then pushed the matter from his mind. Even if one of the Alphas had spotted them, the away team had not displayed superior technology except for his brief use of the phaser, and that would surely be interpreted as an application of flint and steel by the primitive people of Alpheratz VII. The Enterprise's sensors had detected heat sources consistent with early firemaking techniques, and there seemed to be no other conclusion that the Alphas could possibly reach.

"Possibly," he said at length. "However, there's nothing we can do about it now, so we'll have to cross that bridge if and when we get to it."

Data looked at Riker, puzzled.

"I was unaware that the inhabitants of this world had advanced sufficiently to master the engineering skills necessary for the construction of bridges," he said. "Was I in error?"

Riker rolled his eyes, Yar tried not to smile, and La Forge was forced to stifle a laugh.

"A metaphorical bridge, Data," explained the First Officer.

Then, before the situation could deteriorate any further, he pointed along the trail that led out of the clearing. Data seemed to understand his meaning, leading the way as the rest of the away team followed behind him.

After fifteen minutes of steady walking, La Forge flipped open his tricorder - now functioning almost normally again - and examined the readings on the tiny computer screen, checking his findings with the Second Officer.

"Commander," he whispered loudly enough to catch Riker's attention at the position that the First Officer had assumed at the front of the party. "The forest continues in this direction for another two hundred metres, then thins out at the edge of a rock formation," continued the Helmsman as the four officers slowed to a halt. "I'm picking up indications of some forty life forms in that area."

"Confirmed," agreed Data. "They seem to be gathered in a large cave in the centre of the formation."

"They must be huddled around a fire," speculated Riker, glancing up at a sky that was still covered from horizon to horizon by forbidding clouds, "and I can't say I blame them in this weather."

"I don't think so, sir," interrupted La Forge with a shake of his head. "My tricorder can't find a heat source within its range. Whatever they're doing in there, they're doing it in the cold."

Riker shot La Forge a look of surprise and incomprehension, an expression that was mirrored on Yar's face as well.

"But I thought our instruments showed that they were not only sufficiently developed to have harnessed fire, but had actually done so. How else can you explain the localised heat sources we detected in the vicinity of the life form gatherings on the other side of the planet's terminator?"

"The instruments did show that, sir," answered Data, "and the life forms would certainly benefit from that skill because their body temperature, although they register as warm-blooded, is two point seven degrees below that of Humans."

"I wouldn't say any of us are exactly overheating at the moment," added Yar.

"Quite possibly," continued the Second Officer, "but there is insufficient information to determine why this particular group does not have a fire lit at what would appear a most opportune time to do so."

Riker thought for a moment, then made his decision.

"Whatever we do next, it's essential that we don't allow ourselves to be seen. Once may be more than enough already," he said. "Although they're primitive by our standards, these life forms are nevertheless sentient, and that means the Prime Directive is in full effect here. They can't have had any contact with other civilisations, so make sure they don't have any with us either."

"Data, circle around the back of the rock formation, see what you can find there. Geordi, follow the perimeter of the forest for

a couple of kilometres, find out if there are any other gatherings like this one and whether they defy our sensor readings as well. We'll meet back here in two hours, so don't use your communicators unless you have to. A comm signal at the wrong time could be very dangerous.

"Yar, you're with me."

The three groups silently split apart, Data and La Forge veering into the forest on either side while Riker and Yar continued to follow the trail, eyes and ears open for any signs of trouble that the Security Chief's tricorder failed to detect. Nothing else moved, even the rain-sodden leaves above quiet now that the squall had died away.

Ten minutes later, the two officers glimpsed the edge of the forest just ahead of them through a break in the trees. Beyond it lay a clearing some twenty metres in length, and beyond that rose a mound of solid rock, its surface broken only by an occasional crack or crevice.

What immediately caught their attention, however, was the cave set at the base of the mound, a cave whose entrance was littered with small boulders, stones and, more ominously, a number of bones.

"They're in there," motioned Yar as she examined her tricorder's read-out. "Thirty-seven life forms, all registering as humanoid in every respect."

"Let's move in a little closer," replied Riker. "As long as we keep one eye on the tricorder, we should be safe."

They edged toward the perimeter of the forest, stopping only when further progress would have left them with no cover from straying eyes. As the entire mound eased into view, it became clear that it was merely part of a larger rock formation, although even this continued for barely a hundred metres before merging into a barren plain that stretched to the horizon. With the light from the planet's blue-white subgiant sun still obscured by heavy clouds, the scene was singularly oppressive in nature.

Checking once more that no life forms were within earshot, Riker tapped his communicator.

"Riker to Enterprise."

"Go ahead, Commander," came the filtered strains of Picard's voice.

"We've broken camp, split up, and are about to proceed with our observations of the life forms," said Riker. "We shouldn't be too long now. I don't envisage any problems - " He glanced across at the security chief, who shook her head. " - and neither does Lt Yar."

"Very good, Number One. Proceed as you see fit. Enterprise out."

Riker turned to face Yar, who had continued to study her tricorder throughout the First Officer's brief report.

"Any change?" he asked, peering at the computer schematic of the cave on the tiny screen.

"Not that I can see, sir," she replied, folding the tricorder and replacing it in the pouch at the side of her uniform. "They're still huddled together about ten metres inside the cave entrance. If we're careful, I think we can probably get a good look at them from a shaft in the side of the mound."

Riker nodded his approval. "Lead the way, Lieutenant."

Yar followed the perimeter of the forest for a hundred or so metre, Riker at her back, to a point where the distance to the side of the mound was less than thirty metres.

"This is the narrowest gap there is," she informed Riker, her gaze remaining on the obliquely-visible cave entrance. "If we're going to try to reach that air shaft, this is the best place to cross."

"Whatever you say, Lieutenant," agreed Riker, his own concentration centred on the stretch of open ground that they would have to traverse. "You go first, I'll follow."

"Aye, sir."

Making one final check that the coast was clear, Yar sprinted out of the forest and over to the mound, where she crouched behind a large boulder that afforded cover from the cave entrance. In all, Riker estimated that she had been visible for less than four seconds, a sure indication that physical training was taken a little more seriously by the Enterprise's Security Division than by its command personnel.

He could not postpone the inevitable, however, so Riker, in turn, dashed across the open ground, arriving beside Yar in a time that, while reasonably acceptable, would never threaten any records.

"Okay, Lieutenant," he said, mildly surprised that at least he was not out of breath, "how do we get to this vent?"

Yar looked up the side of the mound and pointed to a crevice some twenty metres above the two officers. "We climb."

Riker gave the crevice a despairing glance. "Whatever you say, Lieutenant," he finally sighed, beginning to feel that rain was perhaps not as undesirable as he had originally thought, especially when compared to climbing a mountain.

As Yar made her way up the side of the mound, Riker discovered that finding hand and footholds was not as difficult as he had at first believed. Provided that he tested each rock before putting his weight on it, it was a fairly comfortable ascent, complicated only by the fact that a fall would have been painful at the best, fatal at the worst. However, as he pulled himself alongside the Security Chief next to the crevice almost two minutes after she had finished climbing, it struck him that mountaineering was also taken somewhat less seriously by the Enterprise's senior officers than it deserved.

"They're down there," whispered Yar, pointing down the crevice to the floor of the cave that was visible below them.

Riker peered down and caught sight of a number of humanoids attired in animal skins, all of whom were sitting around a central pit and staring at it as if it had some hypnotic hold over them.

One of them would occasionally say something in the rudimentary language that they no doubt shared, but the words were too quiet to carry to Riker's ears, and there was no guarantee that the universal translator in his communicator would have been able to render them comprehensible anyway. Rudimentary or not, any language to which the universal translator was exposed would take time to assimilate.

"I wonder what they're doing down there," whispered Riker to Yar, his eyes never leaving the gathering in the cave. "It's unlike anything I've ever seen before."

If there was an answer, he never heard it. Something heavy crashed against the back of his skull, and blackness descended over his mind like a curtain of steel.

Riker regained his senses to discover that he was sitting upright with a splitting headache on a cold, stone floor. He slowly raised a hand to the back of his skull, gently probed the area with a finger, then let out a low moan as pain flooded his body. When he gingerly opened his eyes, the first thing that he saw was a bloody patch on that same hand.

Glad to be alive if nothing else, he broadened his view to include his surroundings. He was propped against the back wall of a large cave, a thin ray of light cutting across the lower half of his body. Some ten metres in front of him, he could see the backs of a number of the fur-clad humanoids whom he had been observing, humanoids who, he surmised, had somehow sneaked up on him, clubbed him unconscious, and dragged him down to the cave.

Just as he remembered that he had not been alone, a groan from beside him drew his attention to the similarly-bedraggled form of Lieutenant Yar as she also regained consciousness. Before she could say anything, however, Riker clapped his hand over her mouth and leaned over to her.

"Don't make a sound," he whispered as quietly as he could. "Whatever happened, we're in a cave with a large number of hostile life forms who had no regrets at knocking us senseless."

Yar nodded her head slightly in comprehension.

"However, I don't think they know we're awake yet," continued Riker, "and their backs are turned to us. If we can beam out of here without being seen, we'll be able to escape without violating the Prime Directive."

Yar nodded again.

Riker checked that they were still unobserved, then tapped his communicator and bent down to whisper into it. Instead of the comm signal, however, the Starfleet insignia burred apologetically, as it did when he tapped it again. Yar tried her own communicator, but was met in turn by stony silence.

"Damn," swore Riker under his breath. "They're damaged, as are our chances of getting out of here easily."

"We've still got our phasers, Commander," replied Yar in a quiet voice. "If we set them for wide-angle stun, we could get out of here and leave the humanoids with no idea of who we are or what

we did."

Riker looked down to confirm the Security Chief's analysis and found his phaser neatly tucked into its waist pouch.

"Good idea," he whispered. "When I give the signal, we'll both fire simultaneously and -"

Riker stopped in mid-sentence as a dark shadow blotted out what little light reached the back of the cave. Looking up, he found himself staring into the face of one of the humanoids, a hairy male face that conveyed both power and ruthlessness in its owner. He wore an animal skin over his body and carried a large stone club in one hand, a club that sported a bloodstain on one side.

The humanoid stared back at Riker, shifted his gaze to Yar, raised an impressed eyebrow in a gesture that was perfectly understandable to both officers, then looked back at Riker as if intuitively recognising who the leader was. After a moment, he grunted something meaningless to Riker's ears.

"Who you?"

The words that issued from the First Officer's communicator caught him totally by surprise. A working model should not have been able to translate an unknown language so quickly, least of all a broken one, yet the humanoid's unintelligible grunt had been translated. What was no so unexpected, however, was that a reply was obviously anticipated.

Riker glanced at Yar, saw that she was as clueless as he, then turned back to the humanoid. As his mind raced, the one thought that stayed with him was that the Prime Directive had to be observed. Violating it would be an unpardonable act on his part and possibly an irreparable blow to the future development of Alpheratz VII's native inhabitants.

"I'm Riker," he said at length, reasoning that names, at least, would not constitute a violation. "This is Yar," he added, gesturing toward the Security Chief. "We're strangers here."

"I know you strangers," the humanoid replied, the universal translator in Riker's communicator retaining the surly quality of the speaker's voice. "You not members of tribe of Za. What you do here?"

"We're travelling," answered Riker, aware that it was a poor excuse but unable to think of anything better. "We're sorry for disturbing your tribe, and we'll gladly leave you in peace."

The humanoid seemed to digest this for a moment, his features unreadable as he did so, before suddenly releasing a laugh that was totally devoid of humour.

"You think you leave so easily? Never! You not go until you tell Za secret."

"What secret?" asked Yar in a puzzled tone. "What is it you want to know?"

The humanoid whirled angrily on her. "Quiet, woman!" he shouted. "Za not ask you. Za ask him."

Riker shot Yar a silencing glance. She nodded in agreement.

"The question remains, Za," said Riker, using the humanoid's name now that it was clear that he was indeed called Za. "What do you want to know?"

Za leaned forward until his face was scant centimetres from Riker's. When he spoke, his voice was low and threatening.

"When moon was still bright in sky, firemaker of tribe of Za died. He not teach his secret to apprentice. For many nights now, tribe of Za has been cold and miserable. But you not of tribe of Za. You from different tribe. You from tribe that make fire."

Za's voice dropped even lower. "You teach Za to make fire."

At this, a roar of approval filled the cave, a roar from the other humanoids who, Riker suddenly realised, had been listening to their leader's exchange with the Starfleet officers. The howls continued for almost thirty seconds and would have lasted longer but for the sudden gesture that Za made with his hand.

"You teach Za now," he continued ominously, "or you die."

Riker and Yar were bundled, somewhat unceremoniously, out of the cave, Za and four other males blocking the route into the forest with menacing gestures with their clubs, the rest of the tribe following behind the Starfleet officers. As they stumbled onto the rocky clearing in front of the entrance, Riker fleetingly noticed that at least the rain clouds had disappeared, leaving a pristine blue sky with its brilliant sun high above, before a shove in the back focused his attention upon more pressing matters.

"How long were we unconscious?" gasped Yar when they were finally brought to a halt.

"I've no idea," replied Riker, also labouring to regain his breath. "It might have been five minutes. It might have been two hours."

"So we can't even be sure the Enterprise knows we're missing?"

Riker shook his head disconsolately, but was prevented from speaking by the sight of Za raising his hand for silence.

"Za promised he would find again secret of fire." He addressed the crowd in a loud voice. "Now he give it to you, or these strangers die."

Za looked straight at Riker, the expression on his face leaving the First Officer in no doubt that death was a certainty unless he taught these humanoids how to make fire, something that he was forbidden to do by the Prime Directive. His only option lay in thinking of something, and in doing so fast.

"If you want fire," he finally said, his voice defiant, "you'll have to earn it."

This announcement provoked an ugly look in Za's face but rapturous cheering from the others present. Riker hoped only that he would be able to buy the time and opportunity for Yar and himself to escape by challenging the leader of the tribe in so brazen a fashion.

Za looked from Riker to his tribespeople, then back at Riker again, open hatred written on his face.

"You dare challenge Za?" he snarled contemptuously.

"If Za is not too craven to accept," replied Riker coolly.

This time, there seemed to be a hint of fear in Za's expression as he once again glanced at the rest of the tribe, almost as if he recognised that Riker had manoeuvred him into a position where failure to accept the challenge would spell the end of his reign as leader. It was a carefully calculated gamble on the First Officer's part, a gamble upon which the lives of both himself and Lieutenant Yar would rest.

"Za will fight you," said the humanoid finally with what appeared to be a certain amount of false bravado.

As if a tacit command had been given and understood, the other members of Za's tribe deliberately moved back, forming a circle some twenty metres in diameter in which only their leader, Riker, and Yar now stood. The route to the forest was still barred by a number of surly-looking males, but that seemed to be the only concession made to acquiring a good view of the proceedings.

"With all due respect, Commander," whispered Yar as the trio were slowly isolated in the centre of the artificial arena, "I think you should let me handle this. Apart from the fact that you're the Enterprise's First Officer and I'm its Security Chief, I've had experience of this sort of situation recently."

"And with all due respect to you, Lieutenant," replied Riker, sizing up Za and contemplating strategies, "we've discovered that these humanoids have little regard for you simply because you're a female. If they won't let you speak, I hardly think they'll let you take on their chief in one-on-one combat."

Yar seemed ready to protest at Riker's decision, then bit her lip and acquiesced, albeit somewhat unhappily.

"Good luck," she said simply before stepping back to the edge of the clearing and the circle of expectant tribespeople. Such was their interest in Riker's challenge that no one moved to restrain her, but escape was the last thing on her mind. Whether these humanoids liked it or not, she would be around to defend the First Officer without hesitation if need be.

Riker, meanwhile, had circled Za in order to move as close to the forest as possible. Irrespective of the guards who blocked the escape route, it was still the most promising area upon which to concentrate, and the area in which he felt that he would hold the greatest advantage over his opponent.

"Come on then, Za," he challenged when he was satisfied with his position. "Let's see what you're made of."

Bellowing a mighty war cry that Riker's communicator did not even attempt to translate, Za hurled himself forward, his arms outstretched in an attempt to wrap his hands around the First Officer's neck.

Riker was more than prepared for such an attack, however. Holding his ground for as long as possible, he spun aside at the

very last moment and delivered a crippling blow to Za's kidneys as the humanoid hurtled past uncontrollably.

Satisfied with the ease of his victory, Riker turned to face Yar, but was stopped short by the anxious expression that still troubled her face. Feeling the hairs on the back of his neck suddenly stiffen in response to some innate sixth sense, he whirled back round and instinctively threw his arms up in front of his head.

It was a move that saved Riker's life as a heavy branch, wielded by Za's muscular frame, crashed against his forearms where, moments earlier, his unprotected skull had been. However, the blow still had enough force to send him crashing to the ground, where he lay motionless.

"Commander!" shouted Yar, about to dash into the arena to defend Riker's prone figure. Strong hands reached out to hold her in her place, however, and no amount of struggling enabled her to break free. She was forced to watch helplessly as Za, having shaken off a blow that would have left most opponents writhing in agony, advanced menacingly on Riker, the wooden club in his hands and a malicious grin on his face. It was all that Yar could do to keep from closing her eyes to the inevitable.

Za stopped over Riker's motionless body, held the branch high over his head, then let loose a piercing wail that echoed off the sheer face of the mound and drew answering screams from the remainder of the tribespeople. If Yar had wanted to close her eyes to Riker's death, she was even more desperate to block this primeval victory declaration from her senses.

The branch came down in a wide arc... and hit bare ground.

Riker, rolling to a stop and clambering to his feet, stared briefly at what had nearly been his grave, then flicked a glance at Yar to reassure her that he was, at the very least, still alive and kicking. His gaze finally settled on Za, taking in the full extent of the humanoid's rage at being cheated of the kill once more.

"No more games," muttered the First Officer in a voice that barely carried to the surrounding listeners. "One way or the other, we'll settle things this time."

Discarding the branch as if he no longer needed it, Za closed the distance between himself and Riker in three long strides, tackling his opponent at waist level and sending both combatants sprawling to the ground in a jumble of arms and legs. As they grappled, the other tribespeople began to repeat a slow, rhythmic chant whose meaning was entirely lost on Yar, not that she gave it her full attention anyway. Now that she recognised that she was of no importance to these primitive humanoids, Riker's struggle took on a whole new importance.

After what seemed like an eternity, the two rivals briefly drew apart just long enough for Yar to notice a discoloured bruise under Riker's right eye and a nasty gash along Za's left cheek. Then the combat was again engaged, both men trading blows of all descriptions as the First Officer's honed skill sought to overcome the humanoid's natural strength.

Then, suddenly, it was over. There was no spectacular coup de grace, merely a solid right hook that sent Za tumbling onto his back and left Riker flexing a hand that almost certainly contained at

least one broken knuckle.

There was a sudden silence in which no one moved. Yar stared in relief at Riker, who in turn fixed his gaze on the unconscious form of Za. The other tribespeople similarly stared at their leader as if unwilling to accept that he had been beaten and uncertain about how they should treat the stranger who had proved to be his vanquisher.

When it began to seem as if time had stopped running its natural course, Riker finally made a move.

"Run, Lieutenant!" he shouted at Yar, dashing through the group of confused and unsure males who had been blocking the route into the forest.

The Security Chief unfroze at the sound of his voice and plunged into the maze of trees after the away team leader. Branches and leaves whipped back into her face as she rapidly fell in behind him, but their flight was so precipitous that she barely noticed.

After a few seconds in which it seemed that their luck might hold, a sudden cacophony of shouts erupted from behind them. At almost the same moment, the heavy sounds of bodies crashing through the forest reached their ears, and they instantly realised that Za's tribe had decided how to react to its leader's defeat. Unfortunately, it was not the sort of reaction for which they had been hoping.

As they continued their heedless flight, however, it became obvious that the sounds of pursuit were slowly but surely growing fainter and fainter. They could still be heard, but the risk of recapture was growing smaller with every passing second. By the time Riker and Yar could be certain that they were back on the trail that led to the rendezvous point with the rest of the away team, they allowed themselves to slow to a strenuous jog in an attempt to rest their tortured muscles.

"Well done, Commander," gasped Yar when she was finally able to find her voice. "I thought you were a goner for a while back there, but that was a great bluff."

Riker simply gave her an unreadable expression before he turned his attention back to the trail.

Some five minutes later, the two officers stumbled into the clearing where they had originally materialised, only to find Data and La Forge already standing together in the centre. After receiving stares of bemused puzzlement at the condition of Riker's face and amusement at their exhaustion, the First Officer stepped up to La Forge and tapped the Lieutenant's communicator.

"Riker to Enterprise."

"This is the Enterprise, Commander," replied Picard's voice, this time betraying a hint of concern. "Where have you and Lt Yar been? The rest of the away team reported in twenty minutes ago, our sensors couldn't lock on to your communicators, and we were about to send out a search party for you."

"I'll tell you about it when we're back aboard, Captain. Before I do that, however, I think I'd better pay Dr Crusher a brief visit in Sickbay."

"Is someone hurt?"

"Just a black eye, a bruised hand, and a headache, sir," said Riker, feeling a little sheepish in front of the rest of the away team, all of whom did their best to look unaffected, generally without success.

"Indeed, Number One? I look forward to hearing your report. Enterprise out."

As the channel closed, Riker stepped back from La Forge and waited for the transporter beam to capture them. Just as he felt the familiar tingle, however, he looked across at Yar.

"Who said I was bluffing, Lieutenant?" he asked.

Yar's jaw dropped.

Seconds later, a bright light filled the clearing as the away team dematerialised, and then all was again as it had been.

