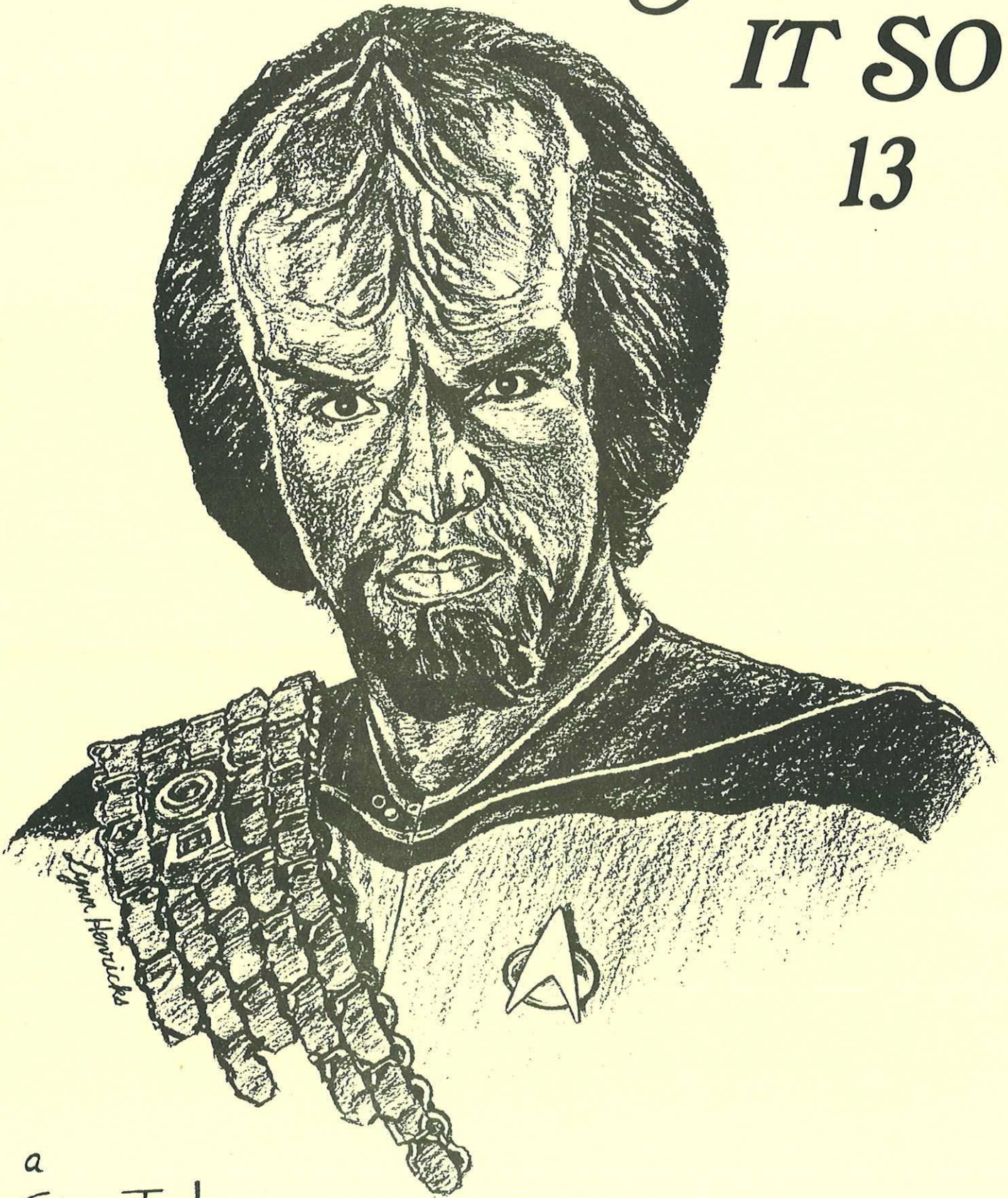


Scotpress

MAKE IT SO 13



a
Star Trek
fangine

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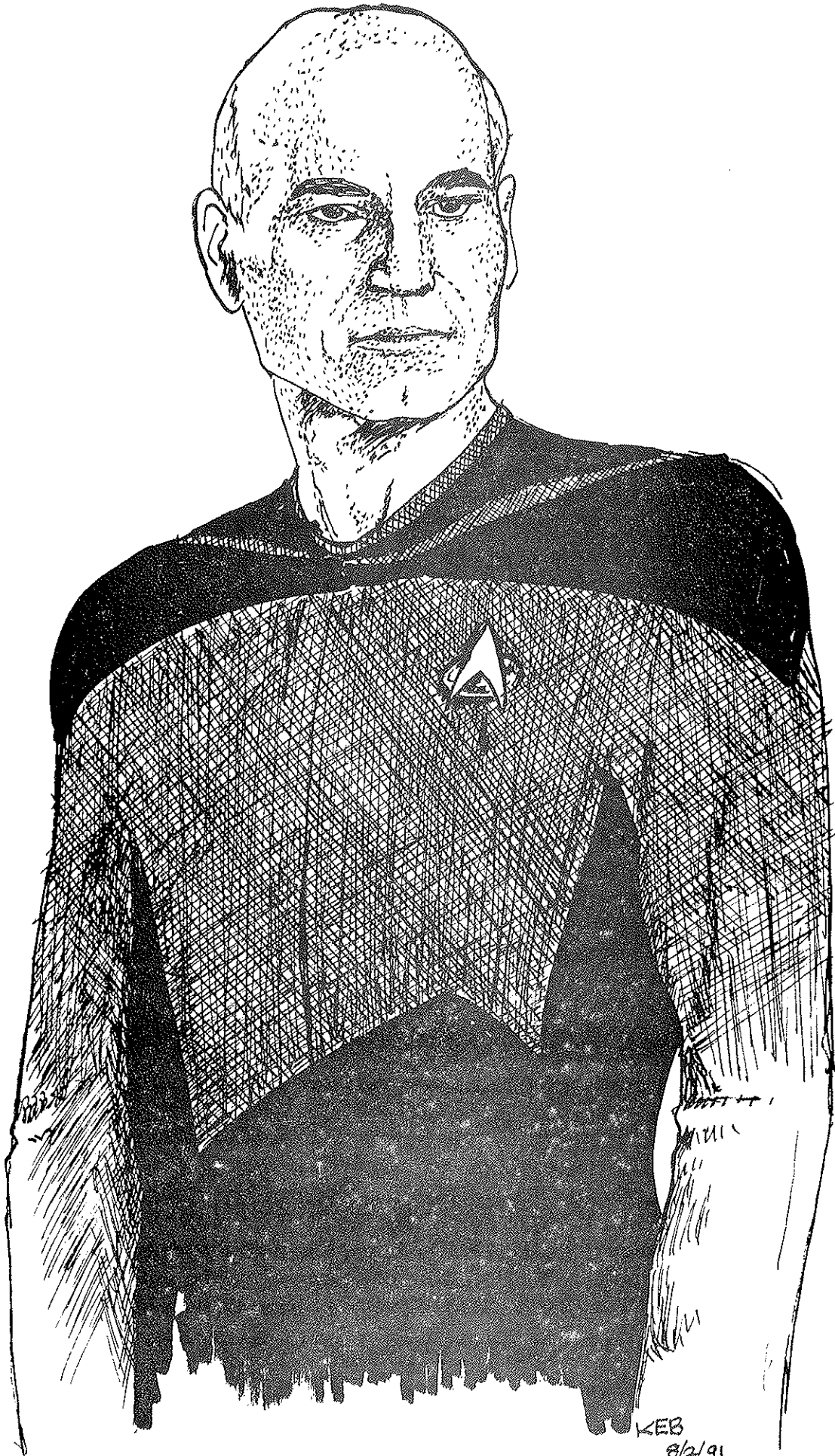
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TAIL OF THE UNEXPECTED

by

Lorraine Goodison

Ploop! The water closed over her entry point with a small smack, ripples edging outwards to lap gently at the shore. Below the surface, a sleek stream-lined body undulated through clear blue liquid with unconscious grace and ease. She dived, twisted, soared and sank until, with a deft combination push of limbs and tail, she sped toward the air.

"Eeek!" A shriek echoed across the small lagoon. "Poppet!"

Poppet's sleek head burst out of the water next to her swim-mate, Ensign Shalla Deunan, who was laughingly trying to back-paddle away. A bark of laughter answered Deunan's cry as Poppet floated by on her back.

"Did I surprise you?" she asked, brushing her whiskers absently.

"You bet. I knew you were down there, but you're so fast."

"And very graceful."

The warm claret tones of Counselor Troi rang out from the shore, prompting both ensigns to acknowledge her. The Betazoid was smiling with delight. "You swim beautifully, Ensign."

If otters could blush, Poppet would have done just that. "It's just swimming," she offered shyly.

"Compared to homo sapiens, it's poetry." Troi strolled along the lagoon shore to a point opposite Poppet. "I'm sorry to disturb you, but did you forget your appointment?"

"Oh, goodness!" Poppet bounced up in the water, heading for the shore with one powerful stroke. "Oh dear. I am sorry, Counselor, I completely forgot. I'm not usually so forgetful, but the water was lovely and..."

"It's all right," Troi assured her. "No harm done. Luckily yours is the last appointment this period."

Poppet pulled herself out, drying her feet and running the towel over her fur to catch any drips. She shrugged on her uniform, continuing to offer profuse apologies, much to Troi's secret amusement.

"Much too involved... only came in for a moment... enhancement off... so sorry..."

The computer picked up her order and complied, changing the blue lagoon back into an ordinary swimming pool. "Hey!" protested Deunan, "I've still got fifteen minutes to go. Enhancement on!"

The lagoon snapped back on, leaving Deunan to the remainder of her recreation period.

Troi indicated a comfortable chair as they entered her consulting room, but Poppet adopted her usual pose of balancing on her tail in a squat.

"Do you get much time in the pool?" the Counselor asked, seating herself.

"Oh yes," bobbed the Mijbilum. "It would be nice to get more time, but I have to take my turn."

"It must be nice to have someone to share that time with."

"Yes, but Shalla and I are usually on opposite shifts and I don't know anyone else really." She paused, muzzle twitching up in thought. "Commander Data said he would be my friend, but I haven't seen him much." A trace of sadness was in her tone as she murmured, "I expect he's really very busy... "

Filing the comment away for future reference, Troi settled back into her chair. "I'm sure you'll make more friends. Everyone is a little strange at first."

Poppet's head nodded in agreement, but a tendril of uncertainty touched Troi's empathy. The Counselor smiled reassuringly. "Now, Poppet, this interview is simply a chat about how you're settling in, any difficulties you might have, that sort of thing. It's not a performance assessment or something which will affect your career. Every new crewmember is interviewed as part of our settling-in procedure, so I want you to relax and look on this as a chat between friends, nothing more."

Again a nod of understanding, and Poppet visibly relaxed as Troi deftly, unobtrusively, uncovered the Ensign's reactions to life in Starfleet.

Commander Riker scratched his bearded chin as he listened to Troi's report on the mental health of the newest crewmembers, most especially a certain ensign he had encountered the previous night.

"I agree that she might be having difficulties," he murmured, "But there is hardly enough to warrant a transfer. It does take new crewmembers time to settle in."

Troi stifled a movement of impatience. "I know that, Will, but I feel Ensign Poprpo'ltrrptaik is a special case. She didn't say as much, but there is an underlayer of anger and some resentment which could be bad for her stability and those around her."

Riker gave her a non-committal look. After the fiasco in Ten Forward last month and the meeting in Captain Picard's office the morning after, he found it difficult to see anything which could warrant an immediate transfer.

He had collected Poppet from the briefing room, keeping silent while the ensign had trotted alongside him to the Ready Room. She seemed awed by being in the presence of a senior officer, and her stillness deepened as they left the Bridge turbolift. It wasn't every new ensign who got a peek at the nerve-centre of the ship, and even under circumstances such as these, Poppet was obviously concentrating on drinking in as much detail as possible.

Her air of attentiveness increased as soon as they entered the Ready Room and she

spotted the Captain's lion fish. Riker figured she had probably eaten before they came up here, but he decided to err on the side of caution.

"Ensign..." he murmured in a slightly warning tone.

"Isn't it interesting..." the Mijbilum muttered, intently eyeing the fish. "I do like fish..."

Riker was not sure if her lip licking amounted to the equivalent reaction in a Human, so he nudged her with his elbow just as the Captain entered the room. Poppet snapped to attention, her bright eyes fixed on Picard.

"Hmm... At ease, Ensign, at ease..." Picard circled behind his desk and fixed them with an eagle eye. "You both know the reason for this interview. Commander, will you please begin?"

For some reason Riker did not quite meet Picard's eye while he described the events leading to the Captain's encounter with five senior officers carrying an unconscious inebriated otter. Picard was quite grateful for this, as the scene which had greeted him on entering Ten Forward had been... quite memorable.

"I see..." said Picard, who wondered if the interview had been a good idea after all. "Ensign... Ensign?"

Poppet dragged her attention away from the fish and thoughts of dinner to attend her commanding officer. "Sir?"

"Ensign, from what Commander Riker tells me, you seem to have reached an extreme state of inebriation in an unusually short time." Picard gave her his best stern look. "Were you aware of the effect your food and drink would have?"

"No, sir!" Poppet's head shook furiously in denial. "I've never eaten Dentrassian lobsters before, sir."

"Yes, quite. Ensign, while I am not adverse to my crewmembers enjoying their off-duty, there is a fine line between personal enjoyment and embarrassing displays - do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir! It'll never happen again, ever. I promise!"

"Yes, well... Just be more careful in future. Dismissed."

Riker had continued to display a poker face as he left the office. It seemed the best approach, considering the circumstances. A snort of laughter would not be deemed appropriate.

"I would say the ensign shows every sign of being over-eager and contrite, but hardly resentful," Riker commented, returning his attention to Troi. From her expression, he knew he'd said the wrong thing.

"She is quite immature in some areas," Troi pointed out, "and it's partly that which concerns me. I think she was pushed into the wrong branch of the service. The Rapid Integration Programme sometimes neglects to fully address the needs of its applicants."

"Deanna, I know your opinion of the RIP, and I agree it can cause problems, but I would need more substantial evidence before I could recommend a transfer. Has Poppet requested one?"

"No, but - "

"You know as well as I do that Picard's going to want more than an initial inability to fit in as a reason. How about a change of division?"

Troi's expression was definitely frosty. "I'll consider it - Commander."

Troi left the office thinking furiously. Poppet's interview was playing over in her mind while she waited for the turbolift. As always, in such an interview it was more important what was left unsaid. Going by Poppet's reactions and what Troi's empathy had picked up, it was evident that an underlying unhappiness was linked to Poppet's current situation. Troi was not sure Poppet herself realised how unhappy she was; her conversation revolved around how lucky she was to be on the Enterprise, how fortunate, how honoured... Troi wondered if Poppet hadn't talked herself into a false bubble of contentment which would surely burst.

The Betazoid woman sighed with irritation as she stepped into the lift and directed it to her quarters. On the surface, Poppet was stable, if a little over-zealous, but on a deeper level...

She pursed her lips as a thought occurred. "Computer, current location of Lt. Worf."

"Deck 15, Security Training Range."

"Deck 15, please." She would speak to Worf. Perhaps his viewpoint would help.

Worf considered Troi's question on his newest recruit for some minutes before replying, "Her record is quite impressive. She has a natural strength and agility which serve her well. Some of her methods are... *unorthodox*, but her technique is sound."

"Would you say she is suited for Security work?"

There was no reply for several seconds as Worf took one of his men to task for shoddy shooting. It hadn't looked all that shoddy from Troi's point of view, but she knew Worf was a perfectionist. The Klingon watched a few more shots through the protective screen before returning his attention to the question. "She lacks an adequate amount of aggressiveness in certain situations."

"Such as?"

"Self defence is one. Although she is capable of inflicting harm, she holds back, even in practice."

"For fear of hurting others?"

"Perhaps. I am working on this area with her."

Troi folded her arms. The news did not come as a surprise. "What about team-work? Does she fit in?"

Worf's attention strayed back to the range. "She is competent, but she has difficulty leading in group situations."

"Leadership doesn't come naturally to some," mused Troi. Food for thought. She smiled, thanked the Security Chief for his time, and left the range.

The holodeck computer was not being helpful. *It isn't the computer's fault*, thought Poppet. It was her. She couldn't describe things properly, couldn't put into words the wish which was beginning to grow into an aching need.

The session had begun badly. The computer's answer to Poppet's request for a scenario based on Mijbil had been, "There is no current detailed record of that planet's ecobase."

Wonderful. Not to be outdone, Poppet gritted her teeth and requested a class M planet close to her home world's specifics. Surely, she reasoned, she could change a few small details from that.

She had begun with the lake. Easily enough altered, she thought, but after twenty-one attempts to get the temperature and texture just right, she had to settle for something like a lukewarm bath. She could have made it like the lagoon in the swimming pool enhancement, but the struggle had sparked her stubborn streak and she was determined not to compromise.

The trees were the next stumbling block. No matter what she said, the computer persisted in producing leaves which were more akin to those of palms than the long slender curving leaves of Mijbil. The bark was too orange, the bird-vines too thick.

The most infuriating difference was that of the scents. The flora and water could be ignored - just - but the scents... Her attempt to conjure up the distinctive scent of the rruna flower, a particular favourite, resulted in something not unlike rancid cat fur. That pong in turn reminded her of the Caitan she had shared quarters with during the induction course - an unsavoury individual, and not an experience she relished.

By this point Poppet's growing irritation coupled with fermenting frustration to sow the seeds of a spectacular outburst. It was building up quite nicely when the computer helpfully informed her, "Your hour is up. Please vacate the holodeck for the next user."

Poppet's cry of rage filtered into the corridor as the doors opened to allow Ensign Hooper access. He hesitated on the threshold, eyeing Poppet warily as she swept past him, muttering in her own language.

Her attention intent on the things she would do to the computer if she had access, Poppet did not notice Counselor Troi emerge from a lift in time to register one very angry Mijbilum.

Troi hurried to catch up, hopping over an angrily-swishing tail. "Poprpo'ltrrptaik? What's wrong?"

Inbred politeness brought Poppet to a halt but for once her verbosity deserted her. She stared at Troi, breathing heavily and thrashing her heavy tail on the deck.

Troi took a deep breath and threaded her arm through Poppet's to guide her toward the

lift. "I think maybe this should be discussed somewhere private..."

Ten minutes later, the Betazoid counselor watched Poppet finally let loose her inner frustrations in a storm of lashing tail and bristling fur. The fact that her consulting room was being trashed at the same time did bother Troi a little, but it was better to let such deep-seated anger out and Poppet desperately needed such an outlet. If the room was the casualty, then so be it.

Crash! The large curved settee toppled backward, losing its fight with Poppet's strength. The otter paused, chest heaving while she looked round with glazed eyes. Empathically testing her mood, Troi could feel the anger abating and moved from her safe corner.

"Poppet, why don't you - "

The opening of the door interrupted her, Will Riker bursting in expecting hellfire and devastation, not necessarily in that order. What he found was a room which had just experienced its own localised hurricane. In the centre, Poppet stood wild-eyed. Devastation just about covered it.

Riker looked in concern at Troi. "Deanna, I was passing and heard this noise - what the hell happened here?"

Troi gave him a calm, professional look. "A little bit of aggression therapy, Will." She lightly steered him toward the door. "Now if you wouldn't mind leaving..."

Bewildered, he left as she had asked, shaking his head in wonderment.

"Poppet - "

"Oh, Counselor!" Poppet looked at her with stricken eyes. "I am most terribly sorry. I'll clean it up at once. I should never lose my temper... I don't know what came over me - "

"I do," Troi gently interrupted. "Don't worry about it. I was bored with the decor anyway." She gave Poppet an impish grin. "Now, would you right a chair or two so we can sit down and talk?"

Once Troi had convinced Poppet that her actions were not so very terrible, the Mijbilum calmed down enough to tell Troi of her failed holodeck session. "I just couldn't get it right," she wavered. "I couldn't explain and the more I tried, the worse it got and I won't get another session for another four days... Oh, I'm so stupid sometimes."

"No, you're not," Troi said firmly. "An unfamiliarity with the workings of a device is not stupidity. It's quite difficult to enhance a running programme while on the holodeck. The computer has to have a fairly detailed basic structure to work from. A few enhancements are fine, but anything more has to be programmed beforehand. Why didn't you go to the computing department?"

The look Poppet gave her was one of pure girlish embarrassment. "I don't know anyone there and I wanted it then, not in a few weeks..."

She misses her home very much, thought Troi. She patted Poppet's paw gently. "It's all right to be homesick. Most of us are at some point, especially in the early months."

There was a noisy sniff from the other end of the settee which prompted Troi to wait a moment before asking, "Are you happy in Security?"

Poppet thought hard about that one for a while before nodding an affirmative 'Yes'.

The Counselor was not entirely convinced. "Tell me what you like about it."

It transpired that there was not a lot about Security that Poppet actually liked. From her reactions, it became clear to Troi that those aspects which suited her - company, exercise, teamwork - were aspects which could be found in almost any area of the ship, depending on your proclivities. Poppet, it seemed, had fallen into a niche which used some of her abilities, ignored others and stretched none.

"Have you ever thought of transferring between divisions?"

"Oh, no, I couldn't," was the earnest reply. "Lt. Worf has been very kind to me, and I can't just swop jobs."

"You'd be surprised how many people do just that. Not everyone makes the right choice, and if you want to move up in Starfleet, you need a balanced training in varied disciplines."

"But what if I failed?" Poppet protested. "Everyone at home is so pleased for me. If I changed and got sent back, I'd be letting them down."

The subtleties of social mores, thought Troi. She'd heard it so often, especially from RIP recruits. To be awarded a place in Starfleet was a prestigious honour, bringing kudos to recruit and home planet alike. The difficulties came when the recruits came to realise they wanted something different from the political expectations. One of the roots of Poppet's frustration was firmly embedded in that dilemma.

"I think," Troi declared, looking directly at Poppet, "it is time to consider your own needs first."

"Mijbil - home of the Mijbilem, a semi-aquatic sentient lifeform, Class B72. Habitat - "

Deanna Troi skipped the initial descriptive passages, scanning the report on Mijbil for something more in keeping with her current search. "Hmm, Social Structure. May be something there... Ah.

"Feudal clan society with rigid infrastructure of social mores pertaining to class and status... Close familial bonds based on Mijbilem sensitivity to scent. See: Rrrikmurr.' Poppet brought one of those with her... "

She jotted down a note or two and continued her search. The planet of Mijbil had been 'rescued' by a treaty with the Federation from ruthless exploitation by the Ferengi. To show their gratitude, the ruling families had encouraged junior members of important clans to go off-world and enrich the magnificent Federation. Thirty-seven had done just that, and Troi keyed in a request for information on their whereabouts.

The pattern of eventual destination for the Mijbilem travellers was fairly varied. Some had opted to join specialist courses as students of everything from medicine to music, while a few had gone to Earth in an ambassadorial capacity. An exchange of innate skills in commerce had taken the interest of several and to date, nine had been accepted into Starfleet.

A request for further data on Poppet's eight comrades frustratingly drew only limited information. Several were on placement far from the Enterprise's cruising sector and up-to-date information was not immediately available. Interestingly, none seemed to be in the Security division on either ships or bases. Two in particular caught Troi's attention. One Mijbilem, Rit'achikk, had left his posting on the USS Lenin and returned to his home planet. No reason was given, but it would not be too difficult to check the details. Pos'tallitr was more of an enigma; he had died aboard the USS Ganemede. Again, details were not forthcoming but Troi felt a disquieting uneasiness run through her. Something told her she would not like the answer to her questions about Pos'tallitr.

The door chime drew her attention from the screen. "Come in."

Data's slender form entered, curiosity written on his features. "You wished to speak with me, Counselor?"

"Yes, Data. I'd like your help." Troi beckoned him over to her desk, swinging the screen round. "Firstly, although this isn't the primary reason I asked you to come by, I'd like you to carry out a search on these names, especially Rit'achikk and Pos'tallitr. I'd also like to know where the USS Lenin is at the moment - I want to speak to my counterpart aboard her."

"That enquiry is easily answered, Counselor," Data instantly confided. "The USS Lenin is at present stationed off Starbase 171 for crew rotation. We are, as you know, due there in fifteen hours."

"Well, that'll save me sending a subspace query."

Data nodded. "The other crew details will no doubt be available on our update transmissions at the Starbase."

"Good. Please find out whatever you can about Ensign Pos'tallitr, in particular. I have a feeling it may be very important." Troi put aside the uneasiness and leaned back in her chair, smiling. "Now - the chief reason I wanted to see you concerns Ensign Poppro'lrrptaik. I don't know if you're aware of the fact, but she is having difficulty settling in here."

"I am disquieted to hear that," Data remarked. "She is an interesting personality."

"Yes... Poppet told me you had indicated you'd like to be a friend to her."

Data paused a millisecond, recalling the exact nuances of his first encounter with Poppet in the mess. "I do believe I did," he agreed. "Unfortunately, opportunities which allow for further social interaction between myself and Poppet have not arisen."

"Could you try to make a few opportunities, Data?" asked Troi. "I think it could help her. She is feeling a little isolated at the moment."

"Of course, Counselor. I believe I can alter my off-duty to coincide with Poppet's leave at Starbase 171. Normally I would pursue other activities during such a time period, but I will endeavour to devote the hours to being a friend."

"I'm sure you will, Data," smiled Troi, thinking that few beings would ever make as attentive a friend as Data.

So it was that as Deanna Troi arranged a meeting with Counselor Chandler aboard the *Lenin*, Poppet found to her delight that Commander Data was accompanying her to the Starbase.

"This is very kind of you," Poppet breathed shyly, still a little in awe of the android.

"Not at all," Data assured her, gallantly stepping to one side as a group of women passed them. "The pleasure is mine. Now..." He paused to take in the bustling concourse which opened out before them. A swift scan revealed any number of possible directions to go in. "As this is a new experience for me, which way do you suggest we go?"

"You haven't been in a Starbase before?" Poppet's eyes widened.

"I have, many times," Data assured her, "but only in an... official capacity. That is, I have spent my time in the research and technical units. Until now, I have felt no need to explore beyond those boundaries."

"But a good way to study social behaviour is to go shopping!" exclaimed Poppet. "It's fun, too." Her eyes gleamed as she studied the crowds. Clearly they had arrived in the middle of a busy period. "This way," she said confidently, and Data found his hand firmly grasped as she pulled him into the stream of bodies.

The dark-skinned, slim woman smiled a greeting as the door to her office opened. "Counselor Troi. Deanna... pleased to meet you."

Troi grasped the offered hand and matched Megan Chandler's smile. "It's not often I get the chance to meet my fellows," she said, taking a seat.

"Yes, I do sometimes feel a little cut off from the mainstream of thought myself," Chandler remarked ruefully. "Do you take coffee or tea?"

"Tea, please. White."

The mess-slot provided the refreshment and Chandler set the cups down on a table before seating herself. "So... How can I help you? I must admit your request for a meeting took me by surprise."

"It concerns a crewmember of yours, or rather an ex-crewmember; Ensign Rit'achikk."

Chandler regarded Troi with surprise. "Rit'achikk? Why him?"

Troi gave her counterpart a summary of Poppet's case and her reasons for investigating the fortunes of other Mijbilem in Starfleet.

"So an examination of others of Poppet's race may turn up a key to her stability within Starfleet," Chandler commented. She frowned slightly. "To be honest, I don't know if Rit'achikk's case will help you very much, Deanna. He was having problems settling in, much along the same lines as your Poppet, but the main reason - " The door chime sounded and with a sigh, Chandler answered it. To the surprise of Troi and the chagrin of Chandler, the caller

was Tatiana Postokov, Captain of the USS Lenin.

Postokov barely touched the required Starfleet height minimum, being short and somewhat stocky. She wore her thin blonde hair tied back into a tight bun and had an expression of direct assertiveness which left no doubts as to her preferred method of communication. This was a lady who did not suffer fools gladly.

Megan Chandler made introductions, which prompted Captain Postokov to give Troi an appraising glance. "A social, or business call, Counselor Troi?"

Troi answered, "Business, Captain Postokov," before catching the fleeting warning look in Chandler's eyes. Of course, the Captain wanted to know exactly what the business entailed and Troi found that her initial impression was correct; one did not hold back details from this officer. Postokov's reaction to Rit'achikk's name was, however, not something the Betazoid anticipated.

"Rit'achikk! Ensign Rit'achikk..." Postokov said in tones of obvious displeasure. An expression of impatience came over her round face. "Let me tell you, Counselor, that - that excuse for an intelligent being should never have left his home planet!"

Chandler opened her mouth, presumably to smooth troubled waters, but Postokov surged on. "He was useless. Useless, I tell you! No discipline, no ability, no back-bone!" Her hands were on her hips by now, indignation oozing from every pore. Troi resisted the temptation to back off a step.

"Captain, he wasn't that bad," began Chandler in what was obviously an on-going disagreement.

"Yes, he was!" snapped Postokov, giving her Counselor a stern look. "I run a tight ship, a crew which I expect to jump to it when I give an order. When we are facing off a flotilla of Romulans, I do not wish to be tripping over a crazy Mijbilum who cannot even keep his tail out of my way!" She faced Troi once more. "Counselor Troi, if you have one of those creatures on your ship, I advise you to pack him off home at once. They should not be on a Starship! They should not be in space!"

The Captain turned on her heel and departed. Troi could have sworn the door closed with an indignant snap.

The Counselors looked at each other.

"The main reason," Chandler said straight faced, continuing her original explanation, "was an extreme personality clash."

Troi's lips twitched. "You don't say..."

Commander Data was finding his visit to the Starbase quite illuminating. Poppet, clearly a veteran of the average Starbase and how to find one's way round it, led him along back passages he would never have imagined existing, emerging into the busy areas mere meters from their destination. If there was a short cut to be found, Poppet knew it. She was in her element, even using her sensitive nose to sniff out the various eating places around the base.

After emerging from one such place, where Poppet had uttered cries of delight over the sushi dishes, Data found himself being led toward a bookshop. The title 'bookshop' was something of a misnomer as the actual number of bound books was limited, but Poppet was determined to browse regardless. Data wondered briefly how she could get so much enjoyment from not actually buying anything.

"Ooo..." Poppet stood in the middle of the shop, drinking in the shelves of periodicals, books, lit-discs and other media.

"Are you requiring anything in particular?" Data enquired, asking the same question he had asked at numerous other shops.

For once, Poppet nodded her head. "I want something about Earth otters. I've heard we Mijbilem look rather like them." She headed for an assistant, tail gently swaying to and fro.

The assistant, a girl with a shock of red dyed hair and a sour expression, looked at Poppet as if she was mad. "Otters?" she echoed. "I don't..." She paused, casting a glance round the shop. "No, I doubt if we have anything on them, whatever they are..."

"Oh." Disappointment weighed heavily in Poppet's voice. "Oh dear. Are you sure?"

The assistant cast her an 'of-course-I'm-sure-you-dimwit' look. "If it's an animal, there might be something in Natural History," she offered in an attempt to get rid of them.

Data was about to offer up a listing of Lutrogale Perspicillata and its many varieties when another assistant joined the debate. "You're looking for books on otters? Stories, or more factual?"

"Anything," Poppet responded, whereon the assistant led her round the shop suggesting all manner of tomes on the subject of otters. By the time they had explored all possibilities, Poppet had found herself the recipient of such titles as 'Ring Of Bright Water', 'The Otter Who Wanted To Know', 'Earth Otters And Their Habitat' and 'Day Of The Otter'.

"This is wonderful!" the Mijbilum exclaimed, whiskers twitching over the literary treasures.

"Is that what you were after?" asked the helpful assistant.

Poppet nodded and the woman smiled. "Just let me know which ones you want, and - "

"Oh, I know already," Poppet assured her. "I'll take that one, and that, and a lit-disc of that one..."

The whole purchase made quite a dent in Poppet's monthly credit bill but she was happy with her find and exuded an air of excited delight as they departed the shop. Data checked his internal time regulator and voiced the opinion that they really should be heading back to the main transporters.

"Just one more look..." Poppet said, determinedly heading for a shop across the way.

Chief O'Brien had seen many a strange sight in his tours of duty at the transporter controls. He would have said he could no longer be surprised by anything which materialised

on the platform, but this time he was hard put to maintain his professional decorum. Had anyone enquired, however, he would have asserted that it was difficult to keep a straight face when a Mijbilum and an android beamed on board each wearing a baggy t-shirt emblazoned with 'Starbase 171 - If you ain't been there, you ain't been nowhere!'.

Deanna Troi smiled to herself as she entered her office. Her encounter with Captain Postokov had revived her spirits somewhat, alleviating growing doubts over the advisability of Poppet remaining in Starfleet. She had gone to the Lenin fearing some trauma had sent Rif'achikk back to his home. It was a relief to find it was a simple case of a Captain who was not suited to the more... unique aspects of Mijbilum personality traits.

"I'm getting paranoid," she murmured, setting herself down by the desk screen. An indicator revealed the presence of a message in the system. Data had said he would arrange for the results of his search to be transmitted directly to Troi's screen; evidently that had occurred. She continued to smile, fully expecting her fears about Pos'tallitr to be just as groundless. The information scrolling up squashed that hope.

"Ensign Pos'tallitr committed suicide on board the USS Ganemede. Oh, no, poor Poppet..."

TO BE CONTINUED IN 'TAILORED ENVIRONMENT'.



EXCUSE ME, IS THIS HOLODECK TAKEN?

by

Elizabeth Roberts

It was 0900 hours and Charlie stood with his classmates and their teacher outside Holodeck 3, waiting for it to become free. A few minutes later, Commander Riker and a lady came out. Their faces were red and they were sweating.

"That was a good run, Will," said the lady.

"Yeah." Commander Riker wiped the sweat off his bearded face with a towel. He saw the children and the teacher waiting. "I'm sorry - were we late?"

"No, sir," said Miss Kyle. "We're a little early." She smiled at him and he smiled back. *Miss Kyle is very pretty when she smiles*, Charlie thought.

The two people left; Miss Kyle started to tell the computer what to do. Charlie shifted restlessly from foot to foot. *Hurry up! Hurry up!* he thought. He had been on holodecks lots of times before, usually with his Mom and Dad. His Mom would say, "It's time you were getting some sunshine, Charlie Hutcheson," and off the three of them would go. They usually had a picnic, and Charlie would watch the fish in the stream. *Holodecks are boring - all you can do is watch fish*, he thought. He would much rather be in Engineering - they were going there next and he could hardly wait.

Finally the teacher finished and the computer told her she could go in. The class filed into the holodeck behind the teacher, Charlie following at the back, dragging his feet. Today's lesson was astronomy, but why they had come *here* to learn it Charlie didn't know. Perhaps the classroom was being used for something else.

The whole class stood in the holodeck. Charlie was standing next to his best friend George. He nudged him.

"Watch this," he whispered and reached out towards Salak's ears. Salak was Vulcan and Charlie reckoned he was a real teacher's pet. He was always quiet and never joined in anything. Charlie had always been fascinated by his ears.

Miss Kyle had caught the whispering at the back. "Charlie Hutcheson!" He jumped and snatched his hands back. "Come over here and stand by me," she said. "I want to keep my eye on you."

Charlie skulked over to the teacher and stood beside her. He actually liked Miss Kyle, she was his favourite teacher, but she always knew he was up to something before he did. She put her hand on his shoulder and turned towards the class.

"Today we have a surprise for you." At this the doors of the holodeck swished open. "Lieutenant-Commander Data is going to take today's lesson." She gestured to the figure

standing in the doorway. "Sir?"

Charlie felt very excited as Commander Data stood beside him. Why, he worked on the Bridge with the Captain!

"Good morning," said their visitor.

"Good morning, Lieutenant-Commander Data," chorused the children.

Close up, Charlie could see his eyes were a strange yellow colour, like a cat he had once seen. Charlie had heard his Dad say Commander Data was stronger than Lt. Worf. That filled him with some trepidation. However, after staring at him for a few minutes, Charlie decided Commander Data had a friendly face.

"Today we are going to learn about the Galaxy in which we live," he said. "Computer, please show us where the Enterprise is today."

The grid around the room changed to a view of a blue and green and brown planet with some space stations and some ships in orbit. Charlie recognised their ship, and he was pleased to see that it was the biggest.

Commander Data pointed to it. "This is the Enterprise."

"Please, sir," asked Karen Irwin, "is that where we are right now?"

"Yes. I have instructed the computer to make an image of where we are right at this precise moment. We are currently orbiting Siluris 4."

Charlie was impressed. However, it was going to get better. Commander Data 'took' the class out of the Siluris system after a look at its planets and sun, through its local star cluster, through this quadrant of Federation space, until the final image took them right out of the Galaxy.

It seemed as if they were floating in space, a thousand light years away, watching the Milky Way rotating past them. Charlie felt that if he put out a hand he would brush against stars slowly moving. He gasped. It was like magic!

He was dimly aware of Commander Data telling them how long the Galaxy took to rotate completely around. It was the most beautiful sight he had ever seen.

All too soon the class was over and they left to go to Engineering. All the way there, Charlie was thinking. When they had nearly reached their destination, Charlie asked Miss Kyle, "Has anyone ever been outside the Galaxy?"

Miss Kyle smiled. "Not very often." She was pleased to see that something had caught his attention, barring engines and tormenting Salak.

He nodded solemnly. "One day, I would like to go out there."

"I would too," said Salak.

"I thought it was boring," said George.

"No it wasn't!" said Charlie fiercely.

"Was!"

"Wasn't!"

All George thinks about is food," Charlie thought, looking at his friend's chubby frame. He looked at Salak. Maybe he wasn't so bad after all. Even his ears seemed to look all right. Charlie began to feel guilty at having been so horrible to him.

"Did you like it?" he said to the Vulcan boy.

Salak nodded. He did not need to say anything. It seemed to Charlie that he knew exactly how Salak felt.

Charlie glanced up to see Commander Data looking at them with a puzzled expression on his face, his head cocked a little to the side. Charlie frowned. What was wrong with him?

At that moment, Chief Engineer La Forge came over to the waiting group and Charlie forgot all about Commander Data. His favourite person on the whole ship was talking to him about his favourite things - Starship engines.

Data left the group in Engineering and went to find Wesley Crusher. The actions of the children had puzzled him. He had noticed the small blond boy Charlie having an argument with another boy about how boring his presentation on the holodeck had been.

He was not concerned if they thought he was boring, but he could not understand why it should provoke such a fierce argument. He decided to ask Wesley.

He finally found Wesley nursing a soda in Ten Forward. By his hunched shoulders and dejected posture, Data concluded that all was not well.

"Hello, Wesley," said Data. "Do you mind if I join you?"

"Oh, hi, Data." Wesley glanced in the direction of the android and tried a smile which didn't quite succeed.

Data remained standing as Wesley had not answered his question. "I conclude, then, that you do not wish me to join you," he said.

"Eh? What? Oh. Why don't you sit down, Data?" Wesley pulled out a stool and returned to staring morosely into his drink. Data meanwhile perched himself precariously on the stool. He had been trying of late to adjust his posture; he had noticed that most Humans, in comparison to his own ramrod posture, slouched (except of course Captain Picard and Commander Riker). In his never-ending desire to be Human, Data had surmised that adopting similar postures would enhance his Human appearance.

However, it was more difficult than he had supposed. Trying to sit on the stool Wesley had provided for him in the manner he most desired took nearly a minute and a good deal of slipping about. Wesley did not even notice his friend's posture problems.

"Pardon me, Wesley," said Data, trying to prevent his elbow slipping off the bar, "but you seem pre-occupied."

Wesley sighed.

"Is there something you would like to talk about?" asked Data, borrowing a phrase he had once heard Counselor Troi use.

"Women!" muttered Wesley under his breath. "Always cutting off their noses to spite their faces."

This puzzled Data greatly. Why would anyone mutilate their face willingly? He opened his mouth and started, "Enquiry - ?"

"Not now, Data!" said Wesley in a credible imitation of Captain Picard. He slammed down his drink, climbed down from his stool and stomped out of the room. The violence of his departure startled Data and proved the final straw to his precarious balance on the stool. He slipped right off it and landed *thump* on his posterior. There was a muffled snort and the clinking of glass from behind the bar and assorted giggles from the rest of Ten Forward.

Several minutes later, his dignity restored, Data faced Captain Picard over his desk in the Ready Room. The Captain was leaning back in his chair, considering his hands gravely. "Have you ever read *The Taming of the Shrew* by William Shakespeare, Data?"

"Indeed, sir. I have read the entire works of William Shakespeare," replied Data. "The *Taming of the Shrew* is a comedy."

The Captain nodded.

"However, Captain, I do not see the relevance of that to this situation."

The Captain's communicator beeped just as he was about to answer. "Riker to Picard."

"Yes, Number One?"

"We have an interesting phenomenon you may wish to observe, sir," replied his sturdy First Officer. Picard, faced with a lengthy discussion on Human behaviour with Data, jumped at the chance to avoid it. He sprang to his feet. "Be right there, Will. I'm sorry, Data - another time," he said, shepherding Data out of the room. He followed his Science Officer and noticed that Data was walking a little... *stiffly*.

"Is there something wrong with your leg, Data?" asked Picard, mystified.

"Just a little stiff, Captain," replied Data, leaving the Bridge.

The Captain became aware of several wry smiles and the grin plastered across Will Riker's face.

"Number One?"

Riker lifted an eyebrow and turned towards the screen.

Why, thought Picard, *am I the last to hear about things?* It was perpetually annoying to be left out of the joke. Ah, the loneliness of command! He straightened his jacket and sat down in his chair.

"Well, Number One? What have you got to show me?"

Half an hour later, after reviewing his copy of Shakespeare's plays, Data stood in Holodeck 3. The Taming of the Shrew, the Captain had recommended. After revising the text several times Data still could not see what the Captain had meant. He had come to the Holodeck to see if the message could be more easily interpreted in a visual setting.

"Computer," said Data, "please programme a performance of Shakespeare's Taming of the Shrew."

"Which performance?"

"Please specify - *performance*?"

"The computer has on file several performances of Shakespeare's Taming of the Shrew. They star Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, Robert LeMarr and Eleanor May, Horok Joquim and Levuree Goshok, Joe - "

"Which is considered the most critically acclaimed?" Data interrupted.

"The performance of Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor is considered the most critically acclaimed," replied the computer, "although Joquim and Goshok's was voted 'Most Original Interpretative Performance at Deneb 5's Academy of Performing Arts Awards' of 2285."

Data's curiosity got the better of him and he wondered what was so unusual about Joquim and Goshok's performance. He asked for that. It comprised, however, two Andorians conducting the entire affair in Klingon, Federation Standard and Denebian simultaneously. Although Data could distinguish between the three languages perfectly well, he felt he was missing the Human message. He asked for Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor instead.

The story, as far as Data could determine, involved two sisters, Katherine and Bianca, who lived in Padua, Italy. Bianca was the younger sister, sweet-natured and her father's favourite, who had no trouble attracting suitors for her hand. Katherine was the Shrew of the title and had a sharp tongue. The problem was that Bianca's father would not let her marry until her older sister was matched off, and since Katherine's sharp tongue chased away potential husbands, that seemed an unlikely prospect.

It seemed to Data very strange that a younger sister should have to wait for the older to marry first and again he wondered why the Captain had recommended this play to him. He watched the performance three times (at an extremely high speed) and still the answer eluded him.

Katherine was finally married off to Petruchio who spent his time taunting and mistreating her until she was 'tamed'. Her unruly tongue was finally stilled in her head and she fell in love with her husband.

"Computer, freeze programme."

At that the Holodeck doors opened and the Captain appeared. He had been feeling a little guilty at fobbing Data off so quickly an hour earlier, and had decided to seek him out.

"Hello, Captain," said Data. "I have been attempting to define 'cutting off your nose to spite your face' by watching *The Taming of the Shrew*, but I am afraid I cannot grasp the concept."

"What version are you watching, Data? Ah - Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. You know, Data, really the Royal Shakespeare Company's performances were considered far superior at that time," said the Captain.

"Sir - I cannot comprehend why you would recommend this play to me," said Data. "It seems to follow some very strange behavioural patterns."

"Ah," smiled the Captain. "Let me show you, then. Computer, replay the first three acts."

He and Data proceeded to watch the play, the Captain pointing out that Katherine felt rejected and hurt and by her father's preference for Bianca. By deterring potential suitors for herself, she denied her sister love and a husband. However, she also denied herself the same things. Therefore, in order to hurt her sister, she was hurting herself in the process - "Cutting off her nose to spite her face. It is a very emotional response, Data," explained the Captain.

"I see," said Data. "It means that Katherine is making her position worse by trying to hurt Bianca."

"Correct, Data," said Picard.

"Therefore, when somebody is cutting off their nose to spite their face, they are trying to correct a wrong made against them by sacrificing something?"

"Yes."

"Their nose? Or rather... a *metaphorical* nose?"

"Yes. Metaphorically speaking, Data, it's as if... As if you looked at your face one morning and it had a pimple."

"A pimple? Oh, yes, a spot, acne, a -"

"Yes, yes!" said the Captain hastily. "And when you looked at your face, it made you angry to have this pimple, and -"

"You cut off your nose," said Data.

"Which makes your appearance worse."

"And you look worse than you did with just the pimple," said Data. "I think I comprehend."

"It is very complicated area of Human behaviour," said the Captain, "and very difficult to understand."

"Thank you for your help, sir." Data considered for a moment. "Although... because I did need your help means I have still so much to learn about Human behaviour."

"Data, all of us on this ship have much to learn about our own behaviour, even after a

lifetime," replied Picard.

"Yes, sir. I suppose that is why we have Counselor Troi."

"Amongst other things - yes."

"If you will excuse me, sir, I have a visit to make," said Data and left to find out how Wesley Crusher was feeling.

After Data had left, Picard stood in the holodeck. He had nothing important to do. He was at the end of his shift. To tell the truth, he was feeling lonely. He knew as Captain of the Enterprise he had to cultivate a certain distance from his crew, but it had its costs.

Today, for example, he had got into a turbolift. "Bridge," he commanded the computer. The turbolift had started its ascent then stopped and the doors opened. Picard could hear female laughter which stopped abruptly when the two young officers - Ensigns Calpaldi and La Roque - saw him. They sidled respectfully into the car. Picard felt as if he was spoiling things and was almost prompted to say, "Carry on." They stood awkwardly, pressed against the wall of the car. Picard had noticed Ensign La Roque before, partly because of her French name and partly because she had a pair of green eyes a man could get lost in. Not for the first time he wished he was a carefree lieutenant again and ask what the joke was. He smiled at them and nodded his head.

They smiled and nodded back.

We must look like ducks with all this nodding, Picard thought. The turbolift stopped again and the two ensigns left, La Roque smiling at him as she left, her green eyes twinkling, her auburn hair cascading around her shoulders. Picard watched then walk down the corridor, restarting their animated conversation, before the doors shut again. He sighed.

He would have thought no more about it, to be honest; the familiar surge of adrenaline arriving on the Bridge always gave him wiped the incident from his mind. But it had been Data's leg that had brought the message home. He never had any fun any more. Nobody shared a joke with him; people stopped talking when he arrived in their presence, especially the younger members of the crew, who, he knew, had a vibrant social circle. They just clammed up on him.

He stood in the middle of Holodeck 3 looking at the frozen images of two great twentieth century actors. He had nothing better to do. He asked the computer if the holodeck was booked; it was not.

What would he do then? He didn't feel like Dixon Hill. Nor horse riding. He was feeling dissatisfied with his lot.

He had an idea. The day's events had made him want to be a carefree lieutenant again, he could ask the computer to recreate a day from the point of view of more junior members of his crew. He gave the computer the instructions, got outfitted in a lieutenant's uniform, placed a privacy lock on the door, and started the programme.

Holodeck 3 was decked out as Ten Forward. As he entered Guinan (or rather, her holodeck image) was serving behind the bar. He walked up to her.

"Hello," she said. "Lieutenant...?"

"Picard. Jean-Luc Picard," he said, delighted. Guinan didn't know him!

"Would you like anything, Lt. Picard?"

Picard was about to answer when he was thumped enthusiastically on the back. "Jean-Luc!"

He turned round to demand what the person thought he was doing. "Do I know you?"

"Hey, Jean-Luc, it's me! Steven Thomson! Remember? What do you think of the USS Enterprise? Some ship, eh?" said the offender, a lanky, sandy-haired individual, all in one breath.

"Yes," replied, Picard, somewhat at a loss. Obviously he was supposed to know this person.

"I hear you've been given a post in Engineering - lucky you! They have a great Chief. She's a bit crusty at first but she soon warms up a bit. Listen, come and meet all the gang." He dragged Picard off to a nearby table which had five or six people sitting round it, talking loudly.

"Hey, everybody!" He got the group's attention. "This is an old Academy friend, Jean-Luc Picard. Jean-Luc, this is Isobel Downie, Phillip Richards, Brian Frew, Alice Incecik and Jason May," he introduced. Picard sat down next to Isobel Downie, an attractive redhead with hazel eyes.

"Hello," she smiled. "Just come on board today?" They started to chat. Rather than use carbon copies of his crew, which would have been unfair, Picard had asked the computer to create a representation of them. His idea was to get an idea of the atmosphere below decks. Isobel - or, rather, Ensign Isobel Downie - was a nurse in Sickbay. The CMO (Picard had asked the computer to be very circumspect) was a real dragon, she said. He stifled a grin as he thought of Beverly Crusher. One of the others worked at Weapons Systems, another two were Mission Specialists and Alice Incecik was on the Ship's Counselor's staff. Jason May was a Command candidate currently serving a term on the Bridge. Soon the others pressed Jason to tell them what was going on in the upper echelons of the crew.

"So, Jason, what happened next? What did the Captain do?" said Isobel eagerly. "Have you met the Captain yet?" she asked Picard.

"No. What's he like?" asked Picard, feeling like an eavesdropper.

"Jason knows best, don't you?" said Isobel.

"He's hard but fair," said Jason. "He's a good Captain - not that I've had much experience of Captains," he admitted, "but if I was to spend most of my career on this ship under his command - well, I wouldn't complain."

There were mutterings of agreement from the rest of the group.

"He makes me nervous," said Isobel. "I can't talk to him without stammering."

"That's because you've got crush on him," said Stephen.

"No I haven't!" retorted Isobel. "Well, he is quite good-looking, you know, and he makes

you feel... feel *safe*."

"Pah!" snorted Lt. Incecik, a tall, striking blonde. "If you see him as a father figure, then just say so."

"Okay, I see him as a father figure," recited Isobel.

This struck Picard as faintly ironic, given his lack of empathy with children.

The conversation moved on to other things, a few jokes were told, some juicy snippets of gossip exchanged - there was a red-hot affair going on down in the Zoology Laboratory, apparently - a future party was discussed. The group was laughing at a particularly awful joke involving a tribble, a Regulan blood worm and a Klingon disruptor, when a shadow fell across the table. Abruptly the laughing stopped. The group looked up at the person causing the shadow. It was the Captain!

He nodded and smiled at them and continued onwards to another table, followed by his CMO who, Picard was forced to admit, did look a little dragon-like.

The conversation started up again. "He must have made it up with Dr. Lamond," said Jason. "They had a flaming row over the Trigellan affair last week."

"Good!" said Isobel. "Maybe she'll be less grumpy around Sickbay."

Later, Picard was in Engineering, carrying out a task the Chief had given him. It was to monitor and realign the navigational sensor array. He had found the atmosphere convivial and the company very entertaining in Ten Forward. If this was an accurate representation of his crew, he was pleased to see they were a warm and friendly bunch.

He was still musing on this when the red alert sounded.

Immediately, Engineering was bathed in red light as the sirens wailed. The Chief Engineer ran towards the turbolift to transfer control to the Bridge. The shields were raised and sensors put on full sweep. The tension level raised several notches. People who, seconds before, had been relaxed, were now wearing serious expressions and moving smartly about their business.

Picard and several other people were thrown off their feet by a huge buffeting, the shield energy readings went haywire, the whole ship shuddered and groaned and the lights flickered.

He was getting to his feet when he was thrown off balance again by another blast. *Ferengi*, he guessed. Around him, people were struggling to their feet, trying to dampen the alert sirens and trying to get full power back to the shields.

"What's going on?" Picard shouted as people ran past him to and fro.

"I don't know!" said a young Ensign. "Ferengi, Romulans - your guess is as good as mine. I don't ask questions, I just do what I'm ordered to."

"How can you stand it?"

The Ensign looked at him. "What do you mean, how can I stand it? Stand what?"

"Not knowing what's going on. Not being able to do anything about it!"

The Ensign shouted above the noise, "We have to trust the Captain to do the best he can."

Picard stopped and considered for a moment. "Computer - cancel program." People froze around him in various positions of urgency, then disappeared. The grid of the holodeck formed around him. He stood alone in the centre of the room, smiling and shaking his head.

The grass is always greener on the other side, he thought. So he could not share in the jokes, but he was in control of the ship; he had some influence over what happened. He was in command. That was what he had always wanted to do, and that was what he would always do.

He left the Holodeck and went to Ten Forward. Guinan came up to him as he approached the bar. "What can I do for you... Lieutenant?" she said calmly.

Picard looked at her, startled. How could she..? Then he looked down at the two rank pins on his uniform and started to grin. "I'll be back in a moment."

"Do you want to explain why you've been demoted, Captain?" Guinan called after him.

He never did get to explain. Just after he changed, he was called back to the Bridge during a yellow alert; but there wasn't a lot about Jean-Luc Picard that Guinan didn't know or couldn't guess at, and she did not press the matter further.

Geordi La Forge had been looking forward to this all day. He was lying in Holodeck 3, VISOR off, a balmy breeze caressing his skin. He had wanted to try something different in the holodeck for some time now - it had been while he was reading *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* that he had been drawn to the words -

"I need a jug of wine and a book of poetry,
Half a loaf for a bite to eat,
Then you and I, seated in a desert spot,
Will have more wealth than a Sultan's realm."

The simplicity of the lines had struck him as beautiful. In deep space, with your head stuck in warp coil specs all day, it was easy to forget the simpler things.

Inspired by the poem, he had worked hard on this program and it was perfect. Well... not *quite*, he had to admit. It would be nice to have a beautiful woman with him to read the poetry to. He could, of course, have got holodeck image to keep him company, but he preferred the flesh and blood type. However, he was also an optimist and therefore did his best to relax and enjoy himself.

He was lying on a hillside, feeling the grass growing beneath his hands. Birds sang all around him, there was a fresh, clean smell to the air laced with the bouquets of thousands of flowers. He could hear the buzz of tiny insects going about their business. The sun warmed his body while he dozed.

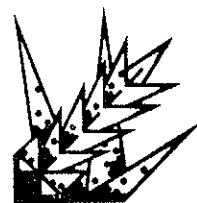
It was easy to forget his other senses as his brain coped with the constant cacophony of vision his VISOR threw at him. Instead of smelling and tasting good food he would examine

its chemical constituents. Instead of hearing the sound of good friends laughing as they responded to the joke he had just told them he would be looking for changes in the blood flow to their face. Therefore, to get away totally from it he had devised the country setting - no technology anywhere, no need to see. He had taken off his VISOR, eaten some good food and settled down to doze.

He sighed contentedly. Life was good on the simple side of the street. He knew he would have to get up soon and vacate the Holodeck for the next user, but he was here now and he was going to soak up every bit of the sun's rays and appreciate in sound and touch and smell the beauty all around him.

Live for the moment, Geordi, live for the moment! he thought to himself. Geordi La Forge had learned that lesson a long time ago; it was the way he coped with the continual pain of his VISOR.

He drifted off into sleep.



NO SAVIOUR

Data's not a saviour
But he'll do the best he can.
Gosheven won't listen
Cause Data's not a man.

Gosheven tells the people,
"Hundreds had to die
Before we learnt to adapt
Learned how to survive."

Gosheven has no knowledge
Of the weapons they'll be facing;
He doesn't understand
That technology's been racing.

Not with words but actions
Data got his point across;
The colonists are leaving -
They know when they have lost.

Margaret Connor



TERMINUS

by

Debbie Lee

'At the time, a refined family had to include at least one delicate child...' Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980)

The bar of the space station Terminus was not the most welcoming of hostelrys in the fourth quadrant. It possessed the same utilitarian dimensions and construction as any of the other facilities on the station - walls of monotonous grey mechanite alloy that glistened dully in the artificial lights. The bar's only concession to customer comfort was the fact that the chairs at the tables moved, not being fixed to the floor as was more commonly the case in more agreeable establishments. A simple reason explained this, and it was that 'mobiles' were cheaper and easier to replace after a fight broke out, which was more often than not on Terminus, there being, in the main, little else to do there except work... of which there was always plenty. Work consisted of heavy freight transfer, vessel repair and for the Federation elite, UFP cargo administration work and the duties associated with the running of a Starfleet JAG office. Terminus was, after all, the last stop for anything, from replicator casing to writ, for approximately 60,000 parsecs.

Within this ill-lit, unwelcoming, and hardly surprisingly half empty, place were three visible figures. One, a drunk, was snoring loudly yet peacefully over his recently drained flagon of old Earth ale. The replicators on Terminus had never been sufficiently updated to generate the synthehol equivalents of such ethanolic delicacies - no, they still knocked out the good old stuff in mind-numbing quantities, much to the approval of the bulk of inhabitants on Terminus. The lone voice in this particular wilderness was the representative of the Judge Adjutant-General's office based there - in whose illustrious opinion the detention cells would be not nearly so full if it were not for the sake of a simple piece of reprogramming that never seemed to be successfully implemented or integrated into the Terminus replicator equipment. The origins of the incapacitated drunk looked to be partly Sulamid, the long, feathery eyelashes giving him all the appearance of a Terran bird-eating spider - a look further enhanced by the clumped growths upon his head and chin, which quivered even as he slumbered.

The second occupant was the Barkeeper, an ill-tempered looking hominid who could have been mistaken at first glance for Terran, but who on closer inspection showed himself to possess the features reminiscent of the Zakdorn race, his rotund build and tendency to corpulence strongly indicating Zakdorn ancestry. He was swabbing down the bar with an air of superior irritation, as if the customers present were a major inconvenience, a scowl marring his petulant, surly features as he worked, a picture of unwelcome.

The third was a Human boy. His appearance was neat and precise; his thin lanky frame was clad in a suit of sober grey and a warm jacket was carefully hung upon the back of one of the nearby chairs. By his side sat a small scruffy looking case that by its battered appearance and scuffed edges had obviously seen much travel. He sat at one of the tables towards the centre of the bar; by his left elbow a pile of books - printed books too, not the more commonplace PADD based ones that more normally predominated. By his right elbow sat a tall glass of Cerasti juice, previously served up, somewhat unwillingly, by the barman who, for

reasons of his own, did not appear to be altogether keen to encourage custom in the middle of the 'day'. The boy, however, was engrossed in yet another book, an elegant tome encased in a gold embossed green binding, the pages soft yellowed with age. Each leaf possessed its own minute dusting of gold evident on the edge of the collected pages as they lay together, the corners flaring outwards with usage. The boy's head was bent in serious concentration; his fine, mouse-blond hair kept flopping down into his eyes as he read, and in response he kept flicking the thin strands back behind his ears in an almost reflex action - not removing his attention from the book in front of him for a moment. He was not old, maybe hovering somewhere near his early to mid teens, but he had what many considered to be an old face, his features looking as if they rarely, if ever, creased themselves into a smile. His eyes, when not glued to the books, were large, green and generously fringed by dark lashes; attractive on a woman, preposterous on a young, teenage boy.

The Barman regarded his one conscious customer with suspicion, for drunks he understood, and rowdy troublemakers he did not have to, as the JAG office would deal with them. But when customers behaved in this unusual way, quiet and introspective, he got nervous, very nervous. His uneasy reverie however was disturbed at that moment as the doors to the bar grated noisily back, and a figure staggered in loaded with baggage that knocked against the metallic doors with a clashing report. The Barman looked up sharply, making a peculiarly Zakdornian noise in the back of his throat as he narrowed his eyes in the direction of this latest arrival.

"Mmmmmmmmmmmmm."

It looked as if he would have to speak to the Administrators of the transporter station yet again as they would appear, once more, to be developing the annoying habit of sending 'off worlders' in space transit to the bar in an effort to keep them occupied. The only other alternative was that the station staff had them under their feet, and they hated anybody and anything being near the transporter equipment any longer than was absolutely, strictly necessary. The object of the Barman's attention was by now staggering across the expanse of the bar room floor, bags dangling from every limb as if he was some form of mobile storage frame.

"Hey you..." came a demanding tone, "Get to it and take some of these cases."

The Barkeeper simply regarded him with a well practised frosty glare from his position behind the bar, before flicking the cloth twice in his hand and resuming his lavish attention on the ebonite counter top, his expression, as he looked at his latest visitor, one of superior condescension at even allowing this upstart to stand on the floor of the facility under his present jurisdiction.

"I meant you," the newcomer repeated impertinently, before dropping his luggage where he stood, on his face an expression of badly used anger.

"I," The Zakdornian Barkeeper enunciated clearly, "keep the bar. I serve the occasional drink in the absence of the more usual... staff. I do NOT, however, carry bags of any description. Mmmm."

His sharp, fussy tone brooked no argument with this stand.

The first boy glanced up from his book at the sound of the newcomer's voice, as if he could not quite believe it to be so familiar, his face falling ever so slightly at the sight of the figure standing arrogantly amidst his considerable collection of cases. The stolid face was flushed an unprepossessing red from the unfamiliar exertion of carrying so much weight.

Obviously the keeper of the transport facility had informed this traveller also that this, the one open bar on the Starbase Terminus, was probably the best place to wait for his connecting transport. Unfortunately. The boy sighed, a deep long sigh, and then waited patiently for the latecomer to recognise him - it took only a little while longer than he had originally expected.

"No, it cannot be!" the newcomer puffed. He walked towards the boy's table, and as he moved nearer it was plain even to the Barman that they were of a similar age.

"Surely it cannot be... Why, I thought you would be staying at school during the holidays having hardly any family at all to visit. It surely can't be true! Is that you, Astor? What the hell are you doing this far out in deep space?"

The second boy's tone gave away his uneasy surprise at seeing this particular familiar face on Terminus, and as Astor reluctantly closed his book and looked into the demanding face of one of his fellow pupils from his UFP boarding school, he wondered if he would ever manage to escape their somewhat unpleasant presence.

"So, Astor, what exactly are you doing out here?"

"Waiting."

The face turned up to regard the newcomer was unreadable, yet hinted at an almost vague irritation - almost as if the boy Astor felt he was somehow socially obliged to make conversation, not that he particularly wanted to.

Jeremy Astor looked at the flushed face of Charles Duvas, and saw uncertainty there, almost as if the hearty, intrusive tone with its almost forced quality of pleasantness covered a fear of... rejection? Surely not. For Charles Duvas was as much a part of the 'elite' crowd at the UFP Earth Residential Educational Facility, European Sector, as it was possible to get. People such as he did not have to cope with the uncertainty of whether they were, or would be, acceptable or not. With influence, and therefore power within that environment, he would not have to. Jeremy finally allowed a very small smile to creep onto his face once he fully registered the stunned disbelief of his school colleague at finding him so far from Earth and the Terran system. Of course, to travel anywhere, even within Federation space, was expensive - and beyond UFP space, it became almost prohibitive. Jeremy Astor's general attitude and persona, possessions and pastimes, did not scream wealth and influence in quite the same way that they did in Charles Duvas. It was remarkable the difference that having a father as UFP Governor of a remote Earth colony world, however small and distant, made to one's consequence in the shallow world of those so very concerned with appearances and the right 'contacts'.

"I am waiting to be collected by the ship due to take me on the final stage to where I am due to spend my vacation," Jeremy explained finally, the words forced out reluctantly.

"It is inconvenient, isn't it," stated Duvas, throwing himself into the nearest chair by Astor's table, encouraged at this sign of a slight thawing.

"As soon as you want to go any further than the edge of the third quadrant, people... or should I say 'travel facilitators', otherwise known as booking clerks, regard you as if you are some form of unsectioned madman!"

"I would not know about that," Astor admitted candidly.

Duvas suddenly looked at Astor, his gaze shrewd. "No. No, I didn't see you on board

the Daedalus, and I walked around that damned ship quite a bit - it was a hellish long journey."

"I did not arrive at Terminus aboard the Daedalus," Astor admitted.

"Ah, so you came by freighter then, did you?"

Was there NO respite? Astor scratched his head and sighed, "Well... yes, sort of, I suppose." He looked across at the Barkeeper and pointed at his now empty glass,

"Could I have another Cerasti juice, please. Do you want a drink - Duvas, is there anything I can get you?"

Jeremy's manners were impeccable, as always, even when he did not particularly like the person that they were directed at, and Duvas was aware of this.

"No... er, no, thank you. Besides, the carrier Daedalus was more than a little too generous with its complimentary hospitality."

Astor shrugged, smiled, and turned in his chair to address the Bartender once more.

"That's all then. Just the one Cerasti juice please." He turned back in his chair, and put his closed book carefully on the pile by his elbow.

Duvas regarded him coolly, unwilling to accept that the self-possessed person before him, ordering Cerasti juice from a bumptious Zakdorn Barman whilst awaiting transport to some mysterious destination, could possibly be the reserved, shy, awkward Astor who had been the butt of so many jokes when he had first appeared amongst their ranks. There had been rumours. Of course, there always were. Rumours of a scholarship won to EREFES by a very talented individual, rumours about a Starfleet officer in the boy's family killed in the course of duty. But nothing was ever confirmed, and certainly not by Jeremy Astor himself, who was an almost obsessively private individual. However, it had been duly noted by the EREFES grapevine that the Sports days and Prizegivings were not attended by Jeremy Astor's parents, ever, which was in itself an absence that spoke volumes. Not that Astor seemed totally devoid of any relatives. An Aunt, and occasionally an Uncle, would often come and visit him during the course of the academic term.

"Was it boring on board the freighter then?" Duvas asked, and then seeing the puzzled look on Jeremy Astor's face, said quickly by way of explanation, "I meant the reading material. There was, no doubt, little else to do."

"Oh no... No, there was plenty to keep me occupied."

"Oh, I bet there was! If you like Deutanium ore rods and storage bins. The Daedalus had the most amazing holodeck facility that emulated a full size swimming pool with sufficient capacity for all travelling guests - complete with sunshine, scenery and waterslides..." Duvas suddenly collected himself, as if he had just caught himself sounding a little too enthusiastic about the whole thing. "It was just about sufficient to pass some of that never ending travel time on board the Daedalus."

"It sounds it," Jeremy agreed politely, his face showing only civil interest.

The Zakdorn Barkeeper made his way slowly to their table, stepping somewhat fussily over Duvas's discarded baggage with noisy tuttings and grunts of disapproval accompanying his progress. He finally arrived at their side with a laborious sigh, and the tall, condensation

frosted glass holding the yellow, milky liquid was carefully placed onto the table before Astor with a smile of great condescension. The empty glass was then removed with a flourish and a dark look in Duvas's direction.

"Mmmmm..." The Zakdorn Barkeeper folded his arms, the tray under them, and pursed his lips before asking, "Is this one also to be charged to account?"

"Yes... Yes, please." Jeremy fiddled with the straw embedded in the thick Cerasti juice, not having to see Duvas's face to sense the surprise emanating from his table companion.

"You come this way often, Astor?" The tone of Duvas's voice was cuttingly sarcastic. "That is, enough to justify keeping an account at a bar like this?"

"Oh, it's not my account. The... the Captain of the vessel that brought me here suggested I use it while I wait. He... he used to be a friend of my father."

"Used to be?"

"My father is dead. He died when I was little, so I can't remember much about him... Luckily for me, Captain DeSoto does."

"Captain DeSoto?" Duvas's face creased into a frown. "Hang on a just a moment here... Captain DeSoto of the USS Hood?"

Jeremy had realised his mistake the moment the name of his father's old friend had slipped out. That is what always happens when you attempt to explain something, it normally leads to even more questions rather than fewer. But Jeremy was not about to compound his mistake even more by lying or denying anything.

"Yes," he replied simply. "The Hood was running medical supplies out to the edge of the third quadrant. Captain DeSoto kindly offered to bring me as far as Terminus when he heard I was to be travelling to... stay with relatives during the long holiday after the main semester."

"That was very generous of him. And how convenient for you, Astor." Duvas's tone was hard. "To have the luxury of galaxy-hopping aboard Starfleet's finest. No wonder you have never had to deal with travel facilitators and the like."

That surely could not be jealousy that edged the words of Charles Duvas?

"It's not like that at all," Jeremy denied, shaking his head as he spoke. "The Hood just happened to be coming this way, it was a favour for an old friend."

"But hardly a freighter ride, Astor. Whatever the cargo, one could hardly describe the Starship USS Hood as a freighter... So did it feel good, Astor?"

"Did what feel good?" Jeremy asked, perplexed.

"Playing me for a fool. Did you have a good, private little laugh at my expense whilst you were trying to make me look stupid?"

"Of course not!" Astor retorted, pushing the Cerasti juice straw away from his mouth. "Why would I want to make anyone look stupid?"

"Oh I don't know... a few good reasons spring to mind. A little piece of petty revenge

maybe - to get a little of your own back for all those times you geeked out at UFP EREFES. Good old jealousy, because I fit in, and you do not. Because I have a future, somewhere to belong, and do not have to rely on scholarships, old family friends and distant relatives for prospects." Duvas's face twisted into an unpleasant grin.

"That is a vile thing to say to anyone, Duvas. You see so little... yet use that as evidence to convict people of so much," Jeremy responded angrily, his colour starting to rise. "And as for attempting to make you look foolish, do not judge me by your own mean standards and petty axioms. I would never stoop to discredit myself by such a pathetic act. I have neither claimed nor denied anything. You have your own neatly drawn picture of who or what I am, already precisely pigeon-holed away in your tiny little mind. The only thing I've done wrong here is to not fit that picture as well as you would like me to. Well, tough, Duvas, because that's life. You know absolutely nothing about me, nothing!"

Jeremy Astor glared at Duvas, subsiding into his chair before plugging his straw into his mouth, snatching up the book he had so recently closed, and opened it at the point marked by an ornate piece of perspex. Duvas glared back at him, his arms crossed and his body turned away in the direction of the main door to the bar, the line of his body rigid, his jaw stiff.

Then there was silence. The bar seemed to echo with it. Even the drunk alien in his dark corner had muted his snoring to the point of heavy breathing. The Barkeeper, meanwhile, had managed to disappear, both mysteriously and conveniently, much to Duvas's chagrin. There was no sound at all, save the hum of the ancient atmospheric conditioning ducts and the distant noises from the Terminus base itself; the banging and crashing of storage modifications, the shouts and called instructions of busy workers. The silence stretched on and on, becoming more strained with the passing of time rather like an over-extended rubber band - with the prospect of it breaking also seeming ever more likely as the lull went on.

"Well, I do know one thing about you." Duvas was the first to break the wordless void that yawned across the table between them.

Astor shut his book with a bang and regarded his tormentor with irritation, brushing the strands of hair from his eyes. "Really? Like what?" Astor snapped, his patience at an end.

"Well... I would say you don't like me very much," Duvas replied, a minute smile on his face.

"Okay. It's not just you," Astor admitted, with a sigh and a forward tone. "It's that whole EREFES approach to 'fitting in', 'being seen' with the 'right people', doing 'the right things'. Surely it's more appropriate that we all 'get along', or at least appreciate everyone's different talents instead of working so hard to become inconsistent clones of each other. It's not what I expected at all from one of the UFP's foremost schools."

"What else is there to expect?" Duvas asked with a small shrug. "Life is composed of fitting in, being seen with the right people, doing the right things... at least it is if you want to get on and get ahead."

"So, you are saying that what we see at UFP EREFES is like a microcosm of the real world, of life, within the UFP and beyond?"

"If you like."

"Then I disagree. DO I disagree with that! I think it is the kind of world people THINK should exist within the UFP and elsewhere, and that gives you an excuse not to change it. That

is what you believe, so that is what it becomes, a self-feeding illusion that eventually spills over into reality."

"Deep, Astor, very deep!" Duvas replied sarcastically. "Obviously all that time spent at school during past school vacations has given you just a tad too much thinking time."

"That has nothing to do with it I like staying at school during the holidays." Astor defended himself hotly, his colour on the rise yet again.

"Oh, come on, Astor - you really expect me to believe that?"

"But I do... and yes, I do."

Duvas regarded the boy sitting opposite him and tried to imagine who he could actually be going to spend the vacation with so deep in space. He personally was on his way home to the colony world his father governed, back to his rather vacuous mother and fiercely competitive siblings who would all no doubt be vying to report to their aloof father their academic exploits. Astor meanwhile would be... where? He had said his father was dead, so he must be going to stay with his mother... who was probably a crusty librarian busy deep in the bowels of a Federation Starbase somewhere, cataloguing and reclassifying the vast stores of data kept on file within the Federation. No doubt Astor would be in for the time of his life, cataloguing information and reorganising data sets until it was time to return to school. He always had had a reputation for being something of bookworm, or that phenomenon peculiar to the European Sector... a swot. Duvas wondered why this mysterious woman had never visited her son when he was at school, the serious boy with so few friends. Astor had been bullied in the past, or at least the bullies had tried upon seeing him appear vulnerable, different. But it was this difference, a quality that made him appear to be almost frighteningly separate from the other pupils at EREFES, that had stopped this behaviour almost before it had begun. Astor had stood apart from the others, refusing to be cowed or scared, prepared to stand alone if others were not comfortable with his individuality. Duvas frowned, for he had never given this a great deal of thought before, but to be prepared, to be able, to do that - how could one person, so alone, be able to isolate himself like that?

"Have you far to travel... on from Terminus I mean?" Duvas asked suddenly.

"Um... No, at least I don't think so. I find it hard to calculate unless someone gives me a clear figure in parsecs - and the figure I was given most definitely was not."

"Your mother sounds as good with figures as mine does." Duvas smiled briefly, unconsciously using his assumption as fact.

"My mother?" *Oh my God, now he thinks I am going to see my mother,* Jeremy thought with despair. For a brief moment he was tempted to lie, but gritting his teeth, he said, "No, not my mother. My mother died when I was twelve."

"Oh hell! *I am* sorry, Astor," said Duvas. And meant it. That at least explained the lack of parents on Prizegiving days.

"Its... okay," Astor said. "I am going to stay with... Well, they are actually sort of an adopted family, I suppose."

"They adopted you after your parents died?"

"After my mother died... yes."

Another silence fell, but this time it was less loaded, both boys appearing to be thrown back into their own thoughts once more. Duvas found himself looking hard at Astor across the table, trying to imagine the family prepared to adopt such an unprepossessing boy. He imagined a middle aged couple, childless, taking pity on someone who was so alone, who really had no one. No father to decry, no mother to despise, no brothers or sisters who would isolate you if it meant furthering their own ends... Lucky Astor.

"Interesting books you have there," Duvas stated, wanting to talk but suddenly not wanting to pry any further into the uncomfortable mystery that surrounded Jeremy Astor. "Antiques?"

"Some. I found them in a small shop off the mall, near the EREFES campus," replied Jeremy, pleased they had somehow arrived on neutral ground.

"Let's have a look... Is this what you call light reading, Astor? Two books on the finer points of archaeological study, one on... what is that? A novel by J R R Tolkien, and another by I Asimov. Now this one... I have no idea what this says at all."

Duvas picked up the one he had been trying to read from where it sat on the table, and moved the volume into the light. Its binding was inky black, tooled and crafted from an unfamiliar material, treated with some form of metallic compound to pick out the intricately done craftwork. Jeremy Astor shifted a little uncomfortably in his chair, willing Duvas to replace the book on the table and forget about it, but Duvas was far too intrigued to do any such thing.

"I have never seen anything like this before." Duvas turned the book over in his hands, intrigued by its unfamiliar weight and curious print.

"Is it an ancient Earth language? It doesn't look like Greek, is it possibly ancient Asiatic?" His face was turned to Astor in question.

Jeremy scratched his head, and wondered if this whole episode was maybe just some form of bad dream, or an ongoing test by the 'Great Bird of the Galaxy' to see if he could be persuaded to tell an untruth and stick by it. "No, it is not of Earth," Jeremy admitted, hoping that would be enough. Of course it was not.

"Then what is it? ...Excuse me for saying so, Astor, but you hardly seem to be the kind of person who purchases something like this because it looks 'nice'!" Duvas turned the book over, and then opened it to its flyleaf, screwing up his eyes in an effort to understand what was written there.

"Astor - is that your name? The rest of this script reads like inveterate gibberish... but this, surely, reads as Jeremy Astor."

"Oh yes..." Jeremy observed innocently, looking across the table at the writing under Duvas's scrutiny, his head inclined slightly, "so it does."

There was a pause. It grew into something of a lengthy one as Duvas steadily studied Astor, waiting for some form of elaboration upon this observation.

Jeremy Astor shrugged, but unexpectedly, it was in fact the Bartender who supplied the answer to Duvas's question as he appeared, as if from nowhere, to claim Jeremy Astor's now empty Cerasti juice glass.

"A Klingon book... and written in the native Klingon script of the pIqaD. Mmmmmmmmm. Not so long ago, possession of such a thing would have had you instantly under arrest as a Klingon spy."

A spate of Zakdornian tutting followed this statement, at which point Duvas hastily put the book down, almost to the point of dropping it like a hot coal. He had learned a long time ago to steer well clear of anything that could cause scandal or reflect badly on his family, most particularly his father.

"It is Klingon?" he asked in an almost hushed tone, regarding the book as if it had sprouted legs and turned into an Astrathine Spider. "Did you know... Were you aware of that fact, Astor?"

"Yes I knew... and it is a beautiful thing." It was Jeremy Astor's turn to pick up the book and weigh it in his hands, running his hands over the tooled cover with great care.

"How did a book like that get into a bookshop on Earth? And in the European sector. I could almost understand if it was on the doorstep of Starfleet Headquarters..."

"It didn't," confessed Jeremy finally. "It was given to me as a gift."

"A gift?" Duvas was confused, incredulous. "A gift... from whom?"

"A... brother," Jeremy said, his face creasing into a wide smile as he said the words, his eyes lighting up as if someone had put a match to their usually dark depths. Duvas realised with a start that it was an expression that he had never before witnessed before on Astor's face.

What a day for surprises, Duvas thought to himself, particularly with respect to Astor.

"Have you ever met someone from the Klingon race, Astor?" Duvas asked him, his voice serious, his brows drawn into a frown. He was forced to admit that at this point, even an affirmative answer would not surprise him - truly anything appeared to be within the scope of this rather different Jeremy Astor.

"Well..." Jeremy started, but Duvas had cut in before Jeremy Astor was even able to complete his sentence.

"I have." Duvas took a deep breath, as if recalling a pretty impressive experience.

"My father met with a Klingon Commander who was working as an attache within a UFP policing force. His ship was helping to investigate an outbreak of space piracy within our colony sector. It was the first time I had met someone who truly looked and behaved like an 'off-worlder'...and it was an interesting experience to say the least. He was a giant. I mean not only tall, but wide with it, a massive creature with very few words - for anyone!"

Duvas shook his head, his face unreadable.

"But he was very polite - most particularly towards my mother. I can remember that most clearly of all. I think that, of all things, shocked me the most."

"I could imagine that would be somewhat unexpected."

"Only IMAGINE, Astor?" Are you telling me that you have never actually met any off-worlders? ...Had I asked myself that question an hour ago, I would have said of course not.

But now I can hardly believe that to be true. You sit in the middle of a bar in deep space, being served by a Zakhorn Barkeeper as if it is nothing unusual, being deafened by a well soused Sulamid and with a Klingon book in your possession. Is there anything else you wish to surprise me with, Astor?"

"No... No, nothing. It only seems more usual to be surrounded by non-Terrans because I was a Starfleet minor when my mother was alive. She was Lt. Maria Astor... a ship's archaeologist, and... well, it meant that we had to travel quite a bit."

So the EREFES mystery student had even MORE to his undisclosed past; he had been a Starship child.

"Oh yes, of course! The archaeology books," Duvas nodded, not prepared to analyse exactly why he suddenly wanted to hear as little as possible about Astor's past. Not now it was appearing so much better and more appealing than his own. No, the books seemed a much more comfortable topic of conversation all round.

"So what is it called?" Duvas asked suddenly.

"Pardon?"

"The book - the Klingon book. What is its title?"

"Oh, the book. It is the - " At this point Astor said about four (although it could possibly have been more, or even fewer) abrupt, guttural words, before adding, "...or in simple Federation basic, 'A/The Treatise of Honour' by Valdern."

Duvas could not deny the surprise he felt at Astor's apparently confident pronunciation of such an alien language. Whenever people normally had to use a language very different from their own, one they were unfamiliar with, they would tend to falter and stumble over the vocalisation, so rarely did one have to communicate without the convenience of a universal translator. Not Astor. Astor spoke with clear assurance, as if he knew his enunciation of the strange, harsh vowels to be absolutely correct. Somehow.

"And you are going to read that? All of it?"

"I have already read approximately one third of it."

"In native Klingon, Astor?" Duvas exclaimed. "Are you mad?"

"No, not at all. There is no merit in doing something that is too easy, after all."

Now he is even starting to sound like that Klingon Commander, thought Duvas irritably.

Jeremy smiled that smile again, flicking yet another persistent strand of mouse-blond hair from where it had flopped into his eyes.

"It is a worthwhile challenge. The Klingon loses some of its more subtle qualities when it is processed by the universal translator. I also believe the exercise to be something of a 'character building' one in nature - a phrase I believe is used to describe a pastime that is not always as pleasant as it could be but with some intrinsic benefit. A very Klingon concept."

Astor suddenly glanced down at his chronometer as if a sudden thought had occurred to him. "Duvas, what time do you make it?"

"Just past 1730 hours."

"Are you sure... that is the right time?"

"Of course it's right! Have you any idea of the cost of this chron?"

"Okay! Okay! I believe you!" Astor climbed out of his chair, and stretched discreetly, looking at his chronometer somewhat anxiously yet again.

"My connection should have been here by now. I hope that there has not been any kind of delay - I have another connection to make yet."

"Where are you going?" Duvas asked him as Astor started walking towards the bar.

"I'm going to find that Barman and see if I can find out if a ship has entered orbit, or if there is maybe a message for me to report to the transporter facility."

"Yet another Starship awaiting your pleasure, Astor?"

"No... No, most definitely not. A freighter this time. An old, cramped and by all accounts incredibly uncomfortable one, and one carrying tabekh-based spices of all things! I just hope the storage bins are all securely sealed, or I'll be sneezing all the way back to juH... er... home."

Astor had speedily made his way across to the bar at this point, stretching over the ebonite bar itself to see if he could see anyone hidden from sight towards the rear of the facility.

Home. Duvas frowned at the seat Astor had just vacated. *How can somewhere be home if you so rarely visit it?* he asked himself. Of course, there was that oft-quoted maxim that home was always wherever the heart was - but that could not be held up as a concrete explanation of anything. Duvas suddenly became aware of being alone in the bar with the exception of the lone drunk.

"Astor?" The only response was a resounding snore from the slumbering quasi Sulamid.

Duvas leant back in his chair and looked at the few possessions grouped around Astor's recently vacated seat, the pile of books, the neatly discarded jacket hung to one side on another chair, the scruffy case tucked underneath the same. It was almost as if he was looking at a completely different Jeremy Astor from the one who attended UFP EREFES. This Jeremy Astor had none of the reserved uncertainty that seemed so evident in the one who spent all his free time either in study or working within the extensive EREF information network, the one that had stood so far out from the crowd to almost make him a target.

This Astor also stood out, but in a different way, probably because he did not care if he fitted in or not. He had the confidence in his own individuality to question the expectation that he should be expected to fit in at all. Astor had mentioned he had been a Starfleet Minor; maybe that would explain it. The often gypsy-like existence of some Starship children was known to have led to minor problems when it came to settling down. Maybe Astor was just happiest, and at his best, when he was where he had been raised, in deep space, away from the Terran system.

Duvas felt a stirring of dissatisfaction as he compared his very public existence with that of the almost clandestine one being lived out by the despised Astor. *Today has been full of*

surprises, thought Duvas churlishly, and he was going to take great take pleasure in being the one to blow Astor's case wide open onto the EREF grapevine when they returned to class after the vacation. It made the prospect of those weeks to come, to be spent in the company of his all too demanding family, seem almost bearable. But the surprises of this day were far from yet over.

Abruptly the door to the bar shot back with a loud metallic bang. Duvas jumped and turned in his chair, thinking it might mark the return of Astor from his quest for information. It most certainly did not hail the return of Jeremy Astor, for instead a group of four hominids strode into the bar. Incredibly tall, with the distinctive features of the Klingon race; the high knotted foreheads, their hair, thick, long and black, their expressions that of barely restrained savagery. They were dressed in the grey metallic uniforms of the Klingon Imperial Empire, the tough composite habergeon settled across the broad shoulders, belted at the narrow waists; their height due also to the strong length of their legs encased in thickly padded mail breeches, the long heavy duty boots tapering to the customary hook on the end of each foot.

Duvas took a deep breath, and then another. And then yet another. The Klingon Commander he had met was obviously quite urbane by the standards of this group as they paused by the door to the Terminus bar, apparently waiting for someone still outside.

"Ghobe...GhaHbej naDevje loswI' VaDpongvo'Duj, qaH," came a distinctly female voice, and with that, a tall lean female of the Klingon species strode through the bar access. Only then was it allowed to close behind them. She was dressed identically to the males of the group, the only difference being her hair, which cascaded thickly down her back, jet black and untangled, to some point well past her small waist.

"Vaj ghahbejwI' naDev vogh!" the leader of the group said as he coolly surveyed the bar, from the sleeping alien on his far left, slowly across to the figure of Duvas, sitting as he was slap bang in the middle of the bar facility.

Duvas suddenly felt very isolated, alone and not just a little afraid. Why the hell had that fool Astor chosen to sit in the middle of the bar for chrissakes! Surely it would have been infinitely more desirable to have sat near a door, *any* door, particularly on a place as obviously unsalubrious as Terminus!

Slowly, unrelentingly, the Klingon 'horde' paced their way towards where Duvas sat, picking their way over his discarded luggage with the barest glance as to what it actually was, moving into position around the table where Duvas cringed, doing his best to appear inconspicuous. The Klingon at the head of the group moved forward, his arms the longest Duvas had ever seen, that managed to keep approximately in proportion with their allotted body.

Then suddenly his attention was caught by something or someone else, behind Duvas's shoulder. Duvas heard a noise behind his chair and realised with no little personal relief, that Astor must have returned to the bar in just enough time to distract the Klingons.

The other Klingons fell back a little, as if to give the Klingon at their head more room to manoeuvre as he moved to where Astor stood with an alarming burst of fluid speed.

That, Duvas screamed in his mind, *must be a bad sign*. He felt his eyes stretch open in fear to their very limits, the whites so exposed they were beginning to feel dry. Duvas spun around in his chair in just enough time to see Astor, with a determined shout, throw a double handed clenched punch at the Klingon figure's midriff as he was seized in a powerful grip. But even with this amount of force Astor's assault was easily fielded, and the grip upon his upper arms

secured to an even greater extent. Astor then resorted to twisting, first one way, and then another, with catlike flexibility - managing to finally free himself sufficiently from the hold of the tall figure to aim a powerful kick to the Klingon's hip joint. This move was also speedily blocked with consummate ease, the boy's shoulder being held firmly in one hand whilst Astor's foot was securely gripped in the other huge fist.

My God...I am going to be the sole witness to the dismemberment of our class geek...by Klingons! Duvas gulped, terrified, suddenly realising, if that was the case, who would be next. For a wild moment he wondered if he should try to do something, call for help, try to get that alien mass of muscle and sinew off of Astor... but found he could do nothing. Fear had frozen him as he was, immobile, to the seat of his suddenly acutely uncomfortable chair.

The tall Klingon released a triumphant laugh, long and raucous as he lifted Astor easily up into the air, whilst Astor struggled on furiously, seemingly for an age, until he eventually tired and went limp, his attitude one of defeat, his shoulders starting to shake.

Duvas leaped to his feet; he could not just stand by and let these animals subject even Astor to this kind of abuse and ill usage! It was beyond tolerance! However, even as he moved, clear Federation basic rang clearly through the air.

"Kurn, put the Human down... you know how fragile they are! You will damage him."

It was the female Klingon's voice that was raised in protest as she perceived Duvas's alarm, glancing from him back to the Klingon dangling Jeremy Astor above his head. She also appeared to have seen Astor's shaking shoulders, and had interpreted it, as had Duvas, as a sign of distress. Duvas registered this with relief, desperate enough to accept sympathy from any quarter... even if it came from the Klingon camp itself.

"Nuq?" roared Kurn. "Be'nI... HlqaghQo'qaja'pu'... DaHlobjIH!"

He spun round to reveal Astor's face, pink with suppressed laughter and the effect of Terminus' gravity on his blood flow as he was being held aloft.

"Scare this one?" His voice boomed in clear Federation basic, "Dap! Never! This, sister, is Astor. Astor is the one we seek. He is ruStay, bond-son of Mogh, brother to the sons of Mogh, Worf and Kurn."

Duvas blinked slowly. His brain felt as if it had been put on primary overload at this latest snippet of information. THIS was part of the adopted family? Astor had been taken in by a pack of Klingons?!

Jeremy was by now laughing openly, his breath coming in gasps. "One day Kurn, one day... I WILL succeed!"

"Persistence is a Klingon trait you emulate well, Astor," Kurn observed with gruff approval, slowly lowering the Human to his feet with ease, to set him before the assembled formidable group of Klingon warriors. "But your fighting tactics are worthy only of a mere mewling pujtera'nganpuq. This we shall work on, however, these forthcoming extensive DISMuVWI' celebrations!"

With that, Kurn slapped Astor on the shoulder, making the Human boy sway precariously, but Astor simply grinned a smile that stretched easily from one ear to the other. He shifted from his left foot to his right, now that both feet were back on Terminus, as he was subjected to a steady regard by the other Klingons standing there.

"Brothers... and sister," Kurn observed as an afterthought on seeing the sparkle in the eye of the young female Klingon present. "I bid you greet Jeremy Astor... joined to the qorDu' of Mogh by the bond of the ruStay when twelve earth years of age. My bond brother."

Was there the merest hint of harsh pride in that deep voice? marvelled Duvas, his breath seeming to be in persistently short supply at present.

"Astor, I would have you meet from my ship, First Officer K'mtok, Officers Diras and Kargon... and my bond sister K'errika, daughter of the family of Lorgh. Her presence as a junior officer on the veSDuj is due to Worf's encouragement."

It would appear that Kurn had yet to be fully convinced of Worf's more liberal attitudes towards equality of the sexes, including the concept of female Klingons as Bridge colleagues based solely on merit and not political gain. But K'errika simply regarded Kurn with a militant sparkle in her eye, and raised her chin a couple of extra notches.

"nuqneH..." Jeremy greeted them, obviously being careful to instil the required amount of insolence into his voice, "...naDev tthinganpu' law'tu'lu!"

Whatever Astor said must have been in accordance with Klingon etiquette for the occasion, gulped Duvas, as the Klingons under Kurn's command seemed pleased with this response to their presence, and regarded each other with grunts and nods of approval.

"blplvHa'law'," Kurn observed abruptly to Astor, regarding this member of his family hawkishly. "You grow puny on your tasteless Human food, brother." He made an unpleasant noise in the back of his throat at this. "To have to survive on such soj... I have eaten my share in my time, burned replicated bird meat, and it is NOT the stuff that warriors are built on. Although it may require a warrior's stomach to consume it in the first place," he added, his thoughts on trying to recall the name of that particularly foul delicacy that started with a c...

"On the subject of consumables... you will no longer be required to use the Tabekh freighter to travel to the First System of the Empire. The freighter attracted the attention of a Ferengi scout ship; their attempts to annexe the vessel resulted in us being ordered to this sector. As a result, the freighter has been redirected under escort - therefore you are to travel with us. The reason we were not here any earlier was due to extensive, and rather tiresome, Ferengan efforts to escape our ship... "

The rather smug expressions upon the fierce Klingon faces present suggested that the Ferengi had not been altogether successful in this endeavour.

Astor's unusual brother started surveying the bar, his meticulous gaze espying Astor's belongings scattered over the table accompanied by the coat and the scuffed case.

"You - " Kurn finally boomed - "Chom... You will pick up Astor's possessions and personally see them taken to the transporter facility now."

The Zakdorn pulled his face into an acutely peeved expression, his protesting prefixing 'Mmmmm' building in his throat as he raised his eyes to the Klingon's face. But, upon studying Kurn's face for the merest fraction of a second, he appeared to think better of voicing a protest.

"Humph," he finally snorted irritably, and moved from his relatively safe position behind the long black bar to collect together Astor's books and belongings.

"I am not a porter," he grumbled sourly, at which remark Kurn simply rumbled ominously.

"Well... so long Duvas," Astor grinned, unashamed anticipation at his forthcoming vacation written clear across his excited face. He moved quickly to rescue his precious books from the rough handling being meted out by the resentful Zakdornian 'chom' as he collected Astor's possessions together for removal. "Have a good vacation - I'll see you back at school."

And with that, Astor walked from the Terminus bar facility, surrounded by the most fearsome escort that Terminus had witnessed in some time. In fact, as they cleared the clumsy alloy doors, Duvas could have sworn that, for one stunned moment, the constant background noise that was Terminus momentarily halted at their passage. Even the Sulamid stopped snoring and opened one dazed, blue veined eye to observe them as they passed.

Duvas sat staring at the heavy doors long after they had closed behind one of Charles Duvas's biggest surprises of the year, possibly of his life. What... WHAT were the others back at EREF, European Sector, going to say when he spilt this particular can of worms? There was no way anyone would believe him at first; boring, bookish Astor a closet Klingon, member of a Klingon 'kordu'... Was that the word the formidable Kurn had used?

It was as amazing as it was preposterous. Why on earth had Astor never said anything, never let on about his extraordinary family! His life would almost certainly have been made instantly easier by such a revelation - this would have given him a unique cachet, guaranteed to draw fellow pupils to him like moths to a flame. As a result, his life at EREFES would have been less of the cruel trial by exclusion that Astor had been forced to undergo by refusing to conform to the expectations of those self same peers. It was an interesting point. Why HAD Jeremy Astor chosen to say nothing? What had made him keep so silent, what purpose did that determined silence serve? Duvas called to mind the unforgettable expressions of those friends and colleagues of Astor's nearest and dearest upon entering the bar, an image that felt as if it was indelibly tattooed upon his memory. He took a deep breath. Maybe... just maybe, if this was such an important secret to one such as Jeremy Astor, just maybe, Charles Duvas could also keep this particular 'on dit', well... unshared.

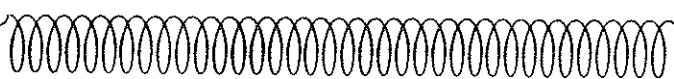
He, after all, had no wish to offend such an obviously refined family...



FATE



Fate protects fools, little children and ships named Enterprise.
 For this we are most grateful when dangers do arise.
 During many dangerous missions Fate has lent a helping hand -
 How the Enterprise survived them many find it hard to understand,
 But you know and I know it's not by man's skill alone
 For Fate has often helped us and so our reputation's grown.
 Yes, Fate protects fools, little children and ships named Enterprise;
 Let's hope it always does so when dangers do arise.



Helen Connor

TAILORED ENVIRONMENT

A Poppet Tale by P.J. Poole

(Warning: This story contains "Plumbing" sequences)

Geordi La Forge looked at the room and smiled the smile of a sculptor presented with a five ton block of finest marble.

"This room is just so *wrong* for her," he said happily.

Wesley Crusher looked confused. "Why are you so happy then?" he asked.

"Because we get to fix it. Ninety per cent of engineering is either computer generation, or applying service shipped by Starfleet, according to Starfleet regulation specs. The other ten per cent is do or die improvisation, usually with someone's phasers stuffed up your nose while you work. *This is fun!*"

Wesley, who preferred computer generation, often of designs that could not yet be built, nodded amiably, smiled back at the Enterprise's Chief Engineer and said, "So where do we start?"

"With research, my boy, with research!" replied Geordi, brandishing a computer datachip. "While we were at Starbase 30 I got hold of the basic profile for Poppet's home world. It would have taken another two months for us to receive it through regular channels, as part of the main computer's bi-annual updates, but I had a word with that cute little redhead in Xeno, and she had a classmate of hers tag it onto a subspace navigational update from Earth. I've already loaded the planetary conditions into the holodeck database so Poppet can call up a proper simulation of Mijbil when she gets holodeck time, but now I want to fix her cabin as well!"

"That's pretty sneaky," enthused Wesley admiringly.

"Improvisation is the sign of a true engineer," smiled Geordi. "It makes sense to restrict subspace transmission of low priority stuff, given the amount of new information constantly flowing in to the Federation, but not when it's something relevant to an individual on a Starship"

"So what does it say about Mijbillim accommodation?" enquired the young ensign.

"Good question," said Geordi, slipping the datachip into the reader. In a second the holoimage before them changed from the standard accommodation floorplan that had incurred Geordi's displeasure to the logo of the UFP and the title "Mijbil (Epsilon Hydra IV) Basic Cultural and Planetary Profile"

Four days later, Poppet was to be found in Ten Forward, staring out of the viewport at the stars drifting by outside the Enterprise's warp field and giving Guinan a fair-sized problem.

Since learning from Deanna Troi the details of Pos'tallitr's death, Poppet had exhibited a number of reactions not dissimilar to those of a Human in similar circumstances, the latest of

which consisted mainly of sitting in a bar, cradling a drink and being quietly and unobtrusively morose... or at least as unobtrusive as possible, when one is an eight foot otterlike being, carrying what to Humans looked like a Raggedy Ann doll which she sniffed and snuffled from time to time, taking the scents of home and her loved ones deep into her powerful lungs and holding them close within her body for long minutes before exhaling in wistful, and - to be frank - rather fishy, sighs.

Guinan's dilemma rose from the facts that a) a morose otter is not conducive to a happy bar room clientele, and b) if Poppet was upset and troubled then every fibre of Guinan's being cried out for her to help in some way, but since fish and fish-like odours affected Guinan's people in much the same way as a dedicated vegan might respond to a dish of steak tartare and rokeg blood pie it was difficult for her to get close enough to do anything. It's hard to empathise when half your mind is focussed on keeping breakfast down! Guinan's compromise solution was to keep her distance but to smile warmly with encouragement whenever she caught the ensign's eye - a subtlety lost on Poppet, but which she fully intended to ask Deanna or Data about when next she saw them.

Poppet, meanwhile, continued to stare into space, whilst her mind replayed memories of Pos'tallittr, and the short time she had known him on the homeworld and on Starbase 632, memories of a youngster, sleek of fur and full whiskered, shy and slightly embarrassed by his south continent accent and odour.

Young and shy, but proud, proud as were all of the chosen ones, to be picked for the offworld embassy, then prouder still when his near genius electronics skills won him placement within Starfleet and not merely - merely! - as one of the embassy sent to the Federation homeworlds as a student. She exhaled explosively, then drew in the trace of her clan-second-eldest from the rrikmurr, picturing the warmth and wisdom of that much loved old greyfur. Clan-second's third mate had chosen to end his own life also, but he had been ill and weak for months before he chose to make the deep dive... Looking out of the viewport, she tried to guess the direction of home and failed, her knowledge of astrogation inadequate to the task, wondering in part if the co-ordinates he'd set before overriding the transporter had been towards home or further away into the blackness of the ocean that space represented to her people. She cuddled the rrikmurr and made a chirr sound, expressing her hopes for Pos'tallittr's happiness.

"Good hunting, good playing, dancing laughter attend thee, in whatever far waters your spirit now swims."

"Goodness, that sounded complicated," said a surprising voice

Poppet, torn from her introspection, felt her ears pull back and her ruff rise in flight or fight response, then whuffed in embarrassment as she saw the startlement on the face of the young Human female who had spoken.

"Oh dear, I am sorry..." began Poppet

"Not to worry, dear. It's my own fault for coming at you from down wind; it's only natural that you would respond like that. My name is Sarah Cobb - I'm from Xenoscience. May I join you?"

The question was presumably rhetorical, because the red-headed young ensign had seated herself before she finished speaking.

Still feeling slightly nonplussed, Poppet made to speak but was interrupted before she

had fully opened her mouth.

"I've been meaning and meaning to look you up ever since you came on board, but Dr Farrow has had us all so busy cataloguing the reports from our last three planetary surveys that I just never found the time, which is sinful really, because we so seldom get the chance to talk to a real live sentient from another species, but then when Geordi asked me to get hold of your planet's profile for him I realised that I just had to fit you in somehow, so here I am!"

Poppet was impressed by Sarah's breath control if by nothing else, so prepared herself to be polite, as she had been when dealing with other Xeno staff on Starbase 632 after they had first left their homeworld. Sarah was off again though, in the split second it had taken Poppet to decide this.

"I hope it's all right if I record this, because I really have a terrible memory and I'd hate to miss some subtle nuance while we talk." Cobb whipped out a tricorder, placed it on the table and keyed full holo record with practised ease, then continued. "I was so sad to hear about what happened to the other native from your planet - the one who killed himself. Maybe that's a place to start, though. Tell me about your peoples' beliefs and funeral rites. Is suicide common amongst your species?"

"Well, it's really rather personal..." began Poppet politely.

"Oh, but this is for science, it's nothing personal at all really, and you must try to be objective about it if we are to get anywhere at all," instructed Sarah blithely.

Poppet clenched teeth capable of biting through rakka-shells with one snap, and began to slowly count to sixty four. By thirty she had come to appreciate the absurdity of the situation, and by fifty knew what her response was to be...

It was two days later that Geordi and Wes invited Poppet to inspect her new quarters. They had decided to make an impromptu room warming party of the event, and apart from Poppet herself, Data, Worf and Deanna Troi were in attendance as Geordi encouraged her to open the doorway.

Poppet, who had been rather subdued since Deanna gave her the news of Pos'tallittr's death, now seemed her old self again, partly embarrassed at being the centre of attention, partly happy to be interacting socially with people.

Poppet led them into the room, and moved towards the central area, neck weaving and whiskers twitching as she surveyed her new quarters. The others looked around curiously, Worf shivering slightly in the lower temperature but pleased by the lower lighting levels.

"It's so large!" exclaimed Poppet as she rushed forward to inspect clumps of moss and lichens artfully arranged along one wall.

"Creative interpretation of the regulations," said Wesley proudly.

Data inclined his head inquisitively, prompting Geordi to explain. "Regulations state that as a unique non-Human on the ship, Poppet is entitled to private quarters rather than being assigned to shared accommodation. The size of her allocated quarters is based on a standard algorithm using her body mass as input - but there's an option to override that algorithm at senior officer's discretion. That was apparently added when someone assigned a

Dylbythri cadet to a space based on his body weight - two kilos - without considering that that species is insectoid, akin to Earth's 'daddy long legs'!!"

Worf looked puzzled.

"Legs five feet long, in a four foot cubicle," expanded Wesley.

"Geordi pointed this out to me, and I felt it important to the ensign's psychological wellbeing that she have extra space," added Deanna sincerely.

Worf grunted, in Klingon approximation of polite agreement, then wandered over to inspect a marked off area of the room, where red four-foot long markings along the floor and up two adjacent walls made a pyramid-shaped outline. Cautious not to step into the area, he peered at the walls, attempting to see if any mechanisms might be activated by stepping into the zone.

"Careful!" urged Geordi and Wes in one voice.

"A concealed bed?" hazarded Worf as Poppet came over to examine the area.

"A proper toilet!!!" exclaimed Poppet delightedly.

Deanna and Worf stared at the area, the ensign, and the beaming Geordi, in that order.

"Mijbillim are primarily scent oriented in many areas, and their territorial evolution involved spraying their territory," began Data helpfully. "By concealing a number of microsuction devices in the walls of that area, it should give the ensign no difficulties to turn, and by 'aiming' as it were to - "

"We get the picture, Data," interjected Wes rapidly.

"I can't wait to try it," said Poppet eagerly.

"Oh, I really think you should!" said Deanna.

Poppet arched her tail and thrust her chin upwards, Mijbillim body language for laughter.

"I'm teasing you, Counselor. I know you Humans have taboos on the subject... I remember the fuss when we first had quarters on board the contact vessel, and how Commander Blyton had to explain things to us... "

"Do you like it, then?" asked Wesley.

"It is wonderful, my friends, especially the real water shower," said Poppet. "But... where do I sleep?"

Geordi beamed in absolute delight.

"Well, the ideal would have been to give you a flotation tank of water, but when we ran simulations of that there were problems with placing the mass and motion compensators for two to three hundred litres of fluid so that it didn't affect the ship's motion under impulse power, but then I realised that we didn't actually need real water!"

"We didn't?" said Poppet, sounding unconvinced.

"No!" crowed Wesley, sounding as triumphant as Geordi looked.

"Just step onto the blue square over there on the floor and press the white panel on the wall," instructed La Forge.

Cautiously Poppet did as instructed. Nothing happened.

Geordi's face fell, then he snorted with discovery. "Worf, step back from the edge of the square - the boundary safety sensor won't let it activate with you half on and half off the marks."

As Worf stepped back scowling, a blue flicker filled the air above the three metre square and then settled into the image of a cube of pure water reaching up to within a metre of the room's high ceiling. Poppet chirred in surprise and delight as she felt herself buoyed up to the 'surface' of the tank exactly as if she were in a pool at home.

Wesley beamed at the startled and delighted faces of Poppet's guests as they watched her gracefully turn and twist, diving and coiling within the pretend water.

"It's a simple holodeck program, and a zero-g pressor field like the one we use in the G-ball courts, but it feels just like a real tank full of water."

Watching Poppet execute a particularly complex coil and twist manoeuvre, Worf seemed to feel a tug at his subconscious from the words "G-ball courts" and a slow smile began at the back of his mind. Of course, he did not allow it near his lips - then.

The next couple of hours seemed to fly by, with Poppet playing hostess to the people who were becoming her friends on board the ship, and it seemed all too soon that duty called them away. Geordi hung back though, to be the last to leave. Poppet began again to express her gratitude, but he broke in to raise the matter that had been on his mind.

"I was talking to Sarah Cobb the other evening - she was full of herself about some things she'd learnt from you about Mijbillim funeral practices."

"Oh. Really?" said Poppet, dropping her neck forward in a way that suggested guilt to the Chief Engineer.

"Really. Something about a tail tip being sheared off by a transporter beam, and that being couriered home for special embalming and enshrinement?"

Poppet swayed from side to side in silence.

"Then again, some people can be remarkably lacking in tact and understanding, so if they are gullible enough to forget about the transporter's boundary safety sensors it's probably only fair that they get wound up by people with a fun sense of humour..."

"It is?"

"It is. Although Sarah was concerned that you might accidentally suffer a similar fate and have some of your molecules sheared by the beam."

"Oh. Was she?"

"Yes, but I explained that I'd recalibrate the scanners especially to avoid that for you... In fact, heh, in fact, heh, hah, I told her that I was going to make you an otter you can't diffuse!!!"

As Geordi strolled away, still chuckling, Poppet mused on the differences in humour between Humans and real people. But she smiled at the similarities that allowed for friendship, too.



GEORDIE

Is the fog that thick?
Is this universe so dark
That the brightest young sun
Can't break through
The silence?

I had my chance to see,
And I refused.
The darkness was part of me
As clouds are part of the sky;
But now I wonder why
I refused.

Now I sense my way around
And see what others can't
Through this thing
Which lights the darkness
Of the place I call my home -
This ship.

It may not be what I hoped for,
But in some ways it's more;
I see beauty in things
I could never have seen before.
Now this is part of me
And never will I forget
The darkness I used to see -
But still, it is a part of me.

Rachel Lindfield



MARELLA

by

Helen Connor

Marella Concrei sat tensely on the edge of her seat. She looked tired and anxious, not her usual self. Deanna Troi looked carefully at her patient and tried to understand the emotions and feelings coming from her.

Counselor Troi thought over the comments from Dr Crusher, who had recommended that Marella Concrei speak to Deanna after she had examined her and found no medical reason for Marella's nightmares and exhaustion.

"Well, Marella, perhaps it would be best if you could explain your experiences and feelings. I may be able to pick up on something as you go along."

Marella sat a little further back in her seat but remained tense. "I don't quite understand it, Counselor. It's very difficult. I don't know what's happening. I've been very happy here on the Enterprise, teaching the young children. I thought I'd finally found the place I had been looking for, but now I'm terrified. My world seems to be falling apart," the young woman said quickly, almost as if she feared being interrupted or prevented from making her comments.

"Marella," Troi said gently, "I think you must try to relax; and to begin with, my name is Deanna. Try to think of me as a friend. Let's just chat for a while - don't force anything."

"I'm sorry, Deanna, I've just been so worked up and confused lately."

"Let's begin at the beginning, Marella. When did you start having nightmares?"

"I can't really call them nightmares. They come whenever I relax, as soon as I stop working or talking. I think that's why I'm so exhausted. I've been trying to stop these events - the feelings bursting in."

"Feelings," Deanna prodded gently. "Can you explain what you mean a little more clearly? All Humans have feelings."

"As you probably know from my records, I am less than psi null. As a child I had to learn when people were giving out feelings of tension or enjoyment. I think that's why I enjoy working with young children so much. They don't try to hide their emotions the way adults do. I am a little like Lieutenant-Commander Data in that respect, the difference being that I understand emotions as I experience them the same as everyone else. But in these dreams, for want of a better description, I have deeper feelings and emotions than I have here, and I also feel those of other people. It's incredible. I experience their anger, fear and frustration. I also feel pain from some. It's as though I'm *them* - or part of them. I can't tell you what it's like. I can even read their thoughts. I know they must be dreams as there's no way I could experience this in real life, but the dreams are even more real. It's like living in a third dimension, not just seeing others and having my own feelings, but having extra ones. I know it sounds crazy - perhaps that's what I am."

"No, Marella, I don't think you're crazy. I have this ability to sense others; what you've

described is how I feel every day. But why has it been dormant in you for so long? Why are you experiencing it now, and why did your earlier tests never reveal this before? I think I shall have to obtain more information from your file, and then Dr Crusher and I will do some tests to try and find a few answers."

Marella sat back in her chair, more relaxed than she had been for the last two days. "Then you don't think I'm mad?" she asked.

"From the description you have given of your experiences I would say you are as sane as I am. You are becoming empathic. It would be helpful if the next time you experience this you relax and try to find out more about the people and events. For example, which member of the crew or other shipboard members are you receiving feelings from? Where are they, what's happening around them? Have you tried that?"

"No," Marella answered. "I've been so confused and worried about going crazy that I've tried to shut it out, pretend it isn't there."

"Well," Troi continued as both she and Marella stood, "now you know you're not crazy, relax; I assure you this empathy can be a real gift and very useful, and good to have once you have learned to use it."

Marella Concrei looked more peaceful and less drawn than she had done at the beginning of the session as she walked through the Counselor's doorway, bringing the discussion to an end.

"Well, Number One, another few hours and we'll have finished mapping this system. It will be good to return to a more interesting duty," Picard said as he sat down in his seat on the Bridge.

"Aye, Captain. I know this is a necessary task but it becomes somewhat monotonous after a time. The rest of the crew feel the same way. The holodecks and libraries have been used more often in these past few days than usual," Riker commented. "I think even Lieutenant-Commander Data has found this tedious," he added a little more loudly in order that the Lieutenant-Commander, at his post, might hear.

Data turned round and looked at Will Riker with an expression of puzzlement. "I am afraid, Commander Riker, that is a Human emotion I am unable to experience. I have found it of interest and would appreciate further information on the matter when it is more convenient."

Picard and Riker exchanged glances as Data turned to face his console.

"I think the way people have been acting the past few days should give you some insight into the emotion, Data," Lt La Forge offered as a way of continuing the Lieutenant-Commander's education in Human attitudes.

"Indeed, Geordi, I have noticed a greater degree of irritability in some members of the crew," Data began, only to find himself halted by the Captain.

"I believe the enhancement of Lieutenant-Commander Data's understanding could be left to that more convenient time he mentioned. Counselor Troi, what do you think of the status of the people on board at this time?"

"As Commander Riker has said, there is a feeling of boredom and anticipation of a change to this routine. I am certain once we have returned to other duties the crew will be more content."

"Captain, I'm picking up something on the edge of our sensor range. I can't get a fix on it, as yet," Lt Yar announced from her post.

"Counselor, do you feel anything?"

"Negative, Captain, I can sense no emotions or danger from the object."

"Just how near are we to completing this survey, Number One?"

Will Riker checked the computer for an update. "Two hours should see it finished completely, Captain."

"Lt Yar, Mr Data, keep an eye on that object. If it has not tried to close with us or contact us, Number One, we'll wait until the survey's completed and then discover what it is. If we stop this now it will take another week to complete those new tests and observations requested. I appreciate why they have to be carried out in one block of time but I don't want to have to restart them just because of a piece of space debris."

"Aye, aye, Captain."

"Captain, as I can sense nothing from the object, would you mind if I used the next few hours in consultation with Dr Crusher? An interesting case has arisen and we would like to consolidate our findings."

"By all means, Counselor. I presume this has to do with the matter you reported to me earlier. It is as well to use this time to its best purpose."

Troi rose gracefully from her seat and made her way to the turbolift. Once inside she requested the Sickbay. She left the turbolift wondering what Beverly had found out in the tests she had carried out on Marella. *I hope they are more helpful than what I have discovered, Troi thought. I can't even feel Marella's own emotions that clearly, and the tests I gave her show the same results as her earlier tests - psi null or less.*

Troi could sense Beverly Crusher's confusion and frustration on stepping into her office. Dr Crusher was sitting facing the computer screen reading the information, and had Troi been unable to sense the Doctor's feelings, she would have been able to deduce them from the look on her face and the now familiar habit of pulling her hand through her hair when the expected answers were not forthcoming.

"I assume those are the results of the test you carried out with Marella." Troi spoke calmly, not allowing her similar feelings to show.

"Oh! Deanna, I never noticed you. Yes, they are. I see no sign of an increase in her empathic feelings, nor are there any changes from the usual tests I carried out two months ago as part of the regular medicals that might show what's causing the problems. All I have are signs that she is upset and almost exhausted," Crusher stated vehemently. "How about your discussion, can you find anything? I know from her files she had problems when she was younger. It wasn't just the simple reversal of internal organs, there were other illnesses and

problems - for example, she reversed actions like a mirror and she had difficulty mixing socially with others, but all this improved as she got older. Could they be coming back to the surface again? Is it something emotional?" The last question was asked in a hopeful tone. *It would be easier to help Marella if they could find a cause*, Crusher thought.

Troi, who was now sitting on a chair facing the Doctor across the small desk, slumped both emotionally and physically for a few seconds, then pulled herself erect.

"I do not believe this is something from her past. The way she talks and describes these feelings does not indicate that. Also, as you say, when she was younger she had difficulties in this area. Why is she now able to experience the feelings of others? No, I would say this is being caused by something here and now. And as you say there are no signs of illness, and I can find no emotional outside influence, so it must be something we have not yet considered."

The women looked at each other as they considered the next steps to take. Neither liked unsolved puzzles and both found it more frustrating when the health and wellbeing of someone was at risk.

"I have asked Marella to try and gain as much detail and information as possible from the next experience she has. Perhaps if she can tell us exactly what she feels it may help. She may even be able to discover who on board is causing it. I do not know what else to do at this point," Troi said after a few minutes of silence. "As it now all depends on Marella I shall go to my quarters and deal with some other items before I am required on the Bridge," she continued, rising from her seat. "Try to relax, Beverly. I know how frustrated you feel but we have both done as much as we can for the time being. We can only wait."

"True, Deanna. But remember to follow your own advice," Crusher stated, forcing a smile, the first since Troi had entered the room. "Don't push yourself too far. As you say, it depends on Marella... and time."

Troi left Sickbay and headed for her quarters with a pensive look on her face. On entering her room she checked for any communications which might have been left during her absence, and was surprised and concerned to hear Marella's voice.

"Deanna, I've just had one of those dreams. Could I speak to you as soon as possible?"

Troi immediately contacted the young woman and was relieved that she could come and speak with her at once. "Come to my quarters, Marella. I'm here just now and it would be most beneficial if you could describe what happened while it is still fresh in your mind."

Troi was amazed at the difference in Marella in the short time since their last meeting. The young woman looked pale and distraught as she sat down on a seat in Troi's quarters.

"Marella, can you describe what happened? How you felt?" Troi asked her gently.

"Oh, Deanna," the young woman began, sounding close to tears, "it's terrible. The children are so frightened and confused! Some of their parents are ill and in dreadful pain. The ship's crew is in confusion. They don't know what's happening. Their instruments aren't working and they're ill, unbalanced and disorientated," she sobbed.

"Marella, Marella!" Troi stated crisply, "the ship is all right. I feel no such emotions from anyone on board. Everything is all right. It must be hallucinations. I'm sorry I have confused you by saying you have become more empathic but how you described these dreams and events earlier it sounded as though you were. It's all right. Dr Crusher and I will find what's

causing this," Troi reassured her as she knelt at the side of the young woman's chair, placing a reassuring arm around her shaking shoulders.

"No, it's you who don't understand," Marella snapped as she moved quickly out of her seat. "It's not *this* ship. It's not the Enterprise. It's the one out there!"

"Counselor, are you telling me that the object at the edge of our sensors is a ship in distress?" Picard asked as he, Will Riker and Troi sat down at the table in the ready room. "Have you felt something from over there?"

"No, Captain, I have not, but I believe someone else has," Troi answered.

"Someone else?" Riker asked. "Who? And how has this person felt the presence when neither you nor our sensors have been able to detect its existence?"

"Yes, Counselor, Number One has brought up an interesting point. Perhaps if you could give us a little more information we would be better prepared when we finally investigate the object - as we are about to do now that the survey is complete," Picard stated gently.

Troi leaned forward, her forearms resting on the table, hands clasped, an expression of concentration on her face.

"Of course, Captain. This matter involves Marella Concrei; it is she who felt the presence of people on board that ship over there. She has been experiencing it for a while, and when I asked when it started, she said it was as we neared this sector. Also she had the strongest feeling just under two hours ago - it started at almost the same time as Lieutenant Yar notified us of the object at the edge of the sensors. I do not understand why it is only Marella who can sense the people over there, when she has difficulty feeling the emotions of people close to her, but I am convinced that she is sensing people there."

"I shall accept your opinion, Counselor. What can Miss Concrei tell us that will help our away team?" Picard asked.

"Very little, Captain. You must remember she is not trained in the same way as myself. She has told me that it is not a war-ship as there are children on board with their parents. From the things she said I believe it is a transport ship which is off course, and a number of the passengers and crew are suffering from dizziness and complete disorientation. It appears to be the adults who are suffering the most from this; the children are confused more by what is happening to the adults rather than from whatever the cause might be," Troi answered.

Commander Riker swivelled his chair to look more closely at Troi as he said, "Can Marella state whether it is some form of disease or infection which has caused the adults' difficulties, or is there some other factor involved?"

"No, Bill, she can't. No one on board the ship knows what's caused this, or if they do Marella isn't skilled enough to find them," the Counselor informed them.

"Well, Number One, it is a difficult situation, but we may be able to gain further information as we close with the ship. I suggest you organize your away team, taking all factors into account," Picard stated, and the three of them returned to the Bridge.

"Mr La Forge, set an intercept course for the ship on the edge of sensors," Picard ordered

as he, Riker and Troi moved to take their respective positions on the Bridge.

"Intercept which ship, sir?" La Forge asked, puzzled.

"Ah, yes, of course," Picard said, standing in his usual position behind ops and conn. "It has been brought to my attention that the object Lt Yar first spotted approximately two hours ago is indeed a ship, with people on board, in great difficulty. So lay in a course, Mr La Forge."

"Course laid in and ready, Captain."

"Engage."

Lieutenant-Commander Data turned. "We are most fortunate, Captain. The survey was completed one point three six minutes ago."

"Fortunate indeed, Data, for whether it was completed or not we would have had to leave immediately. Those people on board that ship need help urgently," Picard commented from his now seated position.

Data turned to face the main viewscreen as the Enterprise crossed the remaining distance to the strange ship.

"Sensors detect a large number of people on board that ship, Captain. Some appear to be in great difficulty. There are also children on board. No signs of weapons being made ready, and their shields are so weak that they are useless," Yar announced.

Picard leaned over toward Counselor Troi. "Children and people in difficulty. Very interesting, Counselor; how could Miss Concrei sense this?"

"I am afraid I don't know, Captain. Doctor Crusher and I have tried to discover some reason but we have been unable to arrive at any explanation. However, it would appear she was correct in this respect," Troi answered.

Commander Riker placed his elbows on his knees as he leaned forward facing Picard and Troi.

"Captain, Deanna, I feel it would be helpful if the away team included Miss Concrei and Doctor Crusher. The reason for Doctor Crusher's presence is obvious and I feel Marella may be able to provide information regarding that ship and its occupants."

"Bill, she has no away team experience, nor is she a member of Starfleet - she's a civilian teacher. She is also confused and upset by this whole experience," Troi pointed out, concerned.

"Yes, Deanna, but we know so little and she has been able to relate to those people and their suffering. It may sound harsh but we will need every bit of help we can get," Riker went on.

Picard, who had sat back to listen to his First Officer and Counselor, placed his forefinger to his lips, considering both their comments.

"I must agree with Will on this occasion, Counselor. We don't have enough information and at this point Miss Concrei appears to be our best option. Before you say it, Counselor, I think you should also beam over there. With your help Miss Concrei may be able to help us in the way you have done so often," Picard finally stated, tugging his uniform, an action which

had come to signify that the decision was made and it was now time for action.

Troi gave one of her smiles and said, "Captain, I shall have to keep an eye on you; I think you are after my position as Counselor."

Picard returned her smile. "Indeed no, I much prefer the Counselor I have and the position I hold."

Riker stood up smiling at the light conversation passing between Picard and Troi, knowing that it only covered their deep concern.

"Captain, if you'll permit I shall assemble my away team for beam over."

Picard nodded his agreement and Riker headed for the turbolift, calling Data, Yar and La Forge to join him. There was no need to ask Troi as she was already headed in that direction.

Once inside Riker turned his head toward Troi. "Deanna, Captain Picard is filling Dr Crusher in on the events so far and is informing her of her participation in the away team. I think it would be better if you spoke to Marella about her joining us."

"Yes of course, but I cannot guarantee her presence. After all, I cannot order her - she is a civilian teacher," Troi reminded him. "But I am also certain she is as curious about what is happening as I am."

The turbolift stopped and Troi stepped out, heading toward her quarters where she had left Marella trying to relax as she made her report to Picard.

Commander Riker and the others proceeded with preparations for the beam over.

Troi entered her quarters to find Marella in a very agitated condition. She almost jumped as the Counselor spoke. "Marella, what's wrong? You must try to relax."

"Deanna, we must do something about the condition of those people over there. It is deteriorating quickly. I keep getting this overpowering feeling of the whole universe being turned back to front." The young woman spoke rapidly, trying to make Troi understand. "The ship was damaged as it came through some kind of vortex. They managed to repair some of the damage before a number of the crew became incapacitated by dizziness. There's so much fear coming from the children and confusion from the adults. I've got to help them. I must convince the Captain to help them."

"It's all right," Troi said soothingly. "The Captain's already convinced. The Enterprise is on course for the ship and Commander Riker has an away team prepared. That's why I'm here. We thought it might be helpful if you came with us."

"Yes, yes of course, Deanna," Marella exclaimed, grasping Troi's arm. "How soon can we leave?"

"Right now," Troi answered. "As I said, we were merely waiting for your agreement to join us. Commander Riker and the others should be in the transporter room with Dr Crusher and the equipment. As we go there I'll inform the Captain of the damage to the other ship." So saying both women headed towards transporter room three.

"Glad you could join us, Marella," Riker said as he moved away from the Transporter Chief towards the others, who were already taking their positions on the platform. "I had some emergency repair equipment made ready for beaming over after you spoke of the ship being damaged, and Dr Crusher feels that it may be the effects of the vortex which are causing the adult's illness rather than a disease or infection. You have been most helpful," he finished.

Troi gave Riker a grateful smile for his comments to Marella. The young woman had spoken of her fears of being an encumbrance rather than a help. She could see the confidence Marella had gained from those few words.

Marella stepped onto the platform and stood on the position indicated by Riker as Troi took her position beside her.

"Energize," Riker commanded, and the small group vanished from the transporter to appear on the flight deck of the other ship.

The alien ship was a type of passenger vessel designed for short interplanetary trips. This was obvious from the large number of seats with a large aisle going up the centre. There was no separate Bridge, but a control panel with three seats facing it. Slumped in those seats were two men and a woman.

The rows of seats behind them were also filled with people in various degrees of unconsciousness. There was the sound of a baby crying and several children sat or stood beside adults, trying to shake them awake and turning to face the away team with fear on their faces.

Marella and Troi went quickly to the children and moved them to an area behind the passenger seats which had tables and couches, giving it the appearance of a recreation area. As they moved along Troi observed the young woman, who looked strained and as though she were being bombarded with voices.

Of course, Troi thought, she is receptive to their feelings. She is being bombarded, and unlike me she does not know how to shield herself from them. Strange I don't feel any emotions apart from those of Bill, Tasha and Geordi. Just what is happening here? She leaned towards Marella.

"Try to concentrate on the children and close off the others around you. I know it's difficult but if you're going to help these children you'll have to let them sense calmness from you. They don't seem to be able to relate to me; it's as though you are a part of their people and culture more than ours."

Marella turned toward Troi. "That's true, Deanna, I do feel so much more here. The children are so easy to read emotionally, even easier than the children on the Enterprise."

One of the younger children came over and tugged at the edge of Marella's skirt. She looked down at him and smiled.

"To help these children, I can do anything."

"Commander Riker," Dr Crusher called. "I have one of the crew conscious but he's not too strong and I don't know how long he can stay awake."

Riker left Yar examining one of the entrances to a cargo area and walked towards the Doctor. As he passed Troi and Marella he said, "Deanna, I think you should come with me; you may be able to help."

"I think you should take Marella instead. Since we came here I have only been able to sense you and the others from the Enterprise. Here, Marella seems to have my capabilities. It's very strange, Bill, it's as though she is more like these people than us," Deanna stated.

"All right, if you think she can help. Tasha and I have found it strange here too. We can't place exactly what's different, but we will," Riker remarked. "Marella," he continued, "will you join me and Dr Crusher."

Will Riker and Dr Crusher stood a little distance away from Marella and the ship's crew member.

"Can you hear me?" Marella asked gently. "Do you understand me? We've come to help you."

The man looked at her, nodded, but said nothing. "Doctor, Commander Riker, I can read his thoughts. He's confused. They were on their usual passenger run from Carca to a holiday planet named Beesanna."

"Carca? Beesanna? Where are they? We've found no inhabited planets in this sector," Riker stated.

"A rip in space appeared," Marella continued, speaking haltingly. "It shouldn't have been there - it has never been there before. Quick, Sharola, change course - !"

"Sharola must be the navigator," Deanna whispered. "That must be her there," she finished, pointing to the woman seated at the control panel, unconscious.

"Can't get away from it - it's pulling us through!" Marella was as amazed as the crew themselves must have been. "What's happening? Energy stabilizers! Stop this rolling!...Commander, it's at this time the dizziness and disorientation starts. There are small ruptures in the outer skin and something seemed to get in before they sealed themselves. No, it wasn't something getting in, it's everything. The stars are wrong, their instruments are affected, even their vision is affected. Subtle changes and disorientation." Marella was panting and looked distinctly ill herself.

"Bill, she has to stop this, it's affecting her too much. She doesn't have the mental and emotional shields," Troi stated anxiously.

"What she said agrees with the findings Geordi and I have made, Commander." Data stared from where he and Geordi were examining the console and controls. "It would appear from their computer log and instruments that they came across this rip in space several days ago. They were taking passengers to a planet not too distant from that of their departure. And Commander, before you ask, the planets we are discussing are not in our universe. The rip they came through was a weakness, a flaw between the two. That appears to be the reason they are now experiencing difficulty in our universe, as theirs would appear to be somewhat different from ours. It may also explain why Counselor Troi was unable to sense them. But then there is the interesting question of how Marella could do so."

"Will, Deanna, could I speak with you a moment?" Dr Crusher asked, stepping away from Marella, who was trying to comfort the almost unconscious crew.

"Yes, Doctor?" Riker asked as he and Troi joined the Doctor.

"Will, from the readings I have from the adults, and particularly from the youngest child, I would say that Marella is more related to these people than she is to us. They have the same reversed internal organs, and the child's readings match those of Marella when she was younger," Crusher commented. "She was a foundling, remember - picked up in an escape capsule, and the authorities weren't able to trace any relatives."

"Yes, of course, Beverly, that would explain her ability to sense and read them!" Troi spoke excitedly. "She must have come from the other universe and she survived because she was so young. Look at how well the children are reacting to our universe. Her parents must have suffered as badly as the adults here. The ship they were in must have gone out of control - perhaps there was the risk of crashing and they saved their child by putting her in an escape capsule. And - " Mentally she checked her memory of Marella's records - "Marella was found in this general area, but some distance from here. Is all this possible?" she finished, looking at Riker.

"It may be," Riker answered her. "There's still much we have to learn about our universe, never mind that of others. Data may be able to provide more information," he continued, "but first we have to help these people and find some way of getting them home."

He started moving towards Data but stopped as Troi put a hand on his arm.

"Bill, we have to find out now. If these are Marella's people she should be with them. We will have to tell her what we've just discussed."

"No, Deanna," Dr Crusher stated firmly. "Look at how the adults are affected by our universe. Marella survived the change before because she was young. We cannot be certain she could go back with them and survive."

"No matter what you both think at the moment," Riker interrupted, "we do not know if we can return these people. Let's solve one puzzle at a time and then worry about the others."

Riker pressed his communicator. "Riker to Captain Picard. This ship is from another universe, and it is not an infection which is affecting the adults, but the difference between the two universes. I would suggest that Lieutenant-Commander Data, Lt La Forge and I return to the Enterprise and use its computers and the information we have gathered to find some way of helping them get back."

"Agreed," Picard answered from the Enterprise. "Dr Crusher, do you wish to beam those people over here for treatment?"

"No, Captain," Crusher replied. "I'll contact Sickbay for the equipment and people I need. If Marella and Troi would stay here to help me we may be able to bring the crew round enough to help in their return."

"Miss Concrei, Counselor, do you agree?" Picard asked.

"Yes," they answered simultaneously.

"Then, Commander Riker, we'll discuss this once you and the other members of the away team beam back. Do you wish Lt Yar to remain there?" Picard inquired.

"I'll stay and help out till other help arrives," Yar stated.

"Make it so," Picard ordered.

"Well, Number One, what have you come up with?" Picard asked as Riker, Data and La Forge joined him in the ready room one hour and forty five minutes after beaming aboard. During this period the computer and experts on board the Enterprise had been trying to find a solution to the predicament the people on board the alien ship found themselves in.

Dr Crusher had reported that the children had still not been affected by the differences between the two universes, and that she and her team had come up with a serum which would revive the crew members for about an hour, or as the Doctor said, "It will allow them to be alert enough to control the ship for approximately sixty minutes, but the after effects may be quite severe as we are still unsure what the other universe is like. For this reason I would prefer not to inject any more people than necessary, nor would I like to give the crew members any further injections than need be."

The serum provided Picard and his people with a means of controlling the ship on its return, thus solving one major problem. The next was how they could find an entrance to the other universe to allow the ship re-entry. This was the matter Picard's next question addressed.

"Data has been researching the records to discover if this 'rip', for want of a better term, is perhaps a recurring event," Riker responded as he sat in his seat. Leaning forward and placing his forearms on the table he continued, "From the readings Dr Crusher has taken, and the report Deanna has made regarding Marella's dormant abilities, we believe that Marella herself came through a similar rip, thus indicating the possibility of this not being a one-off occurrence."

"Interesting deductions, Number One, and after reviewing all the facts I agree with your conclusion. Well, Data, have the records revealed anything?"

"Indeed yes, Captain," Data replied quickly. "Several incidents have occurred in this and neighbouring sectors. Thirty five years ago a small space craft was discovered on a moon of a small planet. The occupant had been killed during the crash landing. Forty one point three two years ago the remains of a ship were discovered..."

"Data, I do not require a complete list of all the incidents," Picard interrupted quickly to prevent Data's rather over-efficient report. "A summary of the events and conclusions you have drawn from them would be most helpful."

Data sat with his head slightly to one side as he considered the Captain's statement, and then he swiftly continued. "The records have revealed that the remains of several unidentified space ships have been found in this region. Also there is the report of two children being found in escape capsules in the more frequented parts of this sector - a Mr Bryan Ronfall and Miss Marella Concrei who is, as you know with Dr Crusher and Counselor Troi on the ship over there. From the details given in these records I have deduced that had we not met with the alien vessel it would have been found crashed on some planet or moon after the ship had been drawn into a nearby planet's gravitational pull as there would be no one of the age or experience to regain control due to the fact that all the adults from the other universe would be in a similar condition to those we discovered.

"It would seem that both Mr Ronfall and Miss Concrei were fortunate in the fact that the rips they came through were nearer the more frequented areas of this region," Data concluded.

"So there is a chance of a rip occurring again," Riker stated.

"That is what I have just stated, is it not?" Data asked, looking towards Lt La Forge for confirmation.

"Yes, yes, Data - but, Number One," Picard added, "will it occur quickly enough for us to help those people over there, and will we be close enough to it to use it when it does appear?"

"I believe the answer to those questions is in the affirmative," Data answered. "I have been able to evolve a pattern from the dates of those earlier rips and Lt La Forge and I have come up with - I believe that is the term you used - " Data looked at La Forge for confirmation and received it in the form of a nod, "a possible time and location for the next rip."

"All the information for rendezvousing with the appearance of the rip is on the computer screen now, sir," La Forge stated, punching the details up.

"Well," Picard began, "let's get those people home."

"There may be some difficulty in doing so, Captain. I have based my calculations on some suppositions and this may not be as straightforward as it appears," Data said, trying to clarify the situation further.

"Lieutenant-Commander Data, are they or are they not the calculations for returning these people?" Picard snapped somewhat angrily, the thought of not prolonging the suffering of those people on that ship uppermost in his mind.

"They are what I have calculated..." Data began but Geordi decided this was not the time for Data to go into one of his long discourses with the Captain reaching boiling point in just a few seconds, so he began to explain quickly.

"What Data is trying to explain, Captain, is that none of these phenomena have been observed and so few of the effects or survivors have been found that it is difficult to be exact. We have, from all the information, concluded that a rip opens up on their side of the universe and that a corresponding rip should appear at the co-ordinates we have provided, in our universe."

"I see," Picard said, sitting back in his seat. "We'll just have to hope then that things go the way we wish, Mr La Forge. Number One, gentlemen, let's return to the Bridge, plot a course, get those people to the appropriate place and hope that science, intuition and deduction work for us."

As the Enterprise and the alien ship headed towards the rendezvous with the rip, Dr Crusher, Troi, Captain Picard and Commander Riker met in the ready room to discuss the return of the people from the other universe and also the position of Marella at this point.

"Does she realise that those are her people?" Picard asked.

"I cannot feel or sense her well enough to be sure," Troi replied, "but she is an intelligent young woman and I believe she will have reasoned that out."

"Has she shown any sign of wishing to return with them?" Riker asked, leaning forward and looking at Troi as though trying to read an answer in her face.

"She has given me no such indication," Troi stated, looking from Riker to Dr Crusher. "Has she made any such comments to you, Beverly?"

Crusher sat straight in her chair and then ran her fingers through her hair as she replied, "I don't know if it's really her choice. You saw the effect our universe has on the adults over there. Marella adapted to our universe because she was so young. I believe if she goes back she will be affected by their universe just as badly. But I still don't know if the effects could kill her, leave her permanently disorientated, or if she would readjust."

"Well," Picard concluded, "I suggest we inform Miss Concrei of everything we know and allow her to make the choice. Let's get her over here."

"She has become very friendly with Tasha while working with the children in the ship. Perhaps if you could ask both of them to return to the ship it may help to relax the situation a little," Troi suggested. "And if I and Dr Crusher could speak with her, I believe the Observation Lounge may be a bit more suitable."

Picard looked at Crusher for acknowledgement.

"Transporter, prepare to beam Lt Yar and Miss Concrei over from the alien vessel. Counselor, Doctor, if you would like to meet them in the transporter room?" he added looking at Troi and Crusher.

As both women moved from the room Picard touched his communicator. "Lt Yar, Miss Concrei, prepare to beam over and meet Counselor Troi and Dr Crusher in transporter room three." Then he summoned Transporter Chief O'Brien. "Energize."

"That is all the information we have available," Crusher concluded the briefing they had given Marella as she, Yar, Troi and Marella sat in the Observation Lounge.

"Thank you, Doctor, Deanna, for being so frank with me," Marella stated. "I had concluded that those people were more like me than anyone I had ever met. I could feel so much more... I wonder if they all experience things the way I do?"

"I think not," Deanna commented in her soft calming voice. "I believe that their universe, like ours, has planets with as many varying races as we have here. From your reactions and those of the children it is possible that the people from your planet are like those from Betazed, that is, more open to other people's feelings and thoughts. It is possible that if you went back you might be a Counselor of some kind there."

"A Counselor... To feel *this* all the time." Marella sounded awed and afraid.

"Remember, Marella, you are feeling the fear and confusion of the adults, which is stronger than the feelings from the children. It would not be the same all the time. You would experience their joys and hopes once they were back in the safety of their own universe," Deanna explained.

"Another important item you must remember," Crusher added, "is that we are uncertain of the effects of their universe on you."

"Yes, Doctor, I know, but I feel so little here. Even with the children I do not get such a great response as I did over in that ship. Deanna, I'm sure you know what I mean, you

experience it all the time. I could be useful there," Marella stated with enthusiasm, her eyes sparkling and the tired look of a short time ago swept away.

"I do understand. But there are no more hidden dangers for me here than for anyone else. Think of what might happen if you went with them," was the urgent response from Troi. Neither she nor Crusher wished to make Marella's mind for her. This was too important a decision to be made by others - it was up to Marella alone.

"Oh, I don't know!" Marella stated, her voice agitated. "It's all too fast. I find people to whom I can really relate but there's also the chance I may be unable to function if I go with them. Here it's as though I'm in a shell where I can't be touched by others. There, everything would be so open. What should I do?" she asked, looking not at Troi or Crusher but at Tasha.

It was strange how she looked upon the young Security Chief as her friend after being with her only a short time on the alien ship. Of course she had seen her on the Enterprise when she was off duty but neither had spoken to the other - a smile or nod of recognition but that was all.

Yar looked at her thoughtfully. Her face took on a serious expression as she spoke.

"I know what it's like to live apart from others. My home planet did not really encourage friendly get-togethers. It took time for me to become part of a "family", to share other people's experiences, but now that I am part of it I wouldn't leave. It's still hard for me at times to be open with others but I keep working at it and it gets better."

"But I don't have a family. My adopted parents are dead and I have tried for years to overcome my disabilities, but since my 'parents' died I haven't had a family and I never had close friends, so there's nothing to keep me here," Marella countered sadly.

"I have no parents either, Marella," Yar said moving to crouch near her. "And I had to work hard to rid myself of my protective shell even though it was not as much a part of me as yours is. Yours is part of your physical and mental being."

"But you spoke of a family," the young woman asked, puzzled.

"Yes, but my family are my friends and crew members on board the Enterprise. Each day I learn a little more about opening up, sharing. They are the ones who help me."

Troi and Crusher looked at one another and then at the two other women.

"Strange," Crusher whispered to Troi, "how this feeling of family has evolved among the Bridge crew."

"I do not feel it just with the Bridge crew," Troi answered, "it spreads to those who accept it, wish it or need it."

"Captain Picard to the Bridge," Riker's authoritative voice summoned as the final preparations were made for the alien ship's return to its own universe.

The Enterprise had arrived at the co-ordinates set at 'sixteen point one five minutes' before the anticipated rip, or so Data had stated at the time.

During the time it had taken to reach the appointed place Commander Riker, Geordi, Chief Engineer Argyle and the other crew members had restored the alien ship and instruments in order to allow it every chance of making back through the rip in one piece.

Lieutenant-Commander Data had recorded the appearance of the alien vessel in this universe and the relevant information which would help explain what had happened to those on board and might help to prevent further such incidents in the future.

At the same time Crusher prepared the serum for the crew of the ship and she, Troi and Marella had arranged a quick summary of recent events to give them in order to facilitate their quick acceptance and understanding of what had happened and what they hoped would happen in a short time.

Picard's arrival on the Bridge brought everyone's attention to the full.

"Everything ready, Number One?" he asked as he strode toward the command chair.

"As ready as it can be," Riker answered. "We can never be completely certain when dealing with unknown factors."

"Agreed, Will," Picard said, lightening the atmosphere a little. He saw the tension in those around him. This incident had placed a strain on them all and the worst thing was, they would never know how successful they might be in returning these people. How could they communicate with them after their return? They would not even know if the alien ship got back or not. Was it right to send them back? Might they not be safer here? Well, the children anyway.

Picard gave himself a mental shake. They had been through all this. Dr Crusher was unsure of whether the adults would survive here and Marella said the children felt more secure with their parents around them. She didn't know how badly they would be affected if they were removed from their parents but felt it would be a dreadful shock to them, and if their parents made it back safely what then? Troi and Crusher had both stated that it would be unwise to separate them also, and Data was certain that the chances of getting them back safely were very high.

Well, then, Picard thought why prolong the strain? touching his communicator.

"Dr Crusher, prepare the three crew members. Counselor Troi, Lt Yar and all other personnel prepare to beam over. Transporter Chief O'Brien, beam our people over as soon as Lt Yar contacts you."

The Bridge crew looked at the rip as it appeared on the main viewer. It started as a slight distortion, a ripple across the stars, and then spread until it was like a black gash cut in the star field in front of them. Troi, Crusher and Yar stepped from the turbolift.

"Captain, permission for Marella to join us on the Bridge," Yar asked, moving toward her position.

Picard dragged his eyes from the scene in front of him to see Marella standing in the turbolift.

"Of course," he answered. "Glad to see you are still with us, Miss Concrei. Please come

forward and join us."

Marella walked down the ramp watching the main viewer and seeing the small ship, as it now seemed, move slowly but steadily towards the rip.

Everyone on the bridge watched as it slipped into the rip and vanished from sight. Shortly afterwards the rip itself dissolved and the watchers were left with a normal star scene.

"The three crew members were conscious and had a firm understanding of what was going to happen." Crusher started from her position near the ramp to the turbolift. "I would say medically they were capable of handling their vessel."

"Well done, Doctor," Picard said, turning his head to look at her, "and congratulations to your staff. They did well in such a short time."

It seemed as though no one wished to move; all were thinking the one thing. Was the alien ship safely home? At this point Picard would usually have asked Counselor Troi if she felt anything, but that was not possible as the Counselor had been unable to contact these people from the beginning. Still, she could tell him how his people were doing.

"Counselor, any feeling on our people?" he asked her as she stood beside the Doctor.

"Concern, Captain. Yes, I think that is uppermost in all their minds." Troi paused a little to settle her thoughts and feelings. "Are they safe? Should we have sent them back? Should we have tried something else?"

Marella turned slowly from the viewscreen and faced Picard and Troi. "We were right. I felt relief from the crew members as we explained to them how we were going to keep the children at first but then decided it was better they all went together.

"Also there was a confidence in them," she continued. "They got through to here the first time; it was our universe that caused the problems. They feel certain they can make it back.

"And also everyone should be with their family," she added looking straight at Yar. "No matter whether it's a family of two or the size of a whole starship population."

Yar returned the smile which now lit up Marella's face.

"Well," said Picard, placing his hands together and moving towards his seat, "congratulations to you all on a job well done."

Doctor Crusher and Marella left the bridge to attend their various duties.

"Right, Number One, what's next?" Picard asked as he took his place in the command chair.

"We're to finish transmitting the information from the survey and then we're due to pick up Ambassador Fngju," Riker answered from his seat.

"Then lay in a course, if you please, and let's get back to normal," Picard commanded.

The Bridge crew took up their positions and the Enterprise set off to continue its mission.



AFTER

by

Gail Christison

Deanna Troi woke in a cold sweat. She was terrified, her breathing laboured, her heart pounding.

Troi cast around in the dim light, awareness gradually catching up. She was in her bunk, in her quarters. She shook her head hard. Jean-Luc Picard was having another nightmare.

For days after his operation she had had terrible nightmares, and had even begun to wonder if she herself had a problem.

Then came the day that he had finally come to her, saying very little, yet by his very presence asking for her help. The discussion itself had been superficial, Picard still finding it far too difficult to articulate the dreadful experiences on board the Borg ship, but the revelation that he was plagued by nightmares only resolved one dilemma and created another.

She slid out of bed and went to the food slot. The hot chocolate was a soothing distraction. She curled up in a chair, legs tucked under her, and contemplated the situation.

Captain Picard was a private man, one who resisted intrusion, even by those closest to him, into his personal space. During the few times in the last ten days that they had even discussed the nightmares, she had sensed his reluctance, but she had also sensed the loneliness, the hurt and the fear of sleep.

Troi put down the mug and unfolded herself from the chair. A few moments later she emerged, dressed, from the head, and marched purposefully out of the room.

At the Captain's door she hesitated. She was not reading him strongly now. He was asleep, certainly, and still in REM sleep, disturbed and restless but no longer in the throes of dark terror.

Aware that she was consciously trying to read him, and therefore invading his privacy, she turned to go back to her quarters. She was almost at the turbolift when it began again: a horrific assault on her sensibilities.

The level of despair, the remorse, the helplessness... An involuntary sob escaped as she called medical override on the door, then struggled to divorce herself from his emotions as she approached his sleeping quarters through the dimness of a room lit only by the reflected light of Earth.

The covers were strewn on the floor and the occupant of the bed lay on his back, lips moving silently, eyes frantic beneath their lids and the nerves of his fingers jerking crazily. Suddenly he began to thrash again, trying desperately to cry out. Troi rushed to him, reaching his side as he sat up, waking himself suddenly. He was not immediately aware of her. There was a look of such terrible desolation on his face that Deanna's control wavered. He put his face silently in his hands, using the heels of his palms to rub his eyes, and said something

softly in French. Troi recognized the ferocity of the determination he was projecting and what it meant. He was still resisting...

She took a deep breath. "Captain," she said gently.

"Counselor?" The question was as gently put as the reaction she felt from him was annoyed and puzzled.

"I... felt... you again tonight."

"Computer, lights, low," Picard growled, his haggard, strained features now clearly seen in the half light, as were the tears on Deanna Troi's face.

"I am not a child, Counselor," he rebuked but there was neither power nor conviction in the words.

She stood up slowly. "Was it Locutus again?" For a moment the hazel eyes just stared, then he nodded, barely.

"Did you have a headache when you went to bed?"

"No... Yes," he admitted.

"Beverly says they will pass soon. I hope that the dreams will go with them."

"Coun... Deanna, we both know it is not that simple - "

"Oh, but it can be just that simple," she replied. "The headaches have become a symbol representing that time in your life. They could easily trigger your subconscious to - "

Picard had raised his hand. "I understand," he said, finding her eyes. "Deanna, I don't want to talk about it."

Troi smiled. "I have a distinct feeling of *deja vu*. We have had this conversation before." *And, she thought, your feelings no more matched your words then than they do now.* "I am sorry to have intruded on your privacy but I felt that you needed... I felt I should come. I'll go now."

Picard had not moved, black silk pyjamas still open to the waist, and as dishevelled as his bed.

He watched her turn, his mouth a grim, determined line.

She reached the doors, for once angry at her limitations as a half Betazoid, at her inability to help.

"Deanna..." The word trembled. Troi turned. He was swinging his legs down and getting out of bed. "If I can find some hot chocolate... will you stay a while?"

She grinned then. "Let me. I know how to talk to them. Tea?"

He nodded tiredly and moved to a chair.

They drank in silence, a silence loud, in Deanna's mind, with the sound of his pain.

"Will you be taking leave on Earth?" she asked when she finished her drink.

He nodded. "I'm thinking about it."

"May one ask where?"

"I... don't know yet." He set the cup down.

"You are very tired. You should go back to bed, sir."

"Yes, mother," he teased then grew serious. "Not yet."

"Do you want to talk about it now?" she responded, sensing a half opportunity.

He stared, unfocused, at his tea. As the silence stretched Troi realised that this was not the time. Wordlessly, she reached out and covered his fingers with her own.

"If I could only sleep..." he whispered. He looked up. "Dr Crusher thinks I should use sedatives," he growled.

"They would help you sleep - but I don't think it's the kind of sleep that would help right now."

"Nor I," he said with feeling. There was another pause. "You... you cannot imagine..." his voice faltered and stilled.

"No - but I can feel," Troi reminded him softly.

His fingers tightened about hers.

Picard made a concerted effort to change the subject. "Will certainly has made an impression. He will have the pick of the fleet, in time... It won't be the same without him."

Troi smiled again. "No, sir, it won't. He will leave rather ...large shoes to fill." They both laughed quietly at her attempt at humour.

"Very large," Picard added, with a degree more seriousness. "I will miss him, Counselor."

As will I, thought Deanna. And you've avoided the issue again.

Troi rose, Picard with her, her fingers still in his.

"You must sleep, Captain. You are on duty in four hours. Beverly will kill me."

"Beverly will kill us both," he amended. "However, it will have been worth the risk. Thank you."

"I wish there was something I could -"

Picard touched his forefinger to his lips. "What you have done is more than you can know. Time is the only healer now. If... If I need someone to operate the food synthesizer for me again, I will call you. I promise," he smiled.

Deanna nodded.

"About your leave..." she said.

"When I have decided you shall be the first to know, Counselor," he told her.

"Good. Shore leave is the best therapy I can think of right now. You owe it to yourself to go -"

"Goodnight, Deanna," he said meaningfully, the tired lines in his face made all the harsher by the poor light.


"Going," she said good naturedly, half turned, then turned back, reached up and kissed his cheek. As she turned to go he caught her gently and turned her back to him.

"Thank you," he said very softly, and kissed hers.

A moment later the door had closed and he was alone. He walked to his view port and looked down at Earth, the clear, hazel eyes portals to his inner torment, glistening in the reflected glow.

In the turbolift the velvet eyes of Deanna Troi also glistened.

"Damn..." she said.



OLD FRIEND

Ah, Walker, old friend
This is a surprise,
But what is the problem?
It's trouble I surmise.

This secrecy's strange -
It seems so absurd,
But you say it's important
And I'll take your word.

I wish I'd believed you;
Your warning was true,
If I'd really listened
Could I have saved you?

Well, Remmick's departed,
The mother creature's dead,
But Data's deductions
Have filled us with dread.

Margaret Connor



A QUESTION OF BEING

by

Gail Christison

Captain's Personal Log. Jean-Luc Picard, USS Enterprise:

Commander Riker is absent enjoying some much deserved shore leave on Risa, at my request. The Enterprise is in orbit around an uninhabited class M world, the third in an eight planet system. Starfleet Command has asked us to investigate the possibility that the crew of a freighter reported missing in this sector might have made their way here in the ship's escape pods. It is a highly unlikely scenario and we are not expecting to find anything, but it is on our way to our next assignment. I have made Lt. Commander Data Acting First Officer in Riker's absence. It is time I fully evaluated his performance as a command officer. Data's outstanding performance during our blockade of the Romulans has forced me to reassess my utilization of his skills and abilities as a command officer - and whether or not I have erred in the past by not always giving him the same consideration as his Human counterparts. The idea troubles me greatly.

Captain Jean-Luc Picard emerged from his ready room in answer to a call from his temporary First Officer.

Data rose from the centre seat. "Detra, sir," he said simply, indicating the unremarkable Earth-sized planet on the screen.

"Standard orbit, Mr. Data. Preliminary scans?" Picard settled into his seat.

"Inconclusive, sir. Thus far there appears to be no trace of any alloy comparable to that of the escape pods of the Batiste, either in orbit or on the planet's surface. Sensors have detected a composite metallic signature at one site on the planet's surface, but it is not the escape pods."

Picard paused thoughtfully. "Interesting though, eh, Data?"

"Yes, sir. Detra is not known to be of interest to any Federation members, nor their current adversaries."

"Form an away team, Num... Mr. Data. Find out exactly what that material is and whether or not it represents trouble."

Data nodded silently and headed for the turbolift, watched off the bridge by a surprised and slightly miffed Worf. Not until he was in the turbolift did Data allow his thought process to shift from the composition of his away team to the anticipation of the new experience. There had been a certain satisfaction in his achievements during his first command on the Sutherland, and a regret that he could not further explore the experience. Now here was the opportunity to do just that, and in the context of a challenging mystery - a combination which

the android found irresistible.

The away team materialized in a landscape of canyons and weatherworn, rocky tors. The valley they were standing in was tinged with green, the same green as the tough grass underfoot. A few straggly bushes and small trees dotted the landscape, its bleakness a far cry from that of most of the pleasant little planet.

"Not exactly a garden paradise," commented La Forge as he swept the surroundings with his VISOR.

Jenna D'Sora looked up from her tricorder readings and smiled. "The readings indicate possible wreckage of some kind about two kilometres that way," she said, pointing to the far end of the rolling rift valley, where it rose to hug the base of an impressive-looking mountain.

"Well, it's a great day for a walk," La Forge told Davies, the Geologist, and Elkhorn, D'Sora's fellow Security Officer, as he studied the overcast sky and shivered a little at the brisk breeze that had blown up. The young officers laughed quietly and followed as Data and D'Sora struck out in the specified direction.

"Scans have indicated that the temperature will not exceed eight degrees celsius in this area today," Data told them matter-of-factly.

"Then the sensors were exaggerating," muttered La Forge, shivering for real this time.

They made excellent time in the march to the site indicated by the tricorder. Jenna D'Sora suspected that Data had set the brisk pace in order to raise everyone's body temperature sufficiently to offset the cold. It had not yet risen above six degrees, even though it was now close to noon.

The debris was indeed a crashed vessel, but its design was one not recognised by any of the team, and it had been there for a very long time. La Forge and Elkhorn, whose specialty was also engineering, moved eagerly to inspect the shattered hull and look for its propulsion system. D'Sora went straight to the forward section looking for the remains of the occupants.

Before joining them, Data gave Davies leave to pursue the detailed geological analysis for which purpose he had requested to be included in the away team. The young man was in line for promotion to Lieutenant and enthusiastic, and Data knew that beyond the standard survey required by Starfleet no detailed information existed about Detra's surface structure.

"Data, there are no bodies!" D'Sora exclaimed, withdrawing herself from the remains of the forward section, which now lay several metres from the aft.

"Search the area for skeletal remains or articles of clothing," he told her and signalled Elkhorn to help.

"This is fantastic," La Forge said over his shoulder as Data joined him. "I've never seen anything like this before," he declared enthusiastically.

"I see nothing remarkable about this vessel," replied a puzzled Data. "Its design, although not of identifiable origin, is by no means unique. In fact, there were several reconnaissance craft designs which were not dissimilar to this -"

"I know, Data. It reminds me of that Andorian model too, and a Chrysalian one and maybe even a little of the last identified warp-capable Romulan reconnaissance dart. Trouble is it isn't any of those and this alloy doesn't conform to any known types either. The refinement of the crystal weave and of the crystals themselves is advanced, but I can't identify the technique or the origin of this particular alloy. Something powerful would have had to hit this before it impacted to cause this kind of damage. I mean it'd still be a mess, but not like this. No, something violent happened to this baby long before it came to earth, but within the atmosphere - see, no burn up."

As fascinated as he was by the Engineer's analysis, part of Data's mind was also observing and absorbing his friend's vitality and enthusiasm. Of all his friends and acquaintances on the Enterprise, Geordi La Forge was the one who most often surprised him, and who always seemed to have something new to teach him about Humanity and its uniqueness.

"In that case, it is possible that somehow the occupants may have escaped from the vessel before impact," hypothesized the android, without losing the track of his thoughts.

"Or they might have been thrown out of it by the jolt from whatever caused this, which means that what's left of their remains could be scattered anywhere in these hills," offered La Forge.

"There, Data, look - " La Forge moved to where the fuselage had been torn in two and studied the pattern of damage along the tear.

"Phaser blasts, but a low setting," mused Data. "If someone were attempting to disable it, they would seem to have over-estimated the strength of the shields."

"Or whoever was at the controls didn't know enough about the design of this thing to activate the shields when they were attacked."

"A strong possibility," agreed the android. "Have you determined yet when the attack and subsequent crash actually occurred?"

"Yeah. About eighty years ago, give or take a decade. Which kind of reduces the possibility of survivors, although there are plenty of races with the longevity to be here still, if they weren't killed outright. It seats three, so if we were going to be real optimistic that's how many we could be looking for." La Forge went back to the drive section, to resume his study of its components.

After a beat Data went to the forward section to study the instruments and the helm control. Much of it had been destroyed or melted. His sensitive optical sensors detected biological residue impregnated extensively in the fabric of one of the chairs, the deck around it and the smashed console in front of it. Blood - or at least it had been blood a hundred years earlier. Now only the discolouration of the fabric on the seat gave any indication to the Human eye that anything had been spilled there.

It was not Human blood, nor vulcanoid. Data scanned his medical files for an analog as he walked back to the engineer. When they finally revealed one, the golden eyes blinked in what, for Data, was real surprise.

"Geordi," he said quietly.

La Forge drew himself reluctantly away from the remains of the propulsion system.

"There is only one known species whose biochemistry matches that of the residue I found in the front of the craft."

"Only one?"

"Yes, but for one good reason. The species is from Andromeda."

"Andromeda? As in Galaxy of?!" exclaimed Geordi. "No way. There is no way that this ship is extragalactic."

"It need not be. Records state that our Galaxy was visited by Andromedans - Kelvans, ninety-two years ago. In fact contact was made by the first Enterprise, under the command of Captain Kirk, initially with violent consequences. Ultimately, however, the Andromedans chose to make lives for themselves here in this Galaxy rather than continue to use violent means to return to Andromeda."

"But Data, even if they took the best Federation, Romulan or Klingon ship of that period, they'd have to live for hundreds of years to ever see an Andromedan planet again."

"Indeed. Those whom the Enterprise contacted were descendants of the Kelvans who had left their home world in a generation ship. In fact the Federation actually sent a drone ship to contact Kelva. It will not reach its destination for several more decades."

"OK, Sherlock, then you tell me what all... this... means. And where are those descendants supposed to be right now?"

Data paused to access. "Here," he said after a beat.

"C'mon, Data. There is no record of any colony on this planet."

"Correct. However, the log entries of the first Enterprise indicate that the Kelvans were indeed left on this planet to make a new life for themselves."

"So what happened? This is looking more and more like a major mystery, Data."

"I do not know. Starfleet shows no further record of their existence anywhere."

"I think we should tell the Captain about this and pull that old file for a closer examination."

"My memory contains the sum of the records of every ship named Enterprise. Anything you wish to know, I am able to tell you, Geordi."

"O.K. What are they like, the Kelvans?" asked La Forge.

"In their natural form they are multi-limbed non-humanoid creatures; however they were last known to have taken fully humanoid form to better facilitate their plan to steal the original Enterprise."

"That would explain the hominid set up at the Helm. But if they were in Human form how could you determine that it was Kelvan blood?" asked La Forge, puzzled.

"One must assume that the being whose blood is so voluminously spilled in the ship died of his injuries. A logical hypothesis would be that he reverted to his natural state at or

near the point of death."

"If you say so," La Forge said absently, looking about them with growing concern. "Data, there's no sign of the others, even Davies. He was on that hill a while ago."

Data showed no sign of worry as he tapped his communicator.

"Jenna?" he said evenly.

"D'Sora here, sir," came the reply.

"Are Ensigns Davies and Elkhorn with you?" he asked.

"Brad is here, but Colin didn't come with us. We haven't found anything yet. Do you want us to come back?" D'Sora's voice carried a hint of concern.

"No, but report anything unusual immediately," ordered Data and activated the communicator a second time. "Ensign Davies?" he said firmly.

There was no reply. Together, the two senior officers turned in the direction of the hill Colin Davies had been working on. As they doubled to the spot Data made a decision to call the others back.

There was no trace of the geologist, but La Forge was able to follow his lone trail for some distance, during which time the others rejoined them. The trail seemed to end in a churned up montage of prints, including those of Davies' Fleet boots. His equipment lay undamaged on the ground. Data picked up the tricorder, which was still activated. It had been set to scan for metal deposits. He turned it off and looked up at La Forge.

"The other prints appear to be booted humanoid ones," he said quietly.

La Forge nodded. "They lead over that way. They've gone up over the ridge. I think I'll be able to follow the tracks over the rocks. The soles of their boots are leaving microscopic residue on anything with a rough enough surface, like that stone over there."

They followed La Forge for almost a kilometre before the trail ended at the base of a cliff.

"I don't get any energy readings and there doesn't seem to be a cavity behind this rock face," D'Sora told them without being asked.

"She's right. I don't see any seam or any interference to the cliff at all," confirmed La Forge.

"You think they were beamed out?" asked Elkhorn.

Data struck his communicator. "Enterprise, this Lt. Commander Data. Ensign Davies appears to have been abducted. Please identify the co-ordinates of his communicator."

Worf's rumbling tones responded with the co-ordinates. La Forge looked up.

"Here?" he said disbelievingly.

"Data, what is going on? Who has abducted Ensign Davies and why?" demanded Picard.

"We do not know, sir. We have ascertained that the anomaly detected by the ship's sensors is in actuality the remains of a small warp-capable spacecraft. The occupants would seem to have been Kelvans."

"Kelvans? Wait, I know that name. Data, where have I heard that name before?"

"The logs of the first Starship named Enterprise, sir," Data replied obediently.

"Yes, I remember... but Data, they were extragalactics. They vanished about ninety years ago, long after contact with Kirk's ship."

"Yes, sir. From this planet, actually."

There was a momentary silence, then: "Of course. I should have recognised the name."

"Damn!" La Forge stopped examining the terrain and walked a couple of metres to the right, to a scattering of boulders. They watched him stoop to pick something up. He brought it back to Data.

"Davies' communicator," said the android unnecessarily.

"Right. And no tracks," growled La Forge.

Data frowned and La Forge knew that he was searching for answers, probably trying to apply the Holmesian deductive reasoning he was so fond of.

"Data - " D'Sora called out, momentarily forgetting the conventions of addressing an acting First Officer. "Oh, it's gone now. For just a moment there was a massive energy spike. It wasn't natural," she muttered, adjusting the tricorder.

"Perhaps it was a glitch in the device?" offered Data.

She shook her head. "It was real enough, and it wasn't random either."

"Then we must assume from the evidence thus far that this planet is not uninhabited," said Data suddenly, as if another part of his mind had suddenly clicked in.

"Why?" prompted La Forge.

"The Kelvans appear to have been the victims, not the instigators, of the violence done to the downed spacecraft. The design of the craft is unknown and records do not show the Kelvans to have possessed such a vessel. The fact that the craft was brought down within the planet's atmosphere points to surface attack, rather than a second ship. Davies' abduction, in the absence of another vessel, would seem to confirm a possibly ongoing presence on the planet."

"Supposition, Data," replied La Forge, trying to figure his own theory for Davies' disappearance. "For that long a chain of supposition you really need at least one piece of hard evidence to build on."

"The craft itself is evidence, Geordi. Consider the nature of the accident. The ship has no escape transporter or jettison device, yet no bodies, or even remnants of bodies, remain on board. In fact there is evidence of injury at only one of the three stations on the vessel."

"Then you think that whoever was on board was probably trying to escape from the owners of the ship? ...They were beamed off?"

Data nodded. "I believe so. Had the occupants - assuming that there was more than one - simply been thrown from the vessel when it broke up, the force responsible for rupturing the shuttle should also have caused them grievous injury. There is no indication of more than one casualty."

"What about the ship's logs?"

Data shook his head. "The damage to the console is too extensive. A large portion of the helm console, including the area in which the log is seated, has been extensively damaged."

"Oh, great," growled La Forge, who had been enjoying the mystery. "Wait a minute - !" He suddenly came to life. "If there are inhabitants somewhere on Detra, and you're saying they could have transporter technology, why was Davies dragged all the way to the cliff?"

"That question has provided me with further possible clues as to the nature of Ensign Davies' abductors. Provided their technology is no further advanced than ours, any communication on their part would be detected by the Enterprise, therefore it is likely that they had a prearranged point and time for beaming back to wherever Ensign Davies is now being held."

"In that case," said La Forge, "we should check with Worf to see if he's noticed any energy fluctuations down here that could've been an alien transporter beam." Data nodded and La Forge called the ship.

"There was a minor energy fluctuation at those co-ordinates," confirmed Worf, "but it does not conform to any transporter pattern currently in Starfleet records. Analysing now."

"Worf, it sounds to me like you may have a suspicion," prodded La Forge, smiling.

Data wondered how La Forge could possibly tell what the Klingon was thinking just by the sound of his voice.

"Yes," replied Worf simply. "Analysis by the ship's computer confirms that it is similar to, but not the same as, the transporter pattern used by the Cardassians to transport Gul Macet and his guards from the Trager during the confrontation with the Phoenix."

"Yeah, well, treaty or no treaty, the only transporter pattern we have on record for the Cardassians is the one they are using currently. They have consistently refused disclosure of anything but the absolute minimum information exchange for maintaining the peace. Same goes for their technology, and their ship designs, past and present, other than whatever intelligence has supplied us with," La Forge recounted.

"It is possible," said Data thoughtfully, part of his mind concentrating on checking and verifying Geordi's information, part of it reviewing the layout of the forward section of the shuttle. "Even fifty years ago the Cardassians were known only through their frequent incursions into Federation space, gathering intelligence and tactical information. The crashed vessel is ideally designed for Cardassian physiology, and the lack of symbols on the instruments is consistent with Cardassian custom. If Ensign Davies is in the hands of a possibly anachronistic, covert Cardassian outpost, he is in great danger."

"Couldn't the Enterprise find him with the ship's sensors?" asked D'Sora.

"Perhaps," replied Data. "A single humanoid life sign on any planet of reasonable biological density represents a very small, almost undetectable trace to scanning devices of the magnitude of those on the ship, but it is possible. A more significant target would be the power source detected by Lt. D'Sora's tricorder."

"And we have to assume that any secret base on Detra must be underground, since the Enterprise scans showed nothing on the surface - " added Elkhorn helpfully.

"Not quite," Data told him, "although your hypothesis is a worthy one. The Cardassians are known to have had extensive dialogue with the Romulans and various Klingon elements on several occasions. There is another possibility."

"A cloaked base," came Picard's voice over the open communicator frequency.

"Yes, sir," replied Data after a beat, and La Forge felt that the unexpected voice might have actually surprised the android.

"I'll have Worf begin further intensive scans of the planet's surface, Data. In the meantime, find out as much as you can about what we're dealing with - and be careful. Picard out."

"So where does that leave us?" asked La Forge, fingering Davies' communicator.

"Back at the wreckage," replied Data, striking his communicator. "Transporter Chief - "

Using equipment beamed down from the Enterprise, Data, D'Sora and Geordi La Forge had dismantled and disembowelled the helm of the crashed ship. Much of the helm's superstructure had been melted and fused but beneath it the actual layout and construction - the fingerprint of another race's technology - was still evident.

La Forge turned a cross-section of circuitry and metal in his hands. "It sure could pass for Cardassian design," he mused.

"If you say so, Commander," sighed D'Sora. "It's all beginning to look the same to me."

La Forge looked up at the attractive Ensign, who was working with Data on the ship's log, ready to chastise her lack of enthusiasm, but the android spoke first.

"Jenna, since your specialty is circuitry and programming I do not see how it is possible for that to be so," he told her.

"I'm sorry Da - sir, but I'm worried about Davies - and Elkhorn. I know Brad is going to check in shortly but he's out there alone. That's what I'm here for, not for wire-jerking in some alien wreck. Can't you understand what it's like, losing someone you know like that and not being able to do anything, to go after them, find them, somehow?" D'Sora's voice rose in frustration at the android's seeming passivity.

"Jenna - " began La Forge.

"No, Geordi, I will answer," said Data. "Jenna, I have worked and lived among Humans for almost three decades. Long enough to learn much about their ways, to find friendship, trust, even... romance. And I do understand what it is like to see someone's life-force slip away

and not have the power to stop it," he added quietly.

The reference surprised La Forge, who moved to intercede protectively. "Data understands," he told D'Sora firmly. "But Captain Picard wants answers and we're here to find them. Everything that can be done is being done to find Davies."

D'Sora looked from one to the other. She had heard about the two of them, even seen at times the unique relationship that began when they worked together at the Helm and Ops consoles on the Enterprise bridge. In a way she had often felt jealous of that friendship: the way Data, without realising it, shared an almost fraternal camaraderie with La Forge without the need for 'specially written' programs.

"Yes, sir," she said quietly. "Permission to check on Br.. Ensign Elkhorn?"

La Forge looked to Data, who nodded.

When she had gone, Data turned to the Engineer. La Forge waited for the inevitable questions about Human nature, and more particularly, Human emotional response.

"Geordi - " began the android.

"Yeah, Data?"

"Query: 'wire jerking...?'"

La Forge smiled inwardly. Whatever Data's real response to Jenna's words, he had, for the time being, chosen the age-old stand-by: evasion. Geordi accepted Data's choice and proceeded to explain the twentieth century military origin of the depreciating term for circuit work, from primitive electrical wiring to the current state-of-the-art technology.

"Captain!" The urgent voice of Lt. Worf disturbed the pensive atmosphere of the Enterprise bridge.

"You've found something, Lieutenant?" Picard rose.

"Not on the planet, sir. A ship has entered orbit around Detra."

"Go to yellow alert. On screen," commanded Picard.

It was not obviously a Cardassian vessel, but the similarities were too numerous to ignore.

"Inform Commander Data that we have visitors, Lieutenant." Picard moved forward to stand next to Ops, watching the lumbering, cruiser-sized vessel as it moved slowly across the screen.

"Indications, Mr. Worf?"

"Scans indicate humanoid lifeforms aboard, sir. A crew of fifty. Armaments are... Sir, they are not fully armed. The configuration of their weapons systems is consistent with comparable Federation and Klingon vessels of more than fifty years ago."

"The ship itself?"

"Unidentified, except that it incorporates many Cardassian designs both internally and structurally. It does not, however conform to any currently known Cardassian ship, nor is it a fighting vessel, sir. More like a converted freighter. Its shields are far below Cardassian military standards."

Picard's furrowed brow grew even darker. After a moment's thought he turned and strode up to the Tactical Station as Will Riker often did, leaned against the rail next to the big Klingon and scanned the console.

"Why - " he said quietly, when he had absorbed all the readings - "didn't the instruments pick up this vessel long before this?"

Worf turned slowly and met the Captain's steady gaze. Picard's implicit trust was something that the Klingon valued even above honour.

"Uncertain, sir," he said slowly. "Long range scanners failed to detect any indication of its presence."

"What was its exact position when it first appeared on our instruments?" asked Picard, and watched the powerful hands move over the console to call up the information.

"Bearing 343 mark 12," read Worf. "Emerging from behind the third moon of the fifth planet - the gas giant."

"Interesting," mused Picard and looked up at the silent vessel again. "Hailing frequencies, Mr. Worf. Try Federation and Cardassian linguistic bases first. Let's see just how well they know us."

"No response, sir. They are receiving our transmissions," he added, anticipating the question.

"Continue to hail them, Mr Worf. We will give them some time to reply. Continuous scans. I want to know the moment anything changes over there," ordered Picard, on his way back down the ramp.

Picard shifted uncomfortably in his seat as the time dragged on. His expression remained carefully neutral, but his irritation with the alien ship was growing by the minute. After more than two hours of deafening silence, he turned to the Tactical Station.

"Status, Mr. Worf?"

"Unchanged - " began the Klingon, before reacting swiftly to something on his board. "Wait. Reading an energy source. A transporter beam to the planet's surface."

"Co-ordinates?"

"Close to the current location of the away team."

"Warn Data."

"No reply, Captain," reported Worf several moments later.

"Transporter room! Beam up the away team immediately!" ordered Picard.

A pregnant silence followed.

"Transporter chief, do you have them?"

"Just Commanders Data and La Forge, sir. La Forge is down."

"Sickbay, emergency team to transporter room three, immediately!" ordered Picard, the cold anger in his voice the more edged for the knowledge that he could not leave the bridge. "Mr. Data. I want a report, in my ready-room as soon as possible," he ordered brusquely.

There was an uncharacteristic pause.

"...Aye, sir," a quiet voice eventually said, the sounds of frenetic activity suddenly filling the background.

Geordi La Forge looked up from the pieces of the navigation computer that he'd laid out carefully on a sheet of metal from the helm console.

Jenna D'Sora and Brad Elkhorn had returned from their reconnaissance of the area. La Forge watched the bronze-skinned Elkhorn talking animatedly to D'Sora and wondered what their future held. D'Sora was a good Security Officer, but she did not have the edge or the innate toughness to remain one, and Elkhorn's real passion was engines. He grinned at the memory of the number of times he'd had extra help, just because Brad Elkhorn couldn't stay away. The young man would have reminded him of Wesley, if the two hadn't been so essentially different. Elkhorn was broad and powerful, intense and enthusiastic, while Wesley's strength lay almost entirely in his extraordinary intellect, intuitiveness and sensitivity.

Data finished taking a quiet message from Worf and came silently to the engineer's side.

"An unidentified ship has entered orbit. It has not attempted to communicate with the Enterprise. Worf has suggested that we beam up immediately; however I do not believe we are in any immediate danger."

"And you think we're going to miss too much if we leave now," guessed La Forge.

Data looked at him sideways. "Captain Picard did not order the away team back to the ship," he offered.

La Forge shook his head. The pursuit of the mystery was one of Data's great vices. From Sherlock Holmes to Agatha Christie, from T'Zal to K'InhaRh, the android had gradually absorbed them all. Since their flirtation with disaster - and Moriarty - in their first Holodeck mystery, they had been much more careful, while still enjoying endless hours of pleasure deciphering intricate mysteries from stories which Data deliberately avoided reading until after their adventures.

The dismembered helm of the small vessel had yielded up few secrets, but it had told them that its owners were not ahead of the Federation technology of the time, and that its lack

of armament and limited acceleration made long range interstellar travel almost untenable, let alone intergalactic... The Cardassian connection persisted, yet La Forge felt that it wasn't that easy, that the ship was trying to tell them something, that perhaps they were missing the point altogether...

They were joined by the younger pair. "Commander La Forge, we've been down here for hours, and none of us has eaten since the last watch change. Any chance of rations?" asked Elkhorn.

"Can't right now." La Forge shook his head regretfully, noticing an empty spot of his own all of a sudden.

"An unidentified vessel has entered orbit with the Enterprise. It would not be appropriate for us to communicate with the ship at this time," explained Data reasonably.

"We aren't going back?" asked D'Sora, curious but not overly concerned.

"I have decided to stay," said Data simply. "Chief O'Brien is locked on to our signals and Lt Worf will alert us to any changes in status. In the meantime, I do not believe that there is any direct threat to our safety and more can be accomplished by our remaining."

"Like what?" asked Elkhorn conversationally, then remembered to add, "...sir?"

Data shifted his gaze to the young man. "Analysis of the wreckage can be completed. Lt. D'Sora's tricorder readings may again detect the energy jag and therefore its location, and further, we will be maintaining a presence with which to respond immediately, should the Enterprise be successful in locating Ensign Davies. If we leave now there is a possibility that we will not be able to return to the surface for some time, particularly if the unidentified vessel proves to be provocative."

La Forge applauded silently. His friend had come a long way since Farpoint Station.

"I never thought of it that way," mused Elkhorn. "Hell, I never wanted to leave Colin, but I don't want to sit around here doin' nothing either - " he looked from one senior officer to the other - "sirs."

"You have not made a report on your patrol of the area," Data reminded him, and La Forge fancied there was a rebuke in the even tones of the android's voice.

"There's nothing out there. I covered all the bases. I even took Davies' tricorder with me. There's no tracks, no debris, no indication that anyone ever tried to survive in these rocks even just for a few days after the crash. I did, however, find out that this whole area is part of a volcanic plateau. There's a lot of gold and tin, and traces of dozens of other ores, indications of small concentrations of dilithium, but the weirdest one, because it was just one trace, was topaline. I'm no geologist, but I've studied enough Federation history to remember that where there's topaline there's always a lot of topaline."

La Forge straightened, and Data seemed to be processing. D'Sora frowned, recognising the expression on her friend's face.

"Quite true," he said after a beat. "And there does not appear to be any known record of topaline being detected in other than extensive reserves. Do you have the exact co-ordinates of that particular reading?" he asked, and they all recognised the new sense of anticipation in Data's voice.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" drawled La Forge as he came abreast of the android, whose stride and preoccupation had carried him slightly ahead of the others.

Data looked up from Davies' tricorder and opened his mouth to frame the question. Then he frowned. "Not now, Geordi," he said absently, and didn't even notice La Forge's snort at the reversal of roles.

The engineer fell back a little and was joined by D'Sora.

"Sir, you don't think that that sensor reading was actually picking up refined topaline in a - "

"Got it in one," replied La Forge. "If there's a cloaked base around here it would have to have topaline, particularly a base built over fifty years ago. Refining methods and changing technology have really minimised the need for large quantities of the stuff, but back then it was a necessity. Now, the kind of power they'd need to generate for any useful kind of military installation, covert or otherwise, plus the cloaking device, would require a power plant that most people would feel a whole lot more comfortable about if it was as far from their living area as possible, which means that there's a possibility that the cloaked area is pretty over-extended. I mean, if our theory so far is correct, we're talking about a fifty plus year old cloaking device here."

"A lot of ifs, buts and maybes," mused D'Sora.

"There always are," sighed La Forge, "there always are... but I think Data's on the money this time."

D'Sora nodded, but there was a bemused look in her eyes as she dropped back to walk with Elkhorn. Geordi La Forge's obscure anachronistic comments were the stuff of legend on the ship. There was even a kind of unofficial competition among the junior officers and crew to see who could decipher the latest one first, and plenty of good natured ribbing for those worthy souls who always knew exactly what their boss was talking about, even when it wasn't quite in standard...

Data stopped and La Forge came to a halt alongside him.

"We are very close," the android told him. "Fragmentary readings indicate that the topaline appears to be very near here and there are now significant distortions in my readings of the area. To cloak a base would require far less energy than would be necessary for the covert activities of a Bird of Prey, but to maintain the shields for any length of time would still represent an enormous drain on their power supply. I would suggest that the power jags we have detected and the sporadic topaline readings are a result of intermittent windows, or fluctuations, caused by the overtaxing of that energy supply."

"Look, Data, there," La Forge said unnecessarily, looking over his friend's shoulder as the energy spike appeared once again on the tricorder. Data locked in its co-ordinates.

"If we are correct we should be able to simply pass through the shield to reach whatever, or whoever it hides," Data told them.

"And if we're not?" asked D'Sora.

"We will endeavour to avoid that scenario," Data told her solemnly as they headed toward the co-ordinates on the tricorder.

It was as simple as the android predicted. One moment they were negotiating a slight decline, still surrounded by nothing but rocks and dirt, the next they were faced with a settlement. It was spartan, functional and about fifty years out of date. They swiftly concealed themselves behind a building as several humanoids, identifiable as Cardassians yet startling in their difference in dress, passed by. Data watched them, absorbing the living history of them. Their clothes were obviously modelled on their predecessor's uniforms, far more militaristic and restrictive even than the light body armour and stylistic helmets worn by Gul Macet and his companions.

"How do you figure this, Data?" whispered La Forge. "Cardassian life span is about the same as ours, and these guys are pretty young. What's goin' on? I mean, since when did they allow women in the Cardassian military, then or now?"

"I.. figure it..." Data mimicked the expression... "that we know almost nothing about Cardassian history prior to the signing of the treaty. It is conceivable that they once allowed women to participate in military operations. A change of government or government policy is all that would be required to change those regulations. It is equally as conceivable that if this base was intended to be a permanent listening post, or even a long term forward staging point for an invasion, that the Cardassians might have made their own arrangements for procreation in order to keep the base functional in perpetuity, should it become, as it seems to have done, completely isolated."

"And the ship in orbit?" asked Elkhorn, reminding them all that the Enterprise was having problems of her own.

"Lt. Worf indicated that it appeared likely to be Cardassian in origin, but not of any current known design.

Data was about to signal them to move toward a functional-looking low building at the centre of the compound, when a door slid open and two very large guards emerged, escorting, and in fact holding up, a battered looking Davies.

Hidden behind the high, windowless wall of a perimeter building, Data and the others watched and waited as several groups moved along the 'street' between the buildings, taking little or no notice of Davies and his captors. By the time the way was again clear, the guards had moved the geologist several buildings down the street to another dark, windowless, militaristic looking structure, all the more sobering against the relative mundanity of the few others in the compound.

Finally, Data motioned silently and they drew phasers before beginning a very careful, co-ordinated push to get to Davies.

Several times they were forced to detour to avoid being seen by people emerging unexpectedly from the other buildings, but in all it took less than five minutes to reach the dark-visaged building that now held the geologist.

Data slipped alone from their cover to the front of the structure, did something to the access device of the door, then returned.

"Did you find a way to access the security lock?" asked La Forge.

"Yes," said Data as they moved. "I was not familiar with the system so I... neutralized it."

"You mean you busted it?" whispered a surprised and amused La Forge, but they had

reached their objective and he could see the damage for himself. Data used his extraordinary strength to drive the doors back manually, holding them until he could see inside.

The way was clear and they moved swiftly into the building.

"I don't like it, Data. We've been too damned lucky. Why haven't we been detected? Where's their security?" whispered La Forge as they crossed a hard, open floor to an ornamental recess that gave them at least some cover while they studied the layout of the building.

"Maybe it's been so long since they had to worry about intruders that they've relaxed too much? I mean, that crashed reconnaissance craft has been there for close to ninety years. If they were worried about visitors they'd have cleaned it up long ago," offered D'Sora softly.

"Yeah, maybe," muttered La Forge, "but what about that ship in orbit? I really, really don't like it. Let's get Davies and get out of here, fast. And we'd all better watch our backs."

"There appears to be only two other exits from this entry hall. One is that passage over there, and the other is the carved door to the right. Since we cannot risk detection by using our instruments, we will divide into two groups. Jenna, Ensign Elkhorn, you will try the door. Commander La Forge and I will try the passage. Set phasers to heavy stun. If you are successful, do not wait for us. Take Ensign Davies and beam up immediately. We will rendezvous aboard the Enterprise."

Each pair moved automatically, while the coast remained eerily clear.

There were no doors along the corridor, just a single one at the end.

"Trap, Data," muttered La Forge.

The android looked back at his friend. "Then what is your suggested course of action, Geordi?"

"One goes, one stays here to cover our asses. Wherever the trouble comes from, the one who stays here should be able to deal with it."

"Unless the trouble is behind the door," said Data in a low voice. "We risk detection by delaying too long. I will go to the door. You will remain here, and in the event that anything happens to me, you will go with the others."

"But Data!" hissed La Forge, but the android was already moving swiftly down the passage to the door.

Before Data could attempt to gain access however, all hell broke loose back in the hall. He turned to see La Forge rush out and followed at an impossibly fast run. He burst into the hall in time to see the brilliant coloured arc of a Cardassian weapon as it enveloped D'Sora and Elkhorn, who had been thrown to the floor during a struggle with several tall, gangly Cardassian guards.

They vanished in a horrifying mini-second of destruction.

"No-o-o!" roared an outraged La Forge.

His tortured cry echoed through Data's mind in that split second, then the weapons were

being levelled at the engineer, who had raised his phaser to fire at them.

The sound of that cry echoing through Data's mind, the android made an impossible leap across metres of floor, landing on his friend simultaneously with the firing of the alien weapons and crashing to the floor with him. Almost instantaneously Data raised his torso and fired back at them, swinging the weapon as they dropped to take out the other two who were fast approaching from where D'Sora and Elkhorn had perished. Moments later he was again absorbing the impact of the disaster.

A look into the room from which the Cardassians had emerged revealed that Davies, too, had perished, though the cause was not clear. For a single unblinking moment, Data stared at the limp body still slumped in a chair, then he was moving at speed back to La Forge, who had not moved.

He was alive, but Data was shaken to find that the Engineer's pulse was weak and thready. He lifted him easily and safely in his arms, still wielding his phaser, but before he could move the Enterprise transporter took them. As they dematerialized, Data allowed his thoughts to focus only on the mystery of why they had been transported so swiftly and silently, his mind carefully avoiding accessing anything else. The transporter room of the Enterprise formed around them. Chief O'Brien said something that Data identified as a particularly vehement Terran epithet and answered a call from the bridge as the android stepped off the platform.

To Data, whose attention was focused on the rhythmic and reassuring expansion of his friend's ribcage against the arm that held it, all else had become a background blur, automatically stored for later review.

He heard his name. Data mentally replayed what had been said and realised that it was the Captain's voice. He reflected, with some curiosity, that he really did not want to answer, nor did he wish to go the Captain's Ready Room.

"...Yes, sir," he eventually heard himself say, and turned to Crusher and the paramedics who had just burst noisily into the room. "I believe Geordi may have broken bones and possible internal injuries. It will be less jarring if I carry him to sickbay," he said quietly when Crusher motioned him to lay the Engineer on the antigrav stretcher.

Crusher frowned but came to his side to run her mediscanner over the unconscious La Forge. "All right, but quickly, Data. He needs immediate attention. What happened to him, and where are the others?" she demanded, almost running to keep up as Data immediately struck out for the sickbay.

"I crushed him," said Data bluntly. "The others have been killed."

The blood drained from Crusher's face. "I see," she said inanely, unable to think of any other reply as they stepped into the turbolift.

"Are you all right, Data?" she managed to ask as the lift travelled downward.

Data's golden eyes were fixed on the doors as if willing them to open. After a beat he drew them away to meet the doctor's questioning gaze. The doors finally opened.

"No," he said, turned, and strode out.

"Lt. Worf, hail that ship again, all language forms. Demand that they speak to us!" said Picard angrily, Data's subdued 'Yes sir' and Beverly Crusher's just completed report echoing in his thoughts as he raised his gaze to the viewscreen and the mystery vessel.

"It does not answer," replied Worf.

"Inform them that if they do not open communications with us we will consider their presence as a hostile act and take action accordingly."

"They are hailing us now, Captain," said Worf a few minutes later. "Visual as well as audio. Racic Tar demands to speak to the Captain of the Federation vessel."

"Put him on screen," Picard ordered.

"I am Racic Tar, Captain of the Privar. Our intention is to defend ourselves, nothing more."

"If that is so, then why was one of my away team abducted and murdered by your people? Explain to me why two more of my people were killed trying to retrieve their comrade?" demanded Picard, in a voice cold with unspent rage.

"We were defending ourselves. We had to warn them. You have the firepower to destroy this ship and the settlement below. The Federation has a reputation for atrocities against its enemies," replied the young Captain.

"And who says you have the truth of that?" demanded Picard. "Didn't your people learn anything from the war?"

"War?" Racic Tar demanded, startled.

"My God," muttered Picard. "You've been so isolated here that you don't even know that a war has been fought and finished with. There is now a treaty between your people and ours. We can have the records down-loaded to your computers if you wish -"

"How is that possible? You are a Federation ship. Our systems are completely incompatible."

"They used to be," said Picard in a subdued voice, "but we have come a long way since the treaty - not nearly far enough, I grant - but a great deal has been learned by both sides. We can transmit the data in a format compatible with your systems."

"I do not trust you," Racic Tar said slowly. "I would like to see your evidence, but I do not trust you."

"Understood. Trust is earned. Would it be acceptable to you if the information were stored on the appropriate media and beamed down to the planet's surface for your retrieval?"

The alien Captain nodded slowly. "That would be acceptable. If you speak the truth - if it is not a ploy, will our people come here?"

"If it is your wish, a delegation can be sent for, but it is not yet the custom of your people, or ours, to come and go freely in each other's territory. In any case, your presence will have to be reported both to Starfleet and to the Cardassian military. I would anticipate repatriation to Cardassian space shortly thereafter."

There was a flicker of something, that might have been a smile, for a moment on the alien lips, then they pressed into a straight line again.

"One question, Racic Tar," added Picard. "The wreckage my people were examining - one of your ships?"

The Cardassian paused, then nodded. "What happened to the Kelvans?" asked Picard in a deceptively quiet voice.

Racic Tar closed his eyes for a moment as if making a decision, then spoke slowly. "This world was selected for a purpose, and because it contained no sentient lifeforms. When my father's people arrived on this ship they were confronted by these...Kelvans. We could not afford to risk detection. My father ordered their execution, but one, whom my father recalled as having great courage, escaped and stole the only other vessel we had, the only one with which we could move undetected to our own borders and back again. Reluctantly, the order was given to shoot it down before he could leave and warn the Federation of our presence. As your scans will have told you, the Privar is of little value other than to patrol this solar system and collect ores, which was its only intended use."

A look of regret, sadness, came into the Enterprise Captain's eyes. He had admired the Kelvans for the choice they made, despite their initial commitment to a world they had no memory of and no chance of ever seeing, to make a peaceful life for themselves in an unfamiliar form and with no ties to their own kind. To have met one of them, or their descendants...

"Geordi has a depressed fracture of the skull, several broken ribs, one of which has punctured a lung, and there were other internal injuries. I'm afraid Data is practically a lethal weapon when it comes to high speed impact with Human flesh. There's no doubt that he saved Geordi's life, but he almost killed him doing it," Beverly Crusher enlarged on her original report.

"Will he be all right?" Picard shifted his gaze from Crusher's striking but worried face to the peaceful visage of his Chief Engineer.

"I don't know. He's in a coma. I have relieved the pressure under the fracture and repaired as much of the superficial damage as I can, but medical science hasn't yet found a way to instantly revive a coma victim. We can only make the individual as healthy as possible, create the best environment possible for his or her mind to heal, and wait for them to come around in their own time."

"Are you saying that he might not recover from this?" asked Picard in a voice deep with shock.

"There is nothing certain about traumatic coma. Geordi appears to have escaped major brain damage, but..."

Picard closed his eyes for a moment, then turned to face the android, who had moved away while the Captain spoke to Beverly Crusher. "How long have you been here, Data?" he asked.

Data withdrew from the unpleasant data he was mentally reviewing and focused on Captain Picard. "Thirty six point... Thirty-six hours, sir," he said quietly.

"While we may have come to a tentative agreement with the Privar until the Cardassian representatives get here, I would feel far more comfortable with you on the bridge. When can I expect you to return to full duty?" asked Picard gently.

Data's eyes slid almost reflexively to the unconscious figure in the diagnostic bed. "Immediately, sir, if you wish," he said flatly.

"Your regular watch will be fine," nodded the Captain, vaguely uncomfortable somehow. "Data," he said after a few moments. "You did save Geordi's life. Remember that."

Data watched Picard walk to the exit with Dr. Crusher before moving to La Forge's bedside again and resuming a recital of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. As he spoke, his thoughts returned reluctantly to his own oppressively accurate record of the day's events.

He had done the same thing over a dozen times, reviewing every step of his command, of the disastrous results, of their faces...

A sense of great emptiness and loss suddenly swept over him. Never again would he hear Jenna D'Sora laugh, or make a joke, or see her shake her head at one of his observations, or share their private joke about her perpetually untidy quarters...

A frown creased the opalescent face. He had experienced regret many times, but never so powerfully or... He shook his head. The data was confusing. Suddenly he did not want to understand it. He swiftly consigned it elsewhere and purposefully focused his attention on his friend. Geordi had shown no response to his presence, but Dr. Crusher had said that it could help, that sensory input sometimes influenced the recovery of coma victims.

Sherlock Holmes did not seem to be working. Data again scanned the dark, unVISORed face for any sign of change and sighed almost Humanly with disappointment. He wanted very much to talk to the Engineer, to hear Geordi's unique and always reassuring perspective of his problems.

"Geordi," he said softly, addressing the still form directly for the first time. "You must listen to my voice. Dr. Crusher says that it is possible that you can hear me. If that is so, I want to tell you that I am sorry I have injured you. You must wake up if you are to recover. I need your advice... your friendship, my friend. Please wake up."

"Data," a gentle voice spoke behind him.

He did not need to turn. "Counselor? You wish to see me?"

Troi composed herself and swallowed the emotion in her throat. "No, Data. Actually I came to visit Geordi. When I was in a coma, Commander Riker came to visit me. I was able to remember, much later, the sound of his voice and the reassurance part of me felt at hearing that sound, at knowing somehow that he was there. I didn't know you were still here," she explained. "I'm glad you are, Data. It will mean a great deal to him to have a friend close by."

"He has not moved," said the android simply.

Troi looked at the inert La Forge. "How are you, Data?" she asked unexpectedly.

"I am fine, Counselor," he replied predictably. "It is fortunate that I do not have emotions, and therefore am able to function normally, and to return to duty at my next watch as Captain Picard requested," he said in a voice more forced than she had ever heard it before.

"Were I Human I might have been feeling regret, remorse, guilt, grief..." he recited, the image of Jenna D'Sora suddenly accessed and filling his thoughts. "That I am not Human has saved me from a great deal of pain," he told her matter-of-factly.

Troi stared at him for a long moment. "Data," she finally spoke. "Would you do something for me?" He nodded, for all the world like his normal android self. "I want to talk to you before your next watch. Will you come to my office one hour before your duty starts?"

"Certainly, Counselor," he agreed without question, watching her touch Geordi's cheek before taking a square hand between the two of hers. She leaned over the engineer.

"Geordi, it's Deanna. We miss you. Please come back," she said tremulously, and squeezed the hand before laying it down gently.

Data watched her go, his eyes slightly unfocused, as they often were when he was accessing.

When Troi was gone Data turned back to his friend. For a few moments he stood unmoved. Then he took La Forge's hand wordlessly in his. A number of minutes passed before he seemed to stir from his thoughts and resume the recounting of Conan Doyle's Hound of the Baskervilles, the dark hand still firmly clasped between two pale ones...

The turbolift paused on its downward journey and Data found himself sharing a lift with Worf. They rode in silence, the Klingon headed off duty and in an apparently taciturn mood.

One deck above Data's destination Worf called 'Hold' and the turbolift obediently stopped.

Data waited interestedly to discover what his purpose was. "What happened?" growled the Klingon.

"Worf?"

"Down there. What happened? To D'Sora and Elkhorn... Tell me what happened."

"But... have you not read the reports? I left out nothing," he reassured his large friend.

"I am not interested in paperwork," rumbled Worf. "You will tell me what happened to my people."

Briefly and bluntly Data summarized the events leading to their deaths. Worf listened in strained silence, his eyes flashing with well-restrained rage.

When Data was finished, he waited for Worf to speak, the Klingon's warning prior to the android's small flirtation with Jenna prominent in Data's thoughts. The pregnant silence continued for several more seconds before the Klingon finally moved.

"Resume," he barked.

Data blinked.

Then the elevator was stopping again. Worf exited without speaking. Data frowned. In

his experience, such a silence was usually indicative of extreme displeasure or anger...

He found that he did not like the idea of the Klingon being angry with him. His first impulse was to consult his friend Commander Riker, but Riker was away. The second was to follow Worf, but he was due in Counselor Troi's office.

"Resume," Data told the turbolift and stood motionless, thinking about Worf as it took him to his destination. He did not notice that one of his hands had clenched until he walked into Troi's office.

Her dark eyes lighted upon it immediately. Data followed their gaze, his eyes widening in genuine surprise when he realised, and immediately flexed his fingers as if checking for damage.

"There's nothing wrong with it, Data," Troi said kindly. "It's a sign of stress, that's all."

"In Humans, Counselor. I am not Human," he countered.

"No," she shook her head. "You are not flesh and blood, but that's not the same thing at all. I remember you once saying that true humanity was a state of mind. You'd do well to listen to yourself more often, Commander."

"You wanted to speak to me?" he reminded her calmly, and moved to the viewport without knowing exactly what purpose it would serve to do so.

"I wanted to talk to you about what happened - about your feelings, about Jenna, and Geordi, and the others," she told him.

"Feel?" He said the word experimentally. "I do not feel..." he said almost to himself, then paused to contemplate the fact that the Counselor well knew that, and to wonder why she was persisting in applying the term to him. Suddenly he wanted to be back in sickbay again, or on the bridge - anywhere but there. "Tell me, Counselor, how am I supposed to... feel?" he asked, without turning. "I have sacrificed three lives in trying to save one. And Geordi may still die because of my mistakes."

Troi recognised the truth implicit in that unyielding back, and closed her eyes momentarily.

"Data, look at me," she demanded. "Understand what is happening to you right now. You would call it something else, but we call it pain. I wish there could have been a gentler awakening for you, but you must try understand why you... feel... the way you do."

"It is a common error, ascribing emotions to my responses," he replied obstinately, his eyes unwavering in their gaze.

Troi snorted. "You're the one making the error, Data. Time and time again I've seen you react, seen... I've seen you desperate to save a life and I've seen you, in your own way, grieve. I didn't have to sense it to know that it happened."

Data shook his head slowly. Frustrated colour came to the Counselor's pale cheeks. "Was it only instinct that drove you to try and save Lal when it was hopeless? Was it only duty that compelled you to risk your life to save Q from the Calamarain? And when you broke all the rules and fought for Sarjenka's existence - did you have to write a program for that??" she demanded, almost angrily.

Data blinked at the onslaught. He did not understand the Counselor's passion on his behalf, but neither could he answer many of her questions, and that troubled him. "I did what I believed was right," he finally said in a quiet voice.

"Of course you did, Data," she said through her teeth, "because that is your nature. Hasn't it occurred to you that it might also be in your nature to care? That if you could exceed your programming enough to be officially classified as a living, sentient being, that you could exceed it in other ways too?"

"I have considered that hypothesis at length, Counselor. I believe you would call the process 'wish fulfilment'."

Troi's eyes widened at the unexpected edge in the android's voice. Inflection was so rare in his almost relentlessly even speech that it stood out as a beacon for the turmoil he could neither acknowledge nor articulate. She bit her lip. How could she help him? How could she make him understand when she couldn't even define the parameters of the problem?

"Data, what were you thinking when I came in to sickbay?" she asked experimentally.

"I was thinking about the Cardassians, and about Geordi."

"And what were you thinking about Geordi?" she probed.

"That I did not want him to die. That I would... miss... him."

"You would miss Geordi - a lot?"

"He is my friend. I do not want it to be the way it was when Tasha died."

"And how was that?" she asked softly, trying to contain her reaction to the small opening.

"Empty," he said, an almost haunting quality to the word.

"If you were Human, how would you describe 'empty'?" she pressed, stepping closer to him in spite of herself.

Data thought for a moment. "I do not know," he said finally.

Troi curbed her frustration. "Try, Data. It's important. What do you think 'empty' meant then, to... say Geordi, or Commander Riker, or me?"

He looked at her searchingly, as if seeking an answer in the dark eyes. "Pain," he said finally, remembering their faces, Picard's face, after the holo-image of Tasha had vanished from the holodeck.

"Yes," said Troi triumphantly, but her voice remained very gentle. "We were all hurting, all feeling the emptiness caused by Tasha's absence. You see, that kind of 'empty' wasn't just the concept you might have dismissed it as then - it was the manifestation of your pain, Data. Just because you don't have the biochemical mechanisms Humans have doesn't mean you haven't got your own way of 'feeling.' Lal recognised her pain. That was the only difference between you. She did not exceed her programming, because her programming was yours. What Lal did was to define the real parameters of it by actually recognizing her own fear at the threat of being separated from her father - from the parent she loved."

Data, who had been listening with fascination, turned back to the viewport.

"Why did you turn away?" demanded Troi.

Data turned back, his face still as passive as ever. "I - " He suddenly grew very still and silent.

"Data?"

His eyes focused on her face. "I find that do not want to talk about that aspect of Lal's existence. Surprising, because I normally find a certain satisfaction in talking about her life," he said slowly.

Troi smiled encouragingly. "You were very proud of her," she told him. "We all felt her loss very deeply, Data."

"Is that what it means, to have such an emptiness... to find myself so unwilling to lose her completely?" he asked wistfully.

Troi nodded, moved. "Do you believe that, Data - that you dealt with your... emptiness... by incorporating her programs back into your own - that you found your own way of keeping her close to your heart?"

He looked at her then, with the most Human expression she had ever seen on his android face. There was a jumble of confusion and real pain in his eyes. Memories of Lal were reviving old sensations that he had comfortably dismissed in the past. In a reflex action, Troi clasped his hand in hers.

"It pleased me when Lal did that," he said quietly. "I could have given her so much more, had I known... "

"Known what, Data?" she asked gently as his eyes moved back to the distant stars.

Data did not reply. Troi felt his fingers tighten around her hand, a gesture so simple, yet so profound that tears pricked in the black eyes. She looked up at the pale, lonely profile and blinked away the pressing moisture before leaning wordlessly against his arm, as she had once, a long time ago, after he'd returned from Tin Man.

There was a long, gentle silence, then Data finally spoke. "Counselor - "

"My name is Deanna," she told him softly, lifting her head.

"Deanna, what do you want from me?"

"Data?"

He turned his shoulders slightly to look down at her. Troi raised puzzled eyes to his - and understood the question.

"The emotional well-being of everyone on this ship is my responsibility - " She raised her free hand as Data opened his mouth to interrupt. "That does include you," she told him. "We are here, now, because I care about you. And you were in sickbay with Geordi, because you care about him."

"Yes, Counselor," agreed Data, intrigued.

"Those acts imply an emotional response," she went on. "In my case I believe my friend - she touched his sleeve, " - is in pain. This person means a great deal to me. I cannot bear to think of him hurting, or being alone with his pain."

Data attempted to emulate her example. "In my case, I have caused Geordi serious injury, and I do not wish him to die. I want him to be well again because I miss our conversations, his advice. I need to - "

Troi's fingers tightened around his. "That's right, you do need. We all do, Data. If you are alive, you need. That's what I wanted you to understand. You talk about friendship on one hand, and deny any possibility of feelings on the other. Well, I'm telling you now that you cannot have one without the other. If you have no feelings, then Geordi's death would be of no more consequence to you than a broken toaster. The questions you are torturing yourself with at the moment, questions about how and why those people were lost on Detra, and what you could have done differently, would be academic, like a chess problem..." Troi's voice rose with the strength of her conviction and her desire to communicate it to him.

Data looked down at her impassioned face and the slender hand holding his, and frowned, but remained silent.

"...If you had no feelings you would have been on the bridge, or in your quarters involving yourself in the Cardassian problem on Detra, not reading Sherlock Holmes to an unconscious man in sickbay!" she told him, releasing his hand in frustration.

"I do not understand your distress on my behalf, Counselor," Data told her when she paused again for breath. "I have shed no tears, lost no sleep, nor am I ill. I am uninjured by the experience on Detra, yet you continue to anthropomorphise me." He paused to consider how to frame his next thoughts. "Deanna," he began deliberately, "I cannot be other than what Dr. Soong made me. Lore was given my only chance to experience what you call emotion."

Troi opened her mouth to argue again but paused when he turned away. "You're due on duty in fifteen minutes, Data. I think we've talked enough for today," she told him quietly. He turned obediently for the door. "What will you be doing after your shift?" she called after him, wanting to make another appointment.

He turned momentarily as the doors opened. "I will be in sickbay," he said, turned and was gone.

Jean-Luc Picard turned as his door page sounded and put down the replica of a forties pulp novella.

"Will," he said as Riker came in, still in civvies. "Good to have you back. A good trip?"

Riker smiled. "As good as it gets. Believe it or not, I managed to rest as well. I feel great. Even the trip out here on the Sadat was tolerable - just. Remind me never to hitch a ride on a long range survey vessel again," he said with feeling. "I slept nearly the whole trip. There wasn't anything else to do..."

The First Officer did indeed look good. The tired lines had gone from his face and the weary shoulders were square again. He had even gained a few more pounds. Picard

suspected that Riker was going to feel Beverly Crusher's wrath at his next physical. He refrained from saying so.

Riker looked at the Captain curiously when he didn't answer. Picard looked dog tired and it was obvious that he hadn't been eating or sleeping very well. Riker had come straight from the transporter room, and Miles O'Brien, come to think of it, had been pretty tight-lipped himself.

"Something's wrong, isn't it?" he asked. "Who's that in orbit with us? I haven't heard anything about trouble out here. What is it?"

"We lost some people during an away mission," Picard said bluntly.

"Who?" The word came out in a croak.

"Davies, Elkhorn, D'Sora," listed the Captain in a sombre voice.

"God..." Riker sat down hard on the nearest chair. "They were just kids. How? Who was in charge?"

"Data," replied Picard. "We found a Cardassian base on Detra. A very old one, stranded here decades before the war. The Privar is their vessel. They took Davies hostage and Data took the away team in to rescue him."

Riker shook his head. "How's Data taking it, or is that a redundant question?"

"I'm not exactly certain. Normally Data gives every indication of being unaffected by even the most traumatic events, but he has been almost... withdrawn this time, and he spends his off duty constantly at Geordi La Forge's side in sickbay."

"Geordi's in sickbay?"

"Oh, damn. Sorry, Number One. He was part of the away team. During Data's strenuous effort to shield him from the Cardassian's weapons, Geordi was seriously injured. He is still in a coma."

Riker dragged a large hand over his bearded face. "What a mess. And what a way for Data to find out -"

"Find out?" Picard interrupted curiously.

"Deanna and I have talked a lot about Data, ever since his trial. I've never believed that he could be alive and not have feelings of some kind. You just can't have one without the other. And there was Lal's death. Both Deanna and I believe that Lal, by actually identifying her pain, her fear, didn't so much exceed her programming as suddenly recognise the extent of it -"

"And therefore Data's..."

"Exactly. We, both of us, felt that it was only a matter of time before something happened that caused Data to make that same leap -"

"Only where Lal had a father, and all of us to compare him with, Data has only his own perceptions - and self indoctrination. He truly believes that he is incapable of real feeling... I

had no idea you felt so strongly, Will," said Picard quietly. "I knew you and Data were friends, that he values your advice - "

"He's a unique individual, and my friend," the First Officer said slowly. "Data is as alive to me as Worf or Geordi, or any of the others."

"But are you certain that anthropomorphising Data is any fairer than Bruce Maddox declaring him to be nothing more than a machine?" asked Picard, uncertainty in his own eyes.

Riker's surprise was comprehensive. "But you - I don't understand, sir. Data is alive. He was built to emulate humanoid appearance, movement... "

"But he is not now, nor will he ever be, Human. You said it yourself. He is unique. An entity unto himself. I think that to pressure him to find in himself more than is actually there denies that individuality. I will defend always, as I did at Phillipa Louvois' trial, his right to pursue that individuality without being categorised by anyone: Starfleet, Maddox, you... anyone."

Riker nodded slowly. "You may be right. In any case, Data will find his own way. I just hope that this particular ride isn't too rough. I know Deanna will keep an eye on him, but in a way I'm glad he's not Human. Jenna D'Sora of all people... " he said sadly.

Picard nodded silently, his hazel eyes suddenly bright with a pain that refused to dull. There was nothing more to be said, only the mourning to be done, as always, alone...

Riker yawned and stretched widely. "Well, that's the first one over," he told Troi. "The first watch after leave is always the worst. Mr. Worf, you have the bridge."

Troi rose to follow the Commander into the turbolift, watched by Worf, who chose to remain at his station.

"How does a quiet table in Ten Forward sound?" Riker asked, looking down at his companion affably.

"Later, perhaps," she smiled. "I'm going down to sickbay first."

"Geordi?"

"Mmm."

"...Use a little company?"

"I was hoping you'd ask," she told him, sliding an arm through his as the turbolift descended.

"Yeah, well I just can't believe it's Geordi down there. I really missed him today. It's amazing what it takes to make you realize how much someone figures in your life. I mean, when Geordi was promoted and went to engineering we thought the bridge was going to be almost too quiet, but he always finds a reason to transfer back up here for the occasional watch... "

Troi leaned against Riker's arm comfortingly, understanding that this was his way of

dealing with the worry, the fear he and everyone else felt for the Engineer.

Beverly Crusher was working on a broken ankle in the casualty area of sickbay when they arrived. Lisa Pererskov, still in ski gear, managed to look very sheepish.

Crusher looked up and smiled tiredly at them, then looked across to the smaller intensive care ward.

"All right if we spend some time?" asked Riker quietly as they reached the doctor.

She nodded. "Data's with him," she added before they turned. Troi looked back. "Since the end of his watch," Crusher answered the unspoken question.

The Counselor nodded silently and turned to follow Riker.

Data was standing very still, near the head of the diagnostic bed, his head tilted to one side. He was speaking in muted tones and his eyes were staring fixedly ahead.

"Data?" Troi said softly.

"Ah, Counselor," he said, cutting smoothly across Shakespeare's Twelfth Night. "I was reviewing my medical database and -"

"And reading to Geordi," she finished for him. "How is he?"

"Unchanged, I am afraid," said the android in a conciliatory tone. "Welcome back, Commander," he added, not having seen the First Officer to speak to since Riker's arrival during his last watch.

Riker nodded, the blue eyes going to the still figure on the bed and his memory to the equally still figure of Deanna Troi after the attack by Jevv. He listened as Troi held the Engineer's hand and spoke cheerfully to him, and wondered how they would all cope with losing another of the bridge 'family.' It was a prospect that twisted his insides. He moved closer to Troi and spoke to La Forge.

"Geordi, you can't lie around in sickbay all day. Engineering is going to the dogs without you. Look, you've got half the bridge crew in here goofing around instead of getting on with things," he told him, barely able to maintain the forced lightness of his tone. There was no response, but Troi encouraged him to continue the banter. Riker remembered something he'd joked with the Engineer about after the Romulan incident. "...Listen, if you insist on skiving down here, I might make good that threat we discussed. Picture it, right here in sickbay: me on trombone, Data and his violin and Worf doing selections of the best of Klingon opera..."

Troi chuckled and Data's smooth brow creased once again into a frown. He did not understand. Whether or not Geordi could hear them, he was in no position to appreciate humour, and his own observations had told the android that everyone, including Riker and Troi, was feeling a great deal of anxiety and stress over the condition of the Engineer. He did not understand the application of humour. He said so.

Troi looked up, still holding the strong, dark hand. "If Geordi can hear us he should hear a positive sound, Data, not despair - and more than that, it helps all of us too."

"Counselor Troi - " the intercom came to life. "Please report to the Captain's Ready Room."

"Duty calls, Geordi," said Troi softly, shaking her head and placing the hand gently on La Forge's chest before looking up at her companion.

Riker raised his eyebrows and made a sympathetic face.

"Later," she said meaningfully and departed.

"Commander - " began Data.

Riker sat down in the chair close to Geordi's bedside and leaned forward on his elbows, resting his bearded chin on his knuckles.

" - Since the incident on Detra, I have found the Captain to be reserved and taciturn; Worf is angry with me, Counselor Troi and Dr. Crusher are inclined to great sadness and some of the crew now look at me strangely when they pass by. And today, you, sir, and the Counselor seemed to find humour at a seemingly inappropriate moment. I do not understand the diversity of emotions, nor their application to the situation."

Riker raised his head, shifting his gaze from La Forge's profile to look up at the android. "Data, everyone handles grief differently. None of it is likely to last. I've had crewmen quietly angry, almost to the point of hate with me after taking casualties in any of my away teams. They have to focus their grief on someone. That someone is almost always the person they can most readily identify the blame with. In this case it's you."

Data nodded. "Then, when Tasha died, you were subjected to a similar barrage of inconsistencies?"

A shutter came over the Commander's eyes for a moment. "Worf didn't speak to me for a week," he said slowly. "The Captain and I barely had two casual words to say to one another, and I spent more time with Deanna in those next few weeks than I have in the entire time since..."

"The memory is still painful?" ventured the android.

Riker's blue eyes met his and Data could see for himself that Tasha Yar's death had left many scars.

"Goes with the territory, my friend," whispered the First Officer, turning back to the bed and again resting his chin on his knuckles. "You just have to get on with it."

"But in my case - " Data began, then frowned and looked down at his hand, checking, before turning back to his friend without further comment.

The USS Enterprise broke orbit ten days after arriving at the planet Detra. No sign had been discovered of the crew of the *Batiste* and their disappearance remained a puzzling mystery.

"The Cardassians are eager to repatriate their comrades despite the embarrassment of admitting that they had lost them in the first place," Picard told his senior officers. "The reason

that the lost base never attempted to send a subspace distress signal was their fear of detection. They had been ordered to remain undetected at any cost and told that war was imminent, even though it did not actually occur for another fifty years after their arrival. They were also told that detection other than by Cardassian warships would be fatal, that we would torture and murder all of them, including the women and children."

"So they waited," said O'Brien sombrely, "for a war that never came to them."

"Exactly," agreed Picard. "They are fortunate that in Rasic Tar they have an astute and intelligent leader. Another might have panicked and opened fire on the Enterprise, or refused communication completely and caused a prolonged deadlock. As it is, the Cardassian delegation fully intends to have the whole outpost dismantled and the people repatriated within months."

"What about the Privar's activity in this system?" asked O'Brien.

"The Sadat is combing each planet and its satellites for any other activity," added Data.

"We are scheduled for maintenance at Thartia station. I suggest that everyone rotate through extended stand-down during the transit, and the stopover. I'm certain we can count on Commander Riker to keep things in hand on the bridge," the Captain finally smiled.

Riker grinned sheepishly and nodded.

"Then I think our business is at an end. Lt. O'Brien - " Everyone turned to the Chief at the unexpected use of his rank. "As acting Chief Engineer, I expect you to ensure that engineering is ready for this overhaul by the time we reach Thartia station."

"Yes, sir," O'Brien replied. "Everything is continuing as per normal."

"Yes," acknowledged Picard soberly. "Dismissed, everyone."

The Enterprise cruised peacefully through the heavens, subdued, silent, almost brooding in her perspective as ship's night threw most of the ship into a kind of twilight - a relaxed, unhurried time enjoyed by all but the duty crew as evening and night. A time to unwind, a time to sleep...

In sickbay the lights were also muted, the duty surgeon reviewing the logs of the previous watches away in the CMO's office, no patients waiting to be tended and none on the silent ward. Tucked away in the intensive care unit, a brighter light burned over the tranquil, unmoving form of Geordi La Forge.

Data moved through the larger area of sickbay, headed for La Forge's side, his mind busy with details of the coming overhaul, a letter from Wesley Crusher and the question of more exercise for Spot.

Little had changed. The Engineer lay quietly under the sickbay sheet, and soft Spanish guitar music now filled the room. A table that someone had moved to the side of the bed held his VISOR and small tokens from many of his friends.

Data approved of the music, one of Geordi's favorite forms. He decided to allow it to continue rather than embark on a recital of the literature from Dumas that he'd chosen for the

Engineer.

For a long time he simply stood at the bedside organising files and reviewing information. Then the music stopped, interrupted by a message for the duty surgeon to visit the quarters of a family with a feverish child. Data stopped what he was doing and picked up a dark hand.

La Forge's index and forefingers had moved. The first movement in more than twelve days...

A moment later the music returned. Geordi remained unmoved. Data stared at the hand as if he might will it to stir again. It remained still.

Suddenly he found that he did not want to access any other information, did not want to hear the music, or see the solitary VISOR lost among small, brightly wrapped packages and simple gifts.

Again Data found himself instinctively accessing memories of Jenna D'Sora and wondering why. He had enjoyed their experiment despite its ultimate failure. Geordi had told him that it hadn't failed: it had simply proved that they were not meant to be together. Data had pondered for a long time the Engineer's next statement, referring to his use of a specially written program to try and please Jenna. Geordi had said: "If you really cared for someone, Data, you wouldn't need a program. Just as you are now, you are my best friend. There is no reason known why it couldn't be the same, or even better for you with a lady. You just have to want it as much as she does."

"If I were Human I would be very angry with you for staying away for so long, Geordi," Data said aloud. "Dr. Crusher says that it is entirely up to you now to come back." He squeezed the square hand as if to emphasise the point. "Please, Geordi..." he added softly.

La Forge's fingers twitched again and the dark head turned to the side for the first time.

"Geordi?" said Data tentatively. For a few moments he stood waiting, silent, empty... looking as dejected as any Human at the Engineer's subsequent stillness.

Data had shut out all sensory input but the sight and sound of Geordi La Forge, and therefore failed to notice the arrival of Beverly Crusher in the doorway, covering for the duty physician and still in civvies, in response to a signal from the diagnostic sensors. She looked from one to the other, and reluctantly withdrew again, to monitor the sensor readings from her office.

"Geordi?" Data said again, bringing his other hand to the one he held. "I will not let you die, Geordi... I will not," he repeated, unaware of the depth of vehemence in the words.

La Forge stirred again, and Data leaned forward hopefully as the dark eyelids flickered, eyes suddenly moving under them.

Data found himself unable to speak with the sudden weight of anticipation. Instead his hands tightened in profoundly Human fashion around the one he held, and he waited.

Slowly, the eyelids drew back. For several seconds the Engineer lay, almost trance-like.

Data did not know what to do. He accessed his medical databanks furiously, looking for information about roused coma victims. He had spent so long searching for ways to actually

wake Geordi that he had neglected to study the next step. There was nothing of use, nothing to help La Forge now.

He looked down at the blank eyes and saw La Forge's lips begin to move. Geordi was trying to say a word, the same word over and over.

Finally, it came out in a croaking shout. "No-o-o!" he cried. Data reached forward to catch his other arm as it flailed out.

"No... " moaned La Forge miserably and tried to sit up. Data's hands moved to the Human's arms to steady, to hold him.

"It is all right, Geordi," he said softly.

La Forge's unsteady fingers moved to touch the android's face, as if he needed proof, despite the evidence of his ears. "Data? ...Data, you're alive?"

"I am here," confirmed the android.

"The others... I couldn't save them. Jenna... " There was distress and vagueness in the Engineer's voice, his momentary strength waning quickly.

"Geordi!" Data called, but La Forge had become lost in his last waking memories: the vivid death, fear, uncertainty, then great pain.

"Brad, Jenna!" La Forge clutched at the android's shirt in his disorientation. Data suddenly began to doubt that he had actually roused from the coma.

"It is over, Geordi. I am here," Data soothed, and felt the warm, illness-weakened body suddenly sag heavily against him. "No..." The word was almost jerked from the android, and he moved his arms supportively across the Human's shoulders, unwilling to accept that the Engineer might still be comatose. And when La Forge was suddenly engulfed by an overwhelming tempest of emotion, continued to hold fast to his friend.

Without warning, his own words to Jenna D'Sora came forcefully back to the android. *'...among Humans for almost thirty years...long enough to find friendship, trust... know what it is like to see someone's lifeforce slip away...'* His mind picked out the words as the memory replayed itself in perfect detail while he waited for the storm to pass.

When Geordi finally grew still Data released an arm to reach across to retrieve the VISOR and click it gently into place on his friend's face.

As if waking from a nightmare, La Forge seemed to jolt, a hand resting momentarily on Data's shoulder before he pushed himself away, only to have to submit to being eased gingerly back down to the pillow.

"Data, I'm sorry," he said shakily, but lucidly. "I didn't mean to - "

A great weight seemed to lift from the android at the sound of those words. "You came back. That is all that matters," Data told him. "Nothing else is important."

"Why?" whispered La Forge. "Jenna, Davies, Elkhorn - they're all gone. That Cardassian landing party came from nowhere. I should have fired sooner... I could have saved them."

"No," Data told him. "I saw them die. You could not have stopped it. Had you fired you would have stopped one or two, but not all the Cardassian phasers, and the others would certainly have killed you too."

"How long have I been here?" asked La Forge slowly, scanning his surroundings as his breathing returned to normal and the tension slowly drained from his body.

"Twelve days. All of your friends have been extremely worried about you. How do you feel?"

"I feel like hell," groaned the Engineer. "I seem to have gaps in my memories of the away mission. Why did we go down there? What planet was it? Why don't I remember Commander Riker being there?" he asked in slow, jerking phrases.

"Dr. Crusher says that there is a small amount of brain damage. This might account for the memory loss. You are still weak because your slowed metabolism has prevented complete healing of your wounds," recited Data.

"My wounds?"

"You do not recall what happened after Jenna and Ensign Elkhorn were killed?"

"No. No, I can't remember," admitted La Forge.

Data started to draw back, his face suddenly an uncharacteristically sombre mask, but was stayed by the hand still resting on his forearm.

"Data, what?"

"The remaining Cardassians did attempt to kill you. I tried to reach you to shield you from their fire... however in my haste I crushed you, causing critical injuries. I am responsible for your memory loss, for the coma... "

La Forge frowned beneath the VISOR. To him the only thing that mattered now was that they both survived. That the other seemed to matter so much to Data both puzzled and moved him.

"Forget it, Data. You saved my life," he said softly. "What about you? Are you all right? You really don't seem to be yourself, somehow..."

"On the contrary. My condition does not change with the passage of time. I am functioning adequately," explained Data in an all too familiar tone.

La Forge sighed heavily. "Don't pull that android crap with me, Data," he croaked. "I've known you too long and too well. Talk to me, my friend."

"What do you wish to know?" asked Data, undaunted.

La Forge closed his eyes. "I want to know how you're coping. Leading an away team is a big responsibility and leading one that results in fatalities is a nightmare," he explained in a half croak, half whisper, his voice failing after so long without use.

For a moment the android was silent, as if reluctant to address the question as he normally would. Eventually he spoke. "Counselor Troi says that since I claim friendship, with

you for example, I must, by definition, have feelings. That one cannot exist without the other... I cannot confirm or deny this hypothesis."

La Forge stared wordlessly at him, then slowly reached out to take a pale hand in his. Data's eyes moved to watch as Geordi carefully eased open the clenched fist and uncurled the android's fingers.

"You don't have to, my friend," he said softly.

From the Briefing Room of the Enterprise, Thartia station could be seen, suspended in space off the port bow as each peacefully orbited the green methane planet, Thartia VII.

Most of the department heads had filed out after a short but brisk session headed by Riker, prior to shore leave on the station and the maintenance overhaul Geordi La Forge had originally planned for his engines.

Only Riker paused in the doorway as Data, who had stayed, moved closer to the viewport to look out at the station. There was something poignantly familiar about the lone silhouette framed by the stars.

He made his way silently to Data's side and stood with him for several minutes before either spoke.

"How's Geordi?" Riker finally asked.

"He is recovering swiftly. Counselor Troi says that most of his missing memories are retrievable. Dr. Crusher anticipates no ongoing physical problems," recited Data.

"And you?" added Riker softly.

Data seemed to think for a moment before answering. "I have learned a great deal. More perhaps than the Captain intended when he gave command of the away team to me. I am also more confused than ever about the nuances of Human behaviour. For example, since the memorial services, Worf and I have talked on several occasions about Jenna D'Sora and he no longer seems to be angry with me."

"I told you it would pass," replied Riker gently. "You said you learned a lot. What have you learned about yourself, Data?"

For the longest time the android seemed unable to answer the question. He even turned briefly to look again at the scene beyond the viewport, before once again facing Riker.

"I have learned... that I have much to learn," he said cryptically. "About everything."

"That's all?" asked Riker, his tone almost disappointed.

"No," answered Data literally. "I have also learned that there are many questions about myself that I cannot answer, as much as others might want me to. I know that I was injured by the deaths of Jenna D'Sora and the others, and that I could not keep the possibility that Geordi might die from my thoughts when he was in the coma. This would seem not to be consistent with Dr. Soong's intent, which was that I should not be capable of emotional response."

"No, Data. He never meant that, any more than he meant Lore to be the renegade he turned out to be. Dr. Soong never fully realised what he had created in you. When he created the pair of you it was no different from when you created Lal. No one knows how their children will turn out. And when the children are a new species, like the three of you, who's to say what any of you could be capable of being?" said Riker passionately.

"Then perhaps it is possible that one day I will achieve my goal and find my own humanity," mused Data.

Riker's voice grew warm with affection borne of years of friendship. "If it's a question of interaction with others, of responding sensitively to an emotional situation - of caring - then I think you might be a lot closer than you realise, my friend - "

"Commander Riker, report to the bridge," interrupted the ever patient tones of Captain Picard, over the intercom.

"On my way," replied the Commander. Data turned with him, the First Officer clapping a large hand on his shoulder as he had once before, a long time ago. "You've come a long way, Pinocchio," said Riker. He grinned when Data paused to look up at him. "I remember the first time I called you that... As a matter of fact, this will be the last time."

"Sir?"

"You're only Pinocchio as long as we keep thinking of you that way, Data. I haven't since we stood right here after your trial - and you gave me back my self-respect."

"I will, however, keep the memory of the appellation," Data told him. And at Riker's curious look: "It was my first nickname."

Riker smiled again, moved, and wished the android could hear what *he* could in those words.

"Sir - ?"

"Data?" The First Officer roused from his fond reverie.

"I have noted that Captain Picard has an unusually low tolerance for tardiness. If we do not soon return to the bridge - "

"I know, I know," muttered the First Officer good naturedly. "He'll have our butts in a sling."

"Sir - " a perplexed voice began as the briefing room doors hissed open. "Query..."

