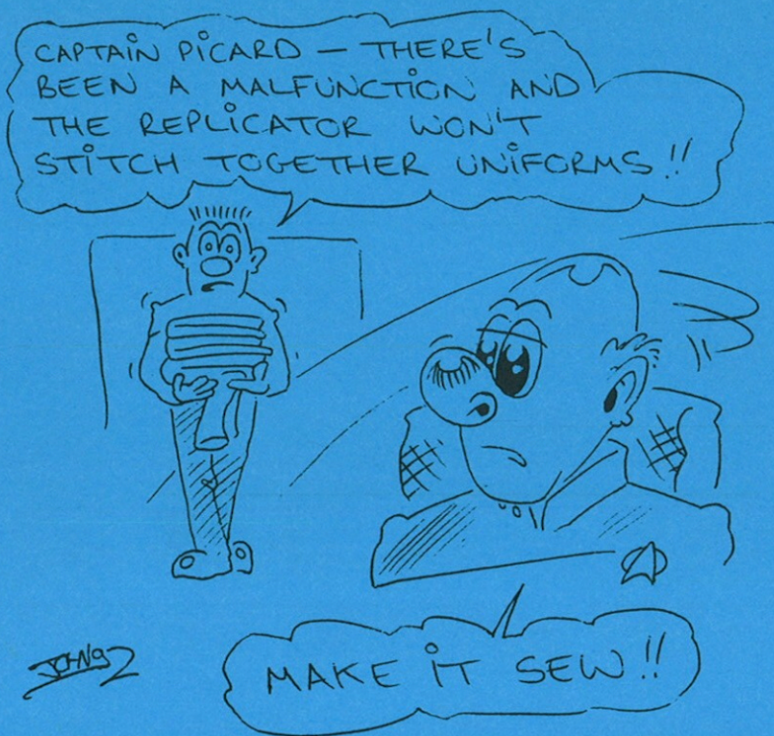


MAKE
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TO BE OR NOT TO BE

by

Martin Stahl

Commander William Riker looked down at the audience. Several couples and two young ladies sat at the small tables. Three men stood at the bar and the barkeeper was giving one of them a blue drink.

The drummer began to beat the time. Riker raised his saxophone to his mouth and began to play. He liked this piece, and now it was time for his solo part. When he finished the audience began to applaud - except for one of the men at the bar. Obviously he hadn't even heard the music. He only had eyes for one of the two women sitting at one of the tables. Although she didn't look bad, there were prettier women. She was not very tall, and had a small mouth. Her black curls were held back by several hair clips.

There was something in her brown eyes that attracted the man. This glitter and sparkling... He had never seen such eyes before. He took his glass and went to the table.

"Hello. I'm Yves Fullen. May I sit down?"

"Surely, Mr Fullen. My name is Andara - Andara Quint."

Neither noticed that the band had finished playing. Riker said loudly, "Exit!" and in the wall of the bar, the door of the holodeck appeared. Riker went to the exit and said, "Come, Mr Fullen. It's time for the briefing."

Yves Fullen jumped. He had totally forgotten the Commander. "Just a moment, please, Mr Riker. Go ahead; I'll follow in a few minutes."

"All right, Lieutenant - but don't be late."

Fullen addressed Andara. "I want to see you again. Where can I meet you?"

"I will wait here for you."

Slowly, Fullen walked out of the holodeck. "Computer. Save program. Access code Yvesandara."

When the door closed behind him, Andara and the whole bar vanished.

"21 Cassiopeia II was explored 95 years ago by the USS Exeter. The crew made first contact with the inhabitants of this planet. They call themselves... Oh, my God, how do I pronounce that?!"

"Xxz'x, Captain," Data answered Captain Picard's question.

"Chz... I'll never learn that! The Federation Council didn't consider this a violation of the Prime Directive, as this culture is so advanced they detected the Exeter even before it entered their solar system. Now the Ch... population of 21 Cassiopeia II wishes a trading relationship

with the Federation. Commander Riker, Counselor Troi, Lt Commander Data and Lt Fullen will beam down to the planet for a preliminary discussion."

"What kind of merchandise do they want from us?" Deanna Troi asked.

"They are very interested in computer technology, which is why Lt Fullen is included. I think that as a computer specialist he is the right man for this assignment. In exchange, the Chz..."

"Xxz'x," Data corrected Picard.

"The Chz... Damn! The Chz-ks offer the natural resources of their second moon."

"That sounds interesting," Riker said.

"The Federation thinks the same, Number One. Therefore, we are here." Picard pushed a button. "This film shows you a little about the culture of the... Cassiopians." That name was easier to pronounce than Xxz'x.

"Andara, you are a wonderful woman. I saw many women before you, but there is something in your eyes I've never seen before."

Andara's fingers stroked his neck. "And you are a wonderful man. I regret I didn't know you earlier - I've had to spend so many years without you. Give me a kiss, please. I want to feel your lips..."

Yves and Andara lay in a bed in one of the most expensive suites of the hotel. A sign on the door of their room said, 'Do not disturb'; two glasses of champagne stood on a little table. The floor was covered with their clothes.

"I love you," Yves Fullen whispered.

"Lt Fullen, report to transporter room one. Lt Fullen, report to transporter room one." Riker's voice sounded from Fullen's communicator.

"Oh... Shit! I've totally forgotten the time!" He pulled on his uniform as he acknowledged the order. "Goodbye, darling. I'll see you as soon as I get back."

He ran out of the holodeck. A moment later a Vulcan came in and saw the naked woman on the bed. "Computer. Cease program. Save it under the current code."

Andara vanished, and with her, the suite. For a moment the Vulcan felt guilt at interrupting someone else's program, but he had to assume that whoever left it running had in fact simply forgotten to terminate it.

"Computer. Show me the Sash-a-Shar Desert of the planet Vulcan." A bright sun appeared; the empty floor was covered with sand and stones. Lt Commander Sarry sat and began to meditate.

The landing party materialised in the foyer of a large building. The Xxz'x expected them

and were waiting. The smallest of the aliens stepped forward. "Welcome to the planet Xxz x. I am X'zz!k; these are Jx' and Z!qj'z."

"I am Commander William Riker of the spaceship Enterprise from the United Federation of Planets. These are Counselor Troi, Lt Commander Data and Lt Fullen. We hope this meeting will be successful for both of us."

"I am sure it will be, X'k. Oh, I am sorry, but your names are difficult for us to pronounce."

"We have the same problem with your names, Ch-ss-k."

"Indeed you have," X'zz!k answered. "If you please, follow us. We will bring you to our government."

X'zz!k led the Enterprise crew to the council chamber where several Xzz'x waited for them. An old woman rose and introduced herself. "I am Kjl'zk. Welcome to our planet, X'k."

X'zz!k introduced the others. "These are X', 'I' and J'."

Fullen could hardly suppress a yawn. He hoped that this meeting would be over soon so that he could get back to the Enterprise and his beloved Andara. He followed the others to a large table and sat; a young Xxz'x served them with juice from the fruit native to the planet. Fullen didn't even notice its taste. He loved Andara as he had never loved any other woman before. She was the first one who deserved to be loved. He could smell her dark hair and see her smile... He imagined marrying this woman and becoming the father of a little daughter - or son - who looked like Andara, and then -

"Lt Fullen!"

He jerked upright. "Yes, sir?"

"Would you *please* begin your report?"

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir." Fullen felt his face beginning to flush. He had totally forgotten his assignment. He pulled a little computer from his case and began his demonstration. It wasn't very convincing, but fortunately Data could expand on what he said and convinced Kjl'zk about the advantages of this computer system. A preliminary contract was made and in the evening the away team beamed back to the Enterprise.

After their materialisation, Riker ordered Lt Fullen to his quarters.

"Mr Fullen. Your behaviour on the planet was impossible. You were absent-minded for the whole time. Your performance was terrible, and it was only thanks to Mr Data that Kij... that the woman in charge accepted our offer. Even Counselor Troi could have told them more about this computer system. Where was your mind?"

"With Andara, sir."

"With who?"

"Andara. Don't you remember her, sir? The girl in the bar when you played with the jazz band."

"You mean... the holodeck program?"

"Yes. Isn't she wonderful?"

"Do you mean to say you fell in love with a holodeck projection?"

"Andara is more than that, Mr Riker. She is the woman I've been looking for all my life..."

Riker couldn't believe it. Yves Fullen was in love with a materialised computer program, to the point of not being able to concentrate on his work. He regretted that he had chosen that program when he took Fullen with him to the holodeck to let him hear the trombone solo. Had Fullen even heard it?

"Mr Fullen. Listen to me. Andara is a computer projection. This woman is not real. She does not exist! You can't love her - she will never love you."

"That's not true, Mr Riker. She does love me."

"She cannot! She can't love you any more than the... the transporter can love you! You will erase this program. That's an order, Lieutenant. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir. I understand."

The pegasan looa-tails were delicious. Yves ate the last one and gave Andara a kiss. "I never expected to fall in love with such a good cook."

Andara smiled - the smile Yves loved so much. "I'm glad you love not only my body but also my qualities as a cook."

"I also love your soul. I love *you*."

"What is love for you?"

"You are more important to me than any other person. I do not want to live without you any longer. I hate each minute I am without you. What can be better than to be in our own little house, you and I?"

"What if we add some children?"

"I'm not sure if I can be a good father... but a child would be proof of our love. Not even Commander Riker could be against our love any longer then."

"Against what, Lieutenant?"

Deanna Troi stood in front of the holodeck door.

"Counselor Troi! What are you doing here?"

"I felt you have a problem, and Commander Riker acknowledged my feeling. Perhaps I can help you. When I couldn't find you on the ship, Commander Riker advised me to try the holodeck. I think you know the regulation that no member of this crew is allowed to leave his

communicator behind. Why are you hiding yourself?"

"I just want to be alone."

"You are not alone. I see this woman with you."

"I want to be alone with her. This is my fiancée."

"Your what?"

"We intend to marry."

Deanna was obviously shocked. "Mr Fullen, this woman is a product of the ship's computer. How can you marry a machine?"

"Andara is more than that, and I love her. That is the only thing that counts."

Deanna felt that Fullen meant what he said. She knew she couldn't help him. "All right, Mr Fullen. I will leave you now, but you should be aware that I must inform the Captain about your behaviour."

"If the Captain ever loved a woman he will understand me. If you want, punish me, but I will never leave Andara."

Deanna sighed and left the holodeck.

She reported her fruitless conversation with Fullen to the Captain and Commander Riker. Riker shook his head. "He almost ruined our negotiations on the Cassiopeian planet because of that. After that incident I ordered him to erase the program. He has disobeyed my order."

"Will, have I to remind you about the time on Betazed when you disobeyed an order to meet me, too? The disobedience is just a symptom, Captain. I feel Mr Fullen is mentally ill. Although he must know that Andara is not a real person he will not admit it. In the world he is living in at the moment, Andara is alive. We can only help him if we enter that world and force him back into this one."

"How can we do that?"

"Andara must die, Will. If he sees her dying he will accept that he has lost her. It will be very hard on him, but it's the only way to bring him out of his own world. I see no other alternative."

"Counselor, I think you are right. Number One, order Lt La Forge to enter Mr Fullen's program and alter it to let Andara die. How should she die?"

"As quickly as possible. It would be unfair to Mr Fullen if she dies a long, slow death."

"A phaser?"

"No. Nothing that disintegrates her body. We must give him the opportunity to take leave of her. He must see her corpse, or he won't be able to accept her death. The best way is some kind of accident."

"That will be hard on him, Counselor. Why don't we just program the computer to make Andara leave him?"

"Then he will never stop hoping he will get her back. He'll never be able to love any other woman because that might make him miss an opportunity to get Andara back. No, Captain, we must make him understand that Andara is lost forever, that he can never get her back."

"You heard that, Number One? Prepare everything with Mr La Forge."

"Aye, sir." Riker nodded and left the room.

"Captain," Deanna continued, "we should also inform Dr Crusher. Lt Fullen may need medical help after the 'accident'. He could be in dangerous shock."

It was such a lovely morning. When Yves woke he looked out of the window and saw the sun rising. He woke Andara with a kiss. "Good morning, my dear. Stay in bed. I will make coffee."

"Thank you, Yves. That's nice. I love coffee in the morning."

Yves got up, and was just leaving the room when an explosion rocked it. Stones fell onto the bed and buried Andara. The dust made it difficult to see anything. Yves ran back to the bed and frantically removed the stones from where Andara was lying.

Her face was covered with dust and blood, her brown eyes open wide; but there was no glittering, no sparkling in them. Yves shook her. "Darling! Please wake up! Say something... anything...!"

When Andara still didn't react he cried, "Exit!" and the door of the holodeck opened. He rushed out into the corridor; Picard, Deanna Troi and Dr Crusher stood there, apparently talking. When Yves saw the Doctor he cried, "Dr Crusher! Please - come at once! There was an explosion on the holodeck. Andara... she's seriously injured. You must help her!" He took Beverly's arm and pulled her into the holodeck. "Take care of Andara!"

Dr Crusher took her tricorder and 'examined' Andara. "I'm sorry, Lt Fullen. She's dead. I can't help her; it's already too late. Her internal injuries were too severe."

Yves Fullen looked down at the corpse of the computer-generated woman he loved, and began to cry.

Captain's Log, Stardate 43285.4. Counselor Troi's plan worked very well. Lt Fullen has accepted the death of the holographic image of Andara Quint. He has not entered the holodeck since that incident, and Counselor Troi is sure that his psychological condition is stable again. If not, we would be forced to send him to a psychiatric rehabilitation centre.

"He's still ill, Captain, but I think I can help him return to normal," Deanna Troi said.

"When Andara died, I felt the first moment of shock, then grief, but slowly he is coming to accept her death. I hope that now I can make him understand clearly that she was just a product of the holodeck."

"How long will he grieve, Counselor?"

"I don't know. At least as long as he still considers her real. But in the last day or two I felt him begin to accept her death. That's the start of healing."

The intercom interrupted her. "Lt Fullen to Captain Picard."

"Picard here. What can I do for you, Lieutenant?"

"Captain, I want to show you something. Could you please come down to holodeck 2?"

"I'm on my way. Number One, you have the con."

When Captain Picard walked down the corridor he saw Lt Fullen standing in the entrance of the holodeck, holding the hand of a little boy who was standing in the holodeck.

"Captain Picard - this is Albert, Andara's and my son. Albert, say 'hello' to the Captain."



SOUND OF SOULS

It is roaring within me...
 Across limitless, bejewelled velvet named
 A void. Oceans deeper, clearer than all time.
 Dark seas, no mystery, of lives, and lives
 Which are not, but could be.
 Threaded, space flows round and
 Through me; I hear the call
 Of silence, the sound of souls, of change...
 A pebble drops, it echoes, breaks
 The still, and ripples outward,
 Whispering... touching... beating
 A path to me, and I know
 Things should be so...
 No barriers for me are there:
 I breach them all - they fall
 As Satan before *my* listening.



Gaile Wood



THE GARDEN OF ...EDEN

by

Sally Woods

"Captain's log, Stardate 41590.7. Whilst on a diplomatic mission to the planet Vellarus, in the Petra Minor star system, the Enterprise has received an emergency distress signal from a neighbouring planet Karris 4. Because of the delicate situation with Vellarus, I have decided to continue to Vellarus with a small party while Commander Riker takes the Enterprise to Karris 4. Negotiations should take no longer than three days and so I have arranged to rendezvous with the Enterprise three days from now at preset co-ordinates."

As the Enterprise left for Karris 4, Captain Picard settled into his seat in the small shuttlecraft. It would be four hours before Vellarus would be within sight; getting comfortable now was important to him, for he had to be fresh for the talks with the leaders of Vellarus - when word had reached Starfleet that they wanted to talk to the Federation, and that they were offering the chance for a Federation outpost to be established. Admiral Anderson had personally asked Picard to handle the talks. At first he was very suspicious of the Vellarians' motives - a war with a neighbouring planet had seen their civilisation almost destroyed. *Their offer could have strings*, he had told himself. *It could be that they would want the Enterprise to use her considerable force on their enemies.* At least their arrival in the shuttle would give him time to make up his own mind.

Counselor Deanna Troi had been personally invited along by the Captain - her empathic powers would give him a slight insight into the Vellarians' true motives - along with Lt Yar and a security team of three. Dr Crusher made up the party - her inclusion had surprised her; a diplomatic mission without a request for medical help wouldn't normally warrant the presence of the Chief Medical Officer, but as Picard had told her when he summoned her to the Bridge, it was about time she saw something other than the inside of a Starship Sickbay. Personally she was glad Jean-Luc had invited her along - this would be the first time they had been together since the Aldeans had attempted to buy some of the children from the Enterprise's family contingent - but since the shuttle had left the shuttle bay, the Captain for some unknown reason had remained silent.

The culture of Vellarus was as basic as you could get - in Federation terms it was classed as an underdeveloped world - but it would be excellent for a Federation outpost. The planet's Council had invited Starfleet to send along Captain Picard to offer Vellarus help; in return they would allow an outpost to be established on their world. But not all Vellarians were welcoming the arrival of the Federation; the Riva System had for many years been at war with the Vellarians - great mineral wealth was buried under the soil of Vellarus, minerals that the people of Riva wanted. When they failed to negotiate, the raids on Vellarian ships taking their only source of wealth to the Etta star system began. Several died as Riva took the minerals from the weaker Vellarians. Now, with Starfleet's help, that problem would at last be eradicated.

The three Vellarian Councillors sat round the large oval table; Dak, a man of fifty, was overall Chairman. Indeed, he had been the Council's Chairman since his thirtieth birthday, when his father passed on the seal of the Council to him. He was the one who had invited Picard here after hearing about the exploits of the Captain from travellers. To Dak's left sat a man whose concern for the safety of Vellarus didn't include inviting strangers along to inhabit their planet; finally there was Colius, a man whose greying hair and close set eyes did not betray his true feelings - a man whose pockets bulged with the credits of Riva Traders and who wanted to see this alliance destroyed.

As Tasha and her Security people patrolled the corridors outside, Picard and Troi sat opposite the three men, listening as Dak offered their only olive branch.

"Captain Picard, this planet could have several useful qualities for your Federation, and in return we would be guaranteed full protection against the constant attacks."

"That is all very well, Councillor Dak, but the Federation needs more guarantees that a Federation-run outpost would be welcomed and that you are not just after our help."

Shifting nervously in his seat, Councillor Dak looked first to his two colleagues, then returned his gaze to Picard; but it was Colius who spoke. "Captain Picard, this is outrageous. Vellarus asked you for help; now you are demanding we accept conditions."

Troi spoke. "Councillor, it was you we came here to help. The outpost was your idea. We are only here to open negotiations. A Starfleet commission will follow us with the contract after we're finished."

As Councillor Dak talked it was clear to both of them that he was embarrassed by Colius' remarks. "Please forgive my colleague, Captain. We have lived so long under the fear of attack that we are all suffering from tremendous pressure in ensuring this alliance is sealed. We should not bicker amongst ourselves," he said, glaring at Colius, who didn't seem to care about insulting their new friends.

"Agreed," Picard said gruffly.

As Chief of Security on the Enterprise, Lt Tasha Yar had been duty bound to accompany the Captain to Vellarus with a hand picked Security team. She had left the Enterprise in the capable hands of Lt Worf, a Klingon who, she knew, would protect the Enterprise from any problem that arose during her absence.

Selecting a team from the large Security contingent was not easy, but with Demotta, Galloway and Hudson she had three of her more experienced personnel. All had served aboard Starships since their graduation twelve years earlier.

None resented the fact that they served under a woman - one, moreover, whose origins were buried deep under a planet of anarchy; she had graduated top of her class and that was all that mattered.

As Tasha walked along the corridor from the Council chambers she found Dr Crusher, who seemed to be at a loss, wandering towards her.

"Dr Crusher, have you seen the Twin Moons of the planet?" Tasha said referring to the two moons that shone down on the planet, their shadows made even more delightful by the

brilliance of the system's sun.

"Yes, Tasha, and I've also seen the atrocious conditions these people live under. It's barbaric to think that they should have to bring up children in a world like this!" With that off her chest, Crusher's more familiar nature seemed to return to her. "How long will the Captain and Deanna be?"

"I would say about another hour, Doctor. This kind of talk can go on for hours."

As Tasha escorted the Doctor along the corridor towards the quarters they had been assigned, Crusher's thoughts turned again to the plight of the Vellarians. "I don't understand why the people of Riva would want to attack such a desolate planet as this. There's nothing here to take."

"But there is, Doctor. Vellarus is strategically placed, and rich in minerals, while Riva is a struggling colony - they're fighting to survive as well, Doctor. Vellarus' minerals are also *their* only source of power and since the Vellarians only have enough for their own needs, the Rivas have no choice but to try and take what they need to survive."

"You admire them?"

"I admire no one, Doctor. Vellarus came to Starfleet first; it could have been Riva who asked for help, but it wasn't."

"But the Prime Directive?"

"We are only giving them a Federation outpost, we are not interfering in the two worlds' war. The outpost is for our benefit, so it doesn't break the Prime Directive."

Tasha knew the Prime Directive wasn't being broken by the new outpost; Starfleet had considered all of this when the Vellarians had sent their message, and they had made it very clear that there would be no help from Starfleet. Captain Picard would be the one to enforce this, and if the Vellarians agreed, then a commission would follow to begin the long construction process.

With the outline of Starfleet's proposal delivered, the three Councillors had requested a minute to discuss Picard's words. As they sat together Picard and Troi moved to the other side of the room.

"I'd like to hear your opinion, Counselor?"

"It's gone very well. I sense good strong emotions," Troi said as she focused on the three Vellarians.

The three Councillors waved the two over, retaking their seats. Councillor Dak spoke, his voice strong and certain. "Very well, Captain, your words have been heard and accepted. your people are welcome to come along to our home and begin their work without any strings attached.

"But Captain... the vote was not all in favour of your Federation. Some of us are suspicious of your true motives - but others who invited you here want this union."

"Thank you, Councillor Dax," Picard said, rising to his feet

"We shall inform our people, and expect to hear from them very soon."

As he shut the door behind them his worried expression concerned Troi. "Something bothering you, sir?"

"I do not think Councillor Colius shared the others' enthusiasm. What did you feel from him?"

"Very mixed emotions. At times I felt he was trying to shield his true feelings from me."

"Why would he do that, Counselor?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Captain?" Tasha's voice broke into their conversation.

"Lt Yar, get our people together. We're about to leave."

"Yes, sir."

Tasha signalled to the three Security guards to join them; together they would find Dr Crusher and return to the shuttlecraft. There were only five hours before their rendezvous with the Enterprise.

Colius, angry with the decision, returned to his chambers for a prearranged meeting with two of his loyal men, Garth and Keel. Both men, although Vellarians by birth, served the Riva, and like Colius they did not want a Federation outpost on Vellarus.

"The fools accepted Picard's words, so it seems we have no choice now but to ensure Picard never reaches his ship." From a small side drawer Colius removed a small explosive device, no bigger than a phaser, which he handed to Garth.

"Vellarus must not be allowed to be the home of a Federation outpost. This will make sure the fools are made to look responsible for Picard's and his friends' deaths."

Doctor Crusher pulled the door behind her and followed the others towards the shuttlecraft's landing pad, walking alongside Troi. Crusher noticed Deanna's deep thoughts appeared to be troubling her.

"Deanna, is something wrong?"

Realising her concern was worrying Crusher, Deanna smiled at her friend. "I'm sorry, Beverly, it has been a long three days. It will be good to be back on board."

"Any word from the Enterprise?"

"No, Doctor, they are still out of communication range. This system's magnetic field affects communications; until we've left the system we shall not be able to make contact."

As they boarded the shuttle, Picard was very concerned that none of their hosts had appeared to see them off. "Very strange," he told Tasha as she settled into the pilot's seat of the shuttle. Demotta took his seat beside her and closed the automatic hatch.

The shuttle rose gently and steadily away from the planet's surface, pulling away from the world's gravitational pull, and made orbit. Picard, realising that he had virtually ignored the Doctor during their visit, unbuckled the harness that secured him to the seat for take-off and moved to sit beside her.

"You're very quiet, Doctor."

"I was just thinking about those poor people we have just left and how simple all of this would be if the two planets could get together and resolve their differences instead of fighting all of the time."

"For years the two have been fighting - neither side is willing to talk peace with the other. A Federation outpost could help them talk," Crusher smiled.

"Something else bothering you, Doctor?"

Crusher was about to speak, her small curved lips pulled together as she thought about what she was about to say. "Captain, there is..."

A sudden lurch of the shuttle distracted Picard's attention.

"Lieutenant?"

"Sir, we have a sudden loss of power in the right booster."

"Cut to emergency power," he barked.

But as Tasha threw the switch that should have cut in the back-up system, it detonated the small device attached to it.

The force of the explosion propelled the shuttle craft off course sending it spinning and falling heavily. As Tasha fought with the controls, Picard pulled himself up from where he had been thrown. "Can you stabilise, Lieutenant?"

"I'm trying, Captain, controls won't respond."

Picard spun round, his gaze seeking out Troi and then the Doctor, who was bending over Galloway. Steadily he edged back past Hudson, who was attempting to extinguish a small fire in a side console, and knelt down beside Crusher who was trying to revive Galloway.

"Doctor, how is he?"

"It's bad. Galloway struck his head as he fell. There's internal bleeding, and if I can't release the pressure, he'll die."

Troi sat down beside them; she was shaken and bruised but otherwise unhurt.

"Counselor, are you all right?"

"Yes, Captain. What happened?" she asked.

"I'm not sure. An explosion. Doctor, can you handle this?"

"I'll be fine," she said using the tricorder to scan Galloway's vital signs. "But we have to get back to the Enterprise quickly, or this man will die."

It was a feeling he too shared; rising, he moved back to rejoin Tasha and Demotta. Both were struggling to stop the shuttle going further off course. Gradually the shuttle stopped and remained stationary.

"Situation report, Lieutenant?"

"The controls have been seriously damaged by the explosion - the navigation console is totally wrecked. We are on reserve power, which will not last long. I am going to have to land on one of the two moons."

"Worst case scenario?" Picard said to no one in particular.

"Yes, sir."

Troi moved up. "Captain, we have to get down. Beverly can't do anything up here, but Galloway has a chance if we land."

"Lieutenant, choose one of the moons and get us down," he said.

"Everyone get strapped in."

Strapping himself in, he looked back to see the Counselor and Hudson strapped in; Dr Crusher, secure in her seat, held on to the limp form of Galloway.

"Engage stabilisers," Tasha instructed Demotta.

"Engaged, Lieutenant."

"I'm switching to manual override."

There was another sudden jolt as Tasha took the shuttle from its preset control, but it wasn't going to be an easy descent; the shuttle was losing power fast and the gravitational pull of the moon was affecting her controls.

"Brace yourselves, we're going down hard!" she shouted as the shuttle jerked violently against the trees that had suddenly appeared.

With a tremendous crack the shuttle hit the tree-tops and plummeted to the ground. There was, for a few moments, no movement from within the shuttle, just the sound of burning wires and a slight hissing sound that filled the shuttle with smoke.

Picard was first to regain his senses. Releasing the restraining straps he stumbled forward to where Tasha lay, her slender body slumped across the burnt console. He lifted her from there and gently eased her back into the cushioned seat. "Tasha, Tasha, can you hear me?"

The voice seemed to be drifting in from a distance. She tried to wake herself to the familiar voice; all she wanted to do was sleep, but the pain in her shoulder seemed to be bringing her round. Her eyes then focused on the Captain whose concerned face suddenly

beamed at her as she opened her eyes.

"Lieutenant, are you all right?"

Rubbing her tender shoulder, Tasha answered him. "As far as I know, Captain. What happened?"

"You got us down in one piece."

From behind, the movement of the others made Picard turn as first Crusher then Hudson stood, both looking as if they had been through an asteroid storm and somehow survived to emerge through the other side.

"Counselor?" Picard said as he saw her bending over the form of Galloway.

"Galloway's dead, sir," she said somewhat sternly. Crusher confirmed the Counselor's remark.

"Hudson, atmosphere report."

Running a check through the console, Hudson turned to Picard with at least one good piece of news. "Class M, sir, able to support Human life."

"Good. Hudson, Demotta, I want a full perimeter check."

"Aye, sir," Demotta said.

As the hatch slid back Picard returned to Tasha, who was trying to get some life out of the console. "Lieutenant, the emergency distress frequency. Can it be used?"

Tasha shook her head. "All systems are burned out, sir, irreparable," she said, her voice disheartened.

"Everybody out of the shuttle now," Picard said as the smoke started to get thicker and made his breathing uneasy.

"Lieutenant."

Tasha lifted herself from the seat and waited until last before leaving. The sun that had shone across the planet of Vellarus was now sinking slowly as the night began to set in. The area around them was pure forest; the shuttle's fall had been broken by the trees that now lay on the ground of gravel and dust. At least there would be cover from the cold.

As Troi came across to Picard, she noticed that his left hand had been badly burnt in the crash. "Captain, your hand!" she exclaimed.

"It's nothing, Counselor, I hadn't noticed," he said, trying to cover the obvious pain he was beginning to feel.

Demotta and Hudson returned from their check of the area. "Report, gentlemen?"

"The area seems secure enough, Captain. We seem to have landed in a valley. There is a mountain range to the left of us, sir, but no sign of life."

"Thank you. Mr Demotta, help Lt Yar make us a lean-to for the night. I don't want to risk sleeping in the shuttle."

"Any idea of where we are, Captain?" Troi asked hopeful for an answer.

"The explosion has obviously blown us off course. I'm afraid no one will begin to look for us in this sector. When we fail to show up Commander Riker will proceed with a search. We're going to have to try and survive as long as possible."

"But a search could take weeks?"

"Yes, Counselor, it could well take that long."

Crusher, who had been listening, came across. Spotting his hand she reached into the small pouch she carried, and using the small scanner, she held it across his burnt hand. "We're in trouble, aren't we?"

"A strange planet, uncharted, a crew with injuries, supplies for three days at the most..."

Tasha came up. "Sir, I suggest we post guard tonight."

"Very good, Lieutenant, I suggest we each take a turn." As Tasha walked away to arrange the first shift with Demotta and Hudson, Crusher shivered.

"Cold, Doctor?"

"I didn't pack anything for the trip," she said, trying to make a joke out of their plight.

Picard smiled reassuringly. "Let's try to get a fire going."

As the night drew in the lean-to was completed, made from broken trees and strapped together with odd pieces of rope and vine. Blankets from the shuttle made for little comfort as the weary group settled in for the night. Only Tasha failed to sleep; taking first watch she had an uneasy feeling that someone was watching them from a distance - perhaps it was her imagination, but as a Security Officer she had not often been wrong.

On board the Enterprise, Data and Commander Riker both stared almost longingly at the blank screen. They were on time, but the shuttle was not; Riker shifted nervously on the Bridge as Data checked the readouts.

"You're sure this is the right sector, Data?"

"Yes, sir, the Captain and I confirmed it before he left. This is where they should be."

"But they're not there," Geordi said, stating the obvious.

"I find that hard to understand." Riker walked across to stand by Geordi. "How long are they overdue?"

"Three hours, forty seconds Sir."

"And there has been no transmission?"

"Nothing on any frequency, sir" Data said.

Riker suddenly straightened. "Mr La Forge, set co-ordinates for Vellarus. They must still be there."

"Aye, sir." Geordi tapped in the co-ordinates. "Locked in, sir."

"Engage."

The Enterprise would take a day to reach Vellarus, but it would be much longer before the real truth emerged. Riker was worried - with the Captain and half the Bridge staff missing, this could turn into a serious problem.

The next morning Tasha and Hudson checked out the area around the camp. Following a trail through the trees they found it led them into a much larger opening and to a water pool, a sight they found most pleasing as their own water supply was running low. The bank led down to the edge of the water; plants and fallen tree trunks littered the side as Hudson tested the water out with his tricorder. "It's good," he exclaimed, before lapping up a handful of refreshing water.

Whatever it was in the pot, it looked disgusting to Troi as she stirred it. *Eating it will be even harder*, she thought.

Picard sat by the lean-to, his thoughts with the scouting party, when his combadge suddenly beeped.

"Picard."

"Lt Yar, sir. We have discovered a fresh water supply and enough small roots that are edible."

"Excellent, Lieutenant. Return to camp when you have enough."

Picard, pleased with their discovery, sprang to his feet and joined Troi at the fire, rubbing his hands as he smelled the cooking. "That smells..." Realising that it didn't smell as pleasing as he had first hoped, he continued "...different," before walking off to find Dr Crusher. He found her in the shuttle collecting together the items from the medical kit that was stored on board. Galloway's body lay where it had fallen, covered by a blanket. "We should bury him, Captain."

Picard nodded. "How are you?"

"I'm fine. A little scared, but surviving."

Now he was alone with her at last, he didn't really know what to say to her. All the times before on the Enterprise he had thought of many things he wanted to discuss with her, but then there was always someone around; now there was not and he was at a loss for words.

"Something you wanted, Captain?"

"No, Doctor. I just came to see if you were all right."

Sensing how uncomfortable the Captain found the situation, Crusher smiled as she passed him. "I'm glad you're here, Captain."

Picard laughed as he realised how it must have looked to her. He would never understand women.

At the water's edge, Hudson picked the roots that would make the evening's meal. He remembered, on Security training exercises, the instructor telling him that the roots were sometimes the only source of food to be found. This particular root seemed to be attached to something much stronger; pulling, he found even his strength could not budge it. Reaching inside the trunk of the tree where the root began, he suddenly felt a slight sting on his hand, and pulled it sharply out. "Ouch!" he said, alerting Tasha who came across just as Hudson began to writhe in agony on the ground, the hand turning purple at the source of the bite.

"Lt Yar to Dr Crusher, medical emergency! Hudson's been stung by something. He's in pretty bad shape. I need you now!" she almost shouted.

Crusher and Picard appeared at the top of the bank and carefully edged down to where Tasha and Hudson were. By now Hudson had slipped into unconsciousness and the hand had blown up like a peach.

"What happened, Tasha?" Crusher asked her.

"I don't know. Something in the tree trunk bit him."

Running the tricorder over him, Crusher realised that Hudson had been poisoned and that his vital signs were slowly disappearing.

"Doctor?"

"I'm sorry, Captain, without Sickbay facilities there's nothing I can do for him."

Feeling helpless as the life slipped away from Hudson, Picard stood, enraged by his own failure to protect his crewman, and angry at the planet's sudden hostility.

Tasha, who had moved away from Hudson as the Doctor tried in vain to revive him, suddenly noticed the footprint marked out in the mud-bank by the water's edge. From examination she could see it was a bare footprint, its size only half theirs. Picard, who saw his Security Chief bending down, crouched by her side.

"Lieutenant?"

"Looks as if we might have company."

"Any idea who?"

"Orion, Ferengi, could be a number of other possibilities. I think it would be wise to return to the shuttle and stay together - we're vulnerable out in the open like this."

"Agreed, Lieutenant," Picard replied. "What else does this planet have for us?" he muttered to no one in particular.

Tasha stood by the newly dug graves - she had picked Galloway and Hudson for this mission, and somehow she felt responsible for their deaths. She knew that it was her duty to report to their families - usually Captain Picard would inform the relatives, but she knew Galloway's wife well from her early days aboard the training ship *Starbound*, and Hudson, although not married, had a family back at Starbase 73.

She would see to this painful duty as soon as she got off this planet.

Her sharp reflexes made her aware of the soft footsteps behind - spinning with the phaser down, she was confronted by a familiar face.

"Deanna."

"I couldn't sleep," she told her friend.

Since the beginning of their assignment, Tasha and the Counselor had become close friends, both seeming to know when the other was troubled - because of her special empathic abilities, it was often Troi who could sense Tasha's concerns, but tonight it was Tasha who saw the worry etched across the Counselor's face.

"Something troubling you, Deanna?"

"This planet. I get the feeling that we might not be the only people here. I felt a strange, almost foreboding, presence earlier, by the water."

As Tasha fiddled almost nervously with the phaser, unsure of what to tell her friend, her uneasy reaction alerted Troi.

"Tasha, there *are* people on this planet - you have seen them?"

"No, Deanna, I haven't seen anyone, but I found footprints by the water. It could mean Orions - and they would love to get their hands on us - or it might not be anything to worry about."

A loud explosion rocked the camp's perimeter, seeming to shake the foundations of the planet, and it knocked both women to the ground. Picard, who had been sleeping, appeared from the lean-to, Crusher and Demotta not far behind. Crusher almost stumbled as she pulled her blue jacket on - she stood by Picard, who helped Troi to her feet.

"What was that?"

A high wall of flame rose from the centre of the surrounding trees, crackling and emitting unbearable heat, as ash and burning branches scattered around the camp.

"Lieutenant, with me!" Picard yelled as he ran off in the direction of the fire.

The water pool reflected the fire as it sparked in the night - from the top of the bank it was obvious that someone had deliberately set the fire, its neatness and the apparent lack of reason for the sudden explosion clear to them.

For a few moments they all stood puzzled - till...

"The camp!" Tasha suddenly yelled, realising their mistake. Her feet barely touched the ground as she raced back to the camp, with Picard's concerned voice ringing in her ears.

"Lieutenant!"

The camp looked untouched, but as she moved around she knew that all was not right; in the lean-to the blankets had been thrown from the makeshift beds, salvaged equipment overturned - it all indicated that someone had been here, the explosion had been a diversion - but by who?

Suddenly, as Tasha turned a heavy rod struck her across the face - the force knocked her backwards. As voices were heard in the distance, blackness suddenly overcame her...

Crusher wiped the blood from her Tasha's lip, carefully avoiding the bruises that would soon mark her face.

"How is she, Doctor?"

"Slight concussion, not seriously hurt," Crusher said with relief in her voice.

"I should have known, Captain," Tasha said through her tender mouth.

"They know we're here now," Troi said, making everyone uneasy. Who were *they*?

"How bad is it?" Picard asked Demotta as he re-entered the lean-to.

"Food, a few medical supplies and all our weapons, except for those we had on us."

"It was a good ploy to draw us out," Picard remarked. "Lieutenant, think you're well enough to assist in a little scouting mission to the other side of the valley?"

Tasha stood, a little shaky. "Yes, sir." There was no way she was going to let the Captain go alone.

"Stay in the shuttle, it will give you protection; and whatever you do don't leave the campsite, understand?"

"Understood, Captain," Troi said.

The Captain and the others had been gone for over three hours. Troi, who had returned to her pot, sat wearily by the small fire, when her eye caught sight of a small shape in the bushes. Knowing Beverly was asleep in the shuttle, Troi left the pot and walked into the bushes. She was sure the figure she had seen was a small child - he had headed off towards the water pool.

But the ground was wet and slippery, and Troi didn't notice how the mud was crumbling underfoot; then without warning the bank gave way and she slid down, coming to rest at the foot, striking her head as she fell.

She lay unconscious as a figure wandered slowly around her, its metal rod prodding into her limp body.

"One moment she was here, then she was gone. I called out for her but I dared not leave until you came back," Crusher told Picard.

Where did she go, alone, Picard thought. It wasn't like the Counselor to go off without a word to anyone else, especially when he had instructed her to remain in the shuttle.

It was Tasha who found the first evidence that the Counselor had been along the path towards the water pool. As they stood looking down, a small area where the bank had crumbled and something heavy had fallen gave them proof that Troi had indeed slipped and fallen into the area around the pool. A broken bush with traces of blood confirmed it.

But then where was she?

"Captain," Demotta said, gesturing to the sudden appearance of two hooded figures who stood by the water pool, their steel rods pointing menacingly at the group. Tasha moved her phaser to waist height but almost immediately Picard waved it down.

"Wait," he said as a small silver object was flung at his feet. Bending, he took the small combadge into this palm. It was Troi's.

"Where did you get this?" he asked the strangely garbed figures. "We mean you no harm, we were looking for a woman. This belongs to her - do you know where she is?"

The taller robed figure walked forward, his rod pointed aimlessly at Picard's face.

"Careful, Captain," Tasha said.

"It's all right, Tasha, stay where you are," Picard said as the figure moved around him, eyeing him inquisitively, then he waved Picard on. As Crusher moved to join the Captain the smaller of the two figures reached out and snatched the Doctor's medical pouch from her hand. Instinctively she moved to take it back from him, but Picard's hand gripped hers.

"No, Doctor, let him have it for now."

The shimmering lights turned slowly into the forms that were Commander Riker and Data transporting down to the planet Vellarus. Their call to Councillor Dak had surprised him, but he was glad to greet the senior Bridge officers.

Dak stepped forward. "Commander Riker."

His outstretched hand was met by Riker's strong grip. "Thank you for agreeing to meet us at such short notice. This is Lieutenant Commander Data."

"Lieutenant Commander," Dak said.

"Sir, we are a little concerned about the welfare of our Captain and his party. They are not still here by any chance?"

"No, Commander. Captain Picard and the others left as arranged after the discussion was completed. Is something wrong?"

"Yes, sir, the Captain failed to rendezvous with our ship at the preset co-ordinates. We find that very strange," Data said.

"I hope nothing has happened, Commander?"

"So do we, sir. Did everything go as planned?"

"Yes. Everything went perfectly, the vote was by a two to one majority. I hope this will not affect the commission."

"A two to one majority? You were not all in agreement?" Riker asked as they walked slowly into the council chambers.

"Councillor Colius did not want this agreement, but then Colius does not like change."

"Where is Councillor Colius?"

"In his chambers," Dak said puzzled at Data's sudden interest.

Councillor Colius' chambers were on the opposite side of the courtyard; as Data and Riker walked across, Riker asked why Data had sought to seek out Colius.

"A thought, sir. Why would the Councillor attempt to stop the alliance? It was to be a very profitable commission. Why would he want to stop it... unless..."

Riker got what Data was thinking.

"...Unless Colius had another reason for stopping the commission. The Rivas are well known for their ability to buy anyone if the price is right, so sabotaging the Captain's shuttle would ensure no alliance would be agreed."

They entered the chambers where Colius sat at his desk. "What is the meaning of this?"

"I'm Commander Riker, First Officer of the Enterprise. We want to ask you about Captain Picard."

"I don't understand," Colius said rising.

"You voted against the outpost, did you not, sir?" Data asked.

"The Federation will bring their rules to Vellarus and ruin our world."

"It would also help destroy any hope Riva would have in gaining control of the minerals this planet has to offer."

"What's that supposed to mean, Commander?"

"The shuttle was sabotaged by somebody. Why not you? You are being paid by the Rivas," Data told him. Riker glanced at him, wondering what grounds Data had for making such an accusation, when Colius condemned himself by his own actions.

He reached into his desk and gripped the blaster, but Data, who had sensed Colius' guilt would react this way, slammed the drawer shut, catching his hand in a painful grip. "What did you do?"

"A small explosion a couple of hours into the trip. It would throw the shuttle off course, but they could land..."

Leaving Colius to the Vellarians' justice, Riker and Data materialised on the transporter pad. Lt Worf appeared.

"Any news of the Captain?" he asked.

"Later, Mr Worf. Data, instruct Geordi to break orbit. We have to find out where the Captain and the others would have been at the time of the explosion."

"Yes, sir, that is possible to determine."

"Go to it, Mr Data."

"Go to it?" Data said, puzzled, as he left the transporter room.

"The Captain, sir?" Worf asked again.

"Let's hope they are all still alive, Mr Worf. I want a check run on all habitable worlds within this sector and a full Security team ready to beam down."

"Yes, sir," Worf said, walking off.

The two figures led them towards the rocks a few miles from the water pool. Neither spoke as they revealed a small opening in the rock face, obscured by carefully placed branches and leaves. The two brought Picard and the others into a large cave lit by bare flame torches. The path led downwards into a much bigger opening. Here Picard could see Troi, safe and apparently unhurt. She sat by a man who appeared to be confined to a makeshift bed. A small child sat close to the fire where some kind of meal was being prepared. The man waved them down.

"Captain Picard, please join us. Don't be afraid, we mean you no harm," he said in a strong voice.

Picard indicated that the others should follow. As he descended to Troi's side she felt his hand grip her arm in reassurance.

"Counselor, are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Captain," she said with no sign of nervousness.

"I'm Captain Picard of the Enterprise. These are my officers, Chief Medical Officer Beverly Crusher, Chief of Security Natasha Yar and Mr Demotta; and you are, sir?"

"Kyle Travis." He stretched his hand out in greeting, and Picard shook it.

"How did you get here, Mr Travis?" Crusher asked as she noticed the badly bandaged legs that lay across the bed covers. Whoever had done them hadn't done such a good job. The bandages looked as if they needed changing badly.

"Kyle, please, Doctor. Our ship crashed here six months ago. We've managed to stay alive for this long, but it hasn't been easy, believe me. It's useless, Doctor, both my legs were crushed in the crash," he said as he saw Crusher taking notice of his legs. Her expression told him only what he already knew. "Six months without the proper care - I'm afraid there's nothing left for you to do."

The two figures who had brought them into the cave peeled back the hoods that had hidden their faces. Neither was older than sixteen; one was a boy, Hal, the other a girl, Jana. They smiled at their new guests.

"Children," Tasha said. "Are they yours, Mr Travis?" He noticed how the blonde Security officer insisted on calling him by his formal title, a sign of how careful she was in allowing herself to trust him.

"No, the ship we were all on was a colony ship. There were over seventy five people on board when it crashed."

"And only you four survived out of seventy five?" Demotta asked.

"No, Mr Demotta, there were others, but they died from injuries sustained, lack of food and the animals that live here."

"One thing troubles me. Why attack us?" Picard asked.

"We first thought you were working with the Orions."

The word 'Orion' made alarm bells in Tasha's Security trained mind ring in a warning.

"Orions? There are Orions here?"

"That's why I had my people pick you up when we found the Counselor and realised you meant no harm to us and that you were all in danger. I had Hal and Jana seek you out, knowing you would be looking for the Counselor."

"The Orions. Why are they here?" Picard asked their new friend.

"I don't know. We have not gone near their camp for fear of giving away our presence here."

"Lieutenant, how dangerous are the Orions to us?"

"They are notorious traders, sir. If they find us - especially you - we could become bargaining tools."

"What do you suggest?"

"That I take a look at their camp, perhaps see if I can find out why they are here on this moon. Perhaps they will have a shuttle we could use to escape?"

"Excellent idea, Lieutenant, but I shall come with you. Doctor, if anything should happen to us, do not return to the shuttle or attempt to come looking for us. Stay here with Mr Travis; he will take care of you until the Enterprise arrives."

Crusher stood, concerned. "Captain?"

"Follow my orders, Doctor." Realising how harshly he had spoken and that she was showing concern only for both of their safety he reassured her. "We will be back. Mr Travis, do you know where the Orion camp is located?"

"Hal, will you show the Captain?"

Tasha spoke quietly to the Captain. "Sir, Demotta and I can handle this alone. It would be better if you stayed with Dr Crusher and the others. If anything should happen to you..."

He smiled. "I am grateful for your concern, but I will lead this away team. I have done so before, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir," Tasha said somewhat sheepishly.

After they had left, Troi walked across to help Crusher. She was digging into her pouch trying to find something that would help Travis.

"How bad is Mr Travis?"

"Travis knows it's not good. I've got sedatives that will help the pain he obviously hides, but that's all I can do for him here."

As Jana and the smaller child Timmy sat to lay out fruit and roots for their new guests, Troi sat by Travis. "The children - don't they talk at all, Kyle?"

"The youngest one, Timmy, hasn't spoken since the first day, and the others talk only when they want to."

"They look healthy enough," Crusher piped in.

"They're fine, Dr Crusher, they have looked after themselves since day one, and now they won't let anyone else help them."

From the top of the hill they could see the Orion camp - a small hut and two shuttlecraft.

"Suggestions, Lieutenant?"

"The shuttle, sir. I have never seen an Orion shuttle with that kind of marking."

"But they *are* Orions?"

"Yes, sir. They will know of our presence here. We have to get one of those shuttles and use it to escape."

"Could you pilot it?" Picard asked.

Tasha responded promptly. "Yes, Captain. It should have a radio; we could use it to call the Enterprise once we get clear of the atmosphere."

"An Orion shuttle is a little different from the shuttle we're used to flying, Lieutenant," Demotta said.

"I had an evaluation during Security training. The scenario was similar to this one," she said confidently.

"How did you score, Lieutenant?" Picard asked.

"I crashed," she spluttered, embarrassed. "But I got top marks the second time round," she added hastily.

Hal suddenly became nervous and shook Picard by the arm.

"We go. It's not safe here," he said, turning away.

Troi was glad to see her friends enter the cave again unscathed. Crusher approached the Captain first.

"Sir."

"Yes, Doctor?"

"Mr Travis has suffered two broken legs which have not been set properly. An infection has spread at an alarming rate. I'm afraid there is nothing I can do for him."

"Can he be moved?"

"No, Captain. He insists on remaining here when we leave. He feels he will only hinder the children's escape."

"Thank you, Doctor. Prepare to leave."

"Did you see the camp, Captain?" Travis asked.

"Yes, Mr Travis. Your boy found it for us. There is a shuttle we can use to get all of us off this planet."

"When do we leave?" Troi asked.

"Tonight."

As Picard stood with Troi, Crusher came across, her worried expression filling Picard with concern.

"What's wrong?"

"The children will not leave Kyle. They feel obligated to him."

"They must, Doctor."

"He's been like a father to them. Without him they would have died," she told them.

Picard looked across as the three children sat with Kyle. Suddenly Mr Demotta, who had been on watch, came hurrying in.

"Captain, an Orion patrol coming this way."

"They must have discovered the shuttle," Tasha said.

"Check the perimeter, Lieutenant. Mr Travis?"

As Tasha joined Demotta outside, Picard went across to Travis.

The children sat with him. Jana had been crying.

"It's all right Captain, they will go with you now."

"There are Orions heading this way, Mr Travis."

"Quickly, there is another way out. The children will show you. Give me a weapon - I will hold them back for as long as I can," he said.

Picard gave him his own weapon as phaser blasts echoed around the cave. Tasha and Demotta ran in.

"Good luck, Mr Travis," Picard said.

With Timmy in her arms, Troi followed the others along the narrow passageway. The sound of phaser fire and a loud explosion echoed through the passage as Travis made his heroic stand against the Orions.

His limp body was tossed aside as the Orions ransacked what had been his home, searching for anything they could use to trade. Picard looked at his friends' forlorn faces.

"Let's take this opportunity Travis has given us." He hurried them along.

As they came out of the dark passageway Tasha spoke quietly to Picard. "We'll scout ahead, Captain, just in case."

"Be careful, Lieutenant," Picard said as Tasha, with her bruised face, waved Demotta to join her.

The Orion camp was almost deserted. Two Orions remained behind; the two shuttles they had seen earlier were now reduced to one. Tasha waved Demotta to follow her. The path led into the camp, and only a few yards away, the shuttle sat...

... its door open and inviting.

Carefully they edged towards the shuttle and inside; as Tasha checked the systems over, Demotta signalled to Picard and the others who sat amongst the bushes waiting.

Picard saw Demotta's signal. "Counselor, take the children first. Be careful."

Tasha was pleased to see her friend enter the shuttle with the children. "Where's the Captain and the Doctor?"

"Following," Troi said as she strapped the children into the seats. Picard and Crusher started down the path toward the shuttle, when an Orion suddenly leapt out at Crusher, his heavy form striking her awkwardly. As she fell heavily she felt her left ankle snap. Picard jumped at the Orion as he raised the heavy blaster toward the Doctor. With almost inhuman strength Picard felt his hands tighten around the Orion's neck, then with almost-compassion Picard struck the Orion in the face. The Orion was not about to stop him...

"Doctor, how is it?" he asked as she rolled into a sitting position, holding her ankle.

"I think I've broken it, Captain."

Demotta, who had seen the struggle, rushed to help the Captain with the Doctor. He pulled her up and Picard took her arm around his neck just as the second Orion, alerted by his colleague's sudden disappearance, came running toward them screaming in his strange vocabulary.

Demotta raised his phaser but it was drained, and the Orion fired. His blaster hit Demotta squarely in the chest. As he fell Picard looked into the Orion's face as suddenly Hal appeared in the doorway of the shuttle. He fired; the Orion fell.

"That's for Travis," Hal said, satisfied.

Picard settled Crusher into the seat before seating himself down beside her. "Let's get off this accursed planet, Lieutenant."

As Tasha pulled back the shuttle stick and ignited the engines the rest of the Orions stormed back into their camp, firing wildly at the escaping shuttle. Their shots managed to damage the rear boosters as the shuttle climbed steadily into orbit.

As the shuttle shook, Tasha fought to gain some kind of control. Picard released his harness and joined her up front

"Lieutenant? What's wrong?"

"We've taken a hit in the rear boosters."

"Can we hold this orbit?"

"It's going to be tight," she told him as she ran a check on remaining fuel, "and if we do make orbit, we might not be able to sustain it for long."

Picard couldn't believe their luck. Even now it seemed as if nothing was going to go right. The look on Crusher's face, the concern of Troi, and the children's lack of emotion... would nothing get them out of this mess?

Picard sat beside Crusher, and smiled.

"Damn. I hate this," she growled.

"It's true then?"

"What's true?"

"That doctors make bad patients."

She laughed silently - it was that obvious.

As two hours passed and the others appeared to be getting some sleep, Picard rejoined Tasha.

"How is it, Tasha?"

"Bad, sir. We have lost almost all power in the rear engines. Another hour and we will have two choices. Either we return to the planet now and take our chances with the Orions or we remain here; our orbit will slowly decay and we will re-enter the moon's atmosphere and none of us will make it."

"What about the Enterprise?" Troi's weak voice piped in.

"I've set the emergency beacon to the Enterprise's frequency, but unless they're listening, they could go right past us," Tasha said.

For a moment Picard remained silent. "We'll stay a little longer, Lieutenant, but if it comes to it, get us down."

"Yes, sir."

As Picard returned to his seat, Troi sat beside Tasha. She knew she could talk frankly to her friend.

"Our chances aren't good, are they, Tasha?"

"No, Deanna."

As Tasha spoke, Troi's mind suddenly seemed to wander off in deep thought.

"Deanna, what is it?"

"The Enterprise," she said.

The Enterprise Bridge was pierced by the sound of the strange emergency signal.

"Mr Data?" Riker said as he appeared on the bridge.

"Emergency signal coming through, sir, but the system's magnetic field is affecting the transmission. And Chief O'Brien reports a malfunction in the transporter circuit."

"Mr La Forge, report to the transporter room."

"Aye, sir," Geordi said, moving from his Bridge position and exiting in the turbolift.

"Mr Worf, magnify the image on the screen".

As the Orion shuttle appeared on the large Bridge screen Riker was puzzled. "That looks like an Orion shuttle, but it hasn't the markings. Can you identify, Data?"

"Orion origin, sir," Data confirmed, "but she sends the Enterprise's emergency signal."

"It must be the Captain. Worf, open hailing frequencies."

Worf, standing at the Security console, tapped the sequence in.

"Open, sir," he said gruffly.

"This is the Enterprise - Commander Riker, First Officer. Please identify yourselves. Riker to Orion Trader, respond."

"This is Picard."

Hearing the Captain's voice made Riker break into a grin. "Captain, thank God. Are you all right?"

"We have casualties, and three new young friends, but we're in need of a swift pick-up, Number One. Lock onto these co-ordinates quickly."

Riker tapped his combadge. "Mr La Forge, report."

"Transporter has malfunctioned, Commander; it will take an hour to repair completely."

Data, who had been monitoring the shuttle, stood. "Sir, the shuttle and the Captain do not have that long. In twenty minutes the shuttle's orbit will start to decay. The power readings I am receiving indicate that they have not got enough power to get through safely."

"Mr La Forge, we need the transporter now."

Picard's voice broke through again. "Riker, what is the delay?"

"We haven't got enough power in the transporter to beam you all over."

On board the shuttle Picard looked at Troi and then at Crusher who was obviously in pain.

"Number One, we need to beam over now," Picard repeated. Geordi's voice spoke again.

"Sir, O'Brien has enough power to beam only five across at a time."

"Captain, we have power enough for five of you."

"Okay, Number One. Stand by." Picard turned to Crusher. "Doctor, take the children and go first with the Counselor."

"Captain - " Troi said.

"That's an order, Counselor."

"Yes, sir."

Picard helped Crusher stand, then, supported by Troi, the children stood by their side.

"Okay, Enterprise, they're ready."

Riker watched as the five forms shimmered and materialized on the transporter pad. Riker rushed forward to help Crusher.

"Where's the Captain and Tasha?"

"Still over there," Crusher said.

"Hurry, Will," Troi urged.

"Full power, Mr O'Brien."

As O'Brien began the sequence there was nothing. Data's voice came across the room.

"Sir, do you have them? The shuttle's orbit is decaying."

"No, Mr Data, we have a problem," Riker said glaring at O'Brien as he tried once more. This time the two shimmering figures began to appear as the shuttle disappeared. Picard and Tasha stepped from the transporter pad.

"Close, Number One," Picard said, smiling.

"Welcome home, sir," Riker said.

"It's good to be back."

Geordi looked at Tasha through his VISOR. Her face was a picture of bruises and cuts as the full effects of Hal's steel rod appeared across her face.

"What happened to you?" he asked.

Picard turned to Tasha.

"Report to Sickbay, Lieutenant."

Crusher hobbled along on her ankle as Picard entered the Sickbay. "Captain," she said as he sat to have his hand examined.

"You're looking well, Doctor. How's the ankle?"

"Better," she said as she cleaned the hand and began to redress it.

"And the children?"

"Settling in well with foster families. All in all I would say we were lucky," Crusher said, looking at Picard.

Stuttering, he replied, "How does it look, Doctor?"

"Good," she said, realising his embarrassment.

"Riker to Captain Picard."

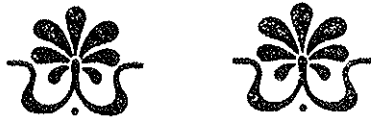
Picard shrugged his shoulders and answered. "What is it, Number One?"

"Your presence is required on the Bridge, sir."

"On my way," he said, standing. "Duty calls."

As he walked to the door he turned as if he wanted to say something, but then he walked off, the door sliding shut behind him.

He had only one love - the Enterprise...



SHOOT TO KILL

I could not tell Commander Riker
That I had pressed the trigger.
If I had admitted it
He would have asked me why
And I do not know.
There would have been a report to file
And I would not have known what to say.

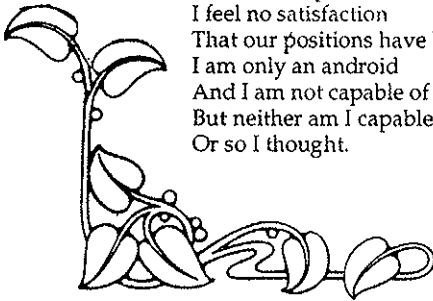
I should be aware
Of the precise sequence of reasoning
For every decision that I make.
But I do not know
Why I fired the disruptor.
I simply knew at the time
That it had to be done.
I scan my record of the events
And the reason for my action
Continues to elude me.
I do not understand
What made me press the trigger.

There was no need for me to kill.
My life was not in danger
And no-one else was being threatened.
I wanted to escape, yes,
But that is no reason to commit murder.
So why did I fire the weapon?

If I were Human
 My motivation would be obvious -
 Revenge, anger, frustration, fear -
 But such feelings are unknown to me.
 I knew that Fajo had killed Varria
 But that was done
 And killing Fajo would not bring her back
 Or reduce her suffering.
 Revenge is not sufficient reason
 For me to kill
 But that is what I was attempting to do
 And I do not know why.

Now it is Fajo who is imprisoned.
 But I feel no pleasure
 In seeing my former captor
 Himself a captive.
 I feel no satisfaction
 That our positions have been reversed.
 I am only an android
 And I am not capable of feelings of any kind.
 But neither am I capable of murder -
 Or so I thought.

Ann Peters



THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM

This incident is quite strange, sir.
 I was hoping that you could explain, sir.
 I am not programmed to dream,
 So I do not know what it could mean.

Geordi and I were involved, sir,
 And this is what I recall, sir.
 On our way back from Beta Magella
 We encountered a curious fella.

He said he needed our help, sir,
 But then he called me a whelp, sir,
 He feared that he might expire
 So our efforts we could not let tire.

But it seems that this all was a test, sir
 To see if we would do our best, sir.
 He said he would give us one wish
 To restore to us one we had missed.

His actions left our mouths ajar, sir;
 He restored to us Lieutenant Yar, sir.
 Death to him was distasteful
 And Armus' action disgraceful.

Her presence time would not change, sir,
 For with us she should have remained, sir.
 Armus was wrong to surmise
 Of her fate aboard the Enterprise.

Her rebirth we all did accept, sir,
 As her death we all did regret, sir.
 He had given her what she was due
 To continue to serve with this crew.

Starfleet was then informed, sir,
 And this conclusion was drawn, sir,
 With her condition we were not to toy -
 She had meetings with Counselor Troi.

If she had passed all the tests, sir,
 Her death was to be put to rest, sir.
 The bridge crew rejoiced her return
 Though her new duties she had to learn.

Now Geordi is running some tests, sir,
 Yes, I'm really doing my best, sir.
 The process is long and tiring
 He may even need some rewiring.

The reason for worry's not there, sir;
 These tests conclusions this bear, sir.
 The dream was just the last act
 Of the Ylan's artifact.

But this is the end of our shift, sir;
 If it's all right we'll head for the lift, sir.
 His dreaming did give me a fright;
 I'm Geordi, he's Data, goodnight.

Margaret Connor



CROSSING THE LINE

by

Alan Butler

Riker shifted uncomfortably in his seat. This meeting had gone on for over an hour now, and he wanted to be elsewhere. *Anywhere* elsewhere!

Captain Picard could see the discomfort on his First Officer's face and he could also see what a distraction it was becoming for the rest of his bridge crew. He toyed with the idea of confronting Will and putting him on the spot but decided to let the matter drop, in view of what he had gone through over the last couple of weeks.

After what seemed like an eternity the meeting came to an end and Riker was able to leave.

As he strode purposefully down the corridor he heard the sound of footsteps, desperately trying to catch up with him. For a moment he considered putting a spurt on but decided that was ridiculous.

"Will!" gasped Beverly Crusher, placing her hand on his shoulder. "We have to talk."

The violent flinch to remove her hand did not go unnoticed.

"What would you like to talk about, Doctor?" enquired Riker, trying in vain to project the cocky First Officer persona that he had cultivated to a fine art.

"I'm concerned about your ability to lead this latest mission," she told him. "From what the Captain was saying the people of Deltori aren't going to be too happy about your away team beaming down to provide medical treatment for a ruler that many of them see as a dictator. Things could turn very nasty down there and you're only just beginning to recover from hosting Ambassador Odan."

"Doctor, I'm fine. In fact, I'm in tip top shape and I would have thought you of all people at the moment should be aware of that."

With that he was gone, leaving Beverly alone to ponder the implication of his words.

Fifteen hours later, Riker stood in Transporter Room Two with his assembled away team, all five of them hand picked by him - except one. It was this one crew woman that he and Picard now stood in the corner of the room debating over.

"Will, this is a medical mission. Despite the added danger it's still a job for the medics and Beverly is the Chief Medical Officer; there's nobody on board more suitable for this mission."

Sighing to himself, Riker was forced to agree, and took his place on the transporter. A flick of O'Brien's wrist teleported the team to the surface of Deltori.

They appeared in the main throne room of Deltori's monarchy. The planet had followed a feudal system, much like that used back on Earth, in England in the twelfth century, for the past several hundred years. Riker had heard enough stories to know that this style of leadership made a large faction of the people unhappy and he had to admit that he wasn't comfortable with it himself, but on this occasion at least it was none of his business.

"Greetings, Commander," said Queen Leora. "I wish to thank you and your crew for responding so quickly to our plea for help."

"Mutual co-operation is part of our treaty," replied the First Officer. "If your staff would care to escort our medical team to your husband, than we can see if we're worthy of your gratitude."

As she was led to the King's chambers Beverly found herself pondering Will again. He had been perfectly polite with the Queen but there had been something missing. Normally when he spoke with a woman, any woman, there was just the merest dash of the 'ole Riker charm' - an aspect of his manner that was practically invisible except for the flash of a smile or a word or mannerism that always went a long way to endear him to the lady in question. With the Queen there had been nothing of that. Why the change, and why did she feel she was somehow to blame?

She and her two nurses entered the King's bedchamber while Riker and his two security guards waited outside. She had been briefed that the King was suffering from some viral condition that had developed during the last three weeks. That wasn't the information that her tricorder was giving her, however.

"Could you ask the Commander to come in?" she asked one of the nurses.

"Of course," he replied, and went to the door.

"Will, it's no virus," she told the First Officer as he entered the room. "I think he's been poisoned!"

"Really?" he replied. "I think that's something we should keep to ourselves for the moment."

"I agree, at least until we know something more than we do at the moment; but it is going to make treating him a lot more complicated."

As she spoke she reached into her bag and took out a hypo. She administered the drug and watched for a reaction from the ailing King. Nothing.

"Damn!" she muttered under her breath. "It doesn't look good for him, Will, and I don't like to come in second place in anything."

"No, I've noticed that about you, Doctor Beverly!"

"Now just what is that crack supposed to - ?"

Her words were interrupted by the main doorway exploding into a mass of debris. Through the smoke Will could see the two security guards. One, a pretty dark haired woman with short cropped hair, was attempting to resuscitate her fallen comrade, but from the blood streaming from his face and the look in his would-be saviour's eyes, Riker knew it was too late.

"No time for that now!" he told himself, pulling his phaser and upping the stun setting as far as it would go.

Eyeing the room quickly he sized up their opposition. There were three men, all of them holding some huge laser weapons that he didn't recognize. From the corner of his eye he saw Beverly dive over her patient, attempting to shield him from falling debris with her own body.

The second security member had reluctantly accepted her partner was beyond her help and was moving to intercept one of the men who was bearing down on Dr Crusher and her stunned staff. Moving as one, both she and Riker fired on the man and watched him sail back across the room.

She turned to see the nurse who had originally called Riker into the room attempting to grapple the weapon away from the smallest of the men. She moved to intervene but the sickening blasting noise made her realize it was too late for him, and as she heard the rifle go off again she knew that time had just run out for her too. As she felt her life force slip away she felt strangely invigorated. She aimed and fired her phaser, but only to stun her assailant.

"That's how we do things in Starfleet," she whispered as she slumped to the floor.

Her passing went unnoticed by both Riker and Beverly. The latter had removed herself from the now comatose King in time to see the final alien bearing down on her and her patient. Riker spotted the danger and began to move.

Before he had chance to react, however, Beverly had pulled herself up to her full height and stood between the attacker and her patient. As the alien aimed his rifle, Beverly swung at him with a right hook.

"No more, damn you!" she yelled, partly to keep him off guard and partly to convince herself.

Before he had chance to react again, Riker was upon him. The Deltorian struggled briefly but was overcome by the Enterprise's First Officer.

As Riker sank to the floor and began to survey the damage Beverly went to her second nurse who, she saw, had been badly injured by the falling debris.

"It's not good, Will," she told him, "but she should be OK if we can get her back to sickbay fast."

As she began to move towards what was left of the door, to check on her fallen comrades, Queen Leora entered, obviously distressed by what had transpired.

"Commander Riker, Dr Crusher, I... I don't know what to say!"

"Explanations will have to wait," replied Beverly. "This woman needs urgent medical attention back on our ship. Your husband, too."

"I'm afraid that won't be possible, Doctor. You won't be leaving for quite some time."

As she spoke she drew a weapon, similar to the one used by the three attackers, from within her gold encrusted robes.

"You have my deepest apologies, Commander Riker, but my people *shall* be free and if

you and yours have to pay the price for that, so be it."

Within a few minutes Riker and Beverly found themselves imprisoned in a cell. Riker didn't take kindly to this turn of events. Their guard, a stout unpleasant looking man whose predominant feature was a large wart on the end of his oversized nose, had been subjected to an almost unrelenting stream of insults, most of which Beverly had never heard but would bear in mind for future reference if they got out alive.

"I think we need some kind of plan, don't you?" she whispered to her Commander.

All she received in reply was a grunt.

"Adonis over there tells me that they put Jackie in a holding cell until they can establish how badly she's been hurt."

There was no reaction from the First Officer.

"Will," she asked, softly. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"Wrong, Doctor? I've just lost three good people under my command and chances are I'm about to lose another one, and you have the nerve to ask me what's wrong? Get your head out of the clouds, Beverly."

"We both know that that's tragic, but we've both lost officers before and chances are we will do again. You haven't been yourself for weeks now. What's your problem?"

"What's my problem?" he replied, sounding astounded that she didn't already know. "My problem, Doctor Beverly, is you and your raging hormones."

"Odan. Your mood and attitude to me is because of my affair with Odan? Why? You can't be jealous?"

He laughed. The laughter, however, was unpleasant and without humour.

"Jealous? How could I possibly be jealous, Bev? I was there. You both made me a part of your little affair. Not by invitation of course. No one said 'Will, would you like to spend the night with Beverly?' No, Odan just decided to give my body a test drive. Well, there were three people there that night, Beverly, and one didn't ask to be there."

"You volunteered to host him. For God's sake, Will, he was dying. You saw that and offered to help. Surely you don't regret that decision?"

"I volunteered him a chance, a temporary stopgap solution to continue his life. I never agreed to him walking all over mine."

"I tried to fight it," she confessed quietly. "I truly did, but I loved him in a way I haven't loved anyone in so long. I protested so hard but in many ways it was a front. When Deanna told me to 'accept the love' it was just the icing on the cake. I simply couldn't stop myself and to be frank I didn't want to."

She looked to Riker for some kind of understanding, if not approval, but there was nothing. Nothing but hurt in his eyes.

"You've become like some sort of brother to me, Will. The whole bridge crew feels like some kind of family to me, but it wasn't *you* there. He wore your face, spoke with your voice, looked at me with your eyes *but it was Odan*. I felt that with every fibre of my being. Perhaps for those few short hours I granted myself a little happiness at your expense, put myself first, but it wasn't intentional and if I hurt you then I'm truly sorry."

Again she looked to him for some reaction. It wasn't long in coming.

"Well, Doctor," he began in that angry tone of voice that she was hearing so often recently, "I guess we know where your priorities lie now. A little self-satisfaction over friendship!"

"You - " Blinking back tears she struck him across the face. He recoiled for a moment but before he had chance to say anything she let rip with words that she never thought she'd use to this man. "You're no saint, Commander, nor are you as pure as the driven snow. I've seen you coerce women who weren't particularly willing to spend the night with you."

"They always had the last say," he replied, sounding far more hurt than she'd expected. "If they said no then the answer was no and I respected that. *I* was never given the opportunity to decline." With that he strode to the far side of the cell, leaving both of them with only their consciences for company.

Beverly was awakened by what she thought was rather an abrupt shake of the shoulder.

"Whattimeizzit?" she asked, still half asleep.

"Looking at both moons I would say it's a little past what passes for midnight on this planet. I think now would be the best time to make our move."

So business as usual is how he wants to play it, thought Beverly. *Well, that's just fine with me.*

She went to the cell doors and peered down the corridors at the guard.

"Amazing!" she whispered to Riker. "They managed to replace the last guard with one who's even more ugly."

"Good," he replied. "Perhaps that will mean you'll keep your mind on your work."

She winced, but wasn't about to let that show. "Oh, I don't know!" she replied casually, as she caught the guard's eye and beckoned him to come closer.

Riker took his cue and moved back into the shadows.

"I'm so sorry to trouble you, dear," she began in the dizziest voice she could manage. She was no good at this kind of subterfuge, being far too direct a person, but had found over the years that she could manage a reasonable impression of Deanna's mother, having discovered this was the best way in the world to get Jean-Luc Picard into a spin. "I appear to have the zipper caught on my outfit. Could you please help me get it undone?"

She had to wait a moment while the guard looked over his shoulder to ensure his brother Beecoll hadn't entered. *He got all the family looks!* thought the guard bitterly. Still, now was not the time for reverie, now was the time for action.

He fumbled quickly for the keys and within moments had swung the cell door open. Then he lunged forward in eager anticipation, straight into the fist of the Enterprise's First Officer.

Within moments both Beverly and Riker were dashing down the corridors towards the throne room, pausing only momentarily to retrieve their phaser weapons from the guard's desk. For Riker this action was almost a relief; for a few moments at least he could put aside the thoughts constantly running through his mind, and just act. Almost immediately it became clear the palace was something of a labyrinth but Riker had been leading these away team missions for more years than he cared to reflect on and had developed something of a sixth sense when it came to direction. He was stumped, however, when the corridor that they had been running through forked in two directions.

He turned to Beverly. "You take the left and I'll take the right. If you find something, yell and wait for me. If there's nothing there after around three hundred metres come back and meet me here."

She nodded her agreement and started down her corridor.

Credit where it's due, thought Riker to himself, *the lady is a true professional.*

He'd gone only one hundred metres when he noticed the light fading fast. As he turned a corner he came face to face with three men, each holding one of the laser weapons used by the men who had stormed the King's chamber.

"Looks like I got lucky with my choice of corridors," he muttered under his breath, spying the royal seal on one of the doors ahead. He began to turn slowly and was confronted by another two men behind him. He silently cursed himself for not sensing them beforehand, and made a silent vow to at least try and keep his mind on the job - if he survived the next three minutes.

One of the men hoisted up the almost ridiculously large gun into his line of vision and took aim at Riker. In that split second he pondered his next course of action.

They couldn't be that stupid! he thought to himself. *Of course, they fell for Beverly's Livaxana impersonation...*

Waiting until he heard the whine of the rifle's shot being dispatched, he dropped to the floor and rolled in the direction of the assailant. Behind him he heard one of the other men cry out in pain and then go totally silent as he hit the floor. Before the remainder of the men had a chance to react, Riker leapt to his feet in front of the man who had fired the shot and sent him spinning into unconsciousness, closely followed by one of his partners.

He lunged at the last man in his line of vision but this one had had a chance to prepare, and with both hands he grasped Riker around the neck.

Riker struggled to free himself, knowing full well the danger this man presented, but also aware that one of the men who had come up behind him was unaccounted for. His phaser had dropped to the floor as he tried to pry his throat free with both hands. A sadistic smile had appeared on his enemy's face and Riker could feel his knees begin to buckle. This stalemate seemed to continue for an eternity until Riker took a gamble and let his concentration be diverted to a lower part of the alien's anatomy. As his knee connected, the man doubled over in agony and a swift chop to the back of the neck seemed the kindest thing to do. As he began to pivot around towards where he knew the remaining Deltorian would be he heard the

scream of an energy weapon. He braced himself for the impact that he knew was coming. Nothing!

He turned to see Beverly replacing her phaser into her jacket as she stooped to retrieve his.

"Thank you," he said, taking the phaser from her hand.

"You would have done the same for me." She said this as a statement but her tone seemed to indicate it was more of a question.

He looked at her for a moment. "Yeah," he replied. "Yeah, I would have."

Nothing more was said as they moved to directly outside the King's chambers. Through the doors, Riker could hear the Queen talking to someone.

"It was all going to be so simple," she was saying. "A little of the drug each day and you'd be gone, leaving me to right your wrongs. I didn't want it to be this way. I loved you once but you spoiled that love. We were partners, equals. I thought our love had changed you, that you had come to see the value of women in our society and my value in your life. Instead, you've taken us even further back to the dark ages than the generations of rulers that preceded you. You persecuted women, other creeds, in fact anyone who doesn't think as you and your government think. Well, no more!"

The tone in her voice led Riker to think now had to be the time to act. He and Beverly burst through the door, only to be confronted by a hulking royal aide and the Queen, holding a dagger over the gagged and bound King.

As Will tackled the guard, Beverly ran to the royal bed and grasped the Queen's arm.

"Don't do this!" she pleaded.

"You don't know what he's done," Leora replied. "He's destroying our world! He's already destroyed mine," she added softly.

"If what you were saying is true, then you're right, he shouldn't remain in power; but no good will come of this bloodshed. Believe me, I know what it's like to feel let down by someone you love, but you've got to be strong."

As Riker's opponent slammed into the wall behind them, Leora began to cry and a gurgled sigh of relief came from the King. As Riker unbound his mouth the King leaned up toward him.

"Your woman appears to be a special creature. She clearly has a mind of her own and a fair measure of sense."

"Firstly," Riker began, not even attempting to mask his distaste, "Beverly Crusher is very much her own woman and a damn sight more sensible than you could ever hope to be." He paused for a moment, a slight smile appearing on his lips. "You're right about one thing, though, she is very special."

The next day Captain Picard visited sickbay to offer his good wishes to the nurse injured

on the Deltori surface. He was accompanied by his First Officer and was met by his Chief Medical Officer.

"I understand," he told the injured crew woman, "that the effect your party had on the Deltorian royal family is quite remarkable. In addition to that, the King is so impressed with the proficient way in which his wife tried to kill him, he's listening to, and acting on, most of her proposals."

After he'd left, and Beverly had insisted on her patient getting some sleep, Beverly found herself alone with Riker.

"I never meant to hurt you..." she began, but he put his forefinger to her lips.

"And I should have been more understanding of your situation."

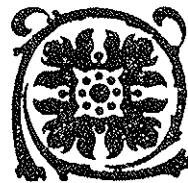
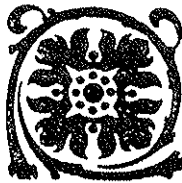
She laughed. "Yes, then you could have explained it to me. Seriously though, I'm sorry. I guess it's a dangerous thing when you cross the line from friendship into something more."

"I guess so," Riker replied, an image of Deanna fleeting across his mind. "But will you tell me one thing, Doctor?"

"Anything."

"Did the earth move for you?"

And laughter echoed around the halls of the sickbay for the first time in far too long.



SKIN OF EVIL

by

Gail Christison

Aftermath

"No-o-o!"

William Riker woke in Beverly Crusher's sickbay sweating, wild eyed and terrified.

Crusher came swiftly from the small room off sickbay that she'd secluded herself in since beaming up with him. "Will, it's all right. You're on the Enterprise," she soothed, holding him by the shoulders and easing him back onto the bunk.

"Doctor Crusher - Beverly?" he groaned.

"I'm here."

"Then... it's not a dream?"

"No..." It came out in a half whisper.

Riker's eyes finally opened properly and focused on her. "Tasha?" he demanded.

Crusher shook her head silently.

Riker covered his face with an unsteady hand. "I remember now," he said unevenly.

Crusher automatically checked his vital signs before exhaling relievedly. "Nightmare?" she asked gently.

He nodded. "You can't know what it was like, being trapped in that thing..."

"Pain, darkness..." she said softly.

"Darkness," he repeated. "It was so cold, so empty, and it was... smothering me, torturing me - like an insect trapped in amber."

"But you're here, now. You even said you frustrated it," she told him as he closed his eyes again. After a beat she patted his arm and turned to go.

"Beverly. Deanna -?" His voice caught.

She turned back and smiled for the first time. "The Captain and Worf got her out, and Ben. She's fine. As a matter of fact she spent quite a bit of time here, but I wanted her to rest. I told her your sedative wouldn't be wearing off for a while."

"Sedative?"

"Sorry, Will, but the state you were in when we beamed up... Well, you needed the rest,

and I didn't want you racing off to the Bridge or even back to the damned planet."

Surprisingly, he nodded and closed his eyes again without argument. "Tasha... It's going to hit every one pretty bad," he said slowly.

"Don't blame yourself," Crusher said astutely. "It wasn't anybody's fault."

"No?" He opened his eyes again, revealing the bitterness in them. "It was my away team. I'm supposed have more sense than to treat any unknown as anything but potentially deadly," he told her savagely.

Crusher's eyes narrowed. There was more eating at the young First Officer than Tasha's death alone.

"I'm getting up," Riker announced suddenly and swung his long legs off the bunk.

"Damn it, Will - "

"I'm fine, Doctor. Not a scratch on me," he said harshly and tested his weight gingerly.

Crusher shook her head as Riker made his way to the synthesizer in his underwear and asked the computer for a replacement uniform.

"Commander." Crusher's tone hardened as he dressed and stepped into the black boots. Riker turned and she saw him shutter the pain in his eyes. "I order you to go to your quarters and rest," she told him.

He nodded silently, zipped his uniform to the throat, wheeled and was gone.

Crusher stared after him for a long moment, then sighed heavily and slowly closed her eyes.

Riker's quarters were silent and empty. He'd have gone there even without orders from Crusher. The last thing he felt like doing was looking any of the others in the face. It had been bad enough watching their faces in the sickbay, listening to their pain in the briefing room... after.

He unzipped his uniform and slumped in his relaxation chair.

"Computer, music. Something I can get lost in," he told it flatly.

"Please re-define request," it answered predictably.

"Forget it," he said irritably. "Just find some Miles Davis and run it. No visual." He rubbed his eyes with thumb and index finger as the melancholy strains of the great trumpet wove their magic around the vibrant, passionate saxophone of John Coltrane.

Riker closed his eyes and swallowed the lump in his throat as the music soaked into his being, soothed the frayed edges of his mind and spirited his battered soul into another, gentler world.

The melodic lines lulled his still weary body into a restless half sleep soon beset by

memories of Tasha and the lingering sense of a place so cold, so terribly lonely... Then suddenly a wave of choking claustrophobia gripped his body, forcing a half articulated groan of despair from him.

The groan became a cry of pain as, in his dreams, Armus again shrouded his body in dank, constricting blackness, a cold liquid shroud that drew tighter with his every agonised, angry movement; that threatened to squeeze his very life blood from his body even as it tried to fill his sinuses, his mouth, his lungs, to steal even his breath from him...

"No-o-o!" His body was suddenly driven upright by the strength of his outrage - outrage which dragged him awake even as soft hands were grasping his shoulders.

"Will?"

"Deanna? I - I could feel you with me. You were there," he said dazedly, aware that only hours ago he had thought never to look into those dark eyes again.

"Yes. I was with you. What Armus did was terrible, but it's over now."

His blue eyes narrowed.

"I felt you - the nightmare was very powerful," she said, answering the unspoken question.

Riker shifted so that she dropped her hands, then drew himself up and went to the food slot. "Bourbon, ice. A double, and no synthelol," he told it, then looked back at Troi. "I'm fine now," he said flatly. "I just need some sleep."

"I know you don't really want to be alone," Troi said gently.

"You know too much, Deanna."

"You've been through a great deal today," she began, but hesitated at the look of distaste on his face, the anger crashing into her mind.

"And you haven't?!" he demanded in a voice made harsh by pain.

"Of course I have. We all have. You aren't alone, Will. Self pity doesn't become you," she retorted.

Riker turned away and Troi could feel the rage drain away as quickly as it had flared. In its place, not self pity but profound grief, guilt and, somehow, fear.

"Fear? What are you afraid of, Will?" she blurted out, but felt the answer even before he faced her again.

"Me? No." Troi shook her head. "I'm not going to make you less, just because I feel your fear, your guilt - yes, guilt, or your vulnerability right now."

"Deanna, back off!" he retorted angrily. "I never asked you to come in here!"

"No," she snapped back, unbowed. "You didn't ask me. And you didn't ask Tasha to challenge Armus... and you didn't ask it to kill her."

"I'm going to the bridge." Riker pulled his gaze away from hers. "I'm sure that you have better things to do, Counselor."

Not that I'm aware of. Her dry thought touched his mind as the doors slid open. "And if you're intent on playing this childish game, I'll have to come down to your level and ask Beverly to list you as medically unfit for service," she finished aloud.

Riker's back stiffened in frustration and he turned slowly, the doors closing again as he returned to the untouched glass.

Deanna...don't, his mind whispered.

The sense of pleading in the silent request tore at her.

"All right," she conceded. "I'll go."

Riker was unmoved as she passed him, but she felt the moment of panic, swiftly crushed down, and the resolution that took its place, before he spoke.

"She's gone, Deanna. I... She was..."

"A friend?" said Troi softly, turning to face him.

"...Family."

A look of surprised comprehension came into the onyx eyes. "I was wrong. It's not me you're afraid of..." She trailed off.

"Spare me the profound revelations. I'm not up to analysis today," muttered Riker, and sat down hard on the chair, which, at his touch, snapped up to meet his back.

"Stop it, Will!" she demanded angrily. "And it's time you stopped being afraid of that kind - any kind - of commitment. Just because your father -"

"Leave him out of it," he said vehemently, rising again. Troi could feel the old anger in him at the thought of his only parent.

"How can I, when you are doing your best to emulate him? Because of Tasha's death you've suddenly realised that, in spite of yourself, you have found yourself a family. You're doing exactly what Kyle did when faced with the prospect of opening himself up to the kind of pain he felt at your mother's death, again. You're running. You've been running all your life, just as he has."

"You've never even met him!" Riker retorted, pain in his voice.

"I don't have to. He's standing here in front of me," Troi went on relentlessly.

"God damn it, Deanna!" he shouted, but Troi heard the crack in his voice, saw the sheen glinting in the blue eyes as he stopped himself from stepping toward her in anger.

He sat down instead, shaking his head. "This can't be happening to me. I have the future planned. I know... knew... what I wanted out of Starfleet, out of this ship -"

"And it didn't include becoming emotionally attached to a group of quite extraordinary

people," she filled in.

"You know," he said shakily, "I really -"

"- hate it when I do that. I know," Troi finished and smiled at him. "You are not the only one."

Riker started to smile back. She felt his surge of emotion, and went to him as he silently covered his face with his hands.

As she laid a hand on the bent head, Riker tensed and dropped the hands.

"Will, let it go," Troi pleaded when she saw the shuttered eyes. "Don't make Tasha responsible for turning you into something bitter and cold. She told me that what she loved best about you was your openness, your honesty. She said you could make her laugh. And few people could claim that."

He smiled in spite of himself at the memory, and Troi felt the moment of crisis pass, for now.

"Commander Riker, report to the Holodeck. Counselor Troi, report to the Holodeck. Dr. Crusher..." Captain Picard's voice ended any chance of making Riker face his grief, his guilt. A pale Troi followed him out of the room, too distracted by the situation at hand to notice the subtle shift in Jean-Luc Picard's emotional state.

They were the first to arrive, the others close behind, completing an assemblage of all those closest to Tasha Yar - her 'family'. It was Riker this time, standing close to support Troi when she reeled under the weight of the group's combined grief, and continuing to stand with her as they waited for the Captain to speak.

And then Tasha was there again. Riker felt Troi shaking and squeezed the shoulder beneath his hand as Yar spoke to them.

"Will Riker, you are the best -" The hologram seemed to be looking at him with Tasha's eyes and the hurt that he'd controlled so well rose again in his throat.

"...Most of all you made me laugh."

It seemed to take an eternity to end, and when it did no one waited for the Captain to leave before fleeing the poignant scene. Nor did they speak to one another, though by mutual assent Riker and Troi remained together. It even seemed that everyone managed to be going in different directions.

"Deck 8," Riker told the turbolift. They rode in silence, Riker still resting an arm on Troi's unsteady shoulders.

"Are you all right?" she finally asked as the doors of his quarters closed, not really reading anything through her own grief.

"It was a hell of a good-bye," Riker admitted shakily. "I kept wanting to tell her I was sorry." The blue eyes were rapidly blurring. "I will never do that to anyone," he added vehemently, as it gradually became more difficult to make his mouth do what he wanted. He sat down hard in the chair.

Troi came to him then, rested her hand on his shoulder. "She's gone. Let her go," she told him.

The words echoed, somehow in Kyle Riker's voice, through all the years of Riker's life and back again and crashed into his gut.

"No!" He struggled to stop himself succumbing to an old, old grief and an agonising new one. "No," he whispered, as a knowing Troi drew his bent head against her, her own tears falling on his hair as she rested a troubled brow against it. And when the force of their grief had passed, it was a pale Troi who finally moved away, gathering her wits.

"I'd better go," she was saying. "Someone might need me..."

Stay, whispered his mind.

She had prayed he would not say it... and yet dreaded his silence.

"Stay," he said aloud as she closed her eyes against him.

"I can't," she whispered.

"Deanna, I won't ask for - "

"I know," she said quickly. "But I might."

"No," he said, coming to her and wrapping his great arms around her. "You won't. Computer, Miles Davis." The music returned and he spoke to the synthesizer. "Computer, bourbon on the rocks - real bourbon, and hot chocolate for the lady," he added, the shadow of a smile ghosting across his haggard face.

"Bribes will get you everywhere," she sniffed, suddenly more fragile than any of her patients.

No bribes, Imzadi. He spoke to her thoughts. Troi felt his lips brush her hair. When she looked up searchingly he answered by lowering his head and kissing her tenderly.

She could not help but feel his spontaneous surge of desire, but it was a fleeting thing. "Now," he said, the trembling of his fingers as he reached for their drinks a silent cry for help. "Hot chocolate, and a lesson in jazz appreciation..."

"Will, you'll cope," she said softly as he set them down.

"Will I?" he looked up. "And if it's you next time? Or Worf, or even Wesley? Will I do my job? Will my judgement be affected?"

"There is no way of knowing that for certain. Captain Picard did not know he was going to choose to break the Prime Directive for Wesley when the Edo took him - "

"Captain Picard doesn't make emotional choices," Riker defended brusquely.

"Doesn't he?" she said softly. "In your own ways, you are very much alike, you and he."

Riker laughed without amusement. "One day, maybe..."

Troi sipped her chocolate and watched him shake his head.

"You - " she hesitated as the door page sounded.

"Come," called Riker reluctantly.

It was Wesley Crusher, and two steps behind him Data and Geordi La Forge.

"I can come back, sir," Wesley offered, looking from one to the other. "I only came to see how you were, after..."

Riker grinned tiredly and shook his head. "Pull up a chair, Wes."

"We wanted to talk about - We'll come back," said Geordi, even more awkwardly.

"No, don't go," Troi stayed them. "Do you like jazz?"

Wesley smiled as Data launched into a dissertation of the history of jazz music, to be cut short by his friend.

"She asked if you like it, not whether or not you could do an hour and a half lecture," complained the helmsman.

Data's puzzled look brought a smile to all the strained faces.

When the door page sounded a second time, Troi was deep in conversation with Wesley, and Riker had become involved in a searching discussion with Geordi and Data over the energy dynamics of the Armus creature.

"Worf?" said a surprised Riker, turning in time to see the Klingon come in at Troi's beckoning.

"I seem to be intruding," Worf said in a low voice. "I will return at a more appropriate time." He strode out again.

After a glance at Troi, Riker followed. It took several strides down the corridor to catch up.

"Worf?"

"I..." The Klingon paused. "I should not have come," he muttered.

"Yes, you should."

Worf focused for the first time on Riker's eyes, the dark circles under them. For a long moment the look held, exchanging pain, grief, and the overwhelming need to share it, then Riker was speaking, deliberately releasing him.

As Riker described his conversation with Geordi, the tension seemed to drain from the Klingon. Worf nodded when the commander made a valid point, and followed automatically when Riker turned, still talking, for his quarters.

Troi looked up as the doors opened again, and smiled as they came in, both men now wholly preoccupied by the Klingon's detailed description of the method of her rescue. Wesley

had heard too and when Worf glossed over some technical points, spoke up and moved to Riker's side to join the discussion.

Troi carefully opened her mind to their emotions and, a moment later, exhaled relievedly. The pain had not left any of them, especially Worf and Will... but they were coping now, and they were not alone. She moved away from them, to the view port.

No one noticed when the Counselor suddenly frowned and chewed her bottom lip. Nor did Riker comment when she came by him silently, patted his arm in farewell and disappeared while he was still engrossed in the discussion.

Sickbay was silent. There were no patients, so that duty staff had been absorbed elsewhere. The lighting had dimmed as the ship moved into the night cycle, and no one had bothered to adjust it.

Deanna Troi stood in the doorway for a moment, located the lone figure of Beverly Crusher in the dimness, and moved forward.

At the sound of footsteps Crusher looked up from the report on her desk monitor. "Deanna? What can I do for you?" she asked automatically, her elegant face pale and composed in the reflected glow from the screen.

Troi shook her head. "I'm fine, Beverly. Everyone's fine. They're all in Will's quarters, together -"

"Wesley?"

"Even Wesley," Troi smiled.

A ghost of one flickered on the doctor's lips before she spoke again. "And Jean-Luc?" she asked softly.

"I don't know," admitted Troi. "I haven't seen him since..." She trailed off, then, "And he hasn't asked for me."

"Why did you come, Deanna?"

"I felt something."

"Damn," muttered Crusher.

"What?" probed Troi, surprised by the sudden strength of the Doctor's feelings. "Can't I even do a simple job without being scrutinised?" demanded Crusher, her voice brittle. "You had no right!"

Troi heard the break in her voice, felt the anger Crusher was trying to suppress. "What job, Beverly?" she asked with quiet deliberation, and saw the Doctor's eyes slide toward a door across the room. The Counselor drew a jagged breath of her own then. She understood.

"It could have waited," she told Crusher in a gentle voice.

"No it couldn't," Crusher told her brusquely. "It would have only made it harder."

Deanna's eyes had grown very bright. It was typical of Beverly Crusher. She could have delegated the job of Tasha's autopsy to someone else, but she would not desert a friend, even in death.

"Beverly," said Troi, containing her own feelings with difficulty. "Do you like jazz?"

Jean-Luc Picard watched as the doors to his quarters opened to admit him. The solo work-out on the racquet ball court had served only to burn him out physically. He went straight through to his bathroom, stripped wearily and threw the clothes, for once, onto the floor before walking into the shower.

For the first time in a very long time he exercised a rarely used privilege and chose water, closing his eyes as the warm liquid streamed over his shoulders, massaging knotted muscles and soothing ragged nerves.

He stepped out without drying himself and padded, dripping, out to the synthesizer.

"Computer, towel, bath size," he told it and wandered across the room drying himself as he had done as a child. When he reached the viewport he paused and looked out at the stars.

It was a long time before he turned to retrieve a uniform from his closet. He drew the jumpsuit over his shoulders, leaving it unzipped, for the little extra comfort it provided.

Picard scanned his shelves for a book that would occupy his mind and rejected them all, turned and went to his desk to look for work. He completed a couple of authorizations for shore leave and countersigned a requisition from engineering, before running out of things to do. He rose and prowled the rooms again, spent some time watching the fish sleeping in their tank, picked up the clothes he had thrown on the floor and located his boots. He sat down on his bunk to pull them on and to stretch the fabric stirrups over them. By the time he'd finished, he had made up his mind to take another turn around the ship.

He rose, reaching for the zipper of his uniform, then froze as his eyes lighted on the bedside table. A small object lay on it, picking up the merest hint of light, causing it to glisten in the dully lit room.

After a beat, Picard drew the zip up to his chest, leaving the throat to fall comfortably open as he slowly and deliberately moved toward the table.

'...how empty it will be without her presence.'

The memory of Data's voice echoed in Picard's thoughts as he reached out to pick up the holocrystal. He closed strong fingers around it and ignored the dull, boring ache behind his sternum as he moved to the food slot.

"Tea - Earl Grey, hot," he ordered, but it was only a whisper. It had not even been loud enough to activate the computer.

Picard hadn't noticed. The knuckles of his right hand were blanched and he had closed his eyes against the memory of a standing order which he now silently revoked.

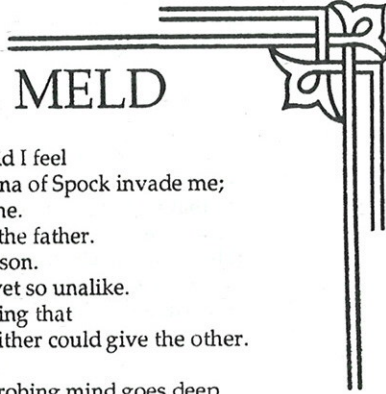
Tears would no longer be permitted on the bridge, not even for those in penalty boxes...

"Damn." Picard swallowed, turned toward the viewport again opening unsteady fingers to look down at the last remnant of a once vibrant life force. He drew a jagged breath, loud with the sound of his pain, as liquid crystal droplets flicked off his lashes and fell upon the glistening prism.

Then, suddenly, the lump that had been in his throat, in his heart for so many hours, finally broke free - a trembling whisper that carried one final fierce, grieving protestation ahead of the silent tide of his grief.

"Oh, Tasha..."

MELD



In the Meld I feel
The persona of Spock invade me;
We are One.
First was the father.
Now, the son.
So alike, yet so unlike.
Both seeking that
Which neither could give the other.

Spock's probing mind goes deep
Into my very being
And makes contact with the light
Of his father's dwindling katra.
I feel their mutual desolation
That in life there was no more time
For reconciliation and the ultimate melding
Of the Paternal Bond.

Then, from the very depths of my soul,
Spock draws his father's katra to him
Leaving me bereft.
But now, I share in the Melding!
Joining, whirling emotions
Of two souls finally uniting
In an admission of love and joy.
Now, at last, they are One.

I feel tears on my face;
The pain of loss is great.
Then, I open my eyes and see
Tears
On the Vulcan face before me.
Tears that are his and mine
For now I feel from him
Another, even deeper, grief.

The loss of someone wonderful;
Someone who can never come again.
Someone who, all else above,
Could give Spock that which he sought;

That which his father
 Could never give in life.
 Acceptance, understanding and, finally,
 Love. The loss of his Captain, so long ago
 But still so very fresh in his memory.
 The deep, aching pain of a grief
 That will never abate.
 Because this First Officer
 Who died for his Captain
 Had to watch helplessly
 As his Captain died for him.

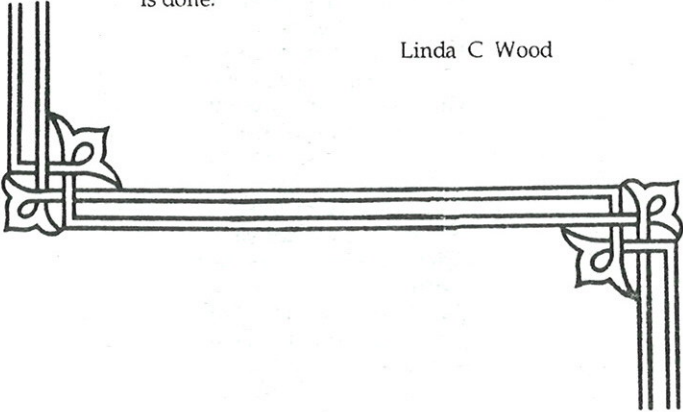
And for him, there was no coming back.

Now, Spock is alone;
 All who loved him
 In that fargone time
 Are gone.
 He feels such emptiness
 That, for him, there is no more time
 For giving, and receiving,
 Human Love.

He has shown me his very soul,
 This Vulcan who stands before me,
 And for that I am privileged;
 For now, as we part,
 I know and understand him.
 There is nothing left for him now
 But, with the aid of his father's katra,
 To continue his solitary task on Romulus

Until his mortal time
 Is done.

Linda C Wood



NOT TO BE SNIFFED AT

by

David Gallagher

Worf was in his cabin and although the great Klingon warrior would never admit it - he was nervous!

He was in this agitated state because he had a date... with K'ehlyr. Earlier that very day, they had mated - in the Klingon tradition; but K'ehlyr had not let him complete the bonding ceremony. And now, not more than half an hour ago, she had asked him if he had ever 'made love' - in the Human sense of the word.

K'ehlyr was half Human - Worf often thought she was more Human than Klingon; and she often rebelled against the Klingon way. Although Worf detested the soft Human ideas of sex, he thought that if he gave in to K'ehlyr's demands, she might finish the bonding ceremony.

Still, none of this was what made Worf nervous. It was a well-known fact that Klingons didn't like to bathe... and Worf had an embarrassing personal hygiene problem. He had *very* smelly feet. What would K'ehlyr think?

(K'ehlyr was also nervous. She'd managed to manoeuvre Worf into a night of passion - Human style - and she was very much looking forward to it, especially after their meeting earlier that day in the holodeck. Unfortunately, the Klingon way of love didn't often involve much kissing, unlike Humans. And K'ehlyr was nervous because she had a chronic case of bad breath!)

The chime to Worf's cabin sounded, and Worf nearly jumped out of his skin. He opened the door, and let K'ehlyr in. He prepared drinks and they both stood around the room, nervously sipping their drinks. Eventually, after much inane small talk, they decided to get ready for bed.

Worf chose to use the bathroom first. While there he took off his socks and stuffed them into the laundry basket. He then proceeded to wash his feet as thoroughly as he could. Once he was satisfied that he'd covered as much of the smell as possible, he re-entered the bedroom.

Then it was K'ehlyr's turn in the bathroom, and as she prepared for what was to come, she brushed her teeth and gargled with industrial strength mouthwash. Although she did as much as she could, she still couldn't clear her breath completely.

Oh, well, she thought, it will have to do - I'll just have to hope he doesn't notice. She came back into the bedroom and climbed onto the bed where Worf already lay. Worf chose that moment to come clean, as it were, and confess to K'ehlyr his hygiene problem.

"K'ehlyr," he rumbled, "I have something I wish to tell you..."

K'ehlyr leaned over and silenced him with a light kiss on the lips. "Hush, Worf - I too have a confession to make..."

Worf raised his hand, wrinkled his nose and interrupted her. "Let me guess," he said, exhaling loudly. "You've just eaten my socks!"





PERSPECTIVES

PERSPECTIVES

by

Lee Sansome

"But is he up to it, Deanna?" Riker's hands gripped the edge of Troi's desk and he loomed over her, a deep frown creasing his forehead. "I know Starfleet Command don't seem to have left us much choice but it's my duty as his First Officer to protect him from undue risks. You *saw* his reaction on the bridge when we were told about Mercatia. Oh, he recovered himself quickly enough - but I didn't need your skills to know how he was feeling at first - it was written all over his face."

Pushing himself away from the desk, he began to pace the floor anxiously. Troi could feel the intense concern for Picard emanating from the Human. Some of his thoughts undoubtedly lay with Starfleet's reputation and with the success of the mission but she knew him well enough to be sure that, mostly, they were for the safety and well-being of his Captain.

Riker stopped abruptly in mid-stride and spun to face her.

"What if he buckles under the pressure down there? How will the Mercatians react? For all we know, the loss of face could be enough not only to jeopardise the mission but also the Captain's personal safety..."

"Will," Deanna interrupted quickly, in what she hoped was a calming tone, "you're letting your worries run away with you. We have no reason to suppose Captain Picard will be in any danger, whatever his reaction to the situation. The Mercatians admire him - they asked for him personally for these negotiations. And," she said firmly, "the Captain assured Admiral Kyoto that he was fit enough to undertake the mission - you heard him yourself."

Riker looked heavenwards, clearly exasperated.

"For pity's sake, Deanna, what was he supposed to say, with the Fleet all but obliterated by the Borg, along with almost all of its senior officers? 'Well, actually, Admiral, after what I've just been through, I'm not sure I can face the Mercatians just now.' I don't think that would have gone down too well, do you?"

Riker's sarcasm stung Troi but she ignored the bait, knowing he was only striking out at her because he felt so helpless. She remained silent, aware it was best to let him give full vent to his frustration.

He turned away from her and began to pace the length of her office again.

"It wouldn't be so bad if we were going to be there to back him up, but we're not." The First Officer's voice was clipped with stress. "The colonists on Velox IV have waited too long already for their medical supplies. We're going to lose another 48 hours as it is, just diverting to Mercatia for long enough to drop off the Captain. We'll be out of communications range practically before he's set foot on the planet."

The Counselor dropped her gaze from Riker for a moment, absently fingering the

datapad which lay before her on the desk. She knew he was right to be concerned; she even shared his foreboding about the Captain's forthcoming mission but a reinforcement of his own doubts wasn't what Will needed right now. What he *did* need was some peace of mind. Deanna wasn't sure she could provide it but she would do her damndest anyway.

Troi rose from her seat and came slowly around the desk. Turning towards Riker, she deliberately stood in his path, so that he had to halt in front of her. She looked up into his familiar, handsome face, the worry so clearly displayed there making her reach out to clasp his arms with her small hands. Even with so much on both their minds, their physical proximity still affected her, as she sensed it did him. But she pushed the unbidden thoughts away and softly addressed him.

"Will, why go on torturing yourself about this when there's no option? We've already established that the Captain was the first and only choice for Mercatia and the Enterprise *must* go on to Velox IV. But he *won't* be entirely alone - you know Worf has insisted he go along and I can't imagine him letting Captain Picard out of his sight for an instant! Worf's been constantly berating himself for failing to prevent the Captain's capture by the Borg and he's not about to let anyone else lay a finger on him. I can't think of a better person to entrust Captain Picard's safety to."

Riker still didn't look convinced but he didn't move away.

"You're right about Worf and the Captain, Deanna. I wouldn't like to try to get past our Security Chief right now, either. But there *is* another option, you know."

The Betazoid looked puzzled and raised one elegantly-arched eyebrow questioningly.

"I could replace the Captain on Mercatia and he could take the Enterprise on to Velox IV."

Deanna dismissed the idea with a perfunctory shake of the head.

"No," she snapped decisively, "that just isn't feasible. The Mercatians want Picard and anyway you don't have the diplomatic experience for a situation like this one. Besides - " it was Deanna's turn to look troubled now - "no-one knows better than I what the Captain went through with the Borg and how fragile his self-image is at present. I accept there's no guarantee he'll be strong enough for the Mercatian deliberations but there are *never* any guarantees. What I do know for certain is that to suggest your replacing him will *definitely* undermine his self-confidence. He won't accept your offer but the damage will have been done."

Riker sighed deeply in acceptance of Troi's words, knowing he must bow to her professional judgement in such matters.

"Okay, Deanna, okay. I won't suggest the switch - but do me a favour? Talk to the Captain, try to assess how he's feeling, will you? Take him through it, shore him up... Hell, I don't know! Just do whatever you can to give him an edge down there!"

Troi squeezed his arms reassuringly. "I'll do everything I can for him, I promise." Then, speaking with a conviction she didn't entirely feel, she added, "He'll come through this, Will. He has a remarkable strength of mind - if he didn't, he wouldn't be with us now."

Riker nodded, withdrawing gently from her grasp; needing to distance himself from her again.

"I know, Deanna. I just hope to God he doesn't have cause to test that strength again on Mercatia."

He turned swiftly away and was out through the doors before she could reply.

Captain Jean-Luc Picard moved methodically around his quarters, gathering various belongings and depositing them neatly in the kit-bag lying open on his bed. His actions were thrifty, yet assured, his body language betraying nothing to the Betazoid who stood quietly watching him from one corner of the room. He cast his eyes quickly over the contents of the bag and, satisfied all was in order, clasped it shut and turned towards his observer.

"You seem to be making a habit of overseeing my packing, Counselor." The tone of voice was deliberately light-hearted. "Are you afraid I'll forget something vital, or curious as to what the contents of my bag reveal about my personality?"

Ordinarily, the rare sight of a smile on the face of her Captain would have warmed Troi but now it troubled her, for it was so obviously forced. Why was it that Humans - and this Human in particular - spent so much time trying to reassure her that all was well, when they must know it was obvious to her that the opposite was true?

With Picard, of course, she knew the answer to her rhetorical question only too well: he firmly believed that the Captain must appear invincible to his crew, or else they would lose faith. She, as Counselor, was the only person aboard - with the possible exception of Guinan - who was privy to Captain Picard's real doubts and misgivings. Even with her, openness did not come easily to him. But the many hours of counselling after the Borg incident had forged a deeper trust between them which, she hoped, would serve her now.

Deanna looked Picard straight in the eye, brooking no argument. "I have to speak to you, Captain. Can we sit down?"

"What is it, Counselor?" The mellow voice was guarded now and without humour.

Troi folded her hands neatly in her lap, relaxed her shoulders. There was no point in avoiding the issue. She took a deep breath and launched in. "The Mercatians, Captain. I sensed your... unease... when Admiral Kyoto first mentioned them. Does it have something to do with what happened during your first visit to their planet?"

Deanna could feel the tension wind itself tight within the Captain's body and she sensed the immense effort of will it cost him not to spring up from the chair and away from her probing. He did not look up at her as he spoke.

"I do confess to some... disquiet... about my visit to Mercatia, yes. But it is nothing you need concern yourself with, Counselor - truly. I'm fine. Just a touch of... pre-diplomatic jitters, that's all."

The Betazoid's mouth set itself into a firm line and she spoke pointedly. "Not your most convincing performance, Captain."

Her directness startled Picard and she saw a whole catalogue of emotions pass across his strong features - anger, denial, frustration - before he raised his hand to his brow, rubbing against the taut skin there, as if to ease the tension he was feeling. When he looked at her again, it was with something more akin to resignation.

"How much do you know about Mercatia, Deanna?"

"Not a great deal," she confessed, sensing something important was about to emerge from the conversation after all. "I know our initial meeting was by accident, when a Federation shuttle crash-landed on Mercatia, and that subsequent contact has been kept to a minimum, to allow their development to proceed as naturally as possible. You were part of the First Contact team sent in after the shuttle crash, weren't you, Captain?"

Picard nodded, lost in the memory. "Yes, I was. The Mercatians were socially and technologically advanced enough to recognise the shuttle crew as space travellers, rather than seeing them as gods or demons, but they were a long way from developing space flight themselves. It was a delicate situation and my team was sent in to minimise the damage caused by premature contact. We expected difficulties over our refusal to supply advanced technology in such a situation - but they never materialised. The people of Mercatia were quite happy to remain in virtual isolation..."

The Captain's voice trailed off and the Counselor took up the thread, hoping to encourage him to continue. "Ah, yes, of course - their distrust of telepaths..."

Picard shook himself from his reverie and, turning to face her, he went on, "Indeed. We discovered it almost by accident. There was a Vulcan on my team, Ensign Sardak and, on one occasion, the leader of the Mercatian Parliament asked why, if the handshakes we had proffered at first were a widely-accepted form of greeting, Ensign Sardak had not extended his hand, also. When I explained that Sardak was a touch-telepath and the random contact with other minds disturbed him, the reaction was immediate and quite worrying. They demanded to know how many others in our group could read minds and they were frantic for us to leave at once."

Picard paused, frowning as he recalled the details from so long ago. "It took a great deal of diplomatic reassurance before we were allowed to beam down again - minus Sardak - and continue our discussions. Eventually it emerged that, some generations past, genetic engineering had resulted in a mutant strain of rogue telepaths, who proved capable of tremendous influence over the majority of psi-null Mercatians. The experiments were banned and the remaining genetic material destroyed. When the last of the mutants died, the problem died with them. But it has left the Mercatians with a loathing for natural telepaths and an almost paranoid suspicion of each others' motives. That is why, since our last visit, they have developed what they call *A'ma'ihitu A'ma'thea* ...the Soulseeker."

Deanna did not miss the momentary hesitation, nor the involuntary shudder which ran through the Captain's body. This, then, was what he feared... She leaned forward, seeking eye contact with the Human. When she found it, she was shocked by the haunted expression there. Instinctively, she laid her hand on his and prompted, "Tell me about the Soulseeker, Captain."

His eyes never left hers as he explained. "It's a mind-linking device, used routinely by the Mercatian Parliament and Courts. It links the consciousnesses of all participants, so there can be no possibility of ill-intent or collusion. And, of course, anyone with telepathic abilities would almost certainly be instantly detected."

Picard cleared his throat, forcing the roughness from his voice. "The use of the Soulseeker on the members of Parliament and... on all members of the Starfleet delegation... was a prerequisite to these negotiations."

He broke off, but Troi did not need him to explain further, for the look in his eyes spoke

volumes.

I don't want them inside my head, Deanna. I don't want anyone inside my head, not yet...

Picard knew he had given away too much of himself and Deanna felt his hurried withdrawal from her as he stood up and crossed to the bed, absentmindedly checking his kit-bag once again.

The Counselor stood up also, moving towards the Human as she spoke. "Captain, I wish I could be there with you, but - "

"Ha!" The Human interrupted, smiling weakly. "Counselor, you are the *last* person they would allow to - "

Deanna held up her hand, interrupting him in turn, so that she could finish. "*But* you knew you would have to face this, sooner or later. It's unfortunate that it's come so quickly but you are strong enough to accept mind-contact, if you can just relax a little..." She reached the bed and paused, not wanting Picard to feel threatened by her closeness again.

The Captain regarded her intently, as if he were determining the sincerity of her words. The ghost of a smile flickered once more across his lean face but failed to reach his eyes. "Now this is truly ironic, Counselor. *You're* assuring *me* that I'm fit to take on this mission? Isn't it traditionally the other way around?"

Deanna returned the smile in full and closed the distance between them. Touching him gently on the upper arm, she nodded. "True enough, sir. But sometimes even the Captain needs his faith in himself restored. And we do all still have a great deal of faith in you."

Picard laid an appreciative hand over hers. "Thank you, Deanna. I hope I can live up to that faith."

Sensing the interview was over, Troi moved towards the door. As it hissed open in front of her, she looked back over her shoulder at the Human, standing, once more, alone and remote.

"I know you will, Captain."

When the ship's Counselor and First Officer arrived at the Transporter Room, it was to find Lieutenant Worf already present and busily engaged checking the co-ordinates for transportation with Chief O'Brien. Seemingly satisfied, he nodded to the Chief and walked over to the newcomers.

Not for the first time, Riker was struck by the impressive sight the Klingon made as he approached. The combination of his sheer size and the perpetual scowl on his face was enough to make an impact on even the most foolhardy opponent. The Human afforded himself a small grin. Quite apart from Worf's impressive service record, which had led to his appointment as Security Chief, his appearance made him a natural for the role. *I hope, for the Mercatians' sake, they don't pick an argument with you today, my friend.*

The thought offered Riker some small comfort in an otherwise frustrating day but his inappropriate expression was not missed by the burly humanoid.

"Something amuses you, Commander?" Worf growled accusingly, fixing his superior officer with a glare fit to freeze the blood.

Riker shook his head dismissively and, out of the corner of one eye, saw Troi hide her amusement at his discomfort behind a neatly-manicured hand.

"No, no - nothing, Lieutenant." He schooled his features back into an appropriately businesslike expression. "Well, Mr Worf - this is not going to be an easy mission for either of you. I trust you feel sufficiently briefed to be of the greatest assistance to the Captain?"

The Klingon came almost to attention in response to the more formal tone. "Yes, sir. Commander Data has been most... *efficient* in providing detailed information on the Mercatians and a history of their contact with the Federation." The words were heavy with remembered vexation at the masses of information the android had provided for his scrutiny. "I have also taken the opportunity of studying Captain Picard's own logs of his Contact Team's meetings with the Mercatians."

Deanna Troi stepped forward to join the conversation, her slight form dwarfed by the two tall males who flanked her.

"A commendable attention to detail, Worf. And what about you - do *you* feel fully prepared for what lies ahead?"

The Security Chief regarded the diminutive Betazoid with some puzzlement. He opened his mouth to speak, then realisation dawned, *The mind probe...* He nodded soberly. "Yes, Counselor. I believe I am prepared. As you know, Klingons do not normally submit willingly to any sort of mental intrusion - but in this case, I am prepared to do whatever I must for the success of the mission and to ensure the safety of the Captain."

The expression on Worf's swarthy face was savagely protective and Deanna could not help but smile. "Then I'm sure Captain Picard is in the best of hands, Lieutenant," she said approvingly.

The Klingon greeted the compliment with an uninterpretable grunt and his eyes slid away from Troi towards the door. Riker looked at the Security Chief sympathetically: he was clearly distracted and impatient for his mission to begin. What was it O'Brien had recounted Worf saying, as he waited for his parents to beam aboard at McKinley Station? Ah, yes... 'I wish they would come, so that it would begin and end sooner!'

Riker shared his disquiet. *The sooner it's all over the better*, he thought sombrely. Something just didn't feel right about this one...

As if Worf had willed them to do so, the Transporter Room doors swished open and everyone's attention was drawn to the figure standing there.

Jean-Luc Picard was by no means tall but there was an air of command about his trim body which somehow lent stature to the man. He held his head high, his jaw thrust out determinedly, matching the mood in his intense grey eyes.

Troi and Riker exchanged a swift glance, each mirroring the other's sense of relief to see the Captain seemingly recovered from his earlier mood. Then Picard strode forward towards them.

"Counselor, Number One, Mr Worf," he acknowledged each of them smoothly,

"everything in order, I trust?"

Riker clasped his hands behind his back and inclined his head fractionally towards his commanding officer. "Aye, sir. The Mercatians await your transport and the Enterprise stands ready to depart for Velox IV on my orders."

"Very well, Number One." The deep voice was brisk and efficient. "Then I see no reason to delay you further. Mr Worf?" The Captain motioned the Klingon towards the transporter platform and joined him there, turning to face his officers once more. "The ship is yours, Number One." Then his tone softened, as he added, "Take good care of her, Commander - and good luck."

Riker smiled warmly. "Thank you, Captain - I will."

"Captain?" Deanna Troi's attractive accent claimed their attention. "I wish you good fortune in your negotiations."

Picard's paler eyes met the Betazoid's dark, expressive ones in a look of mutual understanding. "Thank you, Counselor."

In a gesture Deanna had seen him use many times before, when settling his thoughts, Picard inhaled deeply, then expelled the air sharply through his nose, his shoulders shrugging in rhythm with the staccato breath. He turned towards the control console and raised an enquiring eyebrow. "Chief?"

The stocky man's hands flew deftly over the panel in front of him, making the final adjustments. "Ready, sir."

Picard took a final glance around the room, then nodded to O'Brien. "Energise."

The single word hung in the air as two bodies dissolved into the shimmer of the transporter beam.

The intense humidity hit the two Enterprise officers like a barrage and Picard and Worf felt themselves drenched in sweat almost before they finished materialising on the forecourt of the Mercatian Parliament building. The transparent biodome high above their heads seemed to focus and intensify the heat of Mercatia's setting sun, leaving the Away Team slightly disorientated.

Worf's hand went instinctively to his phaser as he shook his massive head in an effort to clear it. He was determined to maintain his alertness: nothing less than total concentration would suffice if he was to protect the Captain efficiently. Blinking the sweat from his eyes, the Security Chief could see that Captain Picard had been similarly affected but was also regaining control of his senses. Then he saw the Human stiffen to attention and he turned to observe the recipients of his Captain's mark of respect.

The Mercatian delegation was small, but striking - three individuals, biped in habit but bearing little other resemblance to Human or Klingon. Their amphibian lineage was overwhelmingly evident, from the lizard-like heads topped by a hard, fleshy crest which extended down the spine, to their webbed digits. Their horny-looking, grey/green skin sported no body hair that Worf could see, though all three wore grey gauze robes, which covered most of their bodies, while concealing nothing. The clothing, in fact, appeared to be



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entirely superficial: perhaps more decorous than functional, Worf surmised.

One of the Mercatians had stepped forward, drawing in its short upper limbs until the webbed digits touched its torso, then extending them wide into the universal gesture of greeting. The alien's small, golden eyes fixed beadily on the Captain as it addressed him,

"Captain Picard, on behalf of all Mercatia, I welcome you once again to our world. Your presence honours us."

At the sound of its voice, the Klingon's gaze was immediately drawn to their host's most singular feature. A pair of large gill-slits - one either side of its sturdy neck - vibrated noisily as the Mercatian spoke, accompanying its sibilant voice with an eerie, rasping sound.

The Human stepped forward, returning the gesture of greeting and Worf deliberately averted his eyes from the alien, aware that his intense scrutiny might cause offence. He looked, instead, at Captain Picard, as he saluted the Mercatians in his familiar, cultured voice.

"Principal Thomark, it is a pleasure to meet with you once again. I bring greetings from the United Federation of Planets, who are gratified to have this opportunity to extend the peaceful co-operation between our peoples. May I present my colleague, Security Chief Lieutenant Worf, from the planet Klinzhai."

Taking his cue, Worf turned to face the Mercatian delegation and spread his heavily-muscled arms in the appropriate manner.

"Greetings, Lt Worf," Thomark hissed, nodding in the Klingon's direction. "And may I introduce Surrogate Tholmorg," he gestured to the taller of his two companions, then turned and indicated the other, "and Deliberator Thalmar - a member of the Mercatian Parliament and also my mate."

Thomark's long, bifurcated tongue darted in and out of his mouth as he spoke, adding to the strangeness of his appearance. But Picard was unfazed and acknowledged the introductions smoothly. He raised the back of his hand to his glistening upper lip, dabbing at the beads of sweat which were constantly forming there.

"Forgive us, Captain," Thomark lisped apologetically. "Please come inside, both of you. It will be cooler and much more comfortable for you. It is so rarely that we have visitors, we forget how disagreeable you find our controlled areas." He gestured across the wide expanse of glossy green/brown floor, towards the building. "Please, follow me."

The three Mercatians turned slowly around and Worf was not surprised to see that each was equipped with a long, tapering tail which emerged from beneath their robes and rested on the floor, appearing to balance their bipedal stance. The Klingon watched with fascination as they walked before him towards the Parliament Building, their tails setting up a faint, high-pitched squeal as they slithered across the polished surface.

The edifice they approached was certainly impressive and quite unlike anything Worf had ever seen before. Obviously hewn from the same mottled green/brown stone as the floor they traversed, its architectural lines reflected the movement of the seas which covered four-fifths of this world. The frontage was awash with arches and curves: immobile stone carved lovingly into flowing waves and swells, cresting and falling around the doors and windows. The fluid effect was quite startling - so much so that solid rock appeared to move to an eye cast quickly over it.

Worf paused in an archway, inspecting the stone more closely. From this distance he could see its richness: the basic grey/green of the sea - and the Mercatians themselves - formed the canvas for hundreds of criss-cross veins of colour. Thick bands of olive brown were traversed by finer tracings of red, black and beige. Most surfaces on the building's exterior were highly polished but as they moved inside more were left matte, drawing attention to the lighter shades within the rock.

Worf reached out towards a breaking wave crest carved into the doorway in which he stood, compelled by its beauty. His large brown hand slid slowly over the swelling stone. It felt wonderfully cool and smooth beneath his damp fingers, almost sensual. He snatched his hand away guiltily, admonishing himself silently for his distraction.

You are here to protect Captain Picard - not to study the local geology! Then he hurried after the Captain and the Mercatian delegation.

The interior of the building was still intensely humid but noticeably cooler, providing shelter as it did from the sun. Picard and Worf both sighed appreciatively as they were shown into what appeared to be an informal lounge area, where seating and cool drinks awaited them. Carved stone benches, chairs and tables were grouped casually around a large, rectangular sunken pool filled with sea water. Along one length of the pool, stone steps shelved gradually down into the depths.

Thomark turned towards his guests, baring two rows of small, needle-like teeth in what Worf took to be the Mercatian equivalent of a smile. One webbed 'hand' directed them towards some nearby benches, while full pitchers and glasses were placed unobtrusively nearby.

Worf glanced over at his Captain and was reassured to see him raise a glass to his lips and drink deeply - it was obviously a beverage with which the Human was familiar. The Security Chief reached for his own glass and drained it in one draught, hardly aware of the bittersweet flavour of the juice so acute was his need for the fluid. He refilled the container at once but restrained himself to enthusiastic sipping as he listened to Thomark's continuing discourse on their environment.

"The biodomes, of course, provide an invaluable service since without them so much of our time would be wasted returning to the water for comfort's sake. But it is unfortunate that other species find these surroundings so physically distressing." The Principal's gill-slits clicked and hissed as he spoke, expelling small currents of air which, in their new confines, soon reached the noses of the two Enterprise personnel. A strong odour of rotting fish assaulted their airways. It was fortunate both had strong stomachs and were also prepared for the unpleasant aroma: there had been a report of a member of the original contact team vomiting at the feet of his hosts when first confronted with the Mercatian's characteristic halitosis.

Captain Picard smiled reassuringly at the Mercatian. "Please, do not concern yourself on our account, Principal Thomark. Lt Worf and I will acclimatise very rapidly, I'm sure. Any minor discomfort should have passed by the time we begin our deliberations."

Ever the diplomat, Worf thought sarcastically. *I'm sure if I remained here for a year I would find this atmosphere just as irksome as I do today!*

"Ah, yes, Captain Picard," the alien Tholmorg spoke for the first time, the lisping cadence of his voice mirroring the Principal's, "our deliberations." The tall biped moved closer to the Human, placing his glass down on a nearby table. He looked over towards his superior and

enquired, "With your permission, Principal?"

Thomark inclined his Saurian head in assent and Tholmorg continued, "Our Parliament would like to begin the preliminaries early tomorrow, if that would be acceptable to you, Captain?"

"Most acceptable, Surrogate Tholmorg," Picard replied evenly. "May I ask if the schedule for our negotiations has been set?"

"Yes, Captain Picard, it has. We will begin four hours after sunrise with the customary Soulseeker session." The Human felt his mouth begin to go dry but he gazed steadily at the beady-eyed Mercatian, his face impassive as Tholmorg continued, "Provided all is satisfactory, we could commence formal negotiations after *flathta* - our zenith meal."

The slight delay before Picard's reply was enough to make Worf glance over towards the Human but he seemed merely to have paused to clear his throat.

"That seems fine, thank you, Surrogate Tholmorg." The reply came eventually, though Worf thought the Captain's voice sounded hoarser than usual. Then he turned to address Thomark. "In the light of our full schedule tomorrow, Principal, I hope you will not object if Lt Worf and I retire to our quarters for the remainder of the evening?"

The Mercatian looked momentarily startled but recovered quickly, to reply graciously, "Of course not, Captain. You must both be fatigued by the change in atmosphere. It would be most advisable to rest... Thalmara will conduct you to your quarters." He glanced at his mate, who nodded and moved towards the doorway. "Until tomorrow, then, Captain, Lt Worf." Thomark spread his arms once more in salute. "And again, we bid you welcome to Mercatia."

Picard and Worf copied the gesture almost simultaneously as the Human responded, "We are honoured to be here, Principal. Thank you for your gracious welcome."

They turned towards their guide, who moved wordlessly through an arch and out into the hallway. Following the female Mercatian silently along, Worf stole a glance at the man keeping pace beside him.

It was distinctly odd, Worf mused, that Captain Picard should be the one to cut short their discourse with the Mercatians. His commanding officer had an insatiable curiosity when it came to other races, other cultures... He had anticipated a far longer - and most tedious - exchange of pleasantries this evening. And, if the Captain truly *was* feeling fatigued, that was surely a cause for concern. It had not been long since his rescue from the Borg... perhaps he had *not* yet fully recovered...

Picard sensed Worf's gaze on him and shot the Klingon an enquiring look but Worf turned hurriedly away, knowing the Captain would not take kindly to misgivings about his fitness. Nevertheless, he resolved to keep an even closer eye on Picard from now on. He would not have this Human's well-being jeopardised for the sake of politics. Diplomatic links were replaceable but Jean-Luc Picard was not.

Thalmara halted outside a graceful archway framing heavy, deep red drapes. Pushing the rich fabric aside with a webbed hand, she gestured into the room within.

"Your quarters, gentlemen." Her voice was slightly higher in tone than the males' but otherwise the same. "I hope they will be to your liking. A meal is being prepared and will be with you shortly."

Picard was staring distractedly into the room in front of them and it was a moment before Worf realised that he was not going to reply. Turning to face Thalmara, Worf covered the awkward silence as best he could with what he hoped was a suitably gracious word of thanks.

If Thalmara noticed anything amiss, she chose not to show it. She merely smiled and spread her arms wide, before disappearing swiftly back the way she had come.

Worf turned once more to his Captain and cleared his throat. Picard started as the Klingon rumbled, "Shall we go in, Captain?" and propelled him gently into the room beyond.

Lt Worf prowled suspiciously into each corner of the spacious room, methodically scanning every inch with his tricorder. Satisfied there was nothing amiss, he moved towards the archway leading to the bathing and sleeping areas, to continue his task. He paused momentarily and glanced back over one bulging shoulder at the figure seated on a stone bench on the far side of the room.

The Captain had not moved in the several minutes since Worf had begun his security check; he remained slumped wearily on the bench he had found on first entering their quarters. At first Picard had stared distractedly before him, evidently lost in thought, and the Klingon had not liked to interrupt his private reflections. But now the Human's head was in his hands, his face completely hidden and Worf grew increasingly disturbed as the silence continued. At last he could bear it no longer.

"Captain." The deep voice sounded unnaturally loud in the hushed surroundings. "Are you all right, sir?"

Picard raised his head slowly and looked up at the imposing Security Chief. He drew a deep breath, sighed heavily and nodded. "Yes, thank you, Lieutenant. I'm just... fatigued - from the heat, I suppose."

Worf was not convinced but was astute enough to recognise this was not the moment to argue the point. "Is there anything I can get you, Captain?" His voice was more resonant than usual, concern for the Captain softening its normal barking tone.

With some effort, Picard rose to his feet. "No, Mr Worf. I think I'll just take a bath. A good soak and a change of clothes will refresh me, I'm sure." The Human moved towards the archway in which Worf stood but the Security Chief raised a broad hand, halting Picard in his tracks.

"A moment, sir, if you please," Worf growled. "I have yet to check the inner areas. I shall not be long." He turned quickly and disappeared into the next room before the Captain could object.

There was no need for the precaution, Picard felt certain, but his Security Chief was only doing his job, and if it made Worf feel more at ease, so much the better: one of them might as well.

The Klingon was as good as his word and returned a few moments later, gesturing towards the bathing area.

"Everything is secure, Captain. I apologise for the delay." His dark eyes studied the

Human intently from beneath heavy brows, their expression unreadable.

"That's all right, Mr Worf." Picard brushed past, avoiding the stare. "I commend your thoroughness."

Once inside the bathroom, Jean-Luc drew the drapes across the archway, glad of the privacy. Looking around at the facilities, he was thankful to find that most had been adapted for humanoid use - on his first visit, some of the fixtures had been a little... unfamiliar. The bath itself was a smaller version of the pool in the lounge area, though the water here proved to be desalinated and heated and a system of pumps kept it constantly fresh. Jean-Luc could feel his uniform clinging uncomfortably to his body and he peeled it off gratefully, shivering as the air met his damp skin. He placed a large towel on the tiled floor nearby and walked down the stone steps into the bathing pool. The warm water crept gradually upwards, covering his nakedness, until he was standing on the bottom of the pool with the water level just above his waist. A convenient shelf provided a place to sit, so that all but his head was immersed in the relaxing warmth.

Picard slid his body down a little further, letting his head submerge for an instant. Down here the water reverberated with the sound of the pumps feeding the bath and the noise echoed eerily through to his fluid-filled ears. He surfaced again, wiping the water from his eyes and face with both hands, then sliding them back over his scalp and down the back of his neck. He lay back, resting his sleek head against the side of the pool, eyes closed. Physically he grew more relaxed but his mind still raced, going over the events since he and Worf had arrived and projecting, unbidden, into what lay ahead for them tomorrow.

He was ashamed of his poor performance thus far. Up until Tholmorg had mentioned the Souleseeker, he'd been doing quite well but everything had seemed to fall apart at that point. It had been inexcusable to leave the company of their hosts so early tonight, but Jean-Luc had felt it was the lesser of two evils: better a hasty exit than an embarrassing breakdown of self-control.

His normally ordered mind railed in frustrated anger at his inability to control his fears. He sat up suddenly, punching the water in front of him with two clenched fists, sending it splashing up onto the tiled surrounds of the pool.

"Damn it all to hell!" The sudden outburst echoed around the bathing area and Picard half expected Worf to come crashing in to investigate the noise. But the Klingon failed to appear and Picard sank gratefully back into the water again.

He sighed dejectedly. Being at the mercy of his emotions was so *alien* to him. He had always prided himself on his self-control, on his ability to meet the unknown calmly and with an open mind.

He had thought himself recovered after so many hours of counselling and his emotionally-charged visit to his brother Robert - but he had obviously been deluding himself. For, on this very first mission since his release, he had failed miserably to live up to his own standards.

Dear God, he thought angrily, what's happening to me? What did they do to me on that cursed Borg ship to reduce me to this? I can't function this way... I have to get a grip on myself. When I go into that session tomorrow, they'll see everything in my mind... everything...

He began to breathe deeply, deliberately relaxing the tension in his shoulders, arms, fists... attempting to slow the galloping beat of his heart - but it continued to pound in his chest

as he contemplated the consequences of the Soulseeker session.

He knew the shame he felt at losing control of his actions to the Borg was irrational, but still the guilt and remorse swelled within him whenever he thought of the countless lives his weakness had cost. He would never forget the replay of the main viewer's shots of the defeated fleet... Such carnage; such a dreadful loss of life...

They took everything I was. They used me to kill and to destroy and I couldn't stop them... I should have been able to stop them... I tried - I tried so hard. But I wasn't strong enough... I wasn't good enough.

Robert had said he must learn to live with it - but how could he? It *wasn't* simply a matter of accepting his own humanity. Yes, it was probably true that he had grown too accustomed to winning - from the earliest school ribbon, through the Academy and his various commands - but there *had* been mistakes, and losses, along the way. Just - not on this scale...

To have my whole life's experiences taken from me, twisted, used to lay waste to everything I've held dear for the last twenty years. How can they ever trust me again? How can I trust myself?

And tomorrow, his shame would be public knowledge. Bad enough that his mind would be intruded upon so soon after the Borg's violation of him - but to have to share his most private grief and humiliation... He felt physically sick at the thought.

But 'Fleet Command had had no alternative. He had been the only feasible choice for the mission and to have refused it - he might just as well have resigned his commission there and then. And the thought of a future without Starfleet frightened him more than he cared to admit. The whole of his adult life had been sacrificed to his career - and a fair proportion of his childhood, too. If he admitted defeat, left the service - what was waiting for him? But loneliness was no justification for remaining in a position he was no longer fit to hold... If he could just get through this - scrape together enough self-control and self-respect to pull it off... Perhaps then he might truly believe he had made the decision to return to the Enterprise for the right reasons; that he had made the right choice at all...

The sound of Worf's voice in the outer room and the clinking of dishes broke the Captain's reverie. He opened his eyes and stood up slowly, reaching for the towel he had placed beside the pool. Emerging from the water, he rubbed himself down, then wrapped the soft, absorbent cloth around his waist and went through to the sleeping area in search of a clean uniform.

A few moments later, Jean-Luc was dressed and on his way to join Worf. He paused briefly by the mirror, to study the reflection of his angular face. The grey eyes stared back at him uncompromisingly: they were ringed by shadows and a tense frown accentuated the lines across his forehead.

You look, Picard mused, like a man who could do with a good night's sleep but, otherwise, not too bad. And they say the mirror never lies...

Summoning whatever he could of his command persona, he tugged the hem of his tunic into place and walked through the door into the outer room.

The promised meal had arrived and been set out on a large table to one side of the lounge area. Worf stood inspecting the food suspiciously, poking a broad, brown finger at one thing and sniffing another. Even in his present sombre mood, Picard could not help but be amused at the sight of his burly Security Chief behaving like a reluctant food critic. Heartened by the subtle lightening of his spirits, the Human stepped forward towards his officer.

"I hope you've found something to your liking, Mr Worf?"

The Klingon flinched, startled by the Captain's soundless approach and hastily removed a finger from a particularly gruesome-smelling dark green dish. Annoyed at being caught off-guard, he barked churlishly, "It would help if I knew what any of it was!"

A smile tugged at the corners of Picard's mouth and he strolled over to the table. "Perhaps I can be of assistance there. After one or two... unpleasant... experiences on my last visit, I made a point of becoming something of an expert on Mercatian cuisine."

Worf was not slow to pick up on the improvement in his Captain's disposition, nor to encourage it. He regarded the Human curiously, raising one unruly eyebrow and smiling in his peculiarly feral way. "Indeed, Captain? In that case, I would welcome your advice."

"Very well, Mr Worf." The Human led him to one end of the table, pointing to the first dish. "This is *b'ethrii*, a seaweed concoction; very bitter in taste and somewhat... pungent."

The Klingon nodded, "I'd noticed, sir."

"Yes, I thought you might have." The note of humour in his voice was unmistakable as he continued, "And these," his hand swept over a group of dishes in varying shades of blue and green, "are all *b'othta* - a sort of sea cucumber - prepared in various sauces."

Picard proceeded down the table, providing Worf with a description of each item, until the Klingon's mind was awash with culinary information. When the Captain was done, Worf stood staring at the various courses, trying to make sense of it all. Picard looked at him sympathetically.

"There is a simple maxim which I follow, Lieutenant. You might like to do the same." The Security Chief looked at the Human hopefully as he elaborated, "Stick to the fish and avoid anything green." Picard kept a straight face but the warmth of a smile lit his eyes.

Worf snorted and his dark eyes glittered with shared amusement. "Thank you, sir," he boomed. "And, on that basis, shall we eat?"

The Human nodded in agreement and they each approached the table, helping themselves to a selection of food. Sitting at one of the smaller tables, Jean-Luc found, however, that he had little appetite. The shared banter had gone some way to lifting his mood but the improvement lasted only as long as the conversation. As he sat to eat, he became preoccupied once more and a ball of tension formed in the pit of his stomach, suppressing his hunger.

In contrast, once the problems of selection were overcome, Worf ate with gusto, returning to the table more than once to refill his plate. At last he sat back, his huge appetite finally sated, and it was only then he noticed the Human pushing the food around his plate with his fork. It was not a good sign, the Klingon thought, that Captain Picard should become depressed again so quickly, nor that he could not eat; he would need all his strength for the tasks which lay ahead.

"Something wrong, Captain?" Worf enquired as nonchalantly as he was able.

The Human shook his head. "No, no, Mr Worf - it's fine. I'm just not very hungry after all." Jean-Luc pushed the plate away and stood up. "I think I'll get some rest. Goodnight, Lieutenant." He turned away and disappeared silently into the sleeping area.

Worf looked anxiously after him. He was not counting on getting much sleep himself this night, since he could not bring himself to be comfortable about both his and the Captain's being asleep at the same time but it was best that Captain Picard got as much rest as possible, if he was to withstand the rigours of tomorrow's test.

Worf prowled restlessly around the room for a while, his physical tension leaving him unable to relax. *Oh, for a few holodeck monsters at this moment!* he thought angrily.

Once the light had gone out in the bedroom, he positioned himself in a grandly-carved chair from where he could see all the doors in the room, and settled himself to his vigil.

Picard, meanwhile, had bowed to the inevitable. He knew he would find it difficult to sleep and that, when he eventually did, he would probably be plagued by the same dreams as last night. It was not an experience he wished to repeat and so he delved into his bag and retrieved a small container of pills. Beverly had prescribed them shortly after the Borg incident, when the nightmares had been at their most vivid and the few hours of blissful unconsciousness the pills provided had preserved his sanity. Now he needed their help again.

He tipped a single red capsule into the palm of his hand and returned the container to the bottom of his bag. Then he crossed the room into the bathing area. Filling a glass, he tossed the pill into his mouth and washed it down with a mouthful of water. The drug was fast-acting and, by the time he reached his bed, the edges of his vision were already blurring. Gratefully he lay down upon the unrelenting surface, switched off the lights and let the darkness take him.

The adrenalin coursing through his bloodstream had every one of Picard's finely-honed muscles tensed for flight. He fought the impulse, gripping the edge of the huge stone-slab table in front of him, aware of its coolness beneath his unnaturally hot hands. Lines of tension drew taut across his brow and the pulse in his temples beat relentlessly against the two Soulseeker devices now attached there.

He was acutely aware of the small metallic pads and the revulsion he had felt as they were affixed to his skin, for they resembled, all-too-closely, the implants he had worn as Locutus. Then, as now, he had been unable to resist their application; though on this occasion, his forbearance was from a sense of duty, rather than forced compliance.

Picard became aware of Worf who, now that the devices were fitted, had moved closer to stand just behind his right shoulder. Moments earlier, the Klingon had faced this same ordeal - *without fear and with remarkable restraint*, the Human thought, considering his officer's objections to mind-to-mind contact. Jean-Luc had been asked to wait in an anteroom where he had paced anxiously, until Tholmorg had come to inform him that Worf had satisfied the Parliament and would be allowed to attend the negotiations as his guard. By all accounts, all they had detected in his Security Chief was an excess of protectiveness towards Picard and a healthy distrust towards everyone else, which seemed a fairly accurate assessment. But Picard had been slightly embarrassed by Tholmorg's references to Worf's admiration of him; obviously the Mercatian had no idea that such feelings would be regarded as private by the Klingon and not a topic to be discussed - especially with him. It made Picard uncomfortable to think of Worf's devotion, especially now; he had problems enough without trying to live up to Worf's elevated view of his abilities. But, at least, they had been spared the embarrassment of a shared assessment. Jean-Luc hated to think what Worf would make of his present state of mind.

A movement caught Picard's attention and he turned to see Thomark take his place at the head of the long, polished table. He stood for a moment, casting his small, golden eyes around the assembled company. There were twelve Mercatians, including Thomark, seated around the table, each of them wearing the Soulseeker devices. Picard sat at the opposite end of the table to the Principal, shifting uncomfortably at the undisguised interest his presence caused.

"Are we ready, Deliberators?" Thomark's sibilant voice broke the silence and was met by murmurs of agreement from all round the table. "Captain?" The alien looked directly at Picard, obviously wanting to ensure he, too, was prepared.

Not trusting his voice, Picard merely nodded and braced himself for the pain. It was not forthcoming, however. All he felt, initially, was a warmth in each temple when the devices clinging there sprung into action and then... *confusion*... as what seemed like a hundred different voices launched into animated conversation within his mind. He shook his head, giddy from the cacophony of sound - or was it thoughts? - trying to make some sense of it all by concentrating on one 'voice' while filtering out all the others.

The 'voice' in question proved to be Thomark's, skilfully weaving its way through the babble of the other Deliberators' thoughts to reach Picard's mind. Gradually, the clamour of voices receded to a background hum and the Human began to distinguish Thomark's 'words' in his head.

Come, Captain Picard, relax your mind. Be guided by me. You have nothing to fear from us. There will be no pain. Share your thoughts with us and all will be well.

Picard felt his physical and mental tension relax a little and he released the breath he had not known he was holding. He felt the guiding presence of Thomark and was also aware of the supportive susurrus of the other consciousnesses around him. The mists of confusion in his mind seemed to disperse before the warmth of their thoughts and suddenly the Deliberators were leaping through his memories like the pages of a book. From his horror at the touch of the Soulseeker devices, through his arrival on their world and back into the dark days of his pain, they peeled back the layers of his subconscious at amazing speed, pausing only long enough for his emotions to be stirred by each memory, then rushing onward, backward, to the source of his distress.

The giddy ride through time ceased abruptly and a cold sweat broke out on Picard's brow as the image of his body on the Borg's work table swam before him. He felt their cold, unfeeling hands on his flesh, heard the sound of their instruments whirring, relived once again the horror of their soulless presence deep within his mind...

In an instant, the image was gone and Picard's eyes snapped open, his heart pounding in his chest. He slumped forward towards the table, gasping for breath. Worf was at his Captain's side immediately, his strong hands supporting the Human's trembling body as he struggled to sit upright. As Picard looked up, twelve pairs of luminous yellow eyes stared unblinkingly at him and he shrank from the scrutiny, not knowing what it meant. Then Thomark began to speak and the Deliberators turned, almost as one, to face their leader.

"Captain Picard," the Principal's voice hissed softly, "please forgive our abrupt withdrawal but we must consult in private for a moment. We would ask you to wait outside - do you require assistance?"

The Human remained silent, shocked by the sudden severance of the Soulseeker link. As he struggled to find his voice, Worf tightened his grip on Picard's arms and began to help

him stand. With a shake of his massive head, Worf rejected the assistance of a nearby Mercatian who had risen from his seat.

"That will *not* be necessary," the Klingon snarled, his eyes flashing angrily. "I will assist the Captain."

"As you wish, Lt Worf," Thomark lisped calmly, then turned back to face his colleagues, as the Klingon manoeuvred Picard away from the table and out across the glossy floor towards the anteroom.

Picard grasped Worf's hand with his own, signalling that he wanted to pause long enough to control the shakiness in his legs. Mustering as much dignity as he could, he quelled the trembling and drew away from the Klingon, determined to traverse the last few feet alone. Worf hovered at arms' length, ready to catch the Human if he stumbled but, despite his unsteady gait, Picard managed to reach the outer chamber unassisted. Once the doors closed behind them, Picard sank heavily into a chair, shaking once again with the effort that the short journey had cost him.

"Captain." The Klingon's voice boiled with suppressed anger. "What did they do to you?"

Picard looked up into dark, wild eyes and was reminded, once again, just how close to the surface the Lieutenant's savage heritage really was. Worf's thin veneer of "civilised" behaviour was held in place by sheer force of will but, at times, that control was sorely tested.

"I'm all right, Lieutenant. They didn't harm me. It was just the memories... of the Borg... they were so vivid..." His eyes wandered from the Klingon's face, becoming unfocussed as the images began to replay themselves in his head. But he felt his hold on reality slipping and shook himself from the memories, then continued quietly, "And the link... it was severed so quickly. One moment I was there, on the Borg ship and the next -"

"Captain Picard," Tholmorg's rasping voice interrupted him, startling them both. The Mercatian stood in the open doorway, his short arm extended back towards the parliamentary chamber. "Please rejoin us now." It was more of a demand than request and the Human and Klingon exchanged a doubtful glance before advancing through the doorway.

Picard's place at the long table was still vacant and Tholmorg indicated that he should resume his seat. Worf watched as the Captain did so, noting with pride how the Human controlled himself, drawing his shoulders back and holding his head high as he faced the Deliberators once more. Worf moved closer to Picard's chair, placing both hands on its ornately-carved back, the smouldering look in his eyes daring anyone to object to his proximity. But the Mercatians' attention was focussed entirely upon the Human.

"Captain," Thomark spoke with quiet authority, "we realise this is difficult for you but we must ask you to submit to the Soulseeker for another brief session."

Picard stiffened visibly and Worf saw him clasp his hands tightly together on his lap, their knuckles whitening. The Human's strong voice was steady as he answered tersely. "Is there a problem, Principal?"

"No, not at all, Captain Picard," the alien lisped soothingly, slowly shaking his lizard-like head. "It is just that... your mind is quite different from ours and we feel we may have... missed some details in our analysis. We merely require some clarification."

Thomark smiled at the Human and Worf felt his hackles rise at the sight of those rows of yellowed needle teeth. He did not trust this... creature - and its explanation was vague in the extreme. He was reluctant to allow Captain Picard to submit himself to the machine again but what choice did they have? To refuse would cost them the mission before negotiations had even begun.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of Picard's voice quietly agreeing to renew his link to the Soulseeker. Before Worf could even raise an objection, Thomark nodded and the devices attached to Picard's temples glowed into life, as did the others around the table. A hush fell over the room and Worf observed the reactions of his commanding officer with trepidation.

At first, Picard's eyes remained open, staring piercingly at Thomark but then their heavy lids slowly closed. The Captain's upper body swayed momentarily, until he appeared to lean back, steadying himself against the back of the chair. His shoulders dropped and his head eased slowly backwards and Worf could see the Human's chest rising and falling in a slow, deep rhythm. It was curious, Worf thought... almost as if the Captain were asleep. And quite unlike his reactions during the earlier link.

The Klingon glanced around the table and noted that all but one of the Deliberators sat perfectly still and upright, their eyes closed in obvious concentration. The exception was Tholmorg, whose small golden eyes were firmly trained on Picard, their expression veiled.

After a few moments, Picard began to stir, as if waking from a deep slumber and, by the time he sat upright and opened his eyes, the Soulseeker devices had faded into inactivity all around the table. Picard frowned in puzzlement as one of the Deliberators gently removed the pads from his temples; he flexed his neck and shoulders gingerly, as if to remove some stiffness, then turned to address Thomark.

"Principal Thomark?" His tone of voice mirrored his confused expression. "Is the examination over?"

Thomark rose, followed by the other Deliberators. "Yes, Captain Picard, we are finished. The Parliament thanks you for your co-operation and is pleased to inform you that your assessment was satisfactory. If you are in agreement, we will retire now and reconvene after *fathia*, to commence our negotiations."

Worf did not think he had ever seen his Captain look so relieved nor so lost for words. The Human nodded dumbly in assent, then managed to mutter some sort of thanks before Thomark and his colleagues marched sedately from the room.

After long moments of silence, Picard turned to face his Security Chief across the vast chamber, still shaking his head in disbelief. Then his body straightened and his face assumed its familiar, authoritative aspect.

"Come along, Lieutenant," he commanded. "We have preparations to make and not much time."

"Aye, sir," Worf responded gratefully, following the Captain out into the corridor towards their quarters.

Picard closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger,

hoping the pressure would clear some of the fuzziness from his head. The Souiseeker session had left him feeling drained and a little groggy but now was not the time to give in to exhaustion. Since his arrival on Mercatia (and, if he were being honest, for some time before that) his thoughts had not extended further than the machine and the mind link. Now he must use the brief hiatus for the midday meal to reacquaint himself with the facts and figures he would need during negotiations for a trade agreement with the Mercatian Parliament.

His briefing from Starfleet had, fortunately, been quite succinct while the majority of Mercatians still favoured isolationism, there were those who argued that Mercatia needed to advance technologically and should take advantage of the knowledge and equipment the Federation had to offer. In return, they could trade in some of the unique minerals and plant life which Mercatia's seas held in abundance. Samples sent to UFP headquarters had proved most intriguing, especially to the medical sciences, and the Federation were keen to reach an affable agreement, while respecting the Mercatians' desire for minimal contact.

Picard's task, therefore, seemed relatively straightforward: convince any members of the Mercatian parliament who still doubted the UFP's sincerity that their desire for privacy would be upheld and settle upon the basic terms for a trade agreement.

Letters and numbers blurred before his tired eyes and he switched off the datapad which lay before him. Reasoning that, perhaps, a drink and something to eat might refresh him, Picard got up and walked over towards the side table where *flathta* had been laid out. Halfway across the floor, the wave of dizziness caught him, throwing him off balance. For an instant, in his confusion, he thought he was back in the parliament chamber but the image was like quicksilver - gone almost before it had begun. He stumbled forward, groping for support, and brought one of the dishes crashing down from the table onto the stone floor. Worf sprang through the doorway, alerted by the sudden noise and was met by the sight of his Captain leaning against the table and staring, dumbfounded, at a spreading puddle of thick, green liquid at his feet.

"Captain?"

"Oh, Mr Worf." Picard's dizziness had vanished and chagrin swiftly took its place. "My apologies for disturbing you. I seem to have been a little clumsy."

The Klingon strode across the room to Picard's side. "Let me assist you, sir," he offered and bent to help wipe up the mess. The task accomplished, Worf helped himself to a large plateful of food, pleased to note that the Captain, too, was eating this time. "Are your preparations for the negotiations complete, Captain?" he enquired between mouthfuls.

Picard nodded, putting down his fork. "Yes, I think so, Lieutenant. It should be a relatively straightforward process, if Starfleet Command's information is accurate." He glanced at the chronometer on the wall behind Worf and stood up, straightening his uniform and picking up the datapad from the desk. "Time we were leaving, Mr Worf."

The Klingon discarded his plate and stood up also, inclining his head in Picard's direction. "I am ready, sir."

Jean-Luc was headed for the doorway when the dizziness struck again, sending him reeling against his Security Chief. Once more the image of the Souiseeker session leapt, razor-sharp, into his head and then was gone; but, this time, Picard had noticed something odd about the fleeting vision. The image showed the Deliberators seated around the table in the parliamentary chamber, with Thomark at one end... *and himself at the other...* It could not be merely a memory, as he had first thought. It was almost as if he were looking at the scene...

through someone else's eyes. The eerie thought distracted him until the pressure of strong hands gripping his shoulders pained him back to reality. Worf held him in a vice-like grip and was shaking him as gently as he was capable. The Klingon's face was only inches from his own and he called Picard's name repeatedly.

Jean-Luc focussed on the dark eyes in front of him and spoke as emphatically as he could, "I'm *all right*, Lieutenant. Please, let go."

Worf released him instantly and Picard stood rubbing his bruised arms while he tried to explain what had happened.

"I felt dizzy for a moment - lost my balance - but it's passed now. The same thing happened a short while ago, when I knocked the dish onto the floor." The eyes trained on him narrowed in suspicion at this new information but he went on reassuringly, "I'm sure it's just tiredness, Lieutenant, or perhaps relief - a delayed reaction to having got through the Souleseeker assessment. In any case - *I feel perfectly well now.*"

Worf looked sceptical but he could tell from his Captain's tone of voice that discussion on this point was not an option.

As for the Human, he had no intention of mentioning what he had seen during his dizziness; Worf was already mother hen enough without giving him more ammunition. And the negotiations could not be delayed. Better to get everything here finished - there would be plenty of time to worry about minor symptoms when they were back aboard the Enterprise.

They proceeded to the parliament chamber, where the Deliberators were already gathered. The Mercatians rose as the Human and Klingon entered and Picard was ushered to his seat at one end of the long, polished table. Once again, Worf stood just behind his right elbow, hovering like the proverbial spectre at the feast.

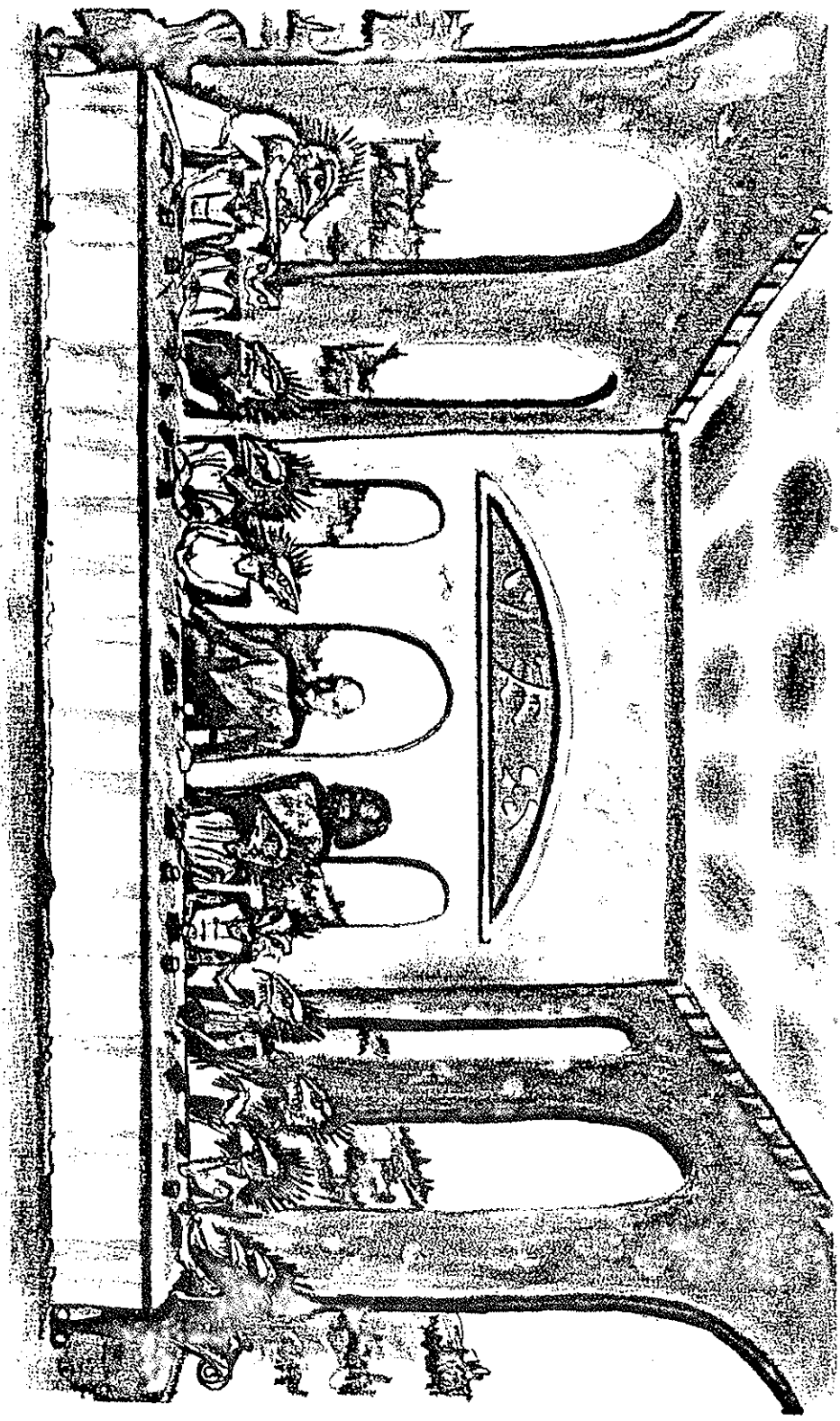
Picard was keenly aware of the difference in mood from his last visit to this room: though they were gathered for formal negotiations, the atmosphere was much more relaxed and convivial, with the Deliberators talking among themselves while waiting for the meeting to commence.

After a few moments, Picard got the distinct feeling he was being watched. The hairs on the back of his neck bristled and, turning his head slowly to the right, he saw Tholmorg staring fixedly at him. The Surrogate was, apparently, unconcerned that his interest had been spotted for, rather than look away, he continued to gaze steadily at Picard. His alien features were unreadable by the Human but, somehow, that made the attention all the more disconcerting. Thomark was calling the meeting to order and Picard dragged his eyes away from the Surrogate but he remained uncomfortably conscious of Tholmorg's eyes upon him.

The Principal launched into an opening address, outlining what the Mercatians hoped to achieve during the course of the negotiations and detailing the promising results of the Federation's latest tests on Mercatian mineral and plant samples. It was clear that Thomark was well aware of their potential value to the UFP and was determined to win the best possible agreement for his people. Several Deliberators nodded in accord and turned with interest to Picard as Thomark addressed him directly. "Captain Picard, we would like to know what the Federation is prepared to offer in return and how you intend to administer this trade while protecting our seclusion?"

The Human rose confidently to his feet, his answer already forming in his mind but, as he opened his mouth to speak, a peculiar feeling of disorientation washed over him. He

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seemed to be watching himself stand to address them once more; reliving the last few seconds from somewhere outside his own body... The confusion vanished abruptly and he found himself facing a circle of expectant golden eyes. His mind groped for clarity of thought and he stuttered into the first few words of his reply. But, as he went on, his assurance grew and the words came more smoothly. Eventually he felt the beads of nervous perspiration drying on his brow and he relaxed into full diplomatic flow.

"So, Deliberators, I hope you will see that the Federation is very mindful of your concerns. We believe our proposals can facilitate healthy trade - which will be of immense benefit to Mercatia - while maintaining minimum contact with other races." Picard's well-modulated tones echoed boldly around the parliament chamber and he smiled reassuringly at the assembled group as he reclaimed his seat.

The sound of a chair scraping against the smooth floor drew everyone's eyes towards Tholmorg, who had risen from his place at the table. "And what of those of us who do *not* support this isolationism, Picard?" The Surrogate's lisping voice was harsh with dissent and the Human frowned in puzzlement at the unexpected onslaught. "Not all Mercatians are afraid of their own shadows. We do not wish to live in the past, hiding from other races for fear of 'contamination'. We are ready for full integration and the greater benefits it will bring and we are not prepared to accept the few crumbs you offer in return for our 'protection'." He spat the words venomously, his long tongue lashing in and out between parted lips. "What does the Federation offer us?"

The challenge was unmistakable and Picard's mind raced. It was clear, from a quick glance around the table, that Tholmorg's outburst was as unexpected by most of the Deliberators as it had been by him but there were a few who murmured their support for this new position. Seasoned diplomat as he was, Picard knew he must defuse the situation quickly, without causing offence to either camp. He was not unaccustomed to meeting such opposing points of view around the same table but it was most unusual for it to occur without prior warning. He was at a loss to understand how the Federation's representatives could have missed this undercurrent of dissatisfaction. No matter. What was important now was... was...

His head ached furiously and a pulse drummed loudly in his ear. He was losing track of his thoughts... He fought the confusion determinedly - *Not now! Not now!* This was too important a moment to lose control...

What was important now was to... was to acknowledge... acknowledge both points of view; to soothe frayed tempers, so that a compromise could be worked out...

"Surrogate Tholmorg," Picard began in conciliatory tones, still struggling against the fogging in his mind. "I must confess that the Federation had no idea the people of Mercatia had differing views on these issues. However, I am sure with further discussion -" His words trailed off as his thought processes were interrupted by a totally incongruous vision:

The grey/green water rose and fell around him and he dived beneath the surface, povering through the murky depths after his sighted quarry. His powerful jaws closed around the firm flesh and the smell of his prey, the taste of its blood in his mouth, excited his senses as he tumbled over and over through the waves...

Picard's senses reeled and bile rose in his mouth. As he fought the gagging sensation he was plunged, once more, into the surroundings of the parliamentary chamber. He was on his feet, both hands gripping the edge of the table as he bent over it. He swallowed hard and raised his head, trying desperately to remember what he had been saying before -

"...can we be expected to negotiate with someone who is obviously unfit to take part in

these proceedings?" The blunt question coming from one of Tholmorg's supporters overrode Picard's frantic attempts to pick up the threads of his speech.

There was a general hubbub of comment around the table, then Thomark stood up and raised his hand for quiet. "Deliberators, the Parliament of Mercatia is not given to such hasty decisions. We should give Captain Picard a chance to explain these... lapses. Captain?" Thomark turned towards the Human expectantly.

"Captain," Worf's deep growl was loud in his ear, "let me - "

"No!" The Human interrupted stridently, bringing a hush to the chamber. "As you were, Lieutenant. Deliberators, I apologise for my loss of concentration. I'm just a little fatigued, that is all. What I wanted to say was that, with further discussion, I am sure we can reach an agreement to suit all parties. Surrogate Tholmorg," Picard turned to face the tall Mercatian, praying he could stay lucid enough to sort this mess out. "The Federation does not merely offer 'crumbs', as you put it - we have resources which will be of immense benefit to your people and we are more than happy to share them with you. And, perhaps, in light of the changing attitudes on Mercatia, a gradual programme of integration could be formulated - "

"Out of the question!" Thomark lisped emphatically, his gill-slits clicking in indignation. "The people of Mercatia have no desire for integration! What you suggest is impossible. Tholmorg's views are not representative - "

"Of you and your cronies!" Tholmorg hissed loudly. "But *you* do not represent the true views of the majority. While we sit back in glorious isolation, the rest of the Federation passes us by! How do we know that we are getting the best 'resources' in return for our goods? How can we tell what the Federation is withholding from us, when we remain shackled to our planet? Why should we trust them? What we need is an Ambassador to the Federation; someone who could ensure Mercatia is fairly dealt with... someone to go out among the other peoples of the UFP and see that our best interests are served."

"Impossible!" Thomark cried again. "Such a person would be open to all manner of alien influences. No true Mercatian would wish to expose himself to such defilement."

Other sibilant voices rose to join in the fray and Picard knew the situation was spiralling out of control. It was up to him to get the meeting back to order, as he had in many similar circumstances... Wincing at the pain in his head, he raised his voice as loud as he dared. "Deliberators, Deliberators - please. Calm yourselves and listen to one another. The situation is not intractable. What we need is to... is to find..."

He stuttered to a halt, confused and wretched. What in God's name had he been about to say? His head felt so strange...

An ambassador... what these people needed was an ambassador... Or was it? No - no, that wasn't it. What they needed was... was...

"Captain Picard! Sir! You must stop this!" This time, Worf's tone was emphatic and Picard knew his officer was right - he could not go on.

"I'm sorry, Deliberators. I regret... I must ask for a recess." Picard began to sweat profusely as a sudden wave of paranoia swept over him. His eyes darted nervously around the chamber. "I regret I am not... I am unable..." He lapsed feebly into silence, wishing only to escape the crowded room. He couldn't think straight, couldn't breathe. *Too much noise... too many people...*

He was peripherally aware of Thomark's voice halting the proceedings, as Worf guided him out of the chamber and along the corridors to their quarters. Once inside, the Klingon helped him to his bed, then disappeared again. Picard thought Worf might have said where he was going but he could not quite recall...

His mind seemed to be enshrouded in a dense fog and he was stumbling blindly about in it, trying desperately to find himself. The pain between his temples grew worse, until he could not bear to keep his eyes open. So he sank back onto the bed and lay immobile, lost in confusion.

Having asked directions, Worf strode angrily along the maze of corridors on his way to the Communications Centre. Even though he knew it was probably futile, he nevertheless felt compelled to send a subspace message to the Enterprise and try to hasten their return. The mission to Velox IV could not, realistically, be completed in less time than originally allotted and Commander Riker was, Worf knew, already anxious to be back at Mercatia as soon as possible... but he had to do *something*. It was simply not in his nature to stand idly by while the Captain's condition deteriorated by the hour... It had been almost more than the Klingon could bear to witness Picard's mental disintegration during the negotiations; he had felt humiliation on Picard's behalf while the Human had seemed incapable of comprehending his disgrace. And the shambling, confused individual Worf had just left in their quarters bore so little resemblance to the eloquent man Worf admired that he feared for the Human's sanity.

If only he could believe that some sort of physical affliction were responsible... but the periods of lucidity and confusion seemed totally random. One minute Picard was strong and decisive, the next almost incoherent. The only other time Worf had witnessed such aberrant behaviour had been on Earth, in a male relative of his adoptive father - and that man had been declared insane. Drugs and psychotherapy had controlled the man's mood swings but the withdrawn and jaded figure who emerged from treatment did not compare with his former self. Such a thing would never have occurred in Klingon society, Worf thought angrily. The man would have been helped to perform *Hegh'bat* and, thereby, end his life with honour.

Worf wished fervently - and uselessly - that Doctor Crusher were with them, or Counselor Troi. If the Captain had been in physical danger he could have handled the situation with ease but it was obvious his problems were not of that nature and Worf felt ill-equipped to help him. At first, he had thought the Captain's illness might have been caused by the Soulseeker but, if that were the case, why was *he* not affected in any way? And Captain Picard had not been himself that first evening, before he had even experienced the alien machine. No - the Klingon was forced to admit that it was far more likely that Captain Picard had been damaged in some way by the Borg...

It was his duty now to protect Picard from further harm and humiliation and that meant putting an end to these negotiations. The Captain was in no fit state to continue and Worf would not allow him to debase himself further.

He reached the Communications room and quickly despatched his message, then began to retrace his steps back to the Captain, silently entreating every power the universe might hold to bring the Enterprise swiftly back to Mercatia.

He dropped to all-fours, slithered across the wet tiles at the edge of the pool and slipped into its depths. The warmth and moisture caressed his dry skin and his nostrils flared hungrily as he caught the female's

scent in the water. He swam towards her and she turned lazily, presenting her back to him. He embraced her, the powerful suckers on his limb-joints adhering instantly to her sides and she began to lash her tail, propelling them through the water in the ritual manner. The rhythmic undulations of her spine pressed the firm tips of her crest into his softer belly-flesh and the sensation enflamed him. He squeezed her pliant body between his limbs and matched the powerful movements of her tail with his own, driving them faster and faster into the dance, until the sound of the water rushing past their bodies echoed the roar of blood in his ears...

The door chimed insistently, the incongruous noise repeating over and over until Picard woke with a jolt, covered in sweat. He sat bolt upright, still in the throes of the vivid dream and was embarrassed to find how vigorously his body had responded to the powerfully erotic images. As he crossed the room to the door, he hoped fervently that his visitor, whoever it might be, would not notice his discomfort.

Straightening his uniform, Picard pulled aside the heavy red drapes which covered the doorway and came face to face with Tholmorg.

"Captain Picard," the Mercatian lisped ingratiatingly, "I was concerned by what occurred at our meeting. I came to enquire how you were feeling...?"

Tholmorg's thin lips drew back into a predatory smile and the Human took an instinctive step backwards. He didn't know why he felt so threatened by this particular Mercatian but the feeling, though irrational, was strong and urgent. Every fibre in his body told him to run but, instead, he turned away from Tholmorg towards the side table, moving with deliberate ease. He reached for a pitcher of juice and some glasses then, looking back over one shoulder, he said evenly, "I am feeling a little better, thank you, Surrogate Tholmorg." Picard held a glass of juice out towards the Mercatian but Tholmorg declined the offer with a wave of one webbed hand, as the Human continued, "But I must confess, I still do not feel entirely... myself." Picard turned back towards the table and raised his own glass to his mouth, sipping at the cool yellow liquid. Then he carefully set the drink down. "I had thought, perhaps, that it might be some after-effect of your Soulseeker - "

"No, Picard. It was *not* the Soulseeker."

The change in the Mercatian's tone was unmistakable. Picard spun to face him, in time to see him signal for two other Mercatians to join him in the room. They stood, alert and poised, one either side of the doorway.

"My personal guard, Captain," Tholmorg rasped coldly, gesturing towards the intruders.

The Human's eyes narrowed in suspicion and a muscle twitched in his jaw. "What is the meaning of this, Tholmorg? *What has been happening to me?*"

"You have become... a pawn, Captain Picard - in an old and most clandestine game."

"I am no-one's pawn, Surrogate." Picard's voice was quietly defiant. "But please enlighten me as to what 'game' it is we are supposed to be playing."

The Mercatian laughed: a peculiar, warbling sound caused by his vocal cords and gills vibrating in harmony. "Oh, well done, Captain, well done! To be so calm in the face of your own ignorance! And after all you have suffered since your arrival..."

The Mercatian's mock sympathy enraged Picard. What did this creature know of his suffering? *Hæv* did he know?

"Oh, yes, Picard," Tholmorg responded to the anger so plainly visible in the Human's eyes. "I know what has been happening to you: the pain, the visions... the nightmares." Tholmorg's golden eyes glowed menacingly at him. "Your doubts, your confusion, your fear - I have seen it all, shared it all... from *within*."

Jean-Luc's eyes widened with horror as he realised what Tholmorg was saying. "You - " His voice cracked and he cleared his throat loudly. "You're telepathic! But the Soulseeker - "

"- Is not capable of breaking my shielding, Picard. There have been several generations of my kind since the original experiments and our abilities have increased with each birthing. The machine is a foolish conceit insofar as detection is concerned - but it does provide useful access to the minds of others."

Picard's brain could hardly assimilate all this new information fast enough to make sense of it. A telepath! On Mercatia - in its Parliament! Using the Soulseeker to enter minds undetected and influence them any way he chose... The implications were frightening.

As his mind raced, he continued to speak to Tholmorg as calmly as he could. "But why me, Tholmorg? What possible use can I be to you, when you already directly influence the minds of the Deliberators?"

"Because, Picard," Tholmorg said angrily, "I cannot *force* them to do my will without revealing myself." He hissed impatiently, striding back and forth in front of the Human. "And my more *subtle* influences have not been sufficient to overcome their petty fears and prejudices! But they trust you, Picard, and respect your judgement. With your support, I shall become the first Mercatian Ambassador to the Federation - and escape the choking confines of this place."

And be free to use your malevolent talents on countless other unsuspecting victims, Picard thought with revulsion.

Keeping his voice carefully neutral, he responded, "You must realise I cannot support you, knowing what you intend."

The Mercatian stopped pacing and advanced on the Human, eyes blazing. "And *you* will come to understand, Picard, that you have no choice."

The sound of footsteps outside in the corridor distracted Picard just long enough for Tholmorg to draw a weapon from a concealed pocket in his robe and press it against the Human's chest.

"You will be silent," the Surrogate whispered menacingly, his rancid breath making the bile rise in Picard's throat.

Worf pushed his way unsuspectingly through the drapes and was assaulted on both sides. Despite his bulk, the two powerful Mercatians quickly overcame his resistance. They secured the Klingon's hands behind his back and hobbled his ankles, leaving him standing, rigid with fury and frustration, in the centre of the room. The guards retired a little from their captive but remained alert, watching the Klingon and Human for any sign of trouble.

"Captain, are you unharmed?" The Security Chief asked gruffly, seeing the weapon trained on his Commanding Officer.

Picard nodded. "Yes, Mr Worf - unharmed. I believe the Surrogate wants my co-operation more than my blood - "

"Enough, Picard!" Tholmorg said brusquely, withdrawing the weapon from the Human's chest. He turned to face Worf, who looked down on the shorter Mercatian with undisguised contempt.

"I *knew* you could not be trusted, Tholmorg..." the tall Humanoid uttered in disgust.

"Silence!" thundered Tholmorg. "I have no interest in your opinions, Klingon!" He turned his head to look at the Captain once more. "One way or another, Picard, I shall have your co-operation. You will support my position at these negotiations, or the life of your officer will be forfeit."

Worf opened his mouth to protest but was silenced by the pressure of the weapon's barrel against his temple. His body stiffened with suppressed rage and he stared at Picard.

Worf's face was that same mask of pride and defiance which he always wore when facing death but the look in his eyes made the Captain shudder involuntarily. Picard could see nothing but trust in the Klingon's steady gaze and he shrank from the enormity of living up to Worf's faith in him.

"Hesitation, Captain?" The alien's sibilant voice cut through the tension, startling Picard. Tholmorg was breathing hard in his excitement and Picard's gaze was drawn away from the Klingon to rest on the fluttering gill-slits in either side of Tholmorg's neck. He stared, mesmerised, at them as the Mercatian went on, "Come now - I would have thought there was more than enough blood on your hands, Picard, after your *association* with the Borg..."

The Surrogate's lisp on the word at once angered and appalled the Human. Did Tholmorg truly think that he had co-operated in *any* way with the Borg? And if he did, how many others suspected the same but had not felt able to voice their suspicions? He *had* fought them, tried to be strong - but... *had* there been a moment when his resistance had seemed pointless? When he had just wanted to stop the pain and had given in? Was that what Tholmorg had seen in his mind? *Was* that co-operation?

All the old doubts and dreads began to well up inside Picard, paralysing his thoughts and he felt his knees buckling as his legs shook with the strain of supporting his weight. Suddenly, just the act of remaining upright was almost more than he could cope with.

"Sir!" Worf protested through gritted teeth, unable to comprehend the Human's silence.

Idiot! Idiot! Picard berated himself mentally. He's inside your head, dammit; seeing your fear, goading you, manipulating... Fight it, goddamn you! Fight it - don't let yourself be used again!

He met the alien's disdainful gaze as steadily as he could, clenching his fists tightly behind his back to stop their shaking. As he fought to keep the tremor out of his voice, beads of perspiration stood out on his brow.

"Lt Worf's life is not mine to grant or take away, Tholmorg. He and I both took an oath to Starfleet - an oath to perform our duty no matter what the personal cost. Both of us are prepared to give up our lives rather than accede to your requests. Nothing you can say or do will alter that fact."

Once more, the eerie sound of Tholmorg's laughter rang through the room. "Bravo, Picard!" His voice was heavy with sarcasm. "A well-rehearsed performance, indeed. And how am I supposed to react, in the face of so much nobility of mind? Shall I lay down my weapon and beg your forgiveness?" He looked towards the firearm, still pressed tightly



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against Worf's skull. "No - I think not. I believe you are so used to victory, Picard, that you doubt my sincerity. Perhaps a small lesson in how mistaken your judgement can be will make you more... compliant."

Picard watched with despair as the alien's webbed thumb stroked a dial on the side of the weapon he held. A faint, high-pitched hum filled the air. In that moment Picard knew, with a dreadful certainty, that events were totally out of his control. Helpless, he looked towards Worf.

The Klingon remained still, his brown eyes locked with Picard's. His gaze betrayed no fear, no doubts -

Dear God, Picard pleaded silently, not again. Not so soon. Don't make me go through this again so soon...

Worf's face blurred before him as his eyes filled with tears of frustration. He swallowed convulsively, desperate to regain control. A single tear spilled over and trickled down his cheek, clearing his vision enough to see Worf's expression change. Where, before, he had seen only trust, there was now a look of utter disbelief. The Klingon's dark gaze bored into his soul and he could not escape the terrible disappointment there.

The moment seemed to last forever, so that, later, he could not remember how long it was before Tholmorg pulled the trigger. The hum of the weapon ceased and the only noise was the heavy thud of the Klingon's massive body hitting the floor. The Mercatian gestured quickly to the guards to remove the corpse. Picard looked on, numb with shock, as they struggled with their heavy burden, eventually managing to drag it, feet first, out of sight.

Tholmorg turned towards Picard, leaning close until his breath was warm and fetid against the Human's face.

"Remember, Picard - when the others died, it could be said in your defence that you were in no position to prevent it. But this - " he gestured in the direction the guards had taken - "this you did of your own free will. You could have saved him, Picard - but you did not. What price nobility now?"

The alien turned and strode from the room. Picard heard him issue instructions for the guards to remain outside the doorway, then his footsteps retreated down the corridor.

Only then did the Human allow himself release. He sank into a chair and buried his head in his hands, weeping openly.

When he opened his eyes, the world was blurred. There was a dull ache deep inside his skull and, as he swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat up, his stomach heaved threateningly. A groan escaped his lips and he closed his eyes once more; if he remained still, perhaps the rest of the world would stop spinning...

After a few moments he cautiously opened his eyelids again and the blurred images slowly drew into focus: a small room, sparsely furnished with bed, stool, basin and toilet. Bars across the exit - a prison cell. *What the...?* Then the memories came flooding back: Tholmorg, the weapon, the high-pitched whine droning louder and louder...

With a roar of rage he flung himself across the confined space and against the bars,

grasping them with both hands and rattling them furiously but they stood firm under the assault.

He struck out at the cold unyielding stone wall, then dropped his forehead to rest briefly against his bruised fist, his back bowed in frustration. Standing upright once more, he began to pace like a caged animal, his eyes darting around the cell, alert for any hint of escape, dangers, explanations.

Why was he still alive? Tholmorg had pulled the trigger - of that much he was certain... and yet he lived! The thought enraged Worf further, for the manner of their passing was all-important to his people. He would have preferred to die with a weapon in his hand, like a true warrior but, nevertheless, he felt he had faced death squarely, with courage and defiance... and survived! He felt somehow... cheated. He had been manipulated; played for every ounce of drama his death could provide and then discarded. Denied his honourable end. But for what purpose? To rot in a prison cell? Or to be used as a bargaining chip in someone's political game?

And the Captain? What has become of the Captain?

As he thought of his commanding officer, a bitter feeling of betrayal rose in the Klingon's heart but he pushed it away. This was not the time for such matters! His only concern now was Captain Picard's whereabouts and condition - that and only that. Shame burned hotly within him at this second failure to protect the Human. After witnessing first hand the terrible consequences of his blunder in allowing Picard to be taken by the Borg, Worf had vowed never to let it happen again. But now... Where was he? What were they doing to him? Was he even still alive?

The need to escape, the need to *know*, was all-consuming. It swelled like a malignant growth inside the Klingon's chest until he felt his lungs would burst.

Muffled voices outside his cell brought Worf to his senses and he shot across the tiny room, peering out through the bars and along the corridor. The two Mercatians who approached were instantly recognisable as Tholmorg's personal guard. They did not appear to be carrying weapons but those might be concealed, he knew.

Worf backed off from the bars, towards the rear of his cell. He stood poised for action, balanced on the balls of his feet, flexing his arms and shoulders. If they were here to attempt interrogation or to kill him, he would at least take one or both of them with him.

The pair stopped directly outside his cell door. One reached for the lock, inserted an old-fashioned metal key and swung the door open. Then the second Mercatian took a step inside his cell and, setting his beady eyes upon the Klingon, declared curtly, "You will come with us, Lt Worf."

Little more than an hour had passed when Picard's sombre meditation was interrupted by the return of the Surrogate.

Tholmorg brushed aside the drapes and strode confidently into the guest quarters to find Picard seated at the desk, his hands steepled as he rested his cleft chin lightly against them. The Human's eyes had that unfocused look about them of a man deep in thought.

"Picard," the Surrogate lisped expectantly, "it is time to return to the parliament

chamber; the Deliberators are waiting to recommence negotiations. I trust you are now ready to support my proposal that I should serve as Mercatian Ambassador?"

Picard turned towards Tholmorg, a blank expression on his bony face. He was peripherally aware of the Mercatian's words and a small voice in his mind told him he must reply. He concentrated hard and lucidity swam up through the cloying fog of disbelief which had overwhelmed him a short while ago.

"My answer has not changed, Tholmorg - I cannot help you." Picard's normally sonorous voice sounded tired and indistinct but the meaning of the words was clear enough.

"Then you are more of a fool than I had thought," sneered Tholmorg. "You know there is no limit to what I will do to achieve my objectives. If you will not co-operate willingly, I shall reinstate the mindsnare."

Picard blinked and his eyes focussed sharply on Tholmorg. "Mindsnare?"

The Surrogate nodded. "The name my kind gives to the mental link we use to control another's thoughts and dreams. You have had some experience of the technique, Captain, but I promise you: whatever you have felt so far is only the beginning. At first you mind was strange to me but I have the measure of it now." The Surrogate drew back thin lips over his yellowing teeth and grinned scornfully at the Human. "Your mind is weak, Captain - especially after your assimilation by the Borg. It will be so simple to gain total control over your actions. I will use you as the Borg used you - as my instrument of destruction. At my bidding, you will kill Thomark, in the name of your Federation. You will be disgraced and the UFP held in disrepute. They will be eager to atone, to please us. I will assume leadership of the Council and use my greater influence to achieve my goals. You cannot win, Picard. Why choose the more painful route to the same end?"

Revolted by the prospect of becoming Tholmorg's marionette, Picard turned his face away from the Surrogate and walked over to one of the windows. He stared out at the awesome view: a sheer, rough-hewn cliff overlooking the sea, which crashed and pounded in huge, grey/green waves onto the base of the rock on which the parliament building stood.

Jean-Luc felt about as exposed as that cliff - but nowhere near as strong. He must play for time, he knew. He could not risk Tholmorg attempting the mindsnare now, for he might not be able to withstand its influence long enough to do what he must. Shoulders drooping and eyes downcast, he turned back to the Mercatian.

"Very well, Tholmorg."

The Surrogate blinked in surprise at his quiet acquiescence. "You submit, Picard?"

The Human nodded. "I will do as you ask... without the need for the Mindsnare."

Tholmorg's lisping voice dripped with derision as he replied, "So be it, Captain. But do not be too hard on yourself - you have good reason to fear the 'snare and you have done well to avoid it." He gestured towards the door. "Let us not keep the Deliberators waiting, then... and remember - " Picard's movement towards the door was halted by the warning note in Tholmorg's voice. "No tricks, Picard. I can crush your mind in an instant - and take pleasure in the action. Do not disappoint me, Captain."

They walked to the parliament chamber in silence and, Picard noted, without escort. Tholmorg was, clearly, supremely confident in his own abilities or he would not have

dismissed the guard.

Obviously, without Worf, he does not consider me much of a threat... Without Worf... Picard felt a tight band of pain across his chest at the thought of his Security Chief but he breathed through it, pushing the feelings of grief aside. Those feelings must be dealt with, he knew, but now was not the time.

They reached the imposing doors to the Chamber and Picard paused on the threshold. The doors opened and Tholmorg moved to stand by the Human's shoulder. So quietly that Picard barely caught the words, the Surrogate hissed, "I am *with* you, Captain." And they walked side by side into the presence of the Mercatian parliament.

Thomark rose to greet them as they resumed their positions at the long table.

"Captain Picard, we are pleased to see you recovered. Are you quite sure you feel able to continue at this point?"

The atmosphere in the room crackled with tension and all eyes were trained expectantly on the Human. Picard gazed unwaveringly at Thomark and nodded fractionally.

"Yes, thank you, Principal. I am quite sure."

There was a flurry of hushed comment around the table, abruptly stilled when the Principal spoke again.

"And Lt Worf - will he not be joining us?"

"Mr Worf is, unfortunately, indisposed, Principal." Tholmorg interjected in concerned tones. "He will not be able to attend this session but--"

"Lt Worf is dead." The Human's powerful voice reverberated its stark message around the lofty chamber. Picard was on his feet, knowing he must expose Tholmorg swiftly and succinctly; expecting to feel his conscious will ripped from him at any moment. "He was murdered by Surrogate Tholmorg in an attempt to force my co-operation in his bid to become Ambassador to the Federation."

The Human paused momentarily, surprised both by the absolute silence which greeted his revelations and by the fact that he still had the free will to make them. He turned and faced Tholmorg, who sat perfectly still, his lizard-face a dispassionate mask.

"Your Surrogate is a telepath, Deliberators, who has been using his skills covertly on all of you, to influence the decisions of this parliament. He is dangerous and unprincipled and I urge you to -"

"Captain Picard," Thomark interrupted the Human's impassioned plea in a calm and steady tone. "We congratulate you on your courage and honesty but please be assured, there is no cause for concern."

Picard looked puzzled for an instant, then his grey eyes flashed angrily. "No cause for concern? Principal Thomark, I do not think you appreciate what has been happening here. Tholmorg used his abilities to enter my mind - he has been manipulating my thoughts, my dreams; it was he who was responsible for my breaking down during our negotiations..."

"All that is true, Captain." Thomark remained unmoved by the Human's accusations.

"Except that our Surrogate himself possesses no such skills. He used the Soulseeker to establish a link with you - as he was instructed to do by this parliament." He paused to let the information to sink in.

Jean-Luc looked blankly at Thomark for a moment, then dropped abruptly down into his chair. "Then this has all been -"

"A test, Captain, yes. An elaborate and, at times, painful one - but only of necessity."

The Human stared, dumbfounded, at the Mercatian leader. Then indignation began to smoulder in his eyes and harsh words rose in his throat; words he knew, despite everything, he must not express.

"Why?" he cried passionately, the single syllable carrying all the anger and horror in his heart.

"We deeply regret the pain that you have had to endure, Captain Picard, but we had no choice," Thomark explained, appearing moved, at last, by the Human's obvious suffering. "You came to our table full of self-doubt and confusion. If you could not trust yourself, how could *we* trust you? And if we could not trust *you*, its chosen advocate, how could we trust the Federation itself? It was necessary to prove, beyond all doubt, that you were above corruption and to do that we had to push you to the very limits of your endurance."

Picard shook his head slowly, in profound disbelief and his expression changed to an eloquent plea for understanding. He looked up at Thomark and spoke quietly, his voice hoarse with distress. "Even to the point of killing my officer?"

Thomark nodded toward Thalmara, who walked to the great doors and drew them open. Worf stood in the doorway, flanked by the two Mercatians who had acted as Tholmorg's henchmen.

The Klingon looked a little unkempt and he scowled at the occupants of the room from beneath thunderous brows. Nevertheless, his wrathful visage was the most welcome sight Picard had had in days. The Human leapt from his chair and crossed swiftly to the door, clapping the broad shoulders of his Security Chief with both hands.

"Worf! Thank God! Are you all right?"

Worf stared straight ahead, avoiding the Captain's eyes, as he said coldly, "I am unharmed, Captain."

Picard released the Klingon from his grasp and, casting an anxious eye over his officer, turned back to the Mercatians.

"Under the circumstances, Deliberators, I would like to spend some time with the Lieutenant - *alone*."

"Of course, Captain." Thomark rose to join them, speaking in his most placatory fashion. "You must both take as long as you need to recover from these... experiences... before we commence negotiations in earnest."

Picard's voice was a model of studied tolerance as he replied, "The remainder of today will be sufficient, Principal. Then I suggest we conclude our negotiations as swiftly as possible. The Enterprise will soon be returning."

"Indeed, Captain, indeed. We will begin first thing tomorrow."

"Very well. But for now I will bid you good-day, Principal. Lieutenant?" Picard signalled for Worf to join him, then spun on his heel and marched decisively from the room.

"Mr Worf," Picard could not entirely keep the irritation from his voice as he addressed the Klingon, "would you please stop that pacing and sit down?"

Worf grunted in annoyance but ceased his restless prowling around the lounge area of their quarters and slunk disgruntledly into a chair in the far corner of the room.

Picard turned back to his tricorder and the records of the agreement reached hours earlier with the Mercatians but he found himself unable to concentrate. Outside it was twilight but, within the room, the quality of light was even more indistinct. The lounge was lit solely by the bright lamp above the desk at which he sat and its scrolled shade cast strange, ethereal shadows into the gloom. Looking around, Picard could just make out the whites of Worf's eyes, staring balefully at him from the corner.

He sighed impatiently. "Lieutenant, your constant... attentiveness is making me nervous. Can't you find some task with which to legitimately occupy your time, while I finish reviewing my report?"

Worf rose and crossed the room to stand in front of the desk. His deep voice was matter-of-fact as he replied, "I do not believe so, sir - and I would prefer to remain in visual contact with you for security reasons. But, if you object to my presence-"

"No, Mr Worf," Jean-Luc interrupted, exasperated. "Of course I don't object to your presence! Only to your somewhat... *overzealous* protection."

"Captain," Worf protested, "after what has happened here, I do not think of *any* degree of protection as *overzealous*!"

"Point taken, Lieutenant," the Human conceded, "but that is precisely what I mean. The Mercatians have done their worst and we have survived it. We have reached an equitable agreement with relative ease and we will shortly be leaving. The danger is past."

The Klingon did not seem so sure. "That may be so, sir. But, as your Security Chief, I must not - and *will* not - relax until you are safely back aboard the Enterprise."

Something in the Lieutenant's manner disturbed the Human and he sat back in his chair, observing his officer closely. "What is it that's bothering you, Mr Worf?"

Worf shifted uncomfortably, still avoiding Picard's gaze. "Sir?"

"Come on, Lieutenant, don't be evasive. You've been like a coiled spring ever since your release - either put your anger aside or discuss it - now!"

Worf hesitated for a moment, then stepped forward into the pool of light around the desk and met Picard's eyes with his own. "May I speak plainly, sir?"

"Of course."

"I do not understand how you can be so tolerant of these people after what they have done to you, Captain. They violated your mind, humiliated you - " Worf's voice grew deeper and more guttural with every accusation he hurled - "played with you like a cat with its prey. They shamed you to the point of..." He stopped short, shaking his huge head. "Why are you not angry? How can you sit in conference with them as if nothing had happened?"

Picard considered the question for a moment, then stood up and walked around the desk. Propping himself against its front edge, he said straightforwardly, "I can't, Lieutenant. I feel used and manipulated and I am angry - for my own sake and yours." Worf raised a quizzical eyebrow and the Human explained. "You had prepared yourself, with courage and stoicism, for a warrior's death - and you were denied it. I am inordinately glad that you are alive, Mr Worf, but I cannot begin to imagine how you must have felt when you regained consciousness."

Worf looked away from the Human into the gathering blackness in the room. "It is true I felt cheated." His rich, deep voice was tight with control. "The Mercatians dishonoured me when they made a mockery of my execution. But it is for their diabolical treatment of *you* that they should be made to answer."

"Worf." Picard reached out towards the Klingon but the big man twisted swiftly away from the reassuring hand. The Human let it fall back to his side and went on. "I am flattered that what you perceive - what we perceive - as this wrong against me affects you so strongly. But we are judging the Mercatians by our own standards. To them, the end obviously justified the means: having proved, in any way they could, that I was unimpeachable, I emerged, in their eyes, with honour. That I was humiliated in the process was not important. They have had so little contact with either of our races they would have no way of knowing that our concept of what is acceptable and what is not differs so much from theirs."

The Captain paused but Worf remained silent, eyes downcast. "We came here for a purpose, Mr Worf - to negotiate a trade agreement between Mercatia and the Federation. I put my anger aside in order to achieve that purpose. At least, now, some good has come out of the hardships we have endured."

"Yes, sir." The affirmation sounded less than half-hearted and Picard could see that his Security Chief was still deeply troubled as he walked away and switched on the room's main lights. Jean-Luc appreciated that it must be infinitely more difficult for Worf to come to terms with what had happened on Mercatia than for himself. Worf, he reasoned, had gained nothing positive from the experience, while he - albeit in a somewhat devastating fashion - had at least proved to himself that he could withstand mental coercion after all. Indeed, it had almost been a relief to learn that his 'visions' had been induced by an outside source - for a while, he had had to consider the frightening possibility that he was going insane.

Now he knew he was well - and fit for command. The trade agreement was prepared and he longed for the Enterprise to arrive, so that he could go 'home'. Given time and distance from the source of his ire, Lt Worf would deal with his anger and find a constructive channel for it, Picard felt certain. His wounded honour was a different matter - but, if he could handle Discommendation, Worf would handle this, too.

Picard glanced across the room to where Worf now sat, his face half turned away, feigning interest in a painting on the opposite wall. He almost smiled at the courtesy, for he could tell he was still being watched out of the corner of Worf's eye. Shaking his head in wry amusement, Picard went back to his tricorder.

Worf continued to observe his Captain, more out of a sense of duty and sheer pig-

headedness than because he feared for his safety. And it gave him something to do; something constructive, positive - so that he did not have to think about what had happened to them both.

Picard was probably right - given time, he would forgive the Mercatians many things, but there was one thing he could not forgive: they had robbed him forever of his previous perception of the man who was his Captain.

Worf looked across the room at his Commanding Officer and, for the first time since his assignment to the Enterprise, he neither liked nor admired what he saw.

They found themselves once more on the burnished expanse of the Parliamentary Forecourt, to say their goodbyes. Worf stood to attention in the background, eyes front, seemingly oblivious of the rivulets of sweat running down his domed forehead to drip from heavy brows.

Picard stood before the original welcoming committee, Thomark, Tholmorg and Thalmara, and he could not help but wonder at the inclusion of Tholmorg in this occasion. Surely this proved beyond doubt that the Mercatians were totally oblivious of any criticism which might be levelled at their treatment of the Federation representatives?

Picard observed the Surrogate with quiet equanimity. Strange that barely 48 hours ago he had been fearful of losing his very sanity at the hands of this individual. Now they were merely two negotiators saying their polite farewells after a successful meeting.

It felt wonderful to be so much more at peace with himself. His visit to Mercatia had proved a very cathartic experience, chasing away the lingering self-doubts that had been the legacy of his encounter with the Borg.

Thomark stepped forward to address the Human, a broad smile on his Saurian face. "Captain Picard, all Mercatia honours you for your courage and your generosity. Let us hope that the agreement we have reached will lead to a peaceful and prosperous relationship between Mercatia and the Federation for many generations to come."

"Thank you, Principal Thomark," Picard replied solemnly. "I am honoured to have been of service to the Federation and to the people of Mercatia." He bowed deeply, spreading his arms wide in salutation. "May the seas provide, Deliberators."

The three Mercatians bowed in turn in acknowledgement of the ritual farewell. "And the tides turn, Captain Picard," Thomark responded.

Picard glanced over his shoulder and nodded to his Security Chief. Worf tapped his combadge and its trill echoed shrilly across the forecourt.

"Worf to Enterprise: two to transport."

Will Riker whistled in amazement and leaned back into the comfortably-upholstered chair. He looked across the briefing room table at Captain Picard, who sat, quietly composed, at its head.

"Remind me never to volunteer for a diplomatic mission to Mercatia, Captain!" His blue eyes sparkled with humour, then darkened as he went on, "But are you sure you're all right, sir? No after-effects from this mind-link?"

Picard smiled reassuringly. "None that I can detect, Commander. I feel fine."

"Nevertheless," Beverly Crusher's voice cut in firmly, "I want you down in sickbay for a full bioscan - *today* - Captain. Just to make sure."

Picard knew from her steely expression and the firm set of her jaw that he would have no peace until he complied. But if he didn't put up some sort of a fight, she really *would* think something was wrong with him.

"Dr Crusher, I have been absent for some time and there are several matters requiring my attention. I think tomorrow would be -"

"I *could* make that an order, Captain." The expected interruption came right on cue. "I'm sure I don't need to quote the relevant regulations?" Crusher flicked a stray lock of auburn hair back over one shoulder and stared pointedly at Picard, concern and irritation vying for dominance across her face.

Picard smiled and gracefully conceded defeat. "Very well, Doctor - eighteen hundred hours?"

Beverly nodded and sat back with a satisfied smile. "That'll be fine, Captain."

"Sir." Lt. Commander Data swivelled his chair around to face Picard. "I am curious: is there genuine dissent on contact policy within the Mercatian parliament, or was that all part of the deception?"

"No, Mr Data, fortunately that was all staged for my benefit. At present the Mercatians seem quite happy as isolationists but I suspect that eventually feelings will begin to change and the Federation will be asked to renegotiate its agreement with Mercatia."

"At least any future Federation representatives will be forewarned about impromptu 'tests of character!'" Riker said vehemently. "We could have done with a little warning ourselves. If I'd had any idea -"

Picard raised his hand, quieting Riker's anger. "Water under the bridge, Number One. We survived, we fulfilled our mission and we learned from the experience. That's what counts."

Worf snorted unintelligibly, causing five pairs of inquisitive eyes to turn in his direction. He shifted uncomfortably in his chair, regretting the outburst which had focussed so much attention on him.

"Mr Worf?" the Captain enquired politely.

"Nothing, sir."

"C'mon, Worf," Riker prompted. "You've been very quiet about your side of what went on down there. It might throw some valuable light on the subject."

Worf grimaced and shook his head slowly. "I can add very little to what the Captain has

already related - except to say that the Mercatians are devious and without honour. They should not be trusted."

Deanna Troi gazed with fathomless, dark eyes at the Klingon, curious and dismayed by what she was sensing from him. The emotions were strong enough for her to decide against a public confrontation here - she would have to speak to Worf privately.

Riker was goading Worf a little, trying to coax him to talk but not succeeding. "What about *your* Soulseeker session, Worf? And your imprisonment?"

The Security Chief stared fixedly at the table in front of him. "Everything I have to say is in my report, Commander," he replied brusquely, then rose and addressed the Captain. "Sir, if you will excuse me, I have matters to attend to in my department."

A small frown gathered on the Human's brow but he nodded in assent. "Very well, Mr Worf - dismissed."

Worf strode hurriedly from the room and Riker raised an eyebrow in surprise, glancing around the group for enlightenment. Picard, Data and Crusher looked as puzzled as he by Worf's manner but Deanna seemed lost in thought and he failed to catch her eye.

Captain Picard cleared his throat, drawing their attention. "Well, if that's everything?" Nods from around the table answered his query. "Then this meeting is adjourned."

Picard stood and watched his staff file out of the room - except Counselor Troi, who remained seated at the table. He waited until the door shut behind the departing officers, then sat down and turned to face her.

"Something bothering you, Counselor?"

Troi looked up, her face full of concern. "Yes, Captain - Lt Worf."

Picard nodded. "Yes, Mr Worf does seem a little unforthcoming, even for him. But he went through a lot down there, Counselor. Not only did he have to stand by and watch me apparently losing my mind but there's this whole business of his sense of dishonour over the fake execution."

"No, sir. I can sense all the feelings in him that those events would cause but it's more than that." She paused and looked intently at the Human. "Did something happen *between you two*, something that's not in your reports?"

Jean-Luc looked puzzled, shaking his head as he ran the events of the last few days through his mind. "No, Counselor - nothing of importance. Exactly what is it you sense from him?"

"Strong feelings of resentment, Captain, and of disappointment - both directed at you, specifically."

Picard stood up and crossed to the window, staring out at the stars as they streaked past. He turned back to the Betazoid still seated at the table. "I can't account for those feelings, Counselor. I realise I was distracted much of the time by what was happening to me but surely I would recall something significant enough to disturb Worf so badly?"

"I would have thought so, Captain." Deanna assured him. "I'll talk to Worf - I just

thought I'd see if you could throw any light on the problem first."

"Mmm," Picard muttered distractedly, staring once more out into the blackness. Troi rose to leave, but the Captain's voice halted her at the door.

"Deanna?"

She turned back towards him. "Yes, Captain?"

"I will speak to the Lieutenant. If, as you say, these hostile feelings are all directed toward me, then it might be better sorted out between the two of us, privately."

Deanna sensed his resolve but such a personal approach was so unusual for her commanding officer that she could not help but question it. "Are you quite sure, Captain?" she asked hesitantly.

Picard smiled, acknowledging her concern. "I understand your misgivings, Counselor, but the Lieutenant and I shared some very intense experiences on Mercatia and I would like to try to resolve this problem myself. If I can't, I'll have no hesitation in calling on you to mediate."

Deanna smiled at him. "That's fine with me, Captain. But you *will* let me know the outcome of your meeting?"

Picard inclined his head toward her. "Of course."

"Thank you, sir," she replied softly and slipped out through the doors onto the bridge.

Picard cradled the bottle lovingly in his hands and studied the small line drawing of his home on the label. A warm feeling suffused him and he smiled, remembering their parting. It had felt good to hold - and be held by - Robert. Family was a precious commodity and their icy estrangement had gone on for far too long. Perhaps he and Robert would never be close - but at least the bitterness was gone.

He placed the bottle next to the glasses already set out on the table then went in search of a corkscrew, so that he could let the wine breathe.

Worf, meanwhile, sat on the curious chair in his quarters, studying his reflection in the small, circular mirror. Only a slight twitching of his hand upon the armrest betrayed his inner disquiet. To be summoned to the Captain's quarters during his off-duty time was unprecedented - at least for him. What could Picard possibly want, except to chastise him for his attitude during the debriefing? And, if that were the case, why not his ready room, as usual? Even the delivery of the summons was unusual: a message blinking on his private terminal, rather than an order via the combadge.

Worf had tried desperately during the short time available, to think of a valid reason *not* to go, but deception had never been one of his strong suits and nothing remotely feasible sprang to mind. He leapt from the chair and paced impatiently across the room and back.

"Computer, time?" he growled, knowing full well it was still too early.

"Nineteen-Forty-Five Hours."

He turned in frustration away from the door but some measure of control in him snapped and he strode determinedly from the room towards the Captain's quarters.

Picard was just about to open the wine when the door buzzer sounded. Laying down corkscrew and bottle, he glanced at the chronometer readout on his terminal.

He's early! "Come!" he called loudly and the door hissed open to admit Worf.

The Klingon took in his surroundings at a glance - the glasses and wine, the Captain's informal attire - and almost withered with embarrassment.

Nor was the Human blind to his officer's predicament. It seemed obvious from Worf's uniform and manner that the Security Officer had thought this an official summons. However, there seemed little he could do but press on.

Picard smiled and gestured to a chair. "Thank you for coming, Lieutenant. Please have a seat."

Worf hesitated for a moment, then perched his not inconsiderable bulk on the edge of one of the chairs. Looking distinctly uncomfortable, he began, "Captain, I -"

"No," the Human interrupted quickly. "Please - let me begin, Lieutenant. Firstly, would you like a drink?"

Worf looked taken aback and there was a noticeable pause before he replied gruffly, "No, thank you, sir."

"Very well," Picard said, sitting opposite Worf. "Then let me explain why I asked you here. I realise this invitation is not... quite what you expected - but I wanted to talk to you... informally. I'm aware that something about our visit to Mercatia is preying on your mind, Mr Worf, and I had rather assumed you were still angry over the Mercatians' treatment of us." He paused, glancing around the room as he searched for the right words - but there seemed no subtle way to put it. "But Counselor Troi has told me that she feels great resentment and disappointment from you and that those feelings are directed towards me."

Worf, who, since the Captain had begun to speak, had been studying the floor at his feet, looked up suddenly.

The expression in the Klingon's eyes reminded Picard of nothing so much as a trapped animal, which stares at its captor with a curious mixture of fury and fear from the snare which holds it.

Picard cleared his throat, looking away from those unsettling, dark eyes. "We shared a very harrowing experience, Lieutenant. And I realise that, for much of the time, I was not... myself."

Unused to adopting such an intimate approach, Picard was finding the conversation increasingly difficult but he forced himself to continue. "If I, er, said, or did, something to offend you... I would much rather you told me, Mr Worf. Let's sort this out now - off the record."

Picard hoped the offer of confidentiality might relax his Security Chief but, to his dismay, the Klingon looked more uncomfortable now than when he had arrived.

Rising from his chair, the big man said curtly, "I appreciate your concern, Captain, but there is nothing to tell. I believe Counselor Troi has misread me. If I have displeased you by my attitude since our return from the planet, then I apologise, sir. I will be sure to keep a closer check on my moods from now on."

Picard rose in turn and spoke bluntly. "Mr Worf - how would you respond if I told you I didn't believe a word you've just said?"

Worf stared at the Human, stony-faced. "I would say that was your privilege, sir."

Picard knew he wasn't handling the situation well but desperation drove him on. He took a step towards his officer, attempting to bridge the physical and emotional gap between them.

"Lieutenant, please - don't throw this opportunity away. Let's use it to gain a better understanding of one another. This distance between us is dangerous. How can I function efficiently as Captain when one of my most senior staff isn't communicating effectively with me?"

Worf's eyes flashed angrily. "I have *never* allowed my personal feelings to affect the performance of my duty, Captain!" he thundered.

Picard felt exasperated and he raised his voice in reply. "And *which* personal feelings are we talking about, Lieutenant?"

The Klingon took a deep breath, willing his rising fury back under control. Then he said evenly, "Are you ordering me to remain and discuss this, Captain?"

Picard shook his head resignedly. "No, Mr Worf."

"Then I ask your permission to leave, sir."

Picard looked sadly at the Security Chief standing stiffly before him, eyes deliberately aimed at a point somewhere over the Captain's head. After a few moments, he said quietly, "Are you quite sure, Lieutenant?"

Worf nodded silently.

"Then you are dismissed."

Worf did not need to be told twice. Moving with almost indecent haste, he escaped out into the corridor.

Picard sighed and, turning back into his quarters, spotted the unopened bottle of wine on the table. It sat there, mocking him - a testament to his foolishness. Why had he been so conceited as to presume he could handle a situation like this? What had possessed him to become so personally involved? And for nothing! All his attempts at conciliation had been thrown unceremoniously back in his face, leaving him embarrassed and angry. Why the hell hadn't he left this to Deanna Troi?

Striding across the room, he snatched up a glass and hurled it angrily at the wall. Shocked by his outburst, he watched the delicate object shatter into a thousand tiny shining fragments, which came to rest, like tears, upon the floor.

"Oh, no, Counselor. Absolutely not!"

Deanna Troi sat on the Ready Room sofa, studying the man behind the desk with professional composure. Had the situation not been so serious, his classically defensive posture and the look of horror on his face would have been almost comical.

"Captain, making a personal approach was a generous gesture - and a courageous one. It made the Lieutenant aware that solving the problems between you is important to you. But -" She paused, not wanting to offend him, or discourage him from making such a move again. "Let's just say that relaxed camaraderie isn't exactly natural for you or Worf. Perhaps a more formal approach might be more comfortable for you both - and more productive."

Picard raised a questioning eyebrow, still looking uneasy. "What, exactly, did you have in mind?"

"A meeting between the three of us, in my office."

"And you believe Worf will co-operate?" the Captain asked sceptically.

Deanna replied with an elegant shrug. "I can't be certain of that." She looked sympathetically at him. "Captain, I know you were hurt by Worf's rejection of your olive branch - but we must try again."

Picard flinched at the keenness of her insight. None of this sat well with his long-held belief in professional detachment. Having broken his own rules once - and achieved nothing - he was reluctant to do so again.

"Are you sure my presence is necessary, Counselor? Couldn't you talk to Mr Worf alone? He might be more inclined to confide in you."

Troi shook her head, setting her long, dark curls into gentle motion. "No, Captain - you must be there. This isn't just a matter of getting Worf to talk about his feelings; that's only the beginning. Once we know the problem, we must resolve it - and, for that, we need you. This is not just Worf's problem, Captain."

Picard looked more than a little irritated. "I am well aware of that, Counselor!" He drew a deep breath and exhaled noisily. "Very well, set up your meeting."

The emotional mix of Worf's hostility and Captain Picard's unease made for a pretty heady atmosphere, so far as Troi's empathic senses were concerned.

The Captain sat, stiffly upright, on a chair to her left, looking as if he wished he were anywhere but here in her office. The Lieutenant sat to her right, a stormy expression on his swarthy face, his muscled arms folded defensively across his chest.

Troi could feel Worf stubbornly attempting to shield his feelings from her but - even though Klingons were notoriously difficult to read empathically - Worf's efforts were futile in this instance. His emotions were so strong that he was unable to suppress them to any great extent. For once, he was as open to her as the proverbial book.

Her perceptions did not make good reading, however: Worf was feeling trapped and defensive - only natural considering the nature of the meeting - but his anger and

disappointment with the Captain still overshadowed everything else.

Deanna concentrated hard, for the Klingon's mood seemed so complex and she sensed there was some other layer to it which was important. She let his jumbled emotions wash over and through her, filtering them through her mind until she touched what she sought...

There! But this feels like... mourning? All the elements were there: grief, loss, unfulfilled hopes... *Yes, mourning. But no-one has died!*

The silence in the room was fast becoming oppressive and Troi knew it was up to her to break it. This was not going to be easy; these two men were far more alike than they would ever admit: honour-bound, private - and damned stubborn. But they must start somewhere.

"Well, gentlemen," Troi began purposefully, looking from one to the other as she spoke. "There seems little doubt that your present... difficulties... began on Mercatia and since you, Captain, can think of nothing which would account for them and you, Lieutenant, have so far refused to be drawn on the subject, I suggest we listen to both your log reports on the mission, studying them for any obvious omissions or contradictions. Agreed?"

"Agreed." Picard replied brusquely.

Troi turned to Worf. "Lieutenant?"

The Klingon scowled and muttered, "Agreed."

"Very well, let us proceed." The Counselor stood and crossed to her terminal. Soon the voices of Human and Klingon rang out in turn, each rendering their account of the mission to Mercatia. The two men listened in almost impassive silence. Deanna, listening also, watched the pair throughout, alert for any physical or emotional clue to their problems. But the only strong response she detected from either was a sudden increase in tension from Worf when each of their stories reached the moment of his supposed execution. Hardly a surprising reaction, given the circumstances.

The recordings finished and Troi again addressed the two men. "So, it would seem you experienced essentially the same events. We must, therefore, conclude that it is your perception of those events which differs."

"Counselor," Picard interjected. "For a considerable time, I was under the influence of Tholmorg's mindsnare. It is possible that my perception of those times is very different from Lt Worf's."

Worf stared wordlessly at his Captain, then turned his head away. He sighed - an uncharacteristic action for the Klingon and an almost imperceptible one. The significance was not, however, lost on Troi.

"You have a problem with this, don't you, Worf?" She tried to look directly at him but he avoided the eye contact.

"No," Worf lied uselessly, knowing Deanna would detect the falsehood instantly, but compelled to voice it anyway. "No problem."

Now it was Deanna's turn to sigh. This game of emotional cat and mouse was pointless and counterproductive. She appreciated Worf's Klingon sense of loyalty made it difficult for him to be openly critical of his commanding officer but the present tension between them was



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harmful and could not be allowed to continue. It seemed Worf's rather idealised image of his Captain was gone - and perhaps that was no bad thing. But its passing should not have meant the fundamental change in attitude she sensed in Worf. There was more to this than someone having to face reality...

Troi's normal modus operandi was extremely gentle - she preferred to coax rather than push. But Worf could go on leading them this far-from-merry dance forever and she knew Captain Picard's tolerance would not be so long-lived, nor should it have to be. For once, confrontation with what each of them had known all along seemed the only way forward.

Troi got up and walked over to the desk, then turned to face the two men.

"Lt Worf." The Klingon raised his head and his dark eyes met hers. "I realise that your loyalty to the Captain makes discussing him very difficult for you... but despite his efforts to be understanding, to encourage you to speak about your feelings, you continue to deny you have a problem with your relationship. We all know that isn't true and the pretence has to stop - *now*. You are angry with Captain Picard; you feel he has let you down in some way. Well, there he is, Mr Worf. Now tell us both: what was it that Captain Picard did to lose so much respect in your eyes?"

Deanna's words fell into a brittle silence and she saw Picard's eyes widen in surprise at her candour.

Worf stared at her, his face a mask of primitive rage and she sensed the furious denial forming on his lips. She tasted failure, knowing if this would not summon the truth from him, nothing would.

Then, suddenly, the fire was gone from him. The broad shoulders drooped and he lowered his gaze to the floor.

"Worf?" She spoke gently, willing him to open up at last.

"Counselor, I cannot... To speak of such things is..."

Worf's deep voice was choked with emotion. Only once before had she heard it so close to breaking - *On the bridge, after they returned without the Captain...*

"*He is a Borg...*"

Troi moved closer to the Klingon, feeling his distress; wanting to reach out and comfort him but knowing she must not - not until he had told them what had happened.

"Lt Worf - I am waiting." The Captain's usually melodic voice sounded harsh and curt. The Klingon started at the sound, almost as if he had forgotten Picard was there.

The two men's eyes met and, for a long moment, there was silence. Then, still looking directly at the Captain, Worf began to speak.

"We were with Tholmorg. He had the weapon trained on me. I knew he intended to kill me - that there was nothing Captain Picard could do to prevent it without compromising his honour. But it did not matter. I was prepared to die - gratified that it would be a warrior's death - but then..." Worf's voice trailed off and he lowered his head. "The Captain... hesitated. I could see... fear... and doubt in his eyes. And then - " Worf stood and walked towards the far corner of the room, his back toward Troi and Picard. When he spoke again, it was almost a

whisper. "And then he... wept."

The Klingon turned slowly to face Picard, his strong features contorted by grief. "You wept, Captain; before me, before our enemy. It was... shameful."

Troi stood, seemingly impassive, as realisation dawned. But even as it did so, Captain Picard was speaking.

The Human's face was schooled into its familiar, stony mask - the one Troi always saw when the Captain was feeling vulnerable. But he could not disguise the hurt in his eyes, nor was he capable of concealing from her the shock he was feeling as a result of Worf's confession. She wanted to interrupt, to straighten this whole thing out once and for all, but it was already too late.

"Lieutenant, I don't know quite what it was I expected to hear from you but - " Picard shook his head slowly. "But it wasn't this." He looked up at Worf, a puzzled frown creasing his forehead. "What would you have of me? God knows, I've needed to come down off that damned pedestal of yours for long enough, but now it seems I am beneath contempt." Picard sighed wearily. "For one instant, when I allow my feelings to show, I am condemned? And who are you to judge me, Lieutenant?"

Troi heard the note of anger creep into the Human's voice but it was quickly suppressed as he continued, "Despite everything that has been said in this room, Mr Worf, you are still a valued member of my crew. But, as your commanding officer, I require not only your loyalty but your respect." The grey eyes stared intently into the Klingon's own and he spoke quietly, "If, as a result of what has happened, I truly can no longer command those feelings from you... then I would view any request for transfer... sympathetically."

Without waiting for a reply, Picard stood and walked swiftly to the door. Troi barely caught his parting, "Excuse me, Counselor," before the Human was gone.

Lt Worf stared after the Captain, shock and confusion etched deep on his face. Troi looked at him sadly; so simple, so understandable an error, to drive such a wedge between these two honourable men - to cause such pain. But the gulf which separated them was not unspannable, as she had begun to fear.

She reached out her hand to Worf, laying it lightly on his huge shoulder, and he looked down at her with dark, sorrowful eyes.

"Worf," she said gently, "sometimes it is not our tears which are important, but the reason we shed them. You believe Captain Picard wept because he was about to break - to betray his oath to Starfleet and your trust in him. But you are mistaken." She paused, willing him to understand and to have the courage to act on that understanding. "The Captain did not weep because he could not make the decision that would end your life - he wept because he *could*. That is what makes him a leader worthy of your respect - and it is also what makes him Human."

Troi withdrew her hand from his shoulder and let it fall to her side. Then she turned and walked silently from the room, leaving Worf alone with his thoughts.

For a long while, Worf stood as if carved in stone, her words echoing in his mind. He had lived all his life amongst Humans, yet he still understood so little of them! How could he have known? And yet, how could he have doubted the one man...?

Worf felt the heat rise in his cheeks. He was unsure if there were words to describe how he felt at this moment or, if there were, whether he would ever be able to find them. He only knew that, *somehow*, he must try.

Raising a hand to his combadge, he intoned,

"Worf to Picard."



WAR GAMES

Will Riker is the Captain
Aboard the Hathaway.
Young Wesley passes a comment -
To win they'll have to pray.

They really do need warp drive
If this game they're going to win.
Wes Crusher gets his project
And gives a cheeky grin.

They've warp drive on the Hathaway
And a few tricks up their sleeves.
Worf's planned some surprises
And Will Riker's looking pleased.

Helen Connor



