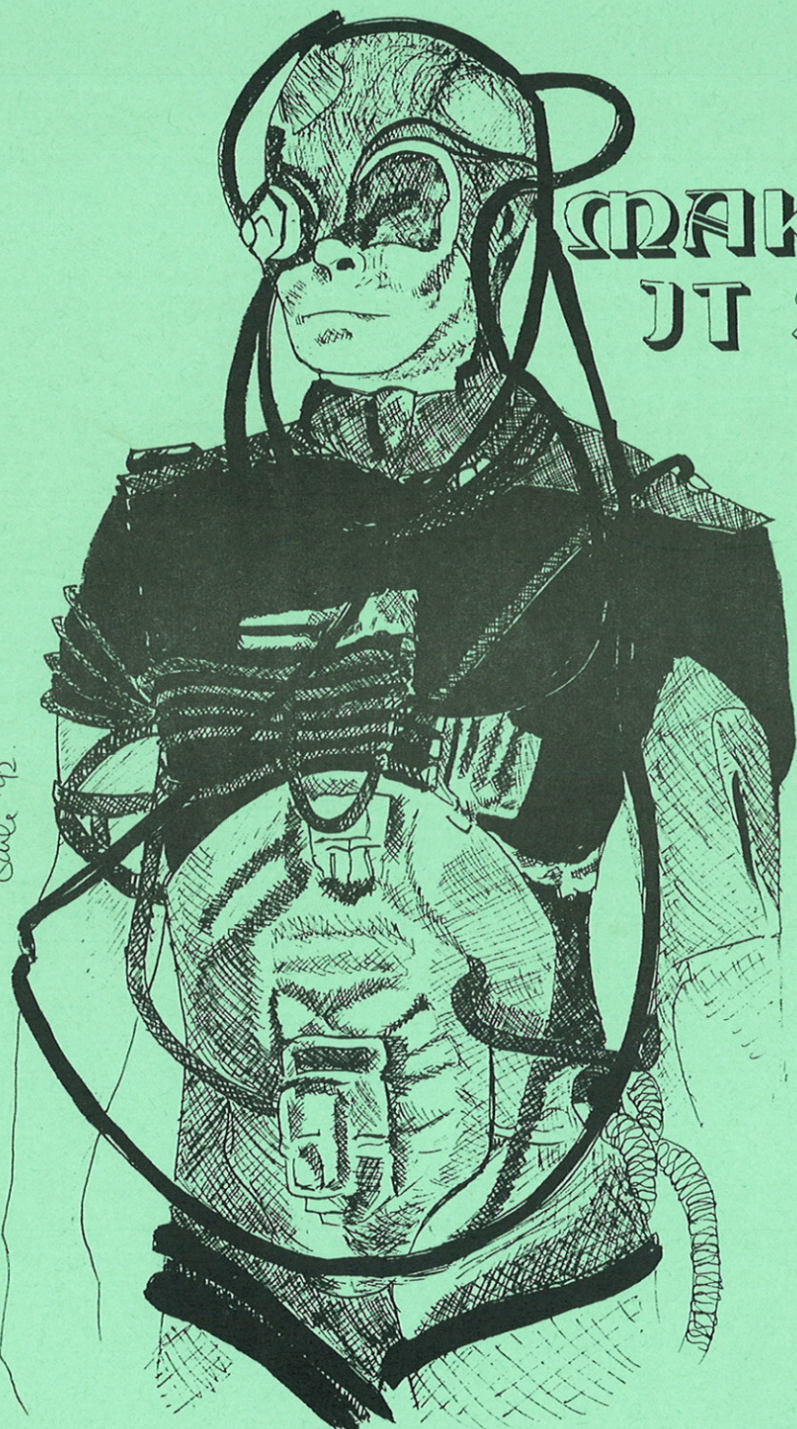


Scotpress

MAKE IT SO 20

Sails '92



CONTENTS

Time Out of Mind	by Nina Lynch	P 3
<i>Captain Lerette has come forward in time 85 years - and insists on trying to return 'home' despite the arguments of the Enterprise crew</i>		
Hidden Feelings	by Helen Connor	P 43
The Closet Officer	by Nola Frame-Gray	P 44
<i>A Health Inspection turns up an irregularity in Data's quarters... (A/U story)</i>		
We're Back	by Helen Connor	P 60
Picking Up the Pieces	by Margaret Connor	P 61
Messenger	by Sandra Edge	P 62
<i>The Enterprise is sent to check on a warring planet.</i>		
Lutan	by Margaret Connor	P 69
A Bloody Revenge	by Jenny Howsam	P 70
No Place for the Innocent	by Sean Christie	P 71
<i>A distress call is cancelled... but things on Veltae II are far from all right...</i>		

Illos Gaile Wood - Cover
 Ruth Mellor - P 2
 Nola Frame-Gray - P 51

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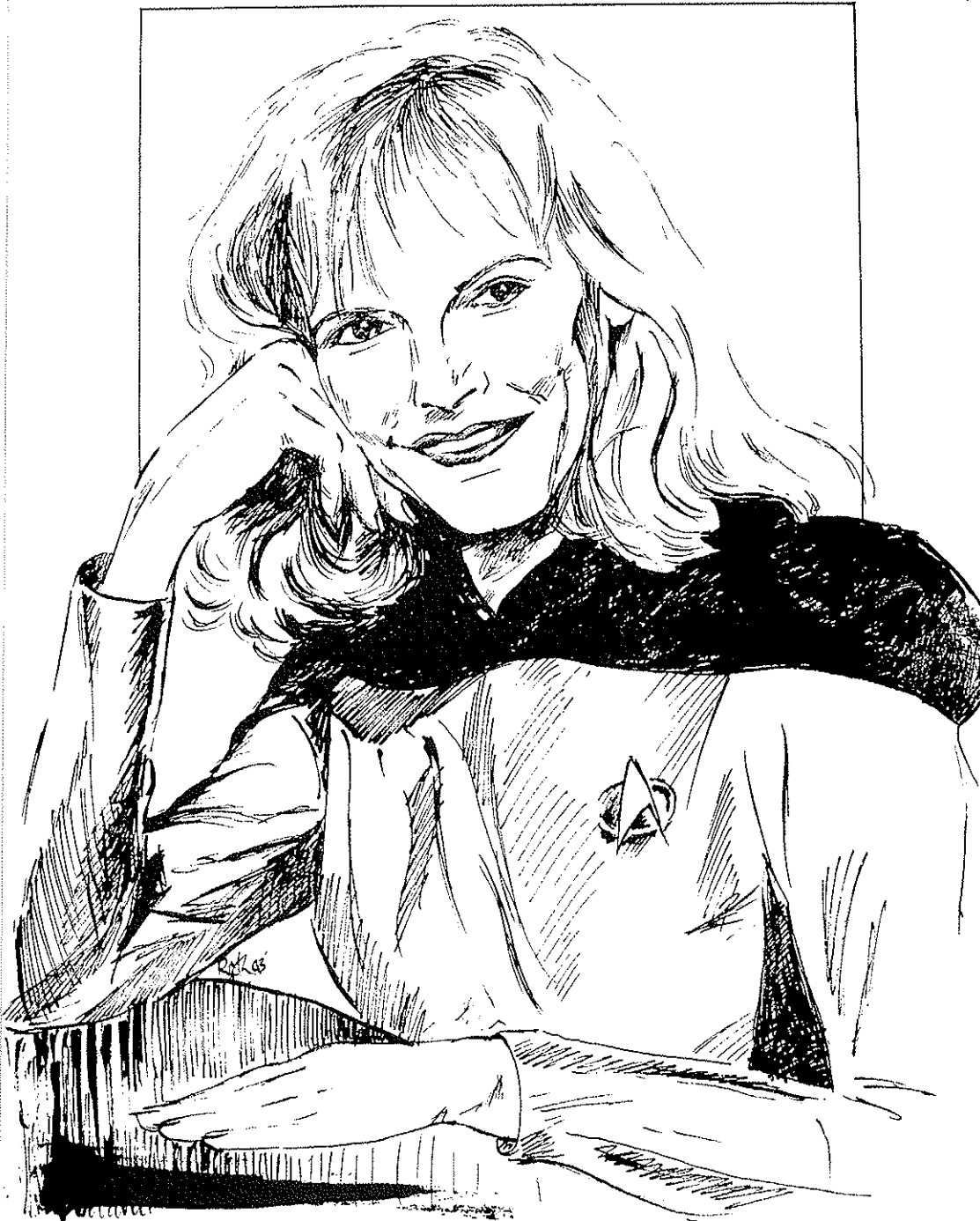
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TIME OUT OF MIND

by

Nina Lynch

Nothing puzzles me more than time and space:
and yet nothing troubles me less,
as I never think about them.

(Charles Lamb)

Captain's Log: "The Enterprise is on its way to Trantious Delta for a much needed shore leave after a nerve-racking few months. I expect it to be a very short R&R, as our last visit to this planet was overcast with bureaucracy and hostility from the very officious leader. I wish there was another planet nearby with facilities as good. To make matters worse, Starfleet has ordered that the Enterprise be used to transport a diplomatic entourage from Trantious Alpha to Trantious Delta containing the Vulcan Ambassador who is to take over leadership, and a group of Trantiousian officials. We are already delayed due to a recent Ferengi attack, which will not be well received by the Ambassador, who is known to be a strict time-keeper."

"Red Alert. Red Alert."

Jean-Luc Picard's finger touched his communicator before the first red alert ended.

"Captain to Bridge. What's going on?"

"Riker here, Captain. We are trying to find the cause of the alert."

"I'm on my way." Picard strode out of his quarters to the turbolift, thinking to himself, *I hope that this is not another Ferengi attack.* He entered the Bridge wondering why the red alert was always so loud. Riker looked up from over Worf's console, and began to brief the Captain.

"Something just appeared in front of the Enterprise; the computer caused the ship to come to a standstill and so prevented a head-on collision. Geordi has gone down to Engineering to see if any damage has been done by such a rapid deceleration."

Picard walked down to his chair and sat down slowly, gathering his thoughts. "Didn't any sensors pick it - whatever *it* is - up earlier?" he asked.

"No Captain, it just appeared." Data gave his answer while still studying the computer reading. "But I can now tell you what it is." He paused and seemed to be checking again.

"Well, Data, don't leave us in suspense." Picard tried not to let the impatience show in his voice.

"Captain?" Data's voice held a question but, looking at the Captain, he decided it was not the time to ask it. "It is a shuttlecraft." Pressing a few buttons, he asked, "Shall I put it on screen, sir?"

"Yes, Data." Picard rubbed his temples. "And shut off the red alert." He looked at the viewscreen and stood up as if to get a better picture. "What on earth is that doing here?"

The rest of the Bridge crew looked at the screen. There, indeed, was a shuttlecraft, a Federation shuttlecraft, but nothing like the ones on the Enterprise, and looking very much the worse for wear.

"It's got to be at least a hundred years old." Riker walked down to join Picard. He turned to the android. "Data?"

"I am running the computer libraries to correctly identify it." Data ran through the information of all previous Federation shuttlecraft.

"Captain."

Picard turned to Worf.

"I am picking up faint life signs from the shuttlecraft, but they are unlike any I've seen - they are very erratic. I have transferred them down to Sickbay." Worf's permanent frown now descended into a scowl.

Picard turned to Data. "Have you found out any more about it?"

Data looked up from his console to Picard. "The shuttlecraft is from the USS Endeavour. May I recommend that it is brought on board?"

"Can't we just beam aboard any life forms?" Picard was reluctant to bring it on board.

"The life readings are very erratic. I can't get a fix on them, but Dr Crusher should be alerted, and a medical team ought to be nearby," explained Data.

"Is the shuttlecraft stable enough to withstand a transporter beam?" Riker was gazing at the old shuttlecraft on the viewscreen.

"Yes; according to the sensors the damage is superficial," replied Data.

"SickBay to Bridge," Dr Crusher's voice came through the intercom.

"Captain here; what is it, Doctor?"

"I am unable to determine what form of life those readings come from. Can Data give me any more information regarding where the shuttlecraft came from?"

Picard turned to Data, who nodded. "Doctor, Data does indeed have more information. We are bringing it on board. Riker, you have the con. Data and Worf, come with me. Doctor, we will meet you in hangar deck three."

"On my way. Crusher out."

Riker was heard giving the orders to bring aboard the old damaged shuttlecraft as the turbolift doors closed behind the three Bridge crew.

As they entered the hangar deck, they noticed Dr Crusher, who was standing with her medical team. All had scanners and tricorders trained on the shuttlecraft. There was a confusion of voices, all questions and no answers.

"Well, Data, would you care to tell us what all this is about?" Picard spoke as they crossed the hangar deck to meet the others.

"85.87 years ago, a Federation shuttlecraft called Prospector was on its way to meet up with its mother ship, the

Endeavour. It contained five crew members who were returning from a briefing on Space Station Z26," started Data.

"That was very close to the Klingon Empire," Worf butted in.

"Yes," continued Data, "but the Endeavour was an exploratory vessel, not a military one, and never ventured anywhere near the Neutral Zone between the Space Station and the Empire. Z26 was always -"

Picard held up his hand. "Data, we don't want an intergalactic geography lesson. Please try to keep to the matter in hand," he advised as he walked slowly round the Prospector.

"Yes, Captain. On the shuttlecraft was the Endeavour's commanding officer, Captain Elenor Lerette, also First Officer Lt Sovik, and three new crew members - Lt Drake and Ensigns Trean and Karol. They had collected the new crew members when they arrived at Station Z26 for a briefing, and were on their way back to the Endeavour to begin another deep space scientific study, when the shuttlecraft suddenly disappeared, leaving no trace or indications as to its whereabouts. The details of the following events are very disjointed, but it seems a Klingon Captain seeking glory for himself decided to enter Federation territory and steal one of our ships."

The thought of a renegade Klingon brought a low grunt from Worf, but Data carried on. "He came in cloaked and the first craft he saw was the Prospector. He managed, somehow, to get the shuttlecraft on board, then recloak before anyone could get a fix on him. To reinstate himself as a warrior of the Empire, he decided he would extract as much information from the shuttlecraft crew about the Federation as he could,

and so used the mind-sifter on them."

"No glory would come to him using such means," growled Worf.

"And it did not," replied Data. "He was so occupied with extracting information that he travelled too far into Federation territory. All of a sudden an explosion was seen by the nearby USS Kingsley, which had been alerted to the Prospector's disappearance, and the Klingon ship decloaked. Although it tried to fight, it was defeated and boarded by Captain Draysus from the Kingsley, who found all the Klingons dead."

"At least they died fighting," put in Worf.

"No, Worf, they killed themselves rather than surrender or be taken prisoner by the Federation, but they did not have time to destroy their ship, which had suffered severe damage."

Picard now remembered why the name was familiar to him - a history lesson many years ago on Starfleet legends - and so he continued. "On the Klingon ship, as well as the dead Klingons, Captain Draysus found four of the shuttlecraft crew; the three new crew dead from the effects of the mind-sifter and Lt Sovik, who appeared to have died from a brutal attack."

Dr Crusher came and stood next to Picard. "Perhaps they knew the mind-sifter would have little effect on him as a Vulcan," she said, "so did they just kill him for pleasure?" Her face showed disbelief.

"We believe so, Doctor," Data added, "but no trace of Captain Lerette or the shuttlecraft was found, although according to the Klingon logs the Captain had been subjected to the mind-sifter."

"How come she did not die?" Worf wanted to get the facts straight in his mind.

"Captain Lerette looked Terran but was, in fact, half Vulcan. The Klingons would think she was Human." Data looked at Worf, then at Picard.

"Carry on, Data."

"Thank you, Captain. It is generally thought that Captain Lerette managed to escape somehow to the shuttlecraft and fired it straight out of the cloaking field, causing the explosion that resulted in the Kingsley seeing the Klingon ship, thus ensuring an attack. It has been held as a victory for the Federation."

Picard carried on with the history lesson. "Captain Lerette was presumed dead. It was at the beginning of the truce between the Federation and the Empire that others were successful in completing. There has been no trace of Captain Lerette or the Prospector until now. Can you give an explanation as to why here and now, Data?"

"The only explanation is time travel," replied Data.

"Do you think that Captain Lerette is in that shuttlecraft?" Dr Crusher was taking more readings.

"Highly probable, Doctor."

"The readings are very disorganised, but that may be a direct result of the mind-sifter." Beverly Crusher stood by the door of the shuttlecraft with a hypo full of tranquilliser in her hand. "Just in case," she added, looking at Worf.

"Is she likely to be dangerous?" Picard looked from Worf to the Doctor.

"The effects of the mind-sifter varied with everyone. It could kill or reduce the recipient to a quivering madman, and although it did not have much effect on a full Vulcan, the effect on the Captain would depend on how dominant her Vulcan half is. I cannot tell you much more by taking readings through a closed door." Dr Crusher looked at Picard who signalled Data to open the shuttlecraft door. Worf stood close by, poised for action.

The shuttlecraft door opened; an eerie silence fell on everyone in the hangar deck. Inside the craft it was dark and quiet - no computer talking, no engines and no-one ranting or raving. Worf entered first, and called out, "Doctor, I think you can put away the tranquilliser." Beverly entered the craft and took more readings. Picard and Data followed. Lying on the floor was an unconscious female wearing a gold command tunic and Captain's braids.

"Take her to Sickbay." Crusher's voice was very matter-of-fact. "But keep a tranquilliser ready."

"Worf, please accompany them."

"Yes, Captain."

Picard then turned to Data who was absorbing all the history around him. "Data." The Captain's voice was quiet, almost a whisper. "Is that - " He paused as though he didn't believe his next question - "Captain Lerette?" He watched as Dr Crusher and her team took the unconscious form to Sickbay.

"Yes, Captain." The full meaning of a person travelling through time meant nothing to him. "The action of the shuttlecraft on the cloaking device - "

Picard held up his hand. "Not now, Data."

"Bridge to Captain." Riker's voice brought with it a reminder of the present.

Picard touched his communicator. "Yes, Riker?"

"Geordi says no damage was done, but there will be a slight delay."

"How slight a delay?" questioned Picard.

"We can now continue to Trantious Alpha to collect the delegates," replied Riker.

"We are now four hours behind schedule," added Data.

"Data." Picard was trying to remain calm. "I am well aware of how late we are." *Why couldn't the Prospector have materialised somewhere else?* "Riker, please give our apologies to Trantious Alpha and inform them of our new arrival time, but - " he hesitated, looked at the shuttlecraft, then added - "make no mention of the Prospector, yet."

"Aye, sir." The hangar deck seemed to be strangely quiet again, although engineering staff were busy examining the shuttlecraft.

"Data."

"Sir?"

"Please get as much information from the computer on the Prospector, analyse and report to me in the Briefing Room in fifteen minutes; and Data, keep it to the basics."

"Yes, sir." Data went back to the shuttlecraft and began to work at the computer console.

Picard walked into the turbo-lift and stood still, thinking, as the doors shut. He

closed his eyes and let the past events run through his mind. The attack from the Ferengi which had caused the delay in taking shore leave, and now here was another delay in collecting a crotchety old Ambassador, who should have more sense than to commission a Starship for a short transfer of a small diplomatic group from one planet to another in the same solar system, when they had already travelled half-way across the galaxy in a variety of distinctly unsuitable crafts. He knew very little of the Ambassador, but did know that 'impossible' was never taken as an answer.

"Please state destination." The computerised voice brought Picard back to the present.

"Sickbay." He gave the order almost without thinking. The Ambassador would have to wait; he had a potential madwoman in Sickbay who should, by all accounts, be dead and buried. *Questions are going to be asked by everyone.* He had already noticed the enquiring faces of the engineering team who were tending the Prospector. Were they to mend it, scrap it or use it in a history lesson? He was going to have to find some answers, and quickly. The turbo-doors opened, he exited and walked over to Sickbay. As he entered he was struck by the calm and tranquillity that Beverly kept her Sickbay in. He stood next to the Doctor, who acknowledged his presence.

"Nothing to report yet, Captain," she said quietly.

Picard looked at the readings. Although not a medical man, he did have enough knowledge to realise something was not right with Captain Lerette. He turned to Beverly and pointing at the readings asked, "Are those readings for real or has our sudden stop caused your scanners to malfunction?"

Beverly smiled, then more seriously replied, "That's no malfunction; but it is very unusual. It seems as though I am getting two sets of readings running alongside each other at different time lapses, and before you ask, it is not because of her Vulcan-Terran mixture, it's much more than that. I haven't dealt with any real cases of the mind-sifter, but these readings match none that have ever been recorded on the computer from any races' encounter with the mind-sifter."

Worf looked at the unconscious figure lying on the bed. Slight spasms of her restrained extremities were the only outward manifestation of her inner turmoil. If the viewing scanner had not been attached, no-one present would have believed the cerebral dysfunction going on between both hemispheres of her cerebrum. It was incredible. No sign showed on her face. At last her recessive Vulcan genetic make-up was dominant, and how. It had to have been the mind-sifter. Unconsciously Lerette must have brought into play all her inherent Vulcan techniques of self-defence for that most precious of things - her mind. The mind rules! The mind *must* rule. She was alone, in darkness, disorientated, confused sensory messages flashed into her Vulcan cerebral centres from all over her body - it tried to send out meta impulses - *escape - escape!*

"The mind-sifter was an evil piece of machinery. There is no telling of what it can do to any race," Worf explained. He stood close to the diagnostic bed and although he was obviously in the way, no-one asked him to move.

In Lerette's brain the electrical activity became more intense and various combinations were tried by the Klingon-affected brain. Suddenly she felt a restraint weaken - then give. The neural impulses must have knitted with those of the restraints of the 1701D. The

diminishing of the power around her limbs and across her chest became more marked as the cerebral chaos grew in an attempt to find physical release. Then it happened; she was free! She screamed as she hurled herself off the table and landed in a fighting stance. But who was she fighting? Where was she? And who were these people?

Picard and Crusher, who were by now close to the doors of the Sickbay, heard Lerette scream and turned as she leapt from the bed, eyes wide and unblinking.

Lerette saw Worf from her crouched position and, staggering to her feet, used the bed to balance herself, then ran. Worf jumped over the diagnostic bed but just missed getting hold of her. Lerette bolted towards the door, knocking two surprised nurses out of the way. As she ran she turned to check on her pursuers. Worf was close now and grabbed her by the shoulders, preventing her escape. He turned her round to restrain her even more and held her arms still as Dr Crusher approached with a hypo full of tranquilliser, which she gave the struggling Captain in the arm. There was no let-up in her resistance but Worf was having no problem holding her.

"Another hypo, quickly!" Beverly barked out the order and administered another, in the neck this time. The Captain showed no sign of calming down and now found her voice.

"Put me down you great overgrown rat!" she shouted. Worf growled but did not retaliate to the insult, or the kicks given by Lerette.

"I am not going to tell you anything at all, so you may as well tell your commander he'd be better off talking to a Denebian slime devil, with whom I know he has relations!" She spat the words out

at the Klingon officer. A third hypo hissed into her neck; she did not react at all to it and continued trying to escape Worf, and insult all he was and stood for. All of a sudden, Lerette went quiet and slumped to the floor. Dr Crusher checked her life signs and announced, "There is enough tranquilliser in her to knock out several Vulcans and yet she is only just out."

Lerette was put back on the bed.

"I think we'd better put physical restraints on her," Dr Crusher said, remembering a lecture on Vulcan physiology and electrical force fields. Perhaps the Vulcan was more dominant in Lerette than they had been led to believe.

Picard walked over to Worf. "You conducted yourself most admirably, Worf."

"Thank you, Captain, but if the third tranquilliser had not worked, I would have found a way to shut her up."

"I'm sure you would. Perhaps another member of your security team could stand watch now?" Picard suggested.

"Yes, Captain."

"I shall be in the briefing room," Picard told no-one in particular as he left Sickbay. Lerette was restrained with straps, a Terran security officer by her side, and order was restored to the Sickbay in a very short time.

Picard sat in the Briefing Room, looking out at the stars, his back to the large table. Data had arrived and was still tapping information into the computer and analysing the feedback to store in his

memory banks. Deanna also sat at the table; after visiting Captain Lerette in Sickbay, she was talking softly to Dr Crusher. The mind-sifter and its effects were something that none of them had ever been in contact with and, judging by the affected Captain, was something they never wanted to come across again. Picard swung his chair round to face the assembled trio.

"Data." The android ceased what he was doing and immediately gave his undivided attention to his commanding officer; Deanna and Beverly also stopped their conversation and faced the Captain. Picard noticed the intense concentration on their faces, wanting to know what he intended to do; but first he wanted some answers. "Data," he repeated, "could you now tell me if the Prospector did in fact come forward in time?"

"Yes," was Data's short reply.

Picard smiled to himself; well, he had asked for answers to be to the point. "How?"

Data put his head on one side like a young child formulating a sentence, and after a few seconds decided he had the answer that the Captain wanted. "When Captain Lerette managed to get into the shuttlecraft on the Klingon ship, she was not altogether sane but had enough computer knowledge left to open the Klingon doors, even though they had their shields up. She then just pressed every button and left the Klingon ship with such force that she hit the cloaking shield, ricocheted off the shield and started to come back into the Klingon ship. But the force of the shuttlecraft engines propelled her forward again, into the shield, this time causing an explosion which lowered the shields." Data stopped. He had tried to put it as simply as he could.

Picard nodded his understanding and put it even more simply. "Like a Yo-Yo," and upon seeing the curious look that came over Data when he encountered something new, added, "it's an old Earth toy," and left it at that.

"Thank you, Captain." Data carried on, not noticing Deanna and Beverly exchange smiles. "The result of all the action made the shuttlecraft go at a much higher warp than it was built for straight towards the nearby Antryn sun, and it must have been there that it went into slingshot and appeared with us. Shall I go on, Captain?"

"No, thank you, Data, I think that we have the general idea." Picard turned to Deanna. "Well, Counselor, did you feel anything when you met the Captain?"

"I can only sense strong emotions, and as Vulcans can lock their minds away, I did not really expect to feel very much," Deanna said. But she was troubled. She had felt something, but nothing that she had ever felt, or expected to feel. She paused, trying to put feelings into words.

"Go on, Counselor," Picard encouraged gently.

"The Captain's mind is locked, but more than I would expect from a half Vulcan, even if the Vulcan half was dominant; and the Human half is very much agitated; and the drugs - " she looked at the Doctor - "are not really helping. She wants to control herself and is confused by the lack of control that she has. The drugs are controlling her body but her mind is running riot. I think she is aware that the mind-sifter has been used. I hear she had an adverse reaction to Worf, and she also understands that most of the effect of the mind-sifter is being controlled by something, but she is unable to work out what." Deanna

stopped; she felt even more confused than before.

Picard was also beginning to feel confused. He had never fully understood the Vulcan way of thinking or the Betazoid's ability. He turned to Beverly. "Anything to add, Doctor?"

"Going by all the readings, confused as they are, I agree with Deanna. Tranquillisers quietened her body but the neurological scan I did went off the scale on all readings. I do not intend using any more drugs as they will do her more harm than good. The only suggestion I can make is to take her to Vulcan for contact with a Healer." The Doctor waited, knowing the reply she would get.

"We cannot make a detour to Vulcan," stated Picard. "However, would any other Vulcan be able to help?" Picard looked from the Doctor to Deanna, thinking of their imminent contact with the Vulcan Ambassador.

"It would have to be a Vulcan who has had training as a healer," the Doctor explained.

Well, that rules out the Ambassador, thought Picard; he knew that healing was not within this Vulcan's capabilities.

"Captain." Data had been tapping at his computer terminal which he now turned to show the Captain. "Ensign Sanak from the Science Department had some training in the healing techniques whilst he was studying at the Academy on Vulcan, and although he did not complete the full training schedule, he may be able to assist."

"We can but ask," Picard replied, and touching the communication console said, "Ensign Sanak, would you please report to Sickbay immediately." He looked at Deanna and the Doctor. "We

will carry on this conversation in Sickbay. Data, will you go to Engineering and see if you can give La Forge a hand so that we may speed up our arrival time at Trantious Alpha."

"Yes, Captain." Data left the briefing room, looking at his hands. Picard shook his head gently then touched the communicator again. "Bridge."

"Riker here."

"I shall be in Sickbay if I am wanted. Data has joined La Forge in Engineering - hopefully they will manage to find some way of getting us to the rendezvous a little more quickly."

"What do you want to do about the shuttlecraft?" enquired Riker.

Picard was silent for a moment. "As long as it is of no danger to us, just leave it in the corner of the hangar deck. Captain Lerette may have her own idea of what to do with it. Picard out." He joined the two ladies and they made their way to Sickbay to meet up with Ensign Sanak.

Captain Lerette, although under the effects of the tranquillisers, was tossing and turning and pulling at the restraints that held her down. A security guard stood to attention, poised for anything. The panel readings above her were still fluctuating up and down.

Like a Yo-Yo again, thought Beverly to herself. A young ensign stood next to the Doctor, gave her two medi-scanners, and told her, "This scanner is set purely for Vulcan readings, and this one for Human. The Vulcan set of readings would coincide with deep meditation, but we cannot get a clear set for a Human."

Beverly studied the two sets and the panel again. She looked at the unconscious Captain, trying to gather inspiration, searching through her own knowledge and training for a suitable reason.

Picard saw in the Doctor's face total incomprehension and, as Deanna went to try and gather more telepathic feelings from Lerette, he stood next to the Doctor. "What is it, Beverly?" he asked quietly.

Beverly looked up at him. "To put it simply, Captain, I haven't a clue. We shouldn't be able to separate the readings like this." She held up the scanners for Picard to see. "Even in the worse cases of schizophrenia this is not possible." She sounded quite indignant. She tapped the scanner set for Human readings and said, more to herself than to anybody else, "This shouldn't be happening."

The doors to Sickbay opened, and a Vulcan in the blue of the Science Department entered, and addressing Captain Picard, said, "Ensign Sanak reporting, Captain."

Picard went over to the Vulcan. "Have you heard much about what has happened in the last hour?" he asked.

"People have been talking about nothing else, sir. I am most curious; is it really Captain Lerette?"

"Yes, it is." Picard went on to give all the details of the Captain that they knew of, and showed him all the readings.

Sanak only spoke one word at the end. "Fascinating."

Picard waited as the Vulcan absorbed all the readings, trying to decide how to ask Sanak for his help. He couldn't order him to do a mind-meid, but

if a mind-meld wasn't done, the Captain would either die by her own hands or by one of his crew's, in self-defence. He noticed Sanak looking at Captain Lerette. Was she also held to be a hero by the Vulcans? Surely they didn't have heroes? "Ensign Sanak." Picard tried to speak as though he wasn't giving an order but still wanted something done. "Would you enter a mind-meld with Captain Lerette and try to help her in some way so that she may begin to help herself? I know that you have spent some time training as a Healer. You can, of course, refuse without fear of reprimand. This is not an order, just a request - one that I make as there is not much time before something is going to snap in the Captain, and we have done all we can to help her."

Ensign Sanak thought of all the information that the Captain had given him, all the readings, history tapes of Captain Lerette, his knowledge and understanding of the Klingon mind-sifter, knowledge of his own capabilities for a mind-meld, and came up with the only logical answer.

"I will do it, Captain, as you say to help her help herself. Whether I succeed or not depends on whether she wants any help, or if the mind-sifter has altered her Vulcan half." He gave his answer slowly, looking at Picard who, in reply, questioned him,

"There will be no danger to you if she does not want to be helped?"

"I can assure you, Captain, I can break contact with the mind-meld long before she can do me any harm."

"Then I will leave Captain Lerette in your capable hands." Picard stepped back out of the Ensign's way, as did everyone else, including Lt Covey, the security guard. Picard was about to ask him to stay close to the restrained Captain but

decided the Captain wasn't going anywhere, and so they all stood at the end of the bed watching and waiting.

Ensign Sanak stood very still and concentrated hard; he drew on his mind to feel peace and tranquillity, to keep pain away. Safe and secure he held this in his thoughts as he began to sink deeply into his own meditative thoughts. He looked at the struggling Captain - would she let him help? Taking a step nearer, he placed his long fingers over her face and tentatively opened his mind to hers. Very slowly and gently he reached into her mind, searching for the pain, searching for control. He stiffened as he touched her memory of the mind-sifter and felt the pain, the agony and the sheer terror of all that had happened in the last few hours for her, but nearly a century ago for them.

Picard noticed Sanak stiffen as he entered the mind-meld and stepped forward to prevent any more; as he did so he felt Deanna's hand on his arm deterring him. He turned to look at her and saw reassurance in her deep brown eyes. He returned to his position at the end of the bed and waited.

Sanak was now deep into the mind-meld and heard voices - two voices - why two? - there should only be one. He went deeper. There was someone else there. Voices called out and he spoke their words.

" - Sovik! No! Elenor - Klingons - take it! - No - CAPTAIN IT WILL HELP - SOVIK NO - NOT ME - MIND-SIFTER - NO - SOVIK - NO - NO - NO - "

Sanak was shouting with three voices. Picard looked at Deanna; could she explain? But no, puzzlement crossed her face as well. Dr Crusher had both medi-scanners in her hands trained on the connected pair, concern on her face. She obviously didn't like the readings she was

getting.

Suddenly a scream was heard from both Sanak and Lerette. Sanak was thrown back, all connection severed. Unable to maintain his balance he collided with the wall and crumpled unconscious to the floor. Dr Crusher hastened to tend him. Picard's attention was grabbed by Lerette, who had broken free of her restraints and had a look of sheer terror on her face. Blinded by fear, pain or even both, she was off again but, this time, Lt Covey was there and, as he tried to prevent Lerette escaping again, he called for assistance. Picard helped Covey but even the two of them were having trouble containing her. Extra security guards arrived and took over from Picard, four of them barely keeping their necks from her attacking hands, and preventing her bolting out of the Sickbay. As Picard went to see if Sanak was all right, Lerette lashed out with her feet and caught him squarely on the right shin.

Damn! was the Captain's only thought as he hobbled towards the Doctor. "How is he?" Before Beverly could give her answer, Sanak opened his eyes and, rubbing his head, slowly stood up.

"Just a bump on the head," said the Doctor unnecessarily.

As Sanak stood gathering his thoughts, he saw Lerette being held, not too securely, by the guards. He could hear a discussion between Picard, Deanna and the Doctor on how best to secure her, no-one wanting to use any more drugs, or restraints, after seeing their effect.

"Allow me," he said, and walking over to Captain Lerette placed his hands on her neck in just the right place and squeezed. Lerette slumped down as if she had been shot.

"Thank you, Sanak." Picard was almost envious. Why couldn't the Federation find a way of teaching the neck pinch to all? "That was most effective and very welcome." They both looked down at the crumpled heap that was Captain Lerette.

"Not at all, Captain. The Vulcan neck pinch is effective, even on Vulcans with two minds."

"What!" Picard gave his full attention to Sanak. "What do you mean, two minds?" He looked at the Ensign, who showed nothing at all of the bombshell he had just dropped.

Lt Covey addressed Picard and the Doctor. "Would you like her restrained again?" He waited for his answer as one of the guards picked her up off the floor.

I know where I would like her, thought Picard but, aloud, he said, "Sickbay hasn't facilities strong enough to restrain her; please put her in the Brig." He turned to Sanak, who answered without being asked.

"The most logical place for her, sir."

As the guards carried her off to the Brig with a nurse in tow, Picard turned once more to Sanak. "Could you please explain what you meant by *two minds*, and also anything else you may have learned from your rather brief mind-meld with Lerette."

"Time in a mind-meld is unimportant. It is, as the old Earth saying goes, quality not quantity."

"Could we all perhaps sit in your office, Doctor, and hear what Ensign Sanak has to say?"

"Be my guest," replied the Doctor.

They all made their way to the Doctor's office and sat round to hear Sanak. He began, "It was a most informative meld and, hopefully, soon she will be in control. There was a lot of confusion and conflict but I managed to make some sense out of it. I will take it from when they were caught by the Klingons. They were all put in one cell, quite a small cell, and Lt Sovik was taken first. He tried to escape but did not manage it. In the ensuing fight he was very badly injured by the Klingons, but not killed. Sovik was returned to the cell. Ensign Trean was next and whilst she was gone Ensign Karol told Captain Lerette that the Vulcan needed help as he was dying from his injuries. Captain Lerette had started to formulate an escape plan for when the Klingons returned. As they were discussing it, Ensign Karol was transported out, thus thwarting the escape plan. Lerette was shouting to find out about Trean when Lt Drake disappeared. As she was tending the Vulcan, trying to make him more comfortable, he told her he would not be able to make any escape plans, he would soon be dead. He wanted to help her, and could; and she could help him. Lerette was against the idea at first but just before he died, she agreed." Sanak paused to get his thoughts together.

"Agreed to what?" asked the Doctor, who was a little confused.

"She has his Katra, doesn't she?" said Deanna.

"Yes, Counselor. Sovik's Katra helped too well and controlled her mind so much during the mind-sifter that she now cannot separate Sovik's Katra from her Vulcan half. Her Human half is, as it were, out on a limb. Afraid to go forward, afraid to return, and the unknowing is driving her insane. Her only thoughts during the mind-sifter were of escape and until she has come

back along the limb, so to speak, she will continue trying to escape. I have shown her how to get back her control and, hopefully, she will take it. Logically it is something she will do, but in Captain Lerette the Human half is dominant, so logic may not have cause or effect. Her actual escape from the Klingons is basically correct, but I would like to add that she didn't open the doors of the ship first, she just blew her way through them."

He stopped and looked at Picard, who was quietly thinking. "Thank you, Sanak," he said.

Deanna spoke, "From what you say and what I felt during the meld, the agitation that I noticed earlier in her is as a result of what has happened to her since she came on board and not the direct result of the mind-sifter?" She looked at Sanak, who nodded.

"So when she first came round and saw Worf - " Dr Crusher was beginning to understand now - "she thought she was still being held by the Klingons, so escape was all that was on her mind, and that is what she immediately tried. The tranquilliser that I gave her would have only aggravated her already unstable mind."

Picard then added his views. "And so when she finally came round, discovered she was in restraints, she tried to escape again."

"Yes," was Ensign Sanak's unemotional reply.

"But surely," Picard went on, "a Vulcan shouldn't be able to break the restraints in Sickbay, even a Vulcan affected by the mind-sifter."

"Do not forget, Captain, that Captain Lerette has the strength of two

Vulcans and her Human half would have provided the impetus to escape."

"What effect will the Brig have on her?"

"It is unknown at this time, but from all I have learned of her from the mind-meld, she may have gained some control by the time she recovers from the neck pinch - enough to realise that although she may be in a Brig, it is not a Klingon Brig, and Klingon officers are not her guards, although I would recommend minimal force and no physical restraints on her."

"We will have to keep Worf out of her way until we can reason with her." Picard began to wonder what this troubled Captain had been like before the mind-sifter. He faced Sanak. "Thank you for all your help, Ensign. You may return to your duties now."

"Very well, Captain." He turned to leave Doctor Crusher's office. At the door he stopped and looking at the Captain, said, "Sir, I would like to know when she recovers; it would be most intriguing to converse with her. I am not on duty for another two hours. I shall be in my quarters should I be needed again - and Captain, a Vulcan Healer is required as soon as possible. I have only touched the surface of her problem and the Katra needs to go to Vulcan." With that he left the Sickbay and strode to his quarters for a period of much-needed meditation.

Picard, Deanna and the Doctor remained sitting in the Doctor's office after the Ensign had gone. Picard was the first to speak.

"The outcome of all this then is, we still have to find a Vulcan Healer as soon as possible, and secondly we have to try and be patient with her until she regains her former composure." He turned to the

Doctor. "Do you have any knowledge of the whereabouts of the nearest Vulcan Healer?"

"I ran the computer data banks to locate one, and the nearest is Lt Commander Syrok, who is one of the doctors on the USS Intrepid C." The Doctor turned her computer console to show the Captain and Deanna.

"But that's the Vulcan science ship orbiting Betazed," Deanna put in. "It will take days either to get to them, or them to us."

"7.89 days," added Dr Crusher, "and that is with us both going at Warp 6 and meeting half way." She had already asked the computer this.

"Well, we have an Ambassador to collect. Could you contact the Intrepid and -"

Picard was interrupted by Deanna. "There is no point contacting them, it will be too late for Captain Lerette."

"Explain, Counselor."

"When Ensign Sanak said *as soon as possible*, he meant immediately, and although he's a Vulcan, I could feel that deep down he was very unhappy with the situation and is sure Captain Lerette will not last long."

"Data to Captain."

"Picard here. What is it, Data?"

"We will be able to reduce our delay by 30 minutes."

"Good work. Please report to the Bridge and I will meet you there." He touched his communicator. "Bridge."

"Riker here."

"Set in co-ordinates for Trantious Alpha, Warp 6 immediately. I will be returning to the Bridge soon."

"Aye, sir."

"Well, ladies, there is not much more to discuss here. We will wait for Captain Lerette to regain consciousness, in whatever form. Meanwhile we will make our way to the rendezvous point to pick up the Ambassador's party."

Deanna and Picard made their way silently to the Bridge, both lost in their own thoughts. Deanna was troubled by what she could feel. She felt anxiety around her, especially from Ensign Sanak, and such strong emotions from Captain Lerette that she felt as though she herself had undergone the mind-sifter. She was trained in psychology, and as a Starfleet Counselor, but she didn't think she was strong enough to help guide Captain Lerette, who needed the powerful mind of a Healer. She glanced at Captain Picard, who was looking straight ahead but not seeing anything. He was tired and he needed his shore leave as much as everyone else. The incident with the Ferengi, although a victory for the Enterprise, had caused an unwanted delay. The instruction to collect the new leader for Trantious Delta, their shore leave planet, had done nothing to ease him. Now Captain Lerette was causing more frustration; rather like a fly buzzing round a light, you just wanted to get rid of it to be peaceful again. She hoped that his tiredness would not cloud his judgement of what to do with Lerette. All of a sudden Deanna felt two things; the first was terror - had Captain Lerette regained consciousness? The second was an incredible idea from Captain Picard that seemed to drain all his tiredness away. She looked at him again and was sure

that his face held a small smile.

They both left the turbolift and walked to their respective seats. "Well, Riker," Picard spoke to his First Officer, "have you been following our actions with regards our time travelling Captain?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Would you like to add any comments?"

"Have you thought of what to do with her when she is reasonably together?" Riker asked.

Picard allowed himself a smile and replied, "Yes, I do. Worf, please put the Brig on screen."

Worf touched his computer console and the Brig appeared on screen replacing the Trantious star system. Picard looked at the screen and immediately his smile vanished.

"What the devil is going on?" He looked at Worf who was calling out orders to the security guards. Where there should have been an unconscious Captain in the activated Brig with a few Terran guards, there was nothing; the whole place was empty.

"Worf, please explain." Picard sounded impatient, but before Worf could answer a stilted voice was heard through the intercom.

"Lt Covey to Bridge."

"Captain Picard here, what has happened?"

"Captain Lerette has escaped."

"I gathered that, Lieutenant, the questions are how, and where is she

now?"

"I have no idea where she is now. She suddenly came to and attacked us. Lt Dury and I fell prey to the Vulcan neck pinch and before anyone else could do anything, she must have grabbed the phasers and shot Ensign Palmer and the nurse."

"Are they all right?"

"I think so, sir, the medics have just arrived, and the phasers were set for heavy stun as per Lt Worf's instructions."

Worf spoke up. "Security has been alerted and several details have been assigned to the search."

"All right, Covey, join the search. Wait a moment, does she still have a phaser?"

"Yes, Captain, she has two; mine and Dury's."

Picard's brief good humour had vanished. He sat down in his chair and practically thumped his console. "Computer - tell me the whereabouts of Captain Lerette."

"I am unable to pinpoint the exact location of Captain Lerette."

"Explain." Picard felt that now even the computer was obstructing him.

"A definite reading has not been given on Captain Lerette."

Picard glared at the computer. If looks could kill, his computer would compute no more. He looked round the Bridge and spoke to everyone, and no-one in particular. "Has anybody any ideas?"

Deanna spoke at his side. "Remember what Sanak said." She

paused, wanting to see if he would remember. He did not appear to, so she added, "Try not to use force on her."

Picard swung his chair round to face her. "Deanna, that Captain is running wild on my ship. She has a phaser and you calmly tell me not to use force. I want her in restraints in the Brig as soon as possible. She is becoming more than just a nuisance."

"Captain." Worf spoke from behind him where he was busy monitoring all the locations of his guards.

"Yes, Worf." Picard turned away from Deanna.

"They have found her."

"Then get her into the Brig!" Picard instructed briskly.

"They cannot." Worf emphasised the 'they'; he was beginning to feel out of it, and was sure that had he been allowed to join the search parties, Lerette would have been safely behind bars by now.

"Why not?"

"She is using her phaser to maximum efficiency and no-one can get close to her."

"Where is she?"

"In Engineering. She has already stunned four of the security team and will not let the medics get to them."

"Well, I shall soon change that." Picard stood up, pulled down his jacket. "Riker, you have the con. Data and Deanna, come with me. I am going to play a hunch about our Captain Lerette." With that he strode towards the turbolift, the other two Bridge members following.

"Captain." Worf's voice held an urgency that made Picard stop, and turning to Worf said,

"What is it?"

"Geordi is down, and also some of the Ensigns working in Engineering."

Picard gave no reply as he entered the turbolift. Although quite a gentle man, he commanded great respect from his crew and from people he'd never met, and that was the one thing he was determined to get from Lerette. Picard had read her career in all its glory and knew that she also expected, and got, great trust and respect from her various colleagues and acquaintances. Although she was known to be very domineering and authoritative, she always had a reason for everything and always, logically, the right reason. From what Sanak had said, and from what he knew, he was going to play the hunch he had had in the turbolift before she escaped again.

"I'll give her credit where credit is due," he said aloud, "she is one of the most determined people I have ever come across."

"She does seem to persist, in a very single-minded way, with attempts to escape. Does she not recognise that we mean her no harm?" Data's question gave Picard another idea.

"Maybe not, Data. After all, no-one has yet told her that she is no longer in the Klingons' hands."

"Ensign Sanak would have tried to reassure her as to our wanting to help."

"Yes, Deanna." As they left the turbolift, walking towards Engineering, Picard added, "So now let's see what good old fashioned talking can do." He

stopped by the door to Engineering, where security guards were massed around. They all made way for the Captain who made his way towards Lt Covey. "Report, Lieutenant." Picard wondered how much more damage had been done.

"Well, sir, five security men are down in there, as well as Lt La Forge and a couple of Ensigns who were working on the computer."

"Deanna, can you feel anything?" Picard asked the Counselor.

"Still just confusion, but it is changed now," she replied frowning.

"How do you mean, changed?" Picard hoped that this was the change he wanted.

"Before, the confusion was at herself, but now it seems to be directed at us."

This was what Picard had wanted to hear. "Covey, open the doors, please; Data and Deanna, you come with me." Picard began to enter Engineering. He noticed Data being handed a phaser by Lt Covey and saw Deanna's reaction. "No weapons, Data." Picard looked at Deanna as Data handed back the phaser to the Lieutenant. "Happy?" he enquired.

"That is not a fair question, sir," Deanna replied.

They entered the Engineering Deck and as they rounded the corner they came face to face with Captain Lerette, who had two phasers pointed at them. She said nothing but the message was clear; take one step nearer and I will not hesitate to shoot. Picard, Deanna and Data came to an abrupt halt. They too

said nothing. Picard looked round and saw all the unconscious crew members on the floor. Lerette was standing directly in front of the antimatter mixer; no wonder no-one had fired at her. She stood very erect and still, and although she appeared to be very dishevelled, she still had a commanding air of authority about her. The gold of her command tunic was beginning to look quite tattered despite its hard-wearing qualities and the bands of gold braid on her sleeve were just visible. Her Starfleet command insignia had gone, and her black trousers and boots were covered in dust. Deanna and Data were also looking around and a small gasp came from Deanna as she saw the crew members. Data spotted La Forge and went to assist him. He hadn't taken more than one step when Lerette fired. She missed Data but created a blackened area on the wall behind him. Picard and Data looked at the damage.

Data gave it a cursory glance and reported, "That was the communication panel for the engineering deck, Captain."

At the sound of Data's calm voice, Lerette stared at him and Deanna felt a whole range of emotions emit from her, the strongest of all being surprise. She turned to Picard and whispered, "Captain, just speak to her. I felt her surprise at hearing Data talk in Standard."

Picard observed Lerette; he too had felt that talking might have some effect on the Captain. For a while he had been formulating an opening sentence in his mind, one designed not to agitate her but to help calm and reassure her. After all was said and done, she had been through a horrendous ordeal, and not one he himself would have liked to have experienced, one he doubted he could - as a Human - have even survived. Although she had caused a great deal of chaos and delay, had irritated him and hurt some of his crew, he still hoped they

could help her. He glanced at Deanna with a look of 'here goes' on his face then turned his head back to Lerette and began to speak slowly.

"Captain Elenor Lerette, Commanding Officer of the USS Endeavour." These words had quite a remarkable effect on Lerette. She stared at Picard, her eyes losing some of their blankness. 'Some life began to appear; it's almost as if they've changed colour', thought Picard. She seemed to relax a little and leaned forward slightly, as if not wanting to miss one word of what Picard was saying. *So far so good*, he thought, and carried on, still speaking slowly so that she could understand his every word.

"You are aboard a Starfleet vessel from the United Federation of Planets." He did not say 'Enterprise' because in Lerette's time, if his knowledge of history was correct, the Captain of the Enterprise was James T Kirk. Lerette still looked at him but now she began to lower the phasers. He turned to Deanna, a smile on his face; she too had a smile and her eyes told him he was saying the right things to reassure Lerette. Suddenly her face clouded as she looked back towards Lerette. Picard turned, Lerette's guard was back up, as were the phasers, this time both of them pointing at him.

"You are lying, Klingon." She practically hissed the words at him.

"I can assure you, Captain, I have never been a Klingon and never will be a Klingon. Take a good look at me - do I look like a Klingon?" Picard took a step closer.

"No," Lerette replied, scowling.

"Do they look like Klingons?" He indicated Data and Deanna.

"No."

"And what about them?" He pointed at the people on the floor.

"No."

All the time Picard questioned Lerette, he was edging closer to her. "This ship - is it anything like you have ever seen belonging to the Klingons, or ever made by the Klingons?" He was now quite close to Lerette but made no move against her nor tried to take the phasers from her hands.

It was now Lerette who asked a question. "Who are you?"

Her question was directed at Picard but she also glanced round, her eyes darting backwards and forwards taking everything in - *like a caged animal from old Earth*, thought Picard.

"My name is Jean-Luc Picard, and I am Captain of this vessel." He indicated Data. "This is Lt Commander Data." Data just nodded his head at her. Lerette looked at him; he was the strangest person she'd ever seen. Picard thought that an explanation of Data was not relevant at this time and carried on with his introductions. "And this is our Ship's Counselor, Deanna Troi." His mind raced for a moment as Deanna went to meet Lerette - did they have Ship's Counselors 85 years ago?

"I am very pleased to meet you, Captain Lerette." Deanna spoke her greeting and held up her right hand in customary Vulcan salute, her mind sending out friendship thoughts. Lerette automatically went to raise her hand, which was now hanging limply by her side, to return the Vulcan salute, but saw the phaser and confusion crossed her face again.

Picard saw it and holding out his hands asked, "Let me take them for you,

and then perhaps I can offer you some refreshments, a chance to freshen up and, later, we can discuss your meeting with us." Lerette gave the phasers to Picard and nodding her head, agreed to everything he said. He turned to the Counselor. "Deanna, could you escort Captain Lerette to her quarters and make her comfortable?"

Deanna knew Vulcans did not care to be touched so she indicated to the Captain which way to go. As they made their way to the door Captain Lerette stopped, seemed to stagger and held on to Deanna's arm for support. Deanna felt again the pain of the mind-sifter as Lerette's control slipped, but Lerette managed to gain control again and let go of Deanna, who knew she would have a bruise the next day. By the time they had reached the door, an array of medics, led by Dr Crusher, had arrived to tend the fallen crew members. Lerette saw all this, and noticed too the guards outside making, almost, a guard of honour to escort her to her quarters. As they left Engineering, she turned to see Captain Picard hand over the phasers to someone, touch his insignia and address someone called Riker, before the doors closed.

She turned to Deanna and asked rather pensively, "Did I do all of that?"

Deanna wondered if now would be a good time for a diplomatic white lie, but upon seeing Lerette's ashen face full of concern, she decided she could risk the truth.

"Yes, Captain." Deanna paused; should she add anything else? She didn't want to pry into Lerette's thoughts. The pain Deanna had felt during her brief encounter with Lerette's mind caused by the mind-sifter was intense. She wondered what Lerette was feeling, and how she was managing to control the effects, albeit tenuously.

As if Lerette had read her mind, she turned to Deanna and with fear in her voice said, "I feel dreadful. What have I done?" The question was directed at herself not Deanna, so Deanna did not reply. "I will not be able to maintain control of this much longer, and then what? I do not have the answer and that scares me. Perhaps Sanak will be able to help me again?" Lerette spoke quietly, almost to herself.

At least Sanak has been able to give her some help and guidance. Deanna thought. "Sanak tells us you need a Vulcan Healer to aid you completely, but please, let me take you to your quarters," she said gently.

Lerette allowed herself to be guided by the Counselor to the VIP quarters. Whilst she showered, Deanna programmed the computer for a new set of clothes similar to those the Captain had been wearing. Remembering the Vulcan in her, she made the uniform thermal and increased the temperature in the room. She then went to the food synthesiser and wondered if the Captain preferred Vulcan or Terran food.

"Well, I certainly feel better for that."

Deanna nearly jumped. She hadn't heard Lerette walk up behind her. She turned to look at the Captain. Lerette certainly looked a lot better, and had an air of authority that Deanna immediately noticed. She felt like snapping to attention and saluting. Instead, pointing to the synthesiser, she asked, "What can I get for you?"

"Just a cup of coffee please," replied Lerette, "I don't feel able to eat just yet. Make it black, no sugar."

Deanna gave the order and then gave the steaming hot cup of coffee to

Lerette. Well, Sanak had said the Human half was dominant.

"Thank you," said Lerette and, as she drank, she began to pace round the room taking everything in.

She still doesn't entirely trust us, thought Deanna, *and her mind is closed now, I can no longer sense anything.* The door chime went, and Deanna opened the door to reveal Dr Crusher. Lerette turned to face her.

"This is Dr Crusher, Captain Lerette."

"Didn't I just see you in Engineering?" asked Lerette.

"Yes." Dr Crusher had attended all those affected by the phasers and the two with sore necks, and so wasn't too amenable to the Captain's request to see how Lerette was, let alone have a conversation with her.

"Are they all right?" The question threw Crusher. She had been expecting to restrain Lerette again and to be asked a question of this nature, perhaps showed more of Lerette's previous behaviour as a Captain before the mind-sifter had been used on her, and less of the destructive and aggressive pattern seen by those who had encountered her since.

"Yes, they have all recovered and are back on duty again." Crusher gave her reply and held out her mediscanner, not wanting to engage in conversation with her, but intending to take readings and report back to Picard as soon as possible.

Lerette looked at the medi-scanner and stood very still, waiting for the Doctor to finish. As soon as the readings had been taken, she held out her hand. "May I take a look please?" Lerette's

question came out of the blue, but Crusher gave the scanner to her and watched her reaction. Lerette gazed at the medi-scanner, not seeming to know what to look for, let alone understand the readings. Suddenly Deanna gave a cry and fell, her face full of anguish; Lerette too cried out in agony, dropped the medi-scanner to the ground and then clutching her head in her hands fell to the floor in a crumpled heap, quietly sobbing. Crusher went to Deanna and helped her up.

"It's all right Beverly. How's Elenor?"

They both approached the kneeling Captain. Deanna spoke softly. "Elenor, it's all right, you're safe here," trying with her words to convey the security she felt the Captain required. Elenor looked up into the dark Betazoid eyes and gently shook her head.

Captain's Log Supplemental: "Our time-travelling Captain is resting in her quarters and, according to Dr Crusher, she is quite well physically, but mentally she is walking on a knife edge, barely maintaining control of her behaviour, a control which the Doctor informs me she will continue to lose periodically. Usually the Klingons implanted a word or action which immediately triggers loss of control in a person who has been through the mind-sifter; however this seems not to be the case here. Dr Crusher is trying to find something that will prolong control, and ease the pain before we can get to a Healer. Ensign Sanak has been approached to initiate another mind-meld but logic tells him he is not strong enough. I could order it, but I will not. We continue on our journey to pick up the Ambassador. Picard

out"

Picard turned the computer off and stretched out in his chair. He drank some more of his now cold Earl Grey, his eyes glancing round the Ready Room and out of the window. Although there was a lot on his mind, his thoughts strayed to the memory of his last shore leave, which now seemed a lifetime away.

"Troi to Captain Picard."

"Picard here. What is it, Counselor?"

"Captain Lerette is ready to meet you."

"Thank you, Deanna, I will see you in the briefing room in five minutes." Picard touched the communicator. "Picard to Crusher."

"Crusher here."

"I would like you in the briefing room in five minutes for a meeting with Lerette."

"Yes, Captain."

Picard stood and walked onto the Bridge. "Riker, you have the con. Worf, have a security detail escort Captain Lerette to the briefing room. Data, with me." Picard gave his instructions whilst walking towards the turbo-lift. He did not have to look to know his orders were being carried out. He stepped into the lift, Data a step behind.

"Captain."

"Yes, Worf?" Picard turned to the security officer.

"Captain Lerette has already left for the briefing room." Picard's only reply was a look upwards. As the doors closed

Picard ordered, "Briefing room."

The Captain and the android were silent for the short journey in the lift, but during the approach to the briefing room they both heard shouting as they reached the door. Picard looked at Data. "I think that Captain Lerette has arrived before us."

"Yes, Captain," was Data's reply.

The doors opened to reveal Captain Lerette about to hurl a cup at the wall. Deanna and Beverly were trying to reason with her. Two security guards stood poised but they looked up with relief as Picard entered. He signalled for the guards to leave as he suspected Lerette wasn't now potentially dangerous. He gave her his full attention.

"Captain Lerette, please put that down." Although he hadn't shouted, his raised voice reached her; but she didn't put it down. She held the cup in her hand staring at the base then, instead of throwing it at the wall, she tossed it towards the Captain, but it was Data who caught it.

"Explain this!"

Data handed the cup to Picard after a swift scrutiny. Before Picard could give any form of attention to the cup, Lerette spoke again.

"Who are you? What ship is this? How did I get here? Why all this paraphernalia from the Enterprise?"

The questions streamed from Lerette with no pause for reply, and as she reached the word Enterprise, Picard's sharp eyes picked out the writing on the cup - 'USS Enterprise - MADE IN MARS'. Suddenly he understood. Now was the time to explain recent events with the intention of making everything clear to

Lerette. He placed the cup on the large table and sat down, hoping to convey a sense of relaxation. Lerette's questioning had stopped and she regarded this authoritative man, who spoke with command and respect, dressed, she presumed, in some form of uniform but one she had not encountered before.

Picard looked up, smiled and asked her to join him, indicating the chair to his left. She stood and held on to the back of the chair and watched as Data, Deanna and the Doctor took their seats. When they had sat she perched herself on the edge of her chair, looking formal and uncomfortable.

"You know everyone here?" Picard directed his question at Lerette, who just nodded her reply. "You are on board the USS Enterprise NCC 1701-D."

"Impossible. The Enterprise has just begun a major refit which is going to take at least eighteen months." Lerette stood and began to pace the room again. "Besides - " she stopped beside Picard, staring most intently at him - "you look nothing like Captain Decker!"

"Not Kirk." Picard spoke almost to himself, but Lerette obviously had extremely good hearing.

"What's Admiral Kirk got to do with this?"

Picard stared back. "Could you please just sit down and let us explain?" He felt his patience going.

"Explain." There was a note of disbelief in it. "I want more than an explanation, I want to report a Klingon vessel in Federation territory, I want to report the death of crew members, I want to meet up with my ship again!"

"That's enough." Picard rose to his

feet and faced Lerette. "I have noted what you want, but on this ship, *I* am Captain, and what *I* want," he paused, "goes."

"All right." Lerette held her hands up as if in mock surrender. "You are a Captain, of which ship I do not know, but I am a Captain too, of the USS Endeavour; please treat me like one." She sat down, still not looking relaxed.

Picard also sat down. He glanced round at his silent officers, then eyed Lerette. "Could you tell us the last things you remember before waking and seeing Lt Worf?"

"Who?" queried a puzzled Lerette.

"The Klingon officer."

"I was returning to my ship, the USS Endeavour, from Space Station Z26 when we were attacked. We were not armed. Before we knew it we were aboard the Klingon ship." She paused, the memory sending stabbing pains through her mind again. She shook her head and rubbed her eyes.

"Didn't your sensors pick the Klingon ship up?" Data asked the question as he was most curious to find out how and why the Prospector had been captured so quickly. Again Picard had to frustrate Data's attempt to further his knowledge.

"Later, Data. Please carry on, Captain Lerette."

"I can remember being taken from the shuttlecraft." She touched a dark green bruise on her cheek. "But we put up a good fight. We were taken to a cell, small and dark. Sovik was taken out first but he was soon returned." Lerette managed a small smile at the memory of Sovik. Picard began to notice characteristics in Lerette that were more

compatible with what he'd read about her, than with her actions on his ship. "Sovik was a good First Officer and he tried to fell a few Klingons, but there were too many of them for him. When he returned he wasn't a pretty sight. Then they took Ensign Trean. It was her first appointment. She was only eighteen." Lerette's speech was becoming disjointed as she tried to remember. "Karol said Sovik needed urgent medical attention. We tried to formulate an escape plan, but they just beamed him out. Sovik felt them both die... He was in so much pain, but he didn't grumble or shout out. Then they took Lt Drake. Sovik felt him die too and knew his own death was imminent." Her voice broke. She stared at the table, trying to breathe slowly and regain her composure.

Beverly looked at her tricorder which had been constantly trained on Lerette, who now appeared to be suffering from extreme stress. Sovik's death had affected her much more than any of the other deaths.

Picard spoke to Lerette. "What happened after Lt Sovik died and you became the keeper of his Katra?"

Lerette looked up at Picard, frowning.

"Sanak told us."

Lerette nodded and carried on, her sentences still fragmented. "When he died I was so full of anger and hate - I could hardly breathe. They came for me and took me to the mind-sifter - I managed to control my mind and put thoughts of a Federation ship into the Klingons' minds. They stopped the machine - turned away - I only needed one second - I got two of them and ran - could only guess where the Prospector was - met a Klingon on the way - he won't fight again - found the Prospector -

more luck than judgement - just fired up her engines and lay down to die. Then, then - " She stopped, her mind a whirlpool of memories, the pain and terror caused by the mind-sifter overwhelming her. She leaned on the table with her elbows and rubbed her eyes. After a while she seemed to gather some strength from deep inside and, almost apologetically, said, "I'm afraid I can't remember much more."

Deanna looked at Lerette and felt again the effect of the mind-sifter and also the mental block that Lerette was trying to put up; but before the block went up there had been something else that Deanna had felt. It was Sovik. Not just the fact of his Katra being in Lerette's mind; no, it was much more than that. Then the full realisation of it came to Deanna. Sovik and Elenor, although not fully bonded, were closer than just Captain and First Officer. The Counselor suspected that Lerette didn't want to remember rather than that she couldn't remember, but decided not to contradict the Captain's statement. She felt that the Elenor Lerette sitting before them now was very much as she had been before the encounter with the Klingons.

Picard had also been listening intently to Lerette's narrative. He was an excellent diplomat but felt that no amount of training or experience had prepared him for what he was about to tell her. He launched into his explanation.

"Obviously you did escape. The Klingons and their ship are no more. However, when you made your escape you entered into a time warp." He paused, waiting for that to sink in, then added, "You travelled 85 years into the future."

"85.87 years," elaborated Data.

"Thank you, Data," said Picard.

"The future? But how? I don't understand. Where is the Endeavour, and my crew?" Lerette's first reaction seemed to be one of total confusion but then the significance of what she had seen since her unorthodox escape from the Klingons struck her. This strange ship with its familiar name. The Klingon she had seen as she came round following her escape. The memories of what had happened to her came flooding back. She stood, slamming her hands on the table. Before Picard could begin to answer her questions, she directed her anger at him and gave vent to some of her feelings.

"If you are indeed the Starfleet of the future you sure as hell don't show it!" Lerette's words seemed to puzzle Picard, but she carried on. "Why have I not been treated with the respect that my rank as Captain decrees, and that I have a right to expect?"

Deanna realised that Lerette spoke more with frustration than anger.

Picard remained seated and kept a hold on his diplomatic self. "You haven't exactly been able to behave like a Captain since you have been on board the Enterprise." He tried not to be sarcastic but felt that he was more able to cope with Lerette's obvious anger than the hidden mental torment of her mind. The past few hours ran through both their minds. Lerette sat down again and faced Picard.

"Touche," she said.

Deanna smiled to herself. Captain Lerette evidently enjoyed a lively discussion, but she felt that the block that was in Lerette's mind wouldn't last much longer.

Picard too smiled at Lerette's reply,

which wasn't at all the one he'd expected. Now that they had, hopefully, achieved some measure of trust between them, perhaps a decision could be made about the situation they found themselves in.

Dr Crusher stood and regarded the two Captains. "I can see that my presence is no longer required here, so if you will excuse me I will return to Sickbay."

"Of course, Doctor," replied Picard.

"Don't hesitate to contact me should the need arise," Crusher addressed Lerette.

"You yourself said that there wasn't anything you could do for me, so I doubt I'll be calling." Lerette spoke matter of factly, perhaps showing more than a trace of the Vulcan in her.

From anybody else it would have sounded, and been, a most discourteous reply, thought Crusher, but she said nothing, thinking, that was just the Vulcans' way of talking.

"Time warp." Lerette appeared to be thinking out loud. "Fascinating."

"It was directly caused by the shuttlecraft leaving the Klingon ship." Data began to explain the exact method to Lerette but was silenced by her.

"I don't really want to know, Data. My knowledge of time travel is rather limited and personally I'd like to keep it that way. My ship and crew?" She left her question half asked.

Picard turned to the android officer. "Data, put the details of Lerette's career on screen, and also the logs of the Endeavour."

Data called up the information required onto the screen and whilst it was

playing, Deanna and Picard kept casual eye on Lerette's reaction to what had happened so long ago.

"I worked damn hard to get my captaincy and now it's all gone," Lerette sighed as she read the reports.

"I'm sorry, Elenor, but history has been written." Picard tried to speak with reassurance.

"It's your history, Picard, not mine. Your past is my future, and I would like to live it for myself."

"The Federation will be able to assist you and maybe retrain you." Deanna tried to show Lerette the options that would be available to her.

"I don't want to be retrained." Lerette was most indignant. "I have already spent enough years at Starfleet being trained, and even more getting where I am. The last thing I want is to return to the Academy."

"If you want to retain your rank as Captain, there will be a lot of catching up to do," Picard informed her.

"Your knowledge as a Captain of 85.87 years ago will not be adequate for you to assume the status you formerly occupied. Analysing your records and grades from the Academy, and experiences in the field on various missions and then comparing them with someone in a similar position today, you would be required to spend one year in the Academy and another year in the field before you would be fully competent as a Captain again," expanded Data, who, as usual, spoke the facts as he knew them.

There was silence around the table, the three Enterprise officers looking at Lerette, waiting for the information to be digested and then hear her reply. Data

opened his mouth to give more precise details of what her retraining would involve, but Picard noticed and raised a hand to again thwart the android's divulgence of information.

Lerette got to her feet slowly and walked towards the window. She stood gazing out at the stars, almost oblivious of those present. She leant against the wall but still stared out at the stars. Picard looked at Deanna, who just shook her head silently.

"Where are we?" Lerette asked her question as though the answer would provide her with all she needed to know.

"We are on our way to the Trantiousian system. More precisely to Trantious Alpha to collect - " Picard gave Lerette the answer, but stopped as she didn't appear to be listening. He wasn't telepathic but he could tell she wasn't happy at all with his answer. He rose from his chair and went to join her by the window.

"What is it?" he asked gently.

"I don't recognise it at all," she replied.

"That would be correct. This star system was discovered only 25 years ago," offered Data.

"All the progress we have made in the last 85 years would be taught to you. All our new technologies, new star systems, new allies - like the Klingons," explained Picard.

Lerette looked at Picard and spoke only one word. "No."

"What *do* you want?"

"I want my ship back. I want to work with my crew again."

"But surely you must understand that that's impossible. The Endeavour is scrap now and your crew dead, and you..." Picard hesitated; the information concerning Lerette's death and the subsequent memorial service was still on the screen.

"I'm what?" put in Lerette. "Dead. Is that what you want to say? I'm dead and buried."

"That is how Starfleet history is written," said Data.

"But as you can see, I'm not dead, not by a long way," replied Lerette.

"Why won't you even consider retraining?" began Deanna.

"I said no, and I am not one to change my mind." Determination showed in Lerette's face. "I am a Captain and I am not going to relinquish my rank."

"You cannot be a Captain in this time, not yet." Picard's voice was as determined as Lerette's. It was as if they both felt that the more force they put into their words, the more the other would understand. Picard carried on, "You must give yourself time to adjust and to learn."

"Whose time, Picard?" retaliated Lerette. They both stood stony-faced, neither of them wanting to back down, both persisting with their own way of thinking.

Deanna felt that the argument had pushed Lerette's agony to the back of her mind but now it was coming to the fore again. Picard was close enough to see the change in Lerette's face as a wave of agony passed over it. Her hazel eyes became blank. He caught Lerette as she began to fall and eased her into a semi-recumbent position. He knelt beside her,

restraining her as gently as he could. He read agony in her eyes as she stared blank-faced at him, and felt her body stiffen as she tried to control herself.

Her thoughts were of escape; she wanted to run forever to rid herself of the pain in her mind. Her own Vulcan half and Sovik's Katra were there with the calm and the logic that was needed. Lerette began to relax as the Vulcan in her managed to regain its control. Her breathing became easier and she stopped her attempts to break free of Picard.

Deanna knelt down beside Picard and asked Lerette, "Are you all right?"

Lerette didn't turn away from Picard and replied, "For the time being, yes."

"Is it always going to be like this?" asked Picard, directing his question at Deanna.

"Yes, it is, Captain. Only the attacks will become more frequent and more painful. She will also have more trouble regaining control. I also feel that her desire to escape is becoming stronger each time she loses control. At some stage this desire will become a need that will block out everything, even logic, and that need will eventually destroy her, and anything, or anyone who stands in her way." Deanna hoped that Picard understood the implication of what she had said, and also of just how dangerous Lerette could become.

"Is there no way of helping her?"

"Don't talk about me as if I am not here." Lerette spoke as she slowly stood up, aided by Picard.

"Captain Lerette?" Data too had risen and approached the Captain to ask his question. "Would you like us to

contact Sanak to see if he could come and assist again?"

Lerette looked at Data. She was curious about him and would have liked to know more, but troubled with the knowledge in her mind she felt that new information would be a hindrance. She gave a short answer to the android's question.

"Yes."

Lerette watched as Data asked Sanak to report to the briefing room and allowed herself to be settled in a chair by Picard and Deanna. She couldn't cope with this situation much longer; she wanted to be anywhere but here. The stars outside seemed to be calling her and she fought an inner battle with herself. She needed help, powerful help. No drugs, no restraints, just a mind stronger than any she knew of to help her win outright, or she must surrender totally and give her life into the mind-sifter.

"Riker to Picard."

"Picard here."

"Captain, there is a personal communication for you from Trantious Alpha."

"I'm on my way. I will take it in the ready room." Picard turned to Lerette. "If you will excuse me, I will return shortly. I hope that Sanak will be able to help you. Deanna, if you would stay with the Captain. Data, you may return to the Bridge." He turned and left the briefing room with Data.

As they turned the corner of the corridor Ensign Sanak arrived, looking a little apprehensive, if Vulcans could be said to look apprehensive. He had been in meditation for a long time after he had left Sickbay. He saw Lerette sitting

staring at the stars. He turned to face Deanna. "Counselor, I was asked to report."

Lerette swung her chair round, rose and stood next to Deanna. "Sanak, I would like your help again. Would you permit a mind-meld?" Lerette asked her question in typical Vulcan form - directly, with no unnecessary words. She took a step closer to the young Vulcan, her eyes seeming to penetrate his innermost thoughts.

"I do not feel - I am unable - I find myself - that I - could." Sanak spoke disjointedly. He did not know how to explain to Lerette that a meld with her was one of the last things he wanted to do.

"All I need is a yes or no," interrupted Lerette.

Deanna sensed the Ensign's unwillingness and intervened. "Elenor, perhaps the mind-sifter is too strong for him."

Lerette looked at Sanak and asked him, "Is that the case?"

"Yes." Sanak said more with that simple yes than with his previous attempt at explanation.

"You won't even try?" Lerette's question seemed more of a Human insult than anything else.

"I'm sorry, Captain Lerette but, as I told Captain Picard, a Vulcan Healer is needed, and I am not a Healer." Sanak remained looking at Lerette, who came closer to him.

"I'm sorry to be so touchy. I should be thanking you for the help you gave me earlier. Vulcan seems so far away and so does any form of help."

Lerette seemed to hesitate and again the horrendous effect of the mind-sifter came to the surface of her mind. Deanna looked at Sanak, who defied his own logic and placed his fingers on Lerette's face. Lerette obviously had some form of control. She returned the gesture with her own fingers to his face. They stood locked. Deanna waited, sensing all that was going on; certain thoughts so private that she made herself forget them; pain that was inseparable from life. Death and escape - the illogical thought from Lerette's Human half whilst all the Vulcan around and in her tried to bring forward emotionlessness with a sense of serenity. But the Human half was too dominant; Sanak was being swallowed, he must break off the meld. He couldn't help her any more. Lerette didn't want to break the meld; she felt some relief and wanted to give all the pain and terror to Sanak. Her Vulcan half was keeping Sanak and the Human half was slowly being transferred to him. Deanna stepped forward. To try and break the meld against their will would possibly do them both some form of damage, but if she didn't do something soon Sanak could lose himself to Lerette.

Suddenly the meld was broken.

Lerette had felt Deanna's concern for them both. Sanak said nothing to either of them as he turned and left the briefing room. He'd done all that he could to help Lerette. Although he knew she hadn't wanted to break the meld, he recognised the fact that she had done so, albeit with Sovik's help. Lerette sat down quietly, her mind in a turmoil. She now knew what she wanted. She also knew that it was the only logical thing for her to do. She sat and waited for Picard to return.

Captain's Log Supplemental: "I have just received a message from the Ambassador's aid, T'Ria. It

would seem that our delay has proved to be too much for the Ambassador, who has decided to rendezvous with us. We have changed course and speed and are now heading for Trantious Delta at warp one. TRia also tells me that the Ambassador will be travelling alone and so will be piloting the shuttlecraft, Hini. As a precaution I have instructed Lt La Forge to be ready with the tractor beam, and have informed Worf to keep a very close eye on the long range scanners. Picard out."

Picard turned off the computer in the Ready Room and stretched back in his chair. It was definitely one of those days, everybody seemed to want their own way with no-one listening to reason. He reached for his Earl Grey. Cold again. He wondered if he was ever going to be able to drink his tea hot today. He put the tea, undrunk, back on the table, and left the ready room and entered the Bridge. He glanced round at his efficient crew, all looking forward to their shore leave. Riker stood up as he saw Picard, vacating the command chair.

"Carry on, Number One," said Picard. He looked up at Worf. "Let me know as soon as you have located the Ambassador's shuttlecraft."

"Yes, sir," came the Klingon's brief reply.

"Where will you be, Captain?" asked Riker.

"Briefing room," replied Picard as he walked to the turbolift. He stated his destination and leant against the wall as the turbolift smoothly delivered him to the area near the briefing room. As he left the lift, he remembered the last time he had made this journey; but this time no

shouting came from the briefing room. Perhaps Sanak had been able to help Captain Lerette - and then again, maybe not. His thoughts were definitely becoming pessimistic. He stopped outside the door to the briefing room, just far enough away from the sensors to prevent immediate entry. Various crew members passed him, no-one seeming to think it strange that he stood outside making no attempt to enter. Then he stepped forward and entered the room.

Looking round, he noticed Lerette sitting in the topmost chair reading the computer screen. Deanna was also sitting nearby, but no Sanak. He approached Deanna and asked, "Did Ensign Sanak report?"

"Yes, Captain," replied Deanna, and then elaborated. "He was, at first, unwilling to enter a meld with Elenor, but when the mind-sifter effect manifested, he did choose to meld. Elenor broke the meld before..." The Counselor tried to choose her words carefully.

"Before I killed him." Lerette finished Deanna's sentence. "Isn't that what you wanted to say?"

Deanna said nothing. Hearing the truth put so bluntly like that caused a certain amount of unease in her.

"Well, it's true. Sanak's mind isn't strong enough, nor is he sufficiently trained as a Healer, to help me." She pointed at the now blank computer screen. "I know how far away a Healer is, and how long it will take to make contact, even with allowing no shore leave for your crew." Lerette paused for a moment and then carried on. "It is highly illogical for a Starship to be diverted from its mission for one person, especially if that person is not even one of the crew." She got to her feet and began to pace the

room.

"Elenor." Picard's voice put a stop to her pacing. "Dr Crusher and Ensign Beadle are trying to find something that will give you some peace of mind whilst we try to work out a way of getting you to Vulcan, or a Healer to you. They are in direct contact with the M'Benga Institute of Vulcan Psychology so - " Picard never managed to finish his sentence.

"Picard," Elenor interrupted, "please understand, I appreciate what Dr Crusher and Ensign Beadle are trying to do but as I said before, I have made up my mind about what I want to do."

"Surely you still don't want to carry on from where you left off?" said Picard.

"I want *my* ship, my crew."

"Your ship is gone and your crew are dead - destroyed by a wormhole eight years after your alleged death." This time it was Picard who interrupted.

Elenor glared at him. "If I may be allowed to continue?"

Picard held up his hands to indicate assent.

"I want my own time." She paused, waiting for her statement to be understood by Picard, and to notice his reaction. He sat down. Lerette chose the chair next to Picard and she too sat down, positioning herself so that she faced him. She looked him straight in the eye; he returned her look.

Picard spoke slowly. "You want to go back in time?"

"Got it in one," replied Lerette. She then smiled for the first time since coming on board the Enterprise.

Picard wasn't too sure of how to reply. "Why don't you want to stay in this time?"

"It's not just a matter of wanting, I can't."

"Because of the mind-sifter?" asked Deanna.

"Amongst other things, yes." replied Lerette. "I've told you once, and I am not used to repeating myself. I want to go back. What do I have to do to get you to see that?" Lerette thumped the table and rose, but then sat down again.

"You really are the most stubborn and single-minded person I have ever encountered." Picard directed his words at Lerette.

"You've obviously read my files," she retaliated. "I know my own weaknesses but I also know my strengths. I'm not the most diplomatic of people. Why do you think I am on an exploratory vessel? Deep space travel and scientific research, only a few crew members, and well away from rationality and uniformity. That's why."

"All right, Elenor." Picard had read and studied her file and although the reason hadn't actually been stated for her commission to the Endeavour, admiring her ability but reading between the lines of her career record, it was the only logical ship to give her. "Let's get Data and La Forge together and see what can be done. I'm quite sure you cannot be swayed from your decision."

"Thank you, Jean-Luc."

Lerette was truly thankful for Picard's agreement to help her. She watched as he called for Data and La

Forge to join them in the briefing room. She began to wonder about the feasibility of her request, but decided she would rather die trying to go back in time than die in this time trying to escape the horror in her mind. Lerette saw Picard join Deanna and watched them talking quietly. If she had wanted to, she could have listened in on their conversation (good Vulcan hearing that had enabled her to hear things about herself on the Endeavour that she shouldn't have). She allowed herself a small grin as she remembered their nickname for her, Captain Cantankerous. But she also knew of their respect for her. Her thoughts went even further, back to her last visit to Vulcan where she had met Sovik for the first time, when he joined the Endeavour as First Officer. His Katra was still present in her mind. The memories became alive in her thoughts as Sovik too remembered how Elenor had helped him when his time of pon farr came, the times they had spent together on and off duty. She missed him, and at the same time cursed her Human emotions. She should have stayed longer on Vulcan and studied control, but then again she was more Human than Vulcan. Elenor closed her eyes and let her mind wander back with Sovik.

"Come." At Picard's voice, Lerette opened her eyes to see who was entering the room. She recognised Data, so the other gentleman must be La Forge. Picard introduced her. "Captain Lerette, this is Lieutenant Commander La Forge, our Chief of Engineering." La Forge and Lerette shook hands. She looked at his visor but said nothing.

"If you would all sit down we will see what we can accomplish." Picard spoke as he sat at the head of the table. Lerette sat on his right and Deanna next to her. Opposite Lerette sat Data with La

Forge next to him.

"Captain Lerette has requested..." Picard paused and then cast a quick look at Lerette as he continued... "that she be returned to her own time. Any comments, please?" He looked at Data and La Forge.

It was Data who spoke first. "Captain," he addressed Picard, "I would like to point out that the probability of returning Captain Lerette to an exact time is not at all favourable. The odds would be - " He never got any further.

"Data." Lerette leaned across the table towards him. "I'm not too bothered about what the odds are; they are probably higher than finding a Vulcan Healer out here, in the middle of nowhere, within a couple of hours." She waved an arm at the window.

Data said nothing in reply. There was, as far as he could tell, no question asked. Lerette leaned back in her chair and continued.

"All I want - " she noticed Picard frowning out of the corner of her eye and corrected herself - "would *like*, is to know, can it be done with the Prospector?"

Data looked at Geordi, who now voiced his thoughts.

"Well, there isn't actually any damage done to the shuttlecraft. I'm sure Data and I could work something out down in Engineering. We will need to check all logs from the Prospector, and history records of 85 years ago."

"85.87 years," corrected Data, once again. "Although we cannot produce a cloaking device, we can always adapt something else to simulate it."

Picard looked from La Forge to

Lerette and saw in her face a grim determination that quite took him by surprise. He turned back to Data and La Forge and instructed them both, "Make it so."

The two officers rose from their chairs and made to leave the briefing room. Just as they reached the doors, La Forge turned round and addressed Lerette.

"Captain, would you like to see the Prospector?"

"No, thank you Lieutenant, I will stay here where I am sure I can do less damage." Lerette continued to look at him and then asked, "Were you present in Engineering during my last visit?"

"Yes," replied Geordi.

"I think then that I should, in Terran tradition, apologise." Lerette stood and walked up to La Forge and, in a voice filled with sincerity, said, "I am sorry if I caused you any pain or inconvenience." She extended her hand, which Geordi shook in acceptance of her apology, a look of surprise on his face.

"Keep us informed as to your progress," said Picard as Data and La Forge left the Briefing Room.

Lerette returned to her seat and sat down. Picard studied the disturbed Captain, and when he too returned to his seat commented, "You must have been a very interesting commander to work with."

Lerette stared down at the table then solemnly replied, "I hope I still am." She looked up at Picard and added, "Maybe I will be rewriting your computer records when I return to my own time."

"Surely that wouldn't happen."

Deanna sounded quite shocked. The full realisation of what a successful return could mean to them all on the Enterprise had just been made clear to her.

Lerette was supposed to die 85 years ago, and if she didn't, what events could or couldn't now take place? Deanna tried to put the negative thoughts out of her mind as she tried to sense something from Lerette, but everything was locked away. All Deanna could sense was that it wouldn't be much longer before she finally gave in to herself, and let the mind-sifter claim her life.

Lerette turned to face the Counselor. "Deanna, I may be a bit unstable at the moment, but I'm not stupid." Her voice was quite calm.

Troi was suddenly quite startled. "You are convinced that you aren't going to make it." Lerette said nothing but continued to look at Deanna who carried on, "But that's suicide."

"Maybe, but maybe not," came Lerette's quiet reply. "One thought though, Counselor - can a corpse actually commit suicide?"

"Riker to Picard."

Picard pressed his communicator pin. "Picard here. What is it, Commander?"

"We have just located the Hini on long range scanner."

"Let me know when it is within hailing distance. Picard out." He looked at Lerette and Deanna but said nothing. He was hoping that Lerette wouldn't meet with the Ambassador; he knew enough about both of them to know they wouldn't see eye to eye.

"La Forge to Captain Picard."

"Picard here."

"Captain, we think we have come up with a plan for returning Captain Lerette that may work."

Picard noticed the two ladies look at each other then turn to face him. He spoke to La Forge.

"Very well. We will meet you in hangar bay three in five minutes." Picard turned to Deanna and Lerette. "Let's go and see what they have come up with, shall we?" With that he headed towards the doors, not stopping to see if they were following him. He instinctively knew they were.

Captain's personal log: "Data and La Forge's idea for returning Captain Lerette is highly ingenious, especially in using the tractor beam to act as an independent force field. Elenor seems to be so adamant about returning to her own time, but at the same time accepts the fact that the probability is negligible. I wish I could persuade her to stay and retrain in this time, and learn to cope, but her mind, however unstable, is made up. She has chosen the course of action for herself and, going by her career, she is not likely to be dissuaded. All I can do is wish her au revoir and bon chance. The sooner we have finished in this area..."

Picard left his sentence unfinished.

"She suffered a bit, didn't she?" Lerette directed her question at no-one in particular.

They had met up with Data and La Forge. Lerette stared at the Prospector and marvelled at the way it had held together. Federation best. The San Francisco Yards on Earth should be proud of themselves. She walked slowly round it, touching it gently, trying to remove all the blackened patches. Picard noticed her action but said nothing. He would have liked to have got to know her better, but felt that he would probably have knocked her for six before too long. He must be overly tired to feel this sort of frustration. When they arrived at Trantious Delta he was going to have a fencing match, maybe even use the Holodeck's fencing programme and defeat the scourge of all who fenced - a holographic fencing champion programmed by the legendary Captain Sulu. He returned to the present.

"The Prospector is actually better than it looks," Geordi was saying to Lerette. "We haven't done anything to the outside and all we have really done inside is to replace the crystals." He stood back, enabling her to look in. "She's all yours, Captain."

Lerette glanced round the shuttlecraft's interior. A dark green stain still remained on the floor. The terror in her mind regained control of her tortured soul and she tried desperately to retain her own calm control. It was too difficult; she couldn't make it. Geordi saw the change in her, saw the face that had fired the phaser at him in Engineering. He stepped back, uncertain of what to do or say.

Picard saw him step back and knew what was happening. He moved forward and held Lerette by the shoulders. She had covered her face with her hands and was shaking uncontrollably.

"Elenor." Picard's voice was reassuring but firm. He repeated her name. "Elenor, hold on - hold on for just

a little longer." Picard looked at Deanna but saw he would not be able to get any help from her. She was having her own problems with the effect of the mind-sifter released from Lerette's mind and thought that Lerette wasn't going to regain control again. But after a few more minutes, Picard managed to get through to her. She lowered her arms and looked at him, her eyes red with the strain and filled with the horror and terror of her situation.

"Now, Picard! Let me go now," implored Lerette.

"Don't give in to it just yet, Elenor." Deanna spoke at Lerette's side, knowing that the end was only moments away.

"Is everything ready?" asked Picard, taking his hands away from her.

La Forge looked at Data, who nodded, and then he replied. "Yes, it is, Captain. If Captain Lerette would like to step inside the Prospector, we will put our plan into action."

"Let's hope whatever it is you have in mind is as effective as my actions a few hours ago," said Lerette.

"85.87 years ago," remarked Data, determined that somebody was going to get the time right.

Lerette pointed at Data and asked Picard, "Is he always like this?"

"It's his way," replied Picard.

"He must be very interesting to work with," wondering to herself who Data was, or, rather, what he was.

Picard regarded Lerette for a moment before agreeing with her. "Yes, he is."

"Well let's get on with it," said Lerette. She walked over to Deanna and gave her the Vulcan salute. "Goodbye, Deanna, thank you for all your help."

"Goodbye, Elenor," replied Deanna, and then added, "live long and prosper."

"It would be nice to, but I very much doubt I shall do either." Lerette turned to Data, "Goodbye, Mr Data. There was certainly nothing like you 85.87 years ago," being as precise as the android.

Data responded with one of his programs on Human behaviour; he smiled, shook Lerette's extended hand and said, "I agree with you Captain. Goodbye."

Lerette stood in front of Picard, who was standing next to the open door of her shuttlecraft. "Well, Picard," started Lerette, "there's so much more I'd like to say, but I'm not very good with diplomatic words."

"So I have noticed."

"I do hope you enjoy your shore leave. I think you all deserve it, and need it. I hope it all works out all right with your Ambassador. Going by the computer records, *not* a person I would like to meet. Goodbye, Picard." She offered her hand to Picard who declined it and taking hold of her shoulder, gently kissed her on both cheeks and whispered,

"Au revoir, Elenor, et bon chance."

Lerette looked at Picard, admiring his strength and nature. A Captain like him was so hard to find, no amount of training could have produced a man like this. She wished she could stay and get to know him better, but knew in her own mind that this was impossible. Lerette stepped into the shuttlecraft, taking one

last look at them as the doors closed, then she let the effect of the mind-sifter take full control.

The shuttlecraft was taken out on a tractor beam. La Forge spoke to Lerette, telling her to repeat all of her actions of a few hours ago. The result was an explosion which caused the tractor beam to fail.

Deanna went to stand by Picard as Data and La Forge returned to their various duties.

"Did you feel anything, Deanna? Do you think she made it?" asked Picard.

"I don't know if she made it. Nothing seems to have changed. However, just before the explosion, I did feel something." Deanna hesitated.

"Go on, Counselor," encouraged Picard.

"I felt absolute terror, as though Elenor had finally decided to give in to the mind-sifter. Then nothing."

They both stood staring at the open hangar bay doors, each engrossed in their own thoughts.

"Captain." La Forge's voice broke through Picard's musing. "The Hini is requesting permission to come aboard."

"Make it so," said Picard. He turned to Deanna and whispered to her, "Now *here* is someone I'd like to lose in a timeslip."

Deanna smiled and looked down, not trusting herself to look at him, knowing that although it was said in a light-hearted way, he really wasn't looking forward to ferrying the Ambassador to Trantious Delta. Deanna composed herself and watched the Hini

arrive in the hangar bay, skilfully piloted by the Ambassador.

"Wow!" exclaimed La Forge as the shuttlecraft came to a full stop. "Now that's what I call piloting."

The outside doors of the Hanger Bay closed as the shuttlecraft door opened. There in the doorway stood the Ambassador, in full Vulcan robes with the large hood pulled up, hiding most of the face, the IDIC emblem holding the front fold together.

Picard stepped forward. "Welcome aboard, Ambassador T'Prayne. I would like to apologise for our delay."

"I want no apologies." T'Prayne's cold voice interrupted Picard's apology, cutting through it like a knife. She stepped out of the shuttlecraft, ignoring Picard's salute of friendship. She walked up to him, and staring him directly in the face added, "Let us go to Trantious Delta as quickly as you can." Deanna admired Picard for not wincing at the emphasised 'quickly' although she felt it in his thoughts. T'Prayne carried on, "I would also like to see you, your Counselor and Mr Data in your briefing room immediately." She made her way towards the door.

Picard turned to follow, saying, "Now just wait a moment -" He never finished his sentence.

Without altering her stride, T'Prayne interrupted, "I have already waited, Captain Picard. I shall be waiting," and T'Prayne swept majestically through the opening doors.

There was a stunned silence in the hangar deck as they stared at the closing doors.

Picard touched his communicator.

"Captain to Worf."

"Worf here, sir."

"Worf, the Ambassador has arrived and is on her way to the briefing room. I would like you to meet her there."

"Aye, sir."

La Forge walked over to Picard, Data following. "What do you think all this is about, sir?" he asked.

"It's probably a lecture on punctuality," replied Picard sarcastically.

"Surely she understands the reason for our delay," said La Forge.

Picard kept quiet, still unsure of how to react. He then turned to Deanna and asked, "Could you sense anything?"

"Nothing at all, sir. She is a Vulcan and so I would only be able to feel what she wanted me to feel." Deanna gave her answer, but felt that the Ambassador was definitely hiding something.

"She's certainly a very formidable person," remarked La Forge.

"According to the file available on her, she is described as domineering and matriarchal and - " Data stopped his interpretation of the file; Picard didn't want to hear the whole of the file. He put some of his puzzlement into words. "However, everybody who wants to say anything about her seems to respect her."

Deanna sensed his puzzlement and voiced her opinion. "I wonder if it is out of fear."

"Somehow I don't think that it's fear, Counselor. Do you know she practically held the Federation to ransom to get this posting. She made a special

study of Trantious for several years regarding its shore leave facilities for Starfleet. Incidentally, this is her first known departure from Vulcan." Picard went towards the doors, "Deanna, Data, if you're ready, let's go see what the..." he paused but decided to be polite... "Ambassador wants."

They left the hangar bay, leaving Geordi behind. He was feeling most curious as to what the conversation in the briefing room would be about. He would grab Data for a full account of it later.

Picard, Deanna and Data entered the briefing room to be confronted by Worf, who looked from the new arrivals to the Ambassador. She was standing with her back to them staring intently at the stars of the Trantious system. T'Prayne didn't turn around but calmly said,

"Computer off," then added a simple explanation. "I don't want this conversation recorded. So please do not activate your communicators."

"What!" Picard's voice broke through the heavy silence.

"I must protest - " began Worf, edging close to the Ambassador.

"No, you don't, Worf." T'Prayne's voice had an edge to it as cold as a sharpened blade. "Also your presence is not required here. Leave us," she demanded.

Worf looked at Picard, took his phaser from his uniform and advanced towards the Ambassador. Picard raised his hand slowly, restraining the Security Officer, and looked at Deanna, who whispered to him.

"She means us no harm, but if we want to know her reasons we must comply." Deanna frowned at the knowledge released by T'Prayne, feeling that she should be able to pick up more.

"I'm sure we will be all right, Worf. You may return to the Bridge." Picard spoke to the Klingon, who then put up his phaser, glared again at the Ambassador and, growling to himself, left the briefing room.

T'Prayne glanced over her shoulder at Deanna and sent her another telepathic message. "That is all you are getting for the moment." T'Prayne turned round and watched as the three officers sat down as an indication of their consent. Data's expression one that he had for anything he regarded as intriguing. T'Prayne was certainly that.

T'Prayne stayed by the window and fixed her gaze on Picard. "Captain Picard. I will not ask you for the reason for your delay, but I will ask you for your opinion."

"Of what, the Trantiousons?" he asked puzzled, thinking that all the study the Ambassador had done would have made this question redundant.

"No, of me." T'Prayne cast a quick look at Deanna before returning her gaze to Picard.

"I don't understand." Picard was beginning to think that he shouldn't have got up this morning.

"Come now, Captain," urged T'Prayne, "I'm quite sure you have read reports on me and know enough about me to give me your opinion. I expect a truthful one."

Picard inclined his head to Deanna. "Deanna?" he whispered, not quite

knowing what to ask, or what he expected her to advise him to say. *Just how diplomatic am I?* he thought.

"I think the Ambassador is waiting for your opinion, Captain. You ought to give it." Deanna, with a slight smile on her lips, kept her look directed at the Ambassador.

Data glanced at Picard, not too sure of what was going on. He had no instincts and so could not rely on a gut feeling as to the safety of his Captain. He turned to the Ambassador, who on seeing him look at her with his quizzical expression said, "The Captain is safe. I want his opinion, not his life."

Data returned his gaze to the Captain, still no clearer in his mind as to what was going on. But his circuits were working overtime trying to comprehend everything.

"The truth?" asked Picard.

"The truth," answered T'Prayne slowly.

"I think that you represent all of Vulcan in a most determined way." Picard felt strangely pleased with himself. He took a deep breath and launched into a very truthful description of the Ambassador. "I also think that you are extremely stubborn, antagonistic, irritating and that you get your own way through sheer cussedness. And to be perfectly truthful, I shall be only too glad when we arrive at Trantious Delta, where we can drop you off."

Data's circuits all seemed to click into place. He had heard a description like that before, but how long ago? He spoke to Picard and Deanna. "That description could fit somebody else -" He didn't finish his sentence. Picard was staring at the Ambassador, so Data also

turned to give his full attention to her.

Ambassador T'Prayne threw back her hood revealing dark hair cut in traditional Vulcan style, slanted eyebrows and pointed ears, all characteristics of a Vulcan. She then did something that was not at all traditionally Vulcan; she threw back her head and laughed.

"What the devil!" exclaimed Picard.

"Not quite the devil, Jean-Luc," came the Ambassador's reply.

"I am beginning to understand," added Data.

Deanna left her chair and moved to stand near T'Prayne. "As soon as your shuttlecraft came on board, I thought I could sense someone familiar," she said. The two ladies were joined by Picard who looked deeply into T'Prayne's hazel eyes and enquired quietly,

"Elenor?"

Before she could reply, Data's voice was heard. "Captain Elenor Lerette." He sounded pleased with himself - if he could be said to feel pleasure. He hadn't been able to use feelings or telepathy, but he had arrived at the answer using his own means, "Who has just left on the Prospector to try to return to the past."

"Well, as you can see, it worked - or, more truthfully, it nearly worked."

"What do you mean 'nearly worked'?" Now it was Picard's turn to feel puzzled. This was certainly a turn of events he had not expected. Everyone, including Elenor, had been convinced that to go back in time, by the means used, would not work. He held out a chair for T'Prayne who sat down. Picard followed suit.

"I went back in time, but not far enough. Only 75 years." She paused and looked at Data. Then she added, "75.24 years. The USS Trymore picked up the message I was broadcasting. A little touch that I knew nothing of and one, I expect, the Trymore was grateful for."

"Dr Crusher thought it might be advisable for the rescue ship to receive a message about your state before taking you on board," elaborated Data.

"They didn't have the facilities to take me on board, but managed to send the Prospector to Vulcan. There my fate was decided by T'Pau." She paused to marshal her thoughts. She had so much to tell them.

"You didn't return to Starfleet?" Picard thought that that was one thing she would have done.

"Like the records said, the ship had been destroyed and the crew were all dead," went on T'Prayne. "I had been dead for ten years. Logic dictated that I couldn't just reappear out of the blue. So, to cut a very long story short, they made me strong and whole again. Going back in time was harder on me than going forward. I was given a new name, new identity and looks." T'Prayne touched her face and ears. "I spent a long time with Healers, and in trances. I became a Vulcan - studied logic and control of emotion."

"It couldn't have been easy for you," Deanna said.

"You're right. When I was in full control I had some difficult questions regarding time that no-one seemed able to answer. Was I meant to return? Was I supposed to change anything? Help anybody?" She stopped. All those questions had never been answered, and never would.

"Is that when you decided to become an Ambassador?" Data asked.

"No, Mr Data. I studied long and hard about Vulcan philosophies and traditions. I followed each of your careers, pleased at your successes, worried at your failures, wondering if I was supposed to interfere." T'Prayne shook her head, it was just too difficult to explain.

"Did you become an Ambassador purely to take up this post?" Picard's question brought a small smile to T'Prayne's face.

"Yes. It was hard but I made them see my point of view. Besides Trantious Delta's old leader didn't care much for Starfleet. He made it difficult for anyone to take shore leave there." Picard nodded in agreement as she paused. "Anyway, it's nice and warm there," she added with a definite twinkle in her eyes.

Picard smiled at her. He was pleased she was still alive, and full of admiration for the way she had conducted herself during the previous 75 odd years.

"So here you are," he said.

"That's right. Ready to take over on Trantious Delta after I'd said hello to you three." Then she looked serious again.

"Would you like me to arrange for you to have a tour of the Enterprise?" asked Picard.

"Just a look at your Bridge - " T'Prayne emphasised the word 'your' - "would be sufficient, thank you. But first there is a more important matter I would like to discuss with you." She paused for a moment. It was imperative that she phrase her request so that it was completely understood by them all.

Data, Deanna and Picard sat quietly waiting, wondering what could have caused the Ambassador to become so solemn. Picard leaned forward.

"Go on Elenor, we're listening."

T'Prayne looked at him and said, with a sad look, "That's just it Picard. I am Ambassador T'Prayne now; Elenor died when the Prospector left the Enterprise. Only you three know my original identity and, when I leave the Enterprise, you must all forget who I was."

"So that is the reason for turning off the computer," said Deanna, who had many questions, some of which were being answered telepathically by T'Prayne.

T'Prayne nodded then turned to Data.

"Mr Data." It had been about 20 years ago that she had finally come to know that he was an android. "I know most of your capabilities and the programs you can access. I would like you to add another one. When I land on the planet, I would like you to erase my true identity from your memory banks. Elenor Lerette no longer exists. She died in her attempt to return to her own time. And do not think too harshly of her for her behaviour whilst she was on board the Enterprise. For this moment just know that she did everything that she ever wanted to." T'Prayne finished her request.

Data looked at her and nodded his understanding and said, "A most logical request, given the circumstances."

T'Prayne turned to Deanna. "As a Betazoid you too, like Data, are capable of erasing me from your memory. Will you do it?"

Deanna was thoughtful for a moment. She didn't know if she wanted to, but she knew she must.

"Yes, I will do it." she replied.

Picard had taken everything in and had been mulling it over in his mind. "Before you ask something of me, may I ask a question?"

"By all means, Picard."

"Why have you shown us your true identity when you want us to conceal that fact as soon as you arrive on Trantious Delta?"

T'Prayne smiled. "I know it is highly illogical, but I wanted you to know that, although Elenor died in her attempt to return to her time, that was the way she wanted to go. I am the body of Elenor, not the spirit - that is gone forever."

Deanna asked the question Picard did not want to.

"What about the Captain? He is not capable of forgetting on his own."

"I know," replied T'Prayne, "but I am able to assist. If you," she turned to Picard, "will permit a mind-meld."

"Is that really the only way?" Picard was thinking of the last time had had anything to do with a mind-meld - Sarek. "One of our medical officers has found a way of affecting the memory," he suggested.

"No, Picard." T'Prayne had followed all the Enterprise's previous missions. "Dr Crusher's treatment will not work here. That erases; I would like to implant a memory as well," she explained.

Picard took a deep breath. "Very well, if it's the only way. When?"

"When I say goodbye, Picard." She stood up. "Computer on. Now perhaps a look at your Bridge, Captain Picard." She walked towards the door with a very determined step and three pensive officers put on their communicators and followed her out.

The turbo-lift doors opened and the four occupants walked onto the Bridge. Riker immediately stood, ready to vacate the command chair, and watched as Data and Deanna walked down the walkway to their respective posts. He looked up at the Captain and the Vulcan Ambassador.

So that's T'Prayne, he thought to himself. He had read so much about her.

The Ambassador took a long slow look round the Bridge. She saw Worf but said nothing. Picard began to walk down and T'Prayne followed him. As they approached the centre, he turned to her.

"Ambassador T'Prayne, may I introduce my First Officer, Commander Riker."

"I am pleased to meet you." Riker was at his most gracious.

T'Prayne coolly replied, "And I you, Commander. I have heard so much about you." She turned away from him and carried on with her look around the Bridge.

So like a Vulcan, though Deanna, and knew that Riker would have felt totally snubbed, but she also knew that she couldn't explain who T'Prayne really was.

Picard looked from Riker to T'Prayne, whose eyes now rested on the

central chair. He had a wild and wonderful thought.

"Ambassador." She turned to face him. "Would you care to bring the Enterprise into orbit?"

T'Prayne's face remained totally impassive as she sat down in the command chair. She then began to give clear, concise and correct instructions.

Picard sat on her right with Riker to his right. Riker looked at Picard, trying to hide his astonishment. He wanted to ask several questions, mainly to do with Picard inviting T'Prayne to take control of the Enterprise. He had heard all about the superb piece of piloting by T'Prayne of the Hini, but the Enterprise was just that little bit bigger. Deanna seemed to be unconcerned, as did Data, but then again nothing worried Data.

Riker need not have worried as Data announced, "Entering standard orbit, Captain. Ambassador."

"Thank you, Mr Data. Maintain," replied T'Prayne.

T'Prayne sat in the command chair, feeling very pleased with herself. It had taken 75 years, but she had made it. She had managed to sit in the Captain's chair again. 75 years of pain, Healers, concentration and trances. She need not worry now. History had not been rewritten. The people who had helped her 75 years ago had done so a few hours ago. She would now live her life out as T'Prayne, Vulcan Ambassador on Trantious Delta, bringing the planet back to Federation standards.

She turned to look at Picard and he read her expressionless face. *She had done very well, he thought, now, and before. Had time not played so cruelly with her, she would have probably gone on to Captain a ship like the*

Enterprise. Picard turned to the viewscreen and gazed at Trantious Delta. It had excellent shore leave facilities and he imagined that the bureaucracy they had encountered before would not be so evident now.

He stood up and addressed T'Prayne. "May I offer you some refreshment before you go?"

"That would be most welcome," she replied standing to join him.

Riker also stood and Picard instructed, "You have the con, Number One, and please prepare the crew for maximum shore leave."

"Yes, sir." He watched as Captain Picard and T'Prayne left the Bridge.

As the turbo-lift doors closed on them, Picard looked at Elenor. *No, he thought, T'Prayne. Did she remember where the Enterprise was going when they had helped her? Has she, with her own form of single-mindedness, managed to become the Ambassador and leader of this understated planet to enable us to enjoy the shore leave the crew so richly deserved, and to bring Vulcan and Federation closer together?*

Elenor probably knew, but Ambassador T'Prayne would never say.



HIDDEN FEELINGS

Total madness stares us in the face;
 Death by freezing in a heatable room.
 Lives destroyed when blown into space -
 We quickly leave this strange and quiet tomb.

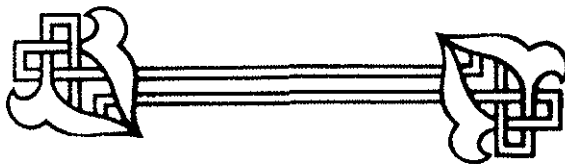
Safely back on board the Enterprise
 Medical checks show we are fit and well.
 But Geordi's response to us is a surprise;
 What has caused it? As yet we cannot tell.

This madness spreads quickly through the crew.
 Tasha, Deanna, Data all succumb.
 Dr. Crusher fights against it to find a cure -
 It looks as though our end has finally come.

No, wait! At last a serum's been devised;
 Once injected, our madness quickly ends.
 Knowledge from the past has helped to save our lives;
 We look again upon our sane and healthy friends.

Some did things they wished they hadn't done;
 Others think of thoughts they have revealed.
 But we'll get through, for each cares for everyone -
 Hidden desires once again will be concealed.

Helen Connor



THE CLOSET OFFICER

by

Nola Frame-Gray

This is a slightly alternate universe story set early in the first season of TNG.

Personal Log: Stardate 2467.6. It is now time for the Enterprise's regular health inspection. Much as I would like to say to the contrary, I am worried. Having two near-fatal shipwide epidemics in less than six months is hardly a glowing record. The officer doing the inspection is Admiral Fiona Hetzel, Specialist in Deep Space Environmental Systems, sent to us by the Surgeon-General's office.

Normally Captain Jean-Luc Picard was accompanied by the ship's Chief Medical Officer, Dr Beverly Crusher, but not today. She was not looked upon favourably by their guest. It was a toss-up as to what had offended Admiral Hetzel more: Beverly's loose casual hairstyle ("What bedridden patient wants their face dragged over by that?"), or Beverly's coat, with sleeves which looked capable of dragging through everything, and often did.

For the second time that day, Picard restrained a sigh. It had started out so right. Hetzel had positively gushed over the improved holodeck, which currently displayed a crew favourite - a forest glen in the springtime. Events rapidly deteriorated after that, starting with Hetzel's visit to the main Sickbay and her examination of the Enterprise's medical records.

Picard was relieved it was the android Data who assisted him on this tour. Normally it was Executive Officer

William Riker who would be at the Captain's elbow, so to speak. Though Commander Riker was usually a competent officer, he would have misunderstood the Admiral's chill silence, taking it as a challenge, or worse, try to overcome Hetzel's reticence with flattery. Even after all this time, Riker still had problems in dealing with beautiful women. If only Riker could see them as people.

Admiral Hetzel was certainly a beauty: good carriage, with sculptured features which were crowned by a headful of copper hair. Hers was an intelligent face. In other instances it would have been kind, but today it bore an expression of "I will brook no nonsense."

Silently, the group filed into the turbolift. The assembly was made up of Picard, Admiral Hetzel and her aides, Relief Medical Officer Mulugheta and his aides, and, of course, Lieutenant Commander Data.

Hetzel stared at Lieutenant Commander Data. Where was Second Officer Data's normal allotment of aides? Surely Captain Picard did not expect the Lieutenant Commander to remember everything about a ship of this size without help?

Abruptly Hetzel barked, "Emergency stop!"

The lift slammed to a full halt; it didn't fool around. Neither did she.

"Door open," commanded Hetzel. The lift doors opened into ship's quarters. The inspection tour stood in junior officer country, judging by the young faces filing past.

Seemingly at random, Hetzel picked a room to inspect. Her routine was the same. If the quarters were occupied, she would 'beep' for admittance, explain to the occupants the reason for her visit, then examine the room thoroughly, combining both alacrity and efficiency.

Once inspections were made of the corridor, the red-haired admiral moved as if she would view another hallway, but was brought up short by what she saw. It was a narrow corridor leading nowhere. Hetzel raised an eyebrow. "A cul-de-sac on the Enterprise?"

Second Officer Data stepped forward, and answered, "The result of a design flaw, Admiral. After this deck was constructed, we discovered that this level was short one transporter room. This corridor - " (the Commander inclined his head) " - was abbreviated to make the necessary alterations."

Hetzel blinked in surprise. Crammed into the mutated corridor was a lone door. She inserted her Admiral's ident card. An indicator on the wall glowed green, a sign that the quarters were empty. Hetzel opened the door.

Picard followed.

Instead of the door opening into the expected living quarters, what faced Picard was a science station in miniature. It even had a comm link. With a sinking feeling akin to panic Picard entered the room, thinking, *I have never seen this room before in my life.* He did not remember ever seeing this room, or one like it, on the Enterprise or on any other vessel. *Nothing but living quarters are supposed to be on this*

level.

Picard, Hetzel and Data now stood inside the room in question while the others lingered outside. There was not a lot of room to move around in.

Picard's initial impression of the room's being a computer substation was marred by the appearance of two mirrors. One was the usual shaving face mirror, and the other was full-length, perpendicular to the computer console. Hetzel faced Picard, her fine brows set in a frown. "What room is this? I understood that there was supposed to be only living accommodation on this level."

It was Commander Data who answered. "Admiral, these are my quarters."

Hetzel's eyebrows lifted. "Of course, Commander," she answered smoothly. "Your work station." She almost smiled. "But where is the rest? I see no doors."

Data gazed at her blankly. He pivoted and turned his face towards the portal they had just entered.

"Yes, Commander," continued Hetzel, "I can see that." *Was he joking?* "Where are your other doors? The ones leading to your bedroom, your fresher?"

"My room has no other doors."

Up went Hetzel's eyebrow... again. "Commander Data, where is your sleeping area?" *Don't tell me he's bedding down with that Chief of Security, Natasha Yar - though if I read her body language right...*

Data said, "Here, sir. You are standing on it." Gracefully Data knelt and pulled out an orange bundle from a nearby niche in the wall and put it on the floor. The orange something straightened

into a sleeping sack.

"A sleeping bag. You sleep in a sleeping bag."

"Oh, the bag itself is not necessary, Admiral. I use it to reassure Security that I am merely sleeping and not unconscious."

"Of course." *Well, he's covered that up nicely.* "Commander Data, follow me." Hetzel led the golden-hued humanoid to the far side of the quarters, as far away from the door, and listening ears, as possible. *I guess I am going to have to spell it out. No-one could be this cool. Ergo, he must not understand.*

"Commander Data, you do understand the reason for my inspection?"

"Yes, Admiral."

"Do you also understand that, while it is not my intention to pry, there exists certain information that I require for my investigation, information I promise to keep confidential?"

Data stared back at Hetzel without a trace of expression. Finally, as if realizing for the first time that a response was called for, he replied, "I understand, Admiral. I am open to any and all questions."

Hetzel repressed a sigh. This one was not making it easy. "Commander, are you currently sleeping with Lt Natasha Yar?"

"Only in my fantasies."

"Are you sleeping with someone else? Here on the ship?"

"No, Admiral."

Hetzel spread her hands. "What I am trying to ascertain..." Here Hetzel pointed at the unrolled sleeping sack still on the floor. "Is that your sole sleeping accommodation?"

The senior officer tilted his head. A sign of puzzlement? "Yes, Admiral Hetzel. I sleep alone. Here. In my sleeping area, enclosed by my sleeping sack."

The Admiral joined the others and motioned Data to do the same. As Data rolled up and stored the sleeping bag, he wondered, *What was that all about?*

"Commander."

Data looked up. "?"

"Am I to understand you have no fresher?"

"That is correct, Sir."

"How do you take care of your personal needs? Bathing? Bodily elimination?"

"When there is time, I use the civilians' showers; else I take a sponge bath. For the other, I use either the head that leads off the main Bridge, or, when I am here, I use the public rest rooms. There are several on each level."

"Commander Data, do you prefer this type of room over standard quarters?"

Data blinked his yellow cat-eyes in surprise. He frowned.

"Is there a problem?" she said.

"No one has ever asked me that before." His features eased back into their usual placid mask. "Admiral, while it is true that the computer set-up here does

make my work easier, I think I would prefer a Human room."

A Human room, mused Hetzel. What an interesting choice of words.

The lift doors opened into the Bridge. Out came Picard, Data, Hetzel, and the rest.

"Mister Data," said Picard, "you have the conn."

"Yes, sir." Data marched down the Bridge to the chair just vacated by Commander Riker.

"I'll be in my ready room," Picard continued. He exchanged glances with Riker, the ship's Exec. "Commander Riker, if you please?"

Riker followed.

Once ensconced in Picard's office, Riker got a good look at the Admiral of Life Sciences. *Wish I had been a part of this morning's tour.* The Admiral's teal-coloured uniform set off her flame-coloured hair to perfection. He smiled experimentally at Hetzel, but she ignored him, instead keeping her eyes riveted on Picard as the Captain settled at his desk. Quietly, a Yeoman served tea, then left.

Hetzel sipped her tea slowly, biding her time as Captain Picard made introductions. "Commander Riker, may I introduce Admiral Hetzel, specialist in Deep Space Environmental Systems. She is in charge of the inspection tour of the Enterprise." Picard fidgeted. "It would seem that the good Admiral has discovered an... irregularity in Lieutenant Commander Data's quarters. I've invited you here, Commander Riker, in your capacity as First Officer."

"May I?" said Hetzel to Picard. He gave a quick nod. Hetzel took hold of the computer on Picard's desk and swung the screen in Riker's direction. The computer displayed an image of a computer substation... or so Riker thought until his eyes caught the legend at the bottom of the screen, identifying the picture as Lieutenant Commander Data's... quarters?

Riker was genuinely surprised. "Ma'am - there must be some mistake."

"Precisely," replied Hetzel. "These 'quarters' contain neither toilet, shower, nor water facilities, which is in clear violation of Starfleet health codes. Worse, the area where Commander Data is situated has no such facilities within easy access. In addition, the room is far too small, certainly undersized in keeping with Commander Data's status and position as a senior officer aboard a Galaxy Class vessel. It is difficult, to say the least, to understand why Commander Data should live in such quarters, unless...?" Hetzel's voice trailed off. "Could it be that your Commander Data engages in practical jokes?"

The two males stared back at Hetzel with such expressions of surprise, and yes, shock - to the point of appearing comic - that it made Hetzel feel as though she had asked if Commander Data were in the habit of performing intimate sexual acts on the ship's bridge. It would seem that her initial impression of Commander Data as a sober and responsible officer was the correct one.

"Gentlemen," continued Hetzel, "is it possible that Commander Data could have specifically requested his current cabin assignment after being assigned to the Enterprise?" Riker stared back blankly. The Admiral continued, "Such a request would be in writing."

"I wouldn't know, Ma'am."

"Would you check, please?"

Scant moments later, the First Officer raised his head from the computer console. "No such request listed, Ma'am."

Hetzel straightened in her chair. She levelled the two men with a stare. "It would seem that I shall have to question Commander Data personally after all." She activated the screen, displaying the holo-pic her scribe had taken of the room earlier. "Are we all in agreement that this image is an accurate reproduction of Lieutenant Commander Data's quarters on board this ship?"

Picard opened his mouth to speak, but was interrupted by Riker. "When I first saw Commander Data's quarters, I remember feeling rather envious of his deluxe computer console..." Riker's voice trailed off as he realized what he was saying. He felt a detached sort of horror at seeing a real-life version of one of his worst nightmares coming true: of walking onto the bridge with his fly open. *Who wants to bet what her next question will be? Why didn't you check out the rest of Data's quarters?*

"And you didn't think to complete your inspection of the Commander's quarters?"

"I..." Riker dropped his eyes. "No, Ma'am."

Hetzel turned her attention back to Captain Picard. The expression on his face spoke volumes.

"Admiral." Picard spread his hands. "I must say - until today I've never seen that room before."

Indeed, thought Hetzel. *How very interesting.*

Picard continued, "I carried out the proper inspections in dry dock above Earth, before the Enterprise left on her maiden voyage." Picard paused, his eyes locking with hers. "That was not the room I saw." He indicated the computer. "May I?"

Hetzel leaned back in her chair, her expression guarded.

"Computer." Picard snapped a series of commands. Each time an official inspection was made of any part of the ship, the system automatically made a record in the computer. Picard jabbed an index finger at the screen. "That is the room I saw. This is a computer reproduction of Lieutenant Commander Data's quarters as of Stardate 2437.9."

What Hetzel saw was not the science station in miniature, but the cabin of a senior officer on board a Galaxy Class vessel. The room, like the 'computer substation', was spotlessly clean, but it, too, lacked a personal touch of any kind. Neither painting nor plant graced its austere walls, the absence of which gave the room an atmosphere of institutionalized desolation.

Looks like my room, but redressed, thought Riker. He frowned at the stardate listed at the bottom of the monitor. "This image was taken before I came aboard, Admiral, Captain."

Picard nodded. "Yes. We - Commander Data and I - wanted to make sure that the Enterprise was in tip-top shape before our first mission. It was understood that Commander Data would occupy First Officer's quarters until the Enterprise was ready to pick up Commander Riker at Farpoint."

"Captain Picard." Hetzel's voice was almost pleading. "Are you certain that Second Officer Data made no request

for his current bunking in writing?"

Picard sighed. "I am certain he did not."

"Commander Riker?"

"The computer shows no such record."

Hetzel, said, rising, "Then, Commander Riker, as Executive Officer, may I suggest that you take steps to find out whether such a request was lost, or your computer is in error?"

"Personal Log: Stardate 2469.9.
Fiona Hetzel reporting. Computer, hold."

A yeoman entered Hetzel's office bearing cups and tea. Hetzel continued,

"I have always prided myself in avoiding knowing a person's background when performing inspections of this nature. This practise has been the safest way for me to avoid falling prey to those unconscious prejudices that have afflicted the Starfleet hierarchy in the past."

Like the Vulcans. Nothing like stating the obvious. Oh, well, this is my personal log after all. The comm unit beeped. "Computer, stand by."

"Yes?" she spoke into the comm.

It was her aide-de-camp, Simms, who replied, informing Hetzel that her invited guest, Commander Data, waited outside.

Hetzel almost smiled. *Can't damn him for his punctuality.* "Have him enter."

The door hissed open and Commander Data entered. He stood motionless at attention. Their eyes met. He saluted, which in Starfleet was a simple head bow. Hetzel was mildly startled. It was quite some time since she had seen that ritual performed, and with such exactness. Belatedly it occurred to Hetzel that this one was not going to sit until invited to. She waved at an empty chair. Gracefully the yellow-hued humanoid sat, with elegant, economical movements, while at the same time conveying genuine nervousness. Could he still not understand why he'd been summoned here? It was time to put him at his ease. Aloud she said, "Would you like some tea?"

"No, thank you, Admiral." He paused. "Should I call you Ma'am?"

Hetzel fought down a smile. "Ma'am is fine. How shall I call you?"

"Data," he said hopefully.

Hetzel rose and walked to the window. She nodded at the Commander to follow suit. 'Below' them stretched the panorama of Starbase 11. "I've always loved deep space," said Hetzel. "I would get so jealous when my parents got called away on a mission and my brother and I had to stay behind. I vowed that one day I too would be allowed to play in my folks' back yard, and here I am." Hetzel glanced back at the Second Officer. He gazed back steadily. His yellow eyes were alight with interest and, yes, a kind of wonder?

Data viewed Admiral Hetzel, rapt with attention. To think that here he was, alone with an Admiral who was treating him like a fellow Human being, even to the point of telling him a little about her background, in much the same way he had seen Tasha Yar talk with Wesley and Worf. He stood motionless - more so

than usual - hardly daring to breathe. He feared to break the mood lest the two of them came to that dreadful moment when the Human, in this case Hetzel, came to their senses to say, "Oh, I'm sorry. You wouldn't understand. You're an android." Yes, it was of prime importance that this moment not be shattered.

"What would you like to know about me, Ma'am?" Data said in answer to one of Hetzel's questions.

"Tell me about the other ships you've been on, before the Enterprise."

"From what point of reference, Ma'am? From the time I graduated from Starfleet Academy?"

"That's a start," she smiled.

"My first assignment was under Commander Wilford Fromm, of the USS Bayonne, patrol frigate, Hebrides Class."

"Hebrides Class? I thought Starfleet discontinued them years ago."

"Nineteen years, two months, twenty five days, actually, Ma'am," said Data helpfully.

"And how long was your first assignment, Commander?"

"Nine years, eight months, two weeks and... two days, Ma'am."

"I see." Interesting. Right off the bat Starfleet starts off this man's career in a milk run, which is standard procedure for a newly-graduated midshipman still wet behind the ears, but on a ship that is illegally active? What race is this man anyway?

Hetzel excused herself and

depressed the button to her personal comm, contacting her aide.

"Yes, Admiral?"

"My interview with Commander Data will most likely exceed his rest period. Will you see that someone replaces him on his next shift?"

"Aye, Ma'am."

Data peered at Admiral Hetzel, puzzled. Surely she knew that he was perfectly capable of skipping a rest period. Lack of sleep for one night was no hardship for him, especially since he was having so much fun. Still, it was comforting to know that Admiral Hetzel was not going to end the interrogation quite yet.

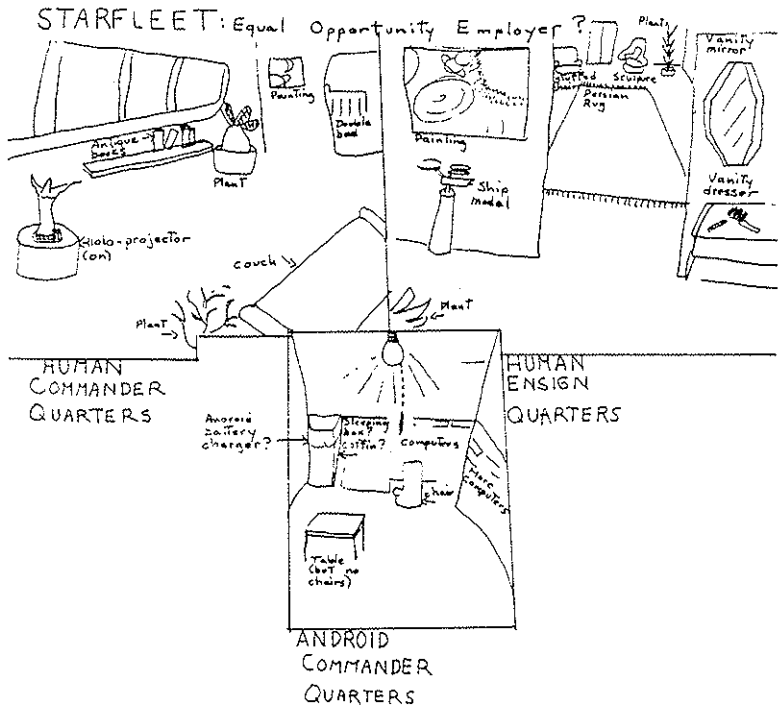
A second door opened and in walked a gold-uniformed yeoman bearing two dinner trays. Normally food was more accessible via computer network, but one of the privileges of rank was having food served by a living person.

Data's heart sank. This practise of being invited by a flag officer, an Admiral yet, was an obligation he could not flee from. Ever so briefly (3.465 nanoseconds to be exact) he toyed with the idea of lying. Aloud Data said, "I thank you, Ma'am, for your consideration, but I wish to eat later, in private."

Hetzel frowned at the unusual request, her hand still on the cover of her dish.

Doggedly, Data continued, "It is just that I have been receiving such positive stimulation from our conversation, that I do not wish to be distracted."

Hetzel's head snapped up at the Lieutenant Commander's unusual request. "Commander, much as I am



loath to disturb another being's cultural taboos, I am pressed for time." The officer did not react. "Besides, I'm hungry. I have no wish to sit here and eat while you do without." With a flourish, Hetzel whipped out a napkin and laid it on her lap. She fixed the Science Officer with a stern stare which said more plainly than words, *This is an order, Mister.*

She dug into her meal. It was one of her favourites, soylent steak and vegemate. *So much for ignoring this Second Officer's file in the name of being an equal opportunity employer. Here we have an officer who sleeps in quarters the size of a walk-in closet, and who prefers to eat in private. What will happen next? I have to look it up sooner or later. I can't keep avoiding looking at him and his food forever. If it wiggles, I won't even blink.*

Hetzel looked up expecting to see a

dish of baby eels, a favourite Andorian dish, and saw instead that the Commander had exactly the same meal she had - but triple the amounts.

As soon as Data received the order that he was to dine with the Admiral, his heart sank. No way are you going to get out of this one. So much for being pleased with yourself at having an extra long discussion with the Admiral of Life Sciences. Fervently Data wished he was doing anything else, to be anywhere else than dining with Admiral Hetzel... or anyone else for that matter. Well, there was nothing to do for it but comply.

Primly he tucked the corner of his napkin into his uniform collar. Soundlessly Data lifted the cover. His tray was heaped with food. Next to

Admiral Hetzel's portions, his looked obscene. Admiral Hetzel looked up.

Data felt trapped, caught, under that measuring gaze. He dropped his eyes back to his plate. He took the first bite. His taste sensors came to full alert. It was delicious. *Where have you been all my life? How could I think of delaying dinner... on top of skipping lunch?* A sensation similar to an electric current invaded him, starting from the inside of his mouth and working its way to his toes.

Hetzel had to stare. To another man, even another being, this gorging on over-large quantities of food would have been obscene. Watching Commander Data was a new experience. It was like gradually starting a holovid at normal speed, then running it faster and faster until the vid was playing at over twice normal speed. Yet through it all, Commander Data never dropped a parsley, or chewed with mouth open or full. *How could anyone move that fast?* thought Hetzel. Not even amphetamines could explain such speed. She was not sure, not at this rate, but he did seem to be enjoying himself.

She could stand it no longer. If she was stuck with a bulimia victim, she had to know. *That's all I need - to listen to him toss his cookies in my fresher.*

Surreptitiously Hetzel reached into her desk and took out her medi-scanner. It was the super-small sneaky kind. It made a small fretful cricket sound which was its way of telling it was not properly calibrated for the nonHuman subject sitting before her, then the mechanism obediently shut up and took readings. Hetzel tossed a glance at Commander Data to confirm that he was still eating at the same breakneck speed, only to find motionless yellow eyes - cat's eyes - gazing steadily back at her.

Slowly, so as not to disturb the scanner still running, Data removed the napkin from about his neck and neatly folded it. About him lay, not the scattered debris of the food junkie, but just normal-appearing order. Indeed, had Hetzel come into this scene cold, she would have thought that she had just interrupted a dinner party still in progress, with Commander Data sitting next to a still-untouched plate.

The Commander's eyes flicked down to the scanner still in Hetzel's hand. His ginger-coloured lashes were startlingly long for a male. His eyes met Hetzel's. Was there shame there?

"Ma'am, I can explain."

"Please do."

Humiliation rushed at him in a smothering wave. Despite his best intentions, he had made a fool of himself... yet again. "I have little willpower where food is concerned, Ma'am."

Hetzel made an adjustment with her scanner, recalibrating it. His readings were normal. He was not bloated.

Data continued, "I have poor control over the amount of food I eat and the rate at which I consume it. I had hoped to modify my behaviour but to no avail. Since I have consistently failed in this area, it would appear that this is how I was designed. Because of this, and the fact that I act in this manner because my creators have designed me in this fashion, it would seem that my main function - that of being a repository for Human knowledge - requires a high degree of energy and, in turn, a correspondingly high caloric intake."

Hetzel was lost. "Creators??" *Don't tell me this is some sort of galactic religious sect...*

"Why, yes, Ma'am." He frowned. "Did you not know? I am an android."

Abruptly Hetzel rose to her feet. Enough was enough. "Thank you, Commander Data. The interview is concluded. You may remain and... finish your meal." Pausing only to scoop up her scanner, Hetzel fled the room.

Unprofessional, totally unprofessional! Hetzel berated herself. Belatedly she realised that she had never asked the main question: had Commander Data wanted the bloody quarters? Embarrassed, she strolled up and down halls vainly seeking calm. Finally she tumbled into a nearby lift. So fierce was her expression that two junior officers seeing her decided to use a different lift.

"Bridge," she said.

Seeing the main viewscreen eased Hetzel's mind in ways few other things could.

The duty officer, seeing her enter, announced in ringing tones, "Admiral on the Bridge." Almost everyone stood, except for those who could not afford to leave their consoles for the instant it took to stand up. Abruptly Hetzel recognised the militarily erect form of... "Commander Data," she gasped. "Why are you here?"

"Yes," said Picard, coming up behind. "Where's your relief? I thought we were rid of you."

Data's head jerked from the Admiral to Picard, mildly confused by the double questioning. To Picard, Data said, "You did, sir, but I cancelled it."

Picard's brows came down in a frown.

Data said, "The interview lasted only twenty three minutes and three seconds after Admiral Hetzel's notification to the duty officer of my need for a relief. Was I in error?"

"Yes, Data, you were," said Picard with a sigh. "Report at the beginning of your next scheduled duty shift." Picard paused. "Get your relief back here first." Another pause. "Now."

Data left.

Turning to the Admiral, Picard said, "Mr Data can be very literal when it comes to the comprehension of his duties."

Agitated, Hetzel took hold of Picard's arm. "Captain, might I have a word with you?"

"Sir - a minute, please? I want to wait until Commander Data's relief arrives, which should be... now."

As if on cue, the lift doors snapped open and a Klingon stepped out onto the Bridge. He saluted Hetzel, then sat in the command chair. Hetzel blinked in surprise. Was this staged? Now I know how the heroine in a musical feels.

Gravely Picard inclined his head, thus completing the theatrical illusion. "Madam, I am now at your disposal. I await your pleasure."

Hetzel took Picard's proffered arm.

Once ensconced in Picard's office, Hetzel realised what she had done. The Captain hovered by his desk, unsure what the Admiral wanted. When Hetzel spoke again, it was not to Picard. "Computer, tell me the location of

Commander Data."

"Lieutenant Commander Data is in Recreation Room Thirty Seven, level twenty four," said the computer almost sarcastically.

Hetzel said, "Captain Picard, I would like to speak with you but it will have to wait. There is something I must do. I will notify you at a later time, most likely tomorrow."

Data was troubled. What had he done now? He wasn't tired - not really. He was keyed up more than anything else. It would have been a relief to attend to the mundane tasks on shift, but such was not to be. He wanted to talk with Geordi but his friend was sound asleep at this late hour, and it would not be fair to wake him.

Inquiry: Why this concern on the part of others over whether I am getting enough sleep and food? Conjecture: Am I the subject of an unknown test? Answer: Not likely. A low probability factor.

Carefully Data laid his towel on the pool deck. He faced the water and dived in with scarcely a ripple. He loved swimming. It was one of the few physical activities he could engage in without fear of breaking something... or someone. Joyfully he zig-zagged about the pool, both above and under the water. Finally he came up for air. His straight, rust-coloured hair was in his eyes. With a smooth practised motion, he snapped his head back. His hair fell into place - more or less. He was smiling but he did not know it. As he blinked the chemical-laced water out of his eyes, he saw the blue-clad form of... Admiral Hetzel.

Inquiry: Is today what Humans call "one of those days"?

Data stood in front of Hetzel clad only in swimming trunks and a towel slung around his neck. In spite of still dripping water, he conveyed the impression that he was fully clothed and at attention.

Again, Hetzel was at a loss. She literally could not believe her eyes at the speed Data swam. *He eats super fast so why not swim super fast also?*

"Commander Data, I'm sorry to be bothering you again so soon, but I neglected to ask you a question." Data regarded her solemnly. Hetzel inhaled deeply. She resisted the impulse to run a hand through her hair. "About your current quarters: did you request them?"

A small crease appeared between Data's brows. "Negative, Admiral. I could not refuse quarters that had been specifically designed for me."

She was not sure which idea was the more outrageous - that someone would take the time and, yes, space, to personally design quarters for Lieutenant Commander Data: or that these quarters were personally designed for anyone at all. To her, the room was a blatant reminder that Data was on the Enterprise to work and nothing else - at any rate, not for the usual things such as sleeping or relaxing. Hetzel opened her mouth to speak but changed her mind. Data was still standing in just trunks, dripping wet. Water made a small puddle around his feet.

Brilliant. Both Picard and I berate Data for not taking his next rest period, yet here I am giving him the third degree during the aforementioned rest period. Inwardly she sighed. Why was there never enough time to get anything done? Still, he did deserve an answer, didn't he? Also, though she did not like to admit it, she was tired also.

Data had closed his mouth just in time to avoid uttering the phrase, 'because I am just an android.' Admiral Hetzel could be so sensitive to the most unusual things. Data gazed at the Admiral, trying to gauge her reaction. Was her expression a request for more information? "Yes, it was Starfleet's belief that my quarters, with its sophisticated computer and maximum cybernetic inputs, represented for me the optimum working environment."

"Cybernetic inputs?... Oh, because you're an android." She was becoming wise to this game. "Good night, Mr Data." She also wanted to wish him a good night's sleep, but she was afraid that he would take it too literally, as a direct command. She was learning. Who said old Admirals couldn't learn new tricks?

It was past time to hunt up Commander Data's medical file.

"Yes, Simms, what is it? I was just preparing for bed."

"Sorry, Fiona." Simms' voice sounded tinny over the defective communicator. "I have here Lieutenant Commander Data's medical file, but the key code won't let me gain access into the system."

"I'll be right there." Hastily she threw on a robe, then entered her office from her adjoining sleeping area.

Simms was a nondescript, moustached Negro in his early fifties. He sat at Hetzel's computer terminal, looking decidedly unhappy. "As I was saying, I have Lieutenant Commander Data's key code but the Enterprise computer won't let me in."

"The computer won't give you

Data's medical file?"

"Ship's computer keeps rejecting my retina scan."

"You're kidding." She pulled up a chair at the conference table where both Simms and the computer terminal sat, and joined in. "How does Starfleet Command expect Life Sciences to be able to treat Data during a medical emergency?"

Simms passed the computer keyboard to Hetzel and she began tapping the keys. She requested entry into the Enterprise's computer system. She loathed using voice commands on a computer. Verbal communication with a computer made her feel vulnerable to eavesdropping. In short order, Data's file did appear - after a fashion.

Simms leaned closer to the screen and squinted. "That's what I got."

"That's no help," Hetzel grumbled. "This is little more than a medical alert Rolodex. This screen contains just the bare minimum of information necessary to treat our commander in an emergency. Besides," she added in disgust, "it's only a page long."

"That's all I got, Fiona. Any further than that and my access was denied. I was booted out of the system, kicked out with no ceremony." Simms pressed a well-manicured fingertip to the screen. "What does this yellow bar code mean?"

"That whatever our Mister Data is, he is rare, an uncommon enough species not to be listed in the standard medical texts: hence, the medi-alert." Hetzel typed in a question and found herself tossed out on her ear also - figuratively speaking.

The screen read: "Information restricted to three persons." What

followed was a list of names arranged by rank, starting with the Enterprise's chief medical officer and all the way up to flag officer. It looked like it was past time to give up.

"Computer, I submit myself to retina scan." She leaned her head closer to the proper position. A piercing light leaped from the computer into her eye. Only the skill that came from long practise kept her from flinching.

"Retina scan accepted," said the computer. "Inquiry: what of the other in this room?"

Hetzel turned to her aide. "C'mon, Simms, time to take your medicine."

Simms and Hetzel switched positions and his eye was scanned too. Hetzel rejoined the computer terminal. She tried looking up Commander Data's full medical file... yet again. Data's file opened up to her like the dawn, casting shadows in dark places.

Hetzel sighed. "Well, I'll be... He is an android."

It was morning. The Ten Forward lounge was crowded, filled with crew and officers from the night shift who wanted to unwind before going to bed.

Admiral Hetzel and Data had their own table, well off to one side, alone. Rank Hath Its Privileges. They kept their voices low. *Such a big ship*, she thought. *So many people and yet so few places for people to meet.* There was her office, the holodeck and this. Before her rested a hot cup of tea. At her suggestion, Data mimicked her actions. The only thing wrong with his eating patterns was lack of experience. (All the other ships he had berthed with carried only nonHumans).

All he needed was some training - and a ruse on her part. *Why not*, she had suggested to him earlier, *eat most of your food in private, at the rate you've been programmed for - and eat the final bits among others? In that way you'll get the social experience you crave among Humans.*

Commander Data continued with his story. "I temporarily changed quarters upon Captain Picard's request that I be Acting First Officer until a suitable replacement be found. When First Officer William Riker joined the Enterprise and assumed his command, I immediately moved back to my original quarters, what you see now."

"Commander Data, as an Academy graduate, you should know that Starfleet regulations apply to all - not just Humans."

With neither bitterness nor rancour, Data said, "Humans often say one thing but mean another."

"Mr Data, I do want to understand your situation, but as long as you insist in indulging in these bouts of self-pity I can do nothing. Am I to understand that you, senior officer and third in command of the Galaxy Class vessel Enterprise, could do nothing when the wrong room was assigned to you? I should think that following Starfleet and Federation health codes, keeping up the morale of this ship, would be far more important to you, a commissioned officer, than possibly wounding the feelings of some ship's designer?"

Data frowned and looked ready to answer, but Hetzel, caught up in her own passion, ploughed on ahead. "What I am referring to, Mr Data, is the inevitable erosion of ship's morale which would occur when your fellow officers learned that your quarters are vastly inferior to standard officers' quarters, not to mention

a senior officer such as you. To put it another way, what would your fellow officers think if they all knew the way you live? They might think, 'Commander Data's quarters are the size of a walk-in closet! What kind of Captain is Picard? What hole-in-the-wall would I wind up dwelling in should the Captain get mad at me? Look at the Commander. Picard must be really be pissed'."

Data's face with its slightly agape mouth had a look of faint surprise. Clearly what she had just said had not occurred to him. He recovered and continued. "But Admiral," he persisted in that maddeningly calm voice, "it was Admiral Pournelle who personally deigned my quarters, the same officer who was project manager of the USS Enterprise 1701-D, Starfleet's first Galaxy vessel. When I returned to Earth," Data went on, "as per Starfleet's orders, the first thing Admiral Pournelle did when he met me was to show me my - 'closet quarters'. He did this with such ceremony, which is customary behaviour for Humans (and especially Human admirals), that I - could say nothing."

"Commander," Hetzel said slowly, "are you saying that an Admiral designed your quarters? Because you are an android..."

"Yes, Ma'am." Data, misunderstanding Hetzel's sudden frown, hastily added, "It's all in the ship's records... of Admiral Pournelle presenting my room to me."

Hetzel was back at her desk. With cold hands she sipped tepid tea. Facts existed in Commander Data's file which were inescapable. With an effort, she wrenched her mind from her thoughts. She did have company. "Thank you, Commander Riker. You may go."

But the tall Human paused by the door. He stood far enough away from the portal not to trigger the door sensor. His normally calm eyes were the colour of a Terran sky before a storm. "Ma'am, I never meant..."

In one smooth motion, Hetzel rose to her feet to signal a termination of the interview.

But Riker continued. He straightened and stood in his best parade rest pose. "I didn't know. He's a good officer."

"As you one day might well be, Commander Riker, if you ever learn from your mistakes - once you acknowledge them. Please tell your Captain Picard I am ready to see him."

Picard marched in with his usual purposeful stride. Impatience vied with concern. Why the Devil was this inspection taking so long? And why all the questions? This tour should have been completed days ago. *Enough is enough.* Picard stood at attention, awaiting the Admiral's pleasure. The room was in low lighting. Hetzel stood motionless by the window, her back to him. Her erect form was silhouetted against the midnight starfield.

"Admiral."

The moment stretched. Hetzel did not move or speak. When Picard felt he could not stand the silence a moment longer, Hetzel said, "Captain Jean-Luc Picard, tell me again of Commander Data's quarters when you first arrived on the Enterprise."

"On Earth, Sir?"

"Yes, Captain." She nodded slowly for emphasis.

Nervously Picard cleared his throat. "When I first - "

"You may sit." The tone of voice was such that Picard wasn't sure if Admiral Hetzel meant it as a request or a command. Picard didn't take a chance. He sat. "When I first met Commander Data on the Enterprise - "

"He was there before you?"

"Yes, sir. It had taken some time for me to recover from my injuries, wounds which I had sustained from the Stargazer incident. Normally I would have gone on furlough, but with so many deaths, I... asked for the opportunity to put the past behind me."

"You returned to work? No - go on."

"As I said before, I knew there would be a lot of work in store for us. Inspecting and checking out a brand-new vessel takes time, as I'm sure you're well aware, Admiral. In addition, we were working with a Galaxy Class vessel, an entirely new experience for both of us - Commander Data and myself." Picard continued, "Since Starfleet had not appointed me a First Officer, or, to be more precise, I was not due to receive one until the Enterprise reached the starbase codenamed 'Farpoint', I took the liberty of naming Lieutenant Commander Data as my acting Number One. I realise that though it is slightly irregular to make a mere Lieutenant Commander First Officer, after reviewing the files of all the other potential candidates... well, frankly, Commander Data was the person for the job. Also, he came highly recommended."

"I understand, Captain. This is all in your logs."

"Oh, and I should add, Admiral, before I forget, that I asked Commander

Data if he would please move into First Officer's quarters as a favour to me. He had already struck me as a conscientious and hard-working individual. With him working beside me, I knew that we could get even more accomplished."

As Hetzel stepped away from the window, she murmured a command to the ship's computer. The lighting in the room changed, casting Picard in a brighter pool of light while the rest was still cast in dimness. With precise, quick motions, Hetzel sat, folded her hands and leaned forward. "Captain, tell me what happened when Commander William Rider joined your ship, in particular about his and Commander Data's quarters."

"That's... going to be difficult. There was so much going on with the entity known as 'Q' and the Farpoint mystery."

"Take all the time you need, Captain."

Picard's peace of mind, or rather, lack of, was not helped by the fact that the good Admiral kept hammering away on the subject of Data's 'home away from home'. Picard felt like a stupid schoolboy caught unprepared for an oral examination. From under lowered lids, he sneaked a peek at Hetzel's features in an attempt to gauge her reaction, but her face was in shadow.

Picard tilted his head, deep in thought. "On the day that Commander Riker first presented himself on the Bridge, we also had an Admiral visiting us. I don't know his name, but he was an Admiral of Life Sciences. I remember him because he wanted to inspect the entire ship, but he made a point of requesting Lieutenant Commander Data to be his guide instead of my new First Officer or myself." He thought, *Admit it, Jean-Luc, you were piqued.* Aloud he

continued, "Hours later I appointed Commander Riker to lead the away team to investigate Farpoint. Lastly, there was that whole unpleasant business with Q."

Picard shifted in his seat, one of the few signs he'd exhibited of nervousness. "Since we spoke last, Admiral, I have checked with the ship's computers, the quartermaster, and Executive Officer Riker. According to my information, Commander Data moved his belongings out of First Officer's quarters immediately after Commander Riker officially joined the Enterprise as First Officer."

As Picard watched Hetzel swing her keyboard in front of her and type in a notation, he was moved to ask, "Admiral Hetzel, may I ask what this is all about?"

"Soon, Captain." Hetzel poured herself a second cup of tea though she knew it was stone-cold by now. She did not offer Picard any tea. She knew he could not accept any; this was not a social call. She replaced the cup and gazed steadily at his green eyes, gauging his reactions. "Captain, after you installed Commander Riker as Ship's Exec, when was the next time you checked on Commander Data and his living quarters?"

"The next time? Well, I didn't do the inspection. I delegated that to Commander Riker..." Picard's words trailed off as he realised, *I handed over my duty to a man who thinks of Data as little more than an ambulatory tricorder.*

Hetzel slipped from her seat and resumed her place by the window. "Captain Picard, please depress the 'enter' key on my terminal. You should find a readout on my monitor. It is an excerpt from a page of Lieutenant Commander Data's psychological file. Do you have it?"

"I do, sir," said Picard tightly.

"Please read it aloud."

"In conclusion, the subject, Data, possesses not only an extremely high intellect, but a vivid imagination as well. His sensory inputs and his handling of information are far superior to most humanoid species. Because of these factors, plus the subject's youth, it is strongly urged that Cadet Data dwell in quarters that reflect the maximum of sensory stimulation. If these recommendations are not followed, and to the letter, sensory deprivation could occur, resulting in diminished mental ability."

Hetzel rejoined Picard during the reading, hoping to catch him unawares. Was he shocked? Yes. Knowing that did not make what was coming next any easier. To her, Picard was a legend, an ideal. How do you tell this legend that he has feet of clay? The blame should have been on Riker, not Picard. The Executive Officer is responsible for the state of the ship. Though it was Riker who had not checked out Commander Data's quarters fully, it was the Captain's responsibility. The Captain of a ship takes all the praise - and all the blame.

They both knew the rules.

Hetzel stood. Picard followed suit. "Captain Jean-Luc Picard, you are on report. You are to remain on report until such time as you assign Lieutenant Commander Data quarters that are in keeping with his rank and are compatible with his needs. This is to be done under your direct supervision. You shall make sure that such quarters meet with Lieutenant Commander Data's free and full approval. Once this has been accomplished, and the proper forms and holos are received by my aide, your black mark shall be lifted.

"That is all, Captain Picard. My inspection of Enterprise is concluded. Almost everything else is above the norm, except for Sickbay. You'll find my report stored in your computer substation." She paused. "Any questions?"

"No... sir," Picard whispered.

"Captain, this interview is over. I shall show myself out. I thank you for your co-operation."

Startled, Picard almost forgot to salute.

With military precision, Picard

turned on his heel and left... and nearly collided with Riker on the Bridge, who was wearing one of his *What is it, Captain?* looks.

Picard ignored him. *I can't deal with this*, he thought. *I need some time to think.* He glided past Riker and entered the main turbolift. *I need to get away and... or do I?* He snapped an order stopping the lift in mid-journey. *Maybe the sooner I get this over with, the better I'll feel.*

"Computer!" barked Picard. "Tell me the location of Lieutenant Commander Data!"



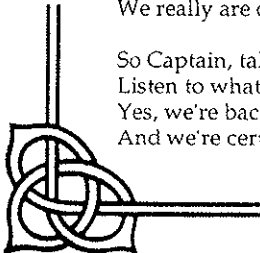
WE'RE BACK

Captain, they're back!
It's a Romulan Bird of Prey.
Shall we fire?
No! Let's hear what they have to say.

Yes, we're back.
Listen to what we say;
Matters more urgent
Have kept us away.

Your presence's not wanted
It's definitely not required.
Of your expansion and your progress
We really are quite tired.

So Captain, take warning
Listen to what we say.
Yes, we're back -
And we're certainly going to stay.



Helen Connor

PICKING UP THE PIECES

I'm frightened and scared,
Don't know what to do.
Please tell me the truth -
Is this really you?

They said I had lost you
And must learn to grieve.
Are you really a stranger?
Who am I to believe?



You say you didn't die
That it was a mistake.
But no one believes you
Whose side should I take?



You want me on the planet
Where this loss I won't feel.
But can I really live
In a place that's not real?



We told of the anger
He felt at Picard.
Troi made me tell Worf
It wasn't too hard.



You've seen I'll be fine here
Yes, I will survive.
You just disappear
With a nod of goodbye.

My mother's gone,
I know now she's dead.
I must face the future
Though I do it with dread.

The bonding's completed
United together
Worf, his family and I
Now and forever.



MESSENGER

by Sandra Edge

They sat around the observation lounge table quietly listening to Data reviewing the Enterprise's destination and its history. They were en route to the planet K-oz Minor in the Delta 9 quadrant, known to Starfleet Captains as The Death Planet. For over 50 decades the planet had been involved in global warfare - since before the first Federation vessel charted the area and reported the war.

The Prime Directive had ensured the non-interference of that vessel and all subsequent ones. Starfleet decided that they would despatch a vessel every 5 years to check on the progress of the war and its effects on the inhabitants. Each successive ship sent to the planet reported no change in the war status. Almost 10 years ago, however, the vessel sent to monitor the war reported significant changes in the ferocity between the factions. Sensors had shown an increasing use of biological germ warfare, which was destroying the planet's ecosystem and, even more worrying, indications of the use of genetically engineered changes to the planet's life forms.

The last vessel sent to monitor the situation reported that, at the present rate of environmental damage, the planet could only sustain life for another 20 years - after which, even if the war ceased, the planet's ecosystem would not be able to regenerate. The report also concluded that by that time all the remaining inhabitants would have been significantly affected by both sides' biological warfare and genetic engineering, and in all possibility be unable to produce healthy offspring,

making the planet's future terminal.

A grim-faced Captain Picard thanked Data for his review, and said, "Our task is to evaluate the situation on the planet. We cannot interfere, as much as we would like to, to help those suffering on the planet. As Data's review indicated, the planet and its inhabitants could be 15 years away from total destruction. Starfleet wants us to record, fully, all areas of the planet, to determine how the life forms have been altered since the last Federation vessel visited, and the type of toxins being used and their effect on the planet's population. This type of long-distance research may well affect the crew; your job is to ensure that the Prime Directive of non-interference is upheld. Even these difficult circumstances..."

Captain Picard looked at Commander Riker, who looked back and nodded. Next was Counselor Troi who looked back and was about to say something, but the Captain motioned that this was not the time, so she also nodded, looking deeply disturbed. Geordi La Forge and Worf both grimaced as they nodded. Finally the Captain looked at Dr Crusher, whose expression echoed Counselor Troi's.

"Captain, I'm a Doctor and I know all about the Prime Directive and why we need it. But Starfleet expects me to look at the implications of the war and its effect on living life forms dispassionately. Of course I'll do it, but I don't have to like it."

"Doctor, we all don't like having to watch a race destroy itself and its planet. None of us would willingly allow that to

happen. The Prime Directive is for our benefit as well as others. If we were to start interfering with other worlds' progress, where would we stop? No, we cannot, we must not, allow sentiment, however deeply felt, to stop the natural progression and growth of other worlds and cultures. Once we begin to tread that road we would be acting as Gods, and that, Doctor, we are not. This mission will be very difficult for all of us. It is necessary though; we are Starfleet officers and we must all do our duty!"

Captain Picard looked at Dr Crusher and waited for her to acquiesce; finally she gave a long sigh and nodded. Once more Captain Picard looked at his senior bridge crew and Dr Crusher, and then dismissed them.

Some time later they went into high orbit around the planet. All study stations were taking readings and measurements, as professionally as possible. There was, however, an undercurrent of depression and great sadness at all the suffering and destruction.

Sensors suddenly started to pick up significant energy pulses being directed onto the planet, resulting in all energy systems on the planet stopping. On further analysis, Data reported that the only systems on the planet that were functioning were those in the hospitals, and areas where which were populated mainly by children, the elderly, and recovering wounded. No other ships in the area could be detected, but the energy pulses were being produced from orbit by small satellite objects on an equatorial station.

"Data, where did they come from and why didn't our sensors pick them up?" asked Riker.

Data turned to look at both the Captain and Commander Riker and answered. "They were not there a moment ago. Sensors are not able to scan them, their construction is not of a type that Starfleet has on record. Analysis is therefore only superficial. I believe them unlikely to have originated from this planet. It is possible that the energy beams are being directed from somewhere else - possibility, an alien cloaked ship."

As suddenly as the satellites had appeared, the Enterprise computers automatically raised shields and the red alert sounded throughout the ship. All stations reported in; there was no apparent reason for the automatic red alert. Data had been monitoring all the shipwide responses and sensory information, and he had no solutions for the Captain. Moments later the Captain decided to drop to yellow alert, perturbed by the apparent malfunction. Whilst running diagnostics on the automatic sensory alert programs, Data became aware that the Enterprise's computer systems were being scanned. Before he could inform the Captain, he gripped the console, totally immobilised. Counselor Troi noticed Data's inactivity and walked towards him. Standing directly in front of him, she could see he was quite rigid, except for slight eye movements.

Geordi was called from engineering to look at Data.

"Captain, I'm not sure, but Data does that with his eyes sometimes when he's accessing stored memory. I can't find any physical problems and I don't have any idea why he's stuck like that. All his higher brain functions and neural net appear to be functioning within his norms. At this point, Captain, I don't know what is wrong with him, much less how to fix it!"

All of the bridge crew were concentrating on Data and had not noticed the Enterprise's slight orbital shift towards the planet. Captain Picard bent, peering into Data's eyes, with his back to the main viewer. Commander Riker was on Data's right with his hand on Data's shoulder, watching Geordi work on the back of Data's head. As Geordi worked, some of Data's facial functions began to work; at first his jaw dropped open, followed by a facial tic. Data's fingers began to twitch and finally released the console. He sat there, arms still out stretched and with an intermittent facial twitch, while Geordi continued to work on his friend, trying to get the body to relax, and a few minutes later he had succeeded. Data's body had become supple enough to be removed to the science lab.

After Data's departure, the Captain and Commander Riker returned to their seats, looking towards the main viewer and then at each other. They could plainly see the satellites as before, but very much closer.

"Ensign Wheeler, confirm orbit status?" enquired a puzzled Commander Riker.

"Orbit is decaying, sir. Automatic orbit adjusters are not operating... I am trying to override... The helm is not answering, sir!!!" answered the worried young Ensign.

Worf confirmed that the Enterprise was being dragged down and that the ship's power levels were also being eroded at an alarming rate.

La Forge had been studying the problem and said, "You know, Captain, the power drain and decaying orbit seem to have begun when Data was

immobilised. Maybe the two are connected in some way! All the instruments in engineering say that we can regain high orbit by using thrusters, and we have enough power. It's just that when we try, the same instruments say we don't have sufficient power. The drain is now having an effect on shields and life support."

"Captain, I recommend that all nonessential areas are shut down and that the family areas are used. Power can be diverted to those areas for as long as possible. I agree with Geordi, this problem definitely began at the same time as Data's episode."

"Agreed, Number One. Make it so," answered the Captain as he turned to look at Data coming from the turbolift. "Mr Data, are you recovered?" asked a surprised but relieved Captain.

"Yes, thank you. Captain, I have been contacted by the life form controlling the satellites. My apparent shut down was caused when she was scanning me. She has given me a message for you. The Enterprise is being pulled down to the planet because our orbit is directly between the polar controlling satellites. Their rotation angles encompass the Enterprise and that is why we are experiencing the draining effect. We are not being attacked - the satellite system is automatic and cannot be interrupted. She is trying to release us from the pull of the planet by attempting to give us power. The satellites will need to operate for 8 Earth hours, after which they will become inactive. She has calculated that our decaying orbit will have reached the planet's higher atmosphere in less than 8 hours. Her systems and power sources are fully committed to the satellites; however, she is trying to divert some power to our shields and thrusters. She recommends we ensure that only essential areas use

power, and minimal life support is used, as the amount of power she can divert is extremely limited. Captain, she expressed regret at the position the Enterprise is in, but pointed out that we should not have been here for another week, by which time the satellites' work would have been completed without the need for this complication and communication."

Captain Picard looked at Data, saying, "What she is in fact saying is, we are to sit and wait and hope that she - whoever she is! completes her work and saves us! Number One, continue as we were; ensure all decks are vacated and the non-essential crew goes to their designated general areas. Shut down all life support in the crew's quarters and all but essential areas. Dr Crusher, to enable us to reduce life support to minimum, tranquillisers will need to be administered. Counselor, please join Dr Crusher; your skills calming the families will also be required."

"Aye, Captain," they all answered as they hurried began to implement Captain Picard's orders.

Almost immediately the drain on the Enterprise became enormous, and even the bridge crew, except for Data, retired to the senior crew lounge.

Lt. Worf sat close to the doorway, Alexander very close to him, almost on his knee. Normally Alexander would not have been allowed that close in public. Worf's arm was cradling the top of the chair and he was leaning down towards his son. He spoke softly in Klingon, comfortingly and gently reciting poetry. He was very proud of Alexander and the way he had overcome the initial difficulties. He worried that the ship would be compromised while he was not able to perform his duties, and K'eyhlar kept coming into his mind. He

remembered her, everything about her, the arguments, the fights, their meeting on the holodeck, and then he looked at Alexander. He smiled a very rare smile to his son, and after checking that no-one was watching he gave the boy a hug. Alexander looked up and smiled as he did, Worf looked at him and would have sworn he could see 'her' laughing back at him.

Lt. Commander La Forge had come into the lounge with Lt. Johnson, one of the newly appointed stellar cartographers. They had been an 'item' for almost 2 months. They found a corner and sat together holding hands, talking and smiling, finding comfort in each other.

All other senior crew managed to find space for themselves and their invited guests. The lounge buzzed with quiet noise; the tranquillisers and reduced life support sapped their energy for anything more than slow and gentle actions. After 4 hours, even the low hum of conversation gave way to half consciousness.

Commander Data, alone on the bridge, had diverted life support to other areas while he monitored the ship and its orbit, still decaying even with the reductions in life support and all the other energy-saving procedures. Saving the Enterprise would be difficult; almost 7 hours into the problem and the systems of the areas designated for life support were registering that they were at the limits of the crew's tolerances. Even then he almost smiled as in one of the Ensigns' lounges a new life had been born.

Captain Picard was in the senior crew lounge waiting out the emergency

and surveying his crew and the way they conducted themselves in this extraordinary situation. His pride in his crew and ship grew and as he sat with Dr Crusher, her work with the families finished, he looked at her, the consummate professional, and yet... He felt a regret, of something not said but almost understood, another time another place, maybe then but not now.

Commander Riker sat by the star window staring at the planet below, and Counselor Troi came to sit close up beside him, her face pale and tense. As they sat there breathing almost as one, their minds wandered back to another time. Once before they had sat looking through a starship's window on the beauty of another world. Then they were in love and wanted nothing more than to be together, for ever. That time, of course, was before his promotion and subsequent meteoric rise to Commander. As they both remembered, he put his arm around her and pulled her close to him. He could see her smile and he felt her warm breath as she gave him a comforting hug. No words; they had travelled so far together, they were almost as one. Not lovers any more, but more than friends!

Meanwhile, on the bridge, Data, monitoring the situation, was aware of another presence. She was standing behind him and to his right, exactly where Captain Picard usually stood. He turned and stood to look at her and saw that she was a humanoid type; her skin glowed golden as did her eyes. It was several seconds before he realised he was looking into the eyes of another android. Her features seemed familiar; he realised she was a female version of himself.

"Who are you?"

"I am a Guardian and I am

designated Messenger. You are Data, the only sentient android in this time!"

"Messenger, why do you look like me?"

"I am capable of changing into any form. I decided this would be the least likely to cause complications for your crewmates."

As she answered, the bridge scanners fused and the bridge recording devices ceased functioning.

"I am sorry, Data, but I cannot allow any further recordings of me or our conversation. Tell me of your creator, Dr Soong, and of your brother, Lore."

"Dr Soong is dead and my brother Lore was cast out in a wide dispersal transporter beam. Why do you wish to know about me and my father and brother? What are you? Are you an android or a shape shifter?"

"I am both - like you, an android, and a shape shifter. We have been given great intellect and many powers. We - and Data, there are many like me - exist to keep the peace and serve the 'old ones', to preserve their culture and existence. My interest in you and your relatives is personal; you seem to be of 'us', and yet you do not have a specific purpose. Did your creator program you to react in this way, and did your brother behave in the same manner? You seem to have an individuality and personal desires; you are almost as Human as those you live with. I find this difficult to understand. You are most certainly superior in mental and physical attributes and still you are subordinate to them. Why?"

"I was found by members of Starfleet and I recognised that my skills could be used here to serve humanity, and I could also observe them. My

dearest wish is to become more Human. My programming allows me to process emotional reactions but not to actually experience them. I have friends here and I exist here, but the enjoyment and pleasure of being here eludes me. My programming and training ensures my daily tasks and routines are completed in the most efficient manner. I am able to socialise with my shipmates by accessing my stored interactive social database. I have found though the longer I spend with these Humans the more information about their interactive behaviour I can assimilate, and my own reactions to them becomes more natural.

"It is true that they cannot process information at my speeds, but I have found their humanity in many ways outweighs my abilities and their reactions and solutions to problems continue to intrigue me.

"My brother Lore was programmed differently from me, and he was more aware of his abilities and not as aware of these Humans' other abilities. He wanted to be seen as a superior being and had no awareness of his actions and their outcome on the life forms he encountered.

"Dr. Soong, my father, was one of the most brilliant of the humanoid scientists in cybernetics and so far only he has been able to create artificial life forms, in me and Lore."

"Thank you, Data. I already knew a lot about you and how we came to be. You see, Data, you are my father and the father of all of us!

"Data, some time in your future you are destined to meet someone who will join you. Together you will begin a dynasty and you will understand why I needed to see you.

"We will meet again. I am not allowed to say more about that - these things are in your future, so you must not speak of them to your Captain and crewmates; but I am able to give you a message for your Captain."

Almost 8 hours after the crisis began the crew of the Enterprise had slipped into semi-consciousness and were dreaming of times past. When the oxygen levels and life support suddenly 'kicked' in they all started to inhale deeply and arouse themselves from their previous half-aware state.

The bridge crew reconvened on the bridge and the Captain took his seat.

"Anything to report, Mr Data?"

"Captain, the alien satellites have ceased functioning. The planet and its ecosystem are recovering."

"Captain, there are no life forms registering on the planet, and no weaponry or buildings of any kind," said a perturbed Lt Worf.

"It's as though the planet has never been inhabited - as if it's a new world. My God, Captain, what kind of power could do that?" said a troubled Counselor Troi.

"Captain, the life form contacted me again and I have a message for you," Data said.

"You have the bridge, Number One."

Captain Picard motioned for Data to follow him into his ready room.

Data began to explain. "The life form that contacted me called herself a

Guardian, and her designation was Messenger.

"The planet's inhabitants were the results of the aliens' ancestors leaving a seed colony, many centuries ago, allowing the colony to grow and thrive, only returning periodically to check on their progress. The continuing war on the planet disappointed their alien forefathers, and the genetic interfering horrified them.

"They have been keeping a close eye on their colonists, and when it became clear that they were killing their planet and themselves, the aliens decided that their seed should surrender to their fate; but some of the inhabitants started to make plans to escape to space, even though they were aware that the last decade of genetically engineered problems would make any contact with other life forms deadly.

"The possibility of their 'children' going out into the galaxy destroying other life forms was unacceptable. As caring parents they returned to stop their children from suffering and ensure that they could not spread destruction and worse to the rest of the galaxy.

"Messenger was sent by 'the old ones' to use the satellites to remove the inhabitants to a far, unpopulated corner of the galaxy. All the inhabitants have been transported to another world and have been genetically altered back to their initial state, but have had all knowledge of technology removed; they are now at the same level of knowledge as the cave dwellers of Earth's ancient history. The new planet's conditions are harsh, and in order to survive the seasons the 'colonists' will have to learn to co-operate and be dependant on one another. The 'old ones' will continue to observe and care for the seed and chart their progress, hopefully this time to a peaceful, harmonious state.

"Having removed their children it was necessary to sterilise and cleanse the damaged planet of the very dangerously polluted atmosphere and their children's genetic experiments and weaponry. After removing all traces of their presence, the 'old ones' could begin the total regeneration of the ecosystem of the planet.

"They have been aware of the Federation for many years and were very impressed by the non-interference regulation. While we watching the planet, the aliens were watching and analysing Starfleet and the Federation. They feel that we are not ready to meet them yet, but they are watching and waiting.

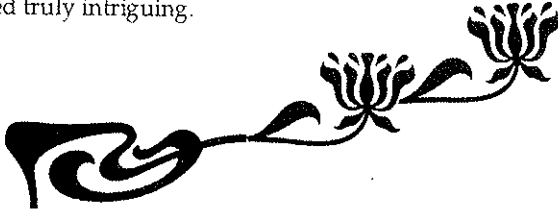
"Captain, the message is: Our time is to come and we will meet again!"

The next morning, at their regular 'breakfast', Dr Crusher and the Captain were chatting and the Doctor asked, "Jean-Luc, what kind of life form has the type of power to literally transfer an entire planet's inhabitants somewhere else, completely remove all traces of their existence and then regenerate the planet?"

"Beverly, I must say that the thought of meeting such a powerful race fills me with much trepidation and curiosity. It does seem cruel to remove their children to another world with all technology wiped from them, but then had they allowed their children to escape into our galaxy spreading disease and destruction that would have been worse. It seems to me they acted in a very benevolent way towards us. Until we meet again, I find I cannot judge them too harshly. Sensors say the planet's recovery is astonishing and it will be up to class M in a matter of weeks.

Meanwhile, in his quarters, Data sat at his console and pondered on all Messenger had told him. Messenger: one of many, and his daughter. The prospects for his future seemed truly intriguing.

Adjourned for the moment.



LUTAN

Lutan, you speak of honour,
But I just call it cheek.
In a system of true honour
You would not last a week.

You had Tasha do your fighting
To rid you of your wife;
But we do our own fighting -
We don't risk another's life.

Yareena has seen through you
Though it's taken her some time.
Tasha will not have you,
So now you're second in line.

Yareena now has Hagon,
Tasha, her own life;
But you've much less than Hagon -
No property and no wife.

Now we have got what we came for
So let us make a start;
Styrus IV we'll now aim for,
So this orbit now depart.

Margaret Connor



A BLOODY REVENGE

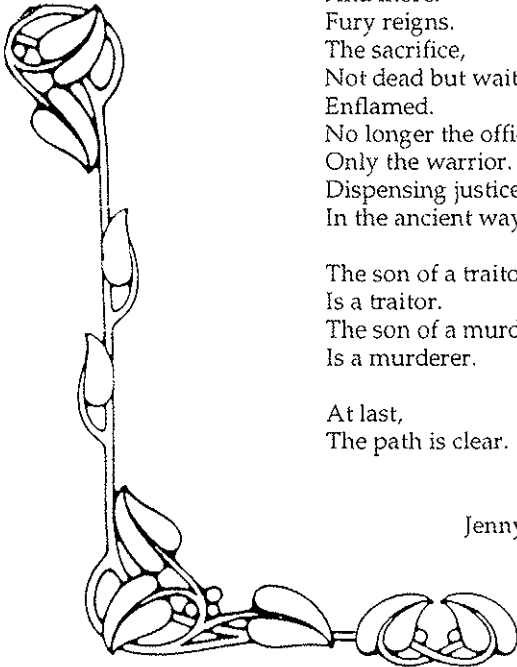
Stolen honour
Paraded before him.
Anger submerged,
Imprisoned.
The taste of death,
Bitter and burning,
Breaks the bars.

Ferocious blade
And bloodied hands.
Raging spirit
And inferno eyes.
Seeking revenge...
And more.
Fury reigns.
The sacrifice,
Not dead but waiting,
Enflamed.
No longer the officer,
Only the warrior.
Dispensing justice
In the ancient way.

The son of a traitor
Is a traitor.
The son of a murderer
Is a murderer.

At last,
The path is clear.

Jenny Howsam



NO PLACE FOR THE INNOCENT

by

Sean Christie

Stardate: 41368.2

"A-1 priority distress from Veltae II has been... cancelled, sir!"

Commander William Riker turned to stare incredulously at Lt. Yar standing directly above and behind him on the aft-deck. "How can a full scale disaster alert suddenly be called off, Lieutenant?"

"No explanation, sir," the blonde Security Chief responded. "Just an apology for any inconvenience the call may have caused."

"Inconvenience!" Riker almost spat the word in his annoyance. "They pull us eight hours off course, setting a full medical and defence alert in motion and they... apologise."

Yar shrugged her shoulders, eyes perplexed as she leaned over the tactical rail. "It's not unknown for an A-1 to be terminated in mid-stream. Although there is usually a reason to go with it."

"Hey, we're real sorry, but the theacelic acid spill wasn't quite as bad as we first thought." La Forge's quip from the con station brought a smile to every face on the bridge - with one obvious exception.

Geordi pointedly ignored the warning signals coming from his companion seated at the ops position, but knew he wasn't about to escape that easily.

Lt-Cmdr Data's eyes were already

moving quickly from side to side in an attempt to analyse the remark that the bridge crew had clearly found so amusing. Human jocularitas was one concept the android had never quite learned to appreciate, despite La Forge's best efforts to enlighten him.

It was so easy to forget that Data tended to take every word uttered to him literally, and Geordi jumped in hastily as he threatened to open his mouth. "I know, Data. There hasn't been an acid spill on Veltae II. I was ..."

"Yes, Geordi," Data interrupted. "I believe I have correctly interpreted your expression as a witticism. A bon mot, a pun, a quip, a -"

"Whoa, okay, okay. Well done," La Forge congratulated, rolling his sightless eyes beneath the cover of his prosthetic visor. "You'll get your kewpie doll later."

"Kewpie doll?"

Golden eyes began to dance with renewed interest and Geordi mentally kicked himself for falling into the same trap, cringing as Data instantly launched into his usual stream of questioning, with all the enthusiasm of a child who has just discovered the word - why?

There was an unexpected hiss from the right of the forward viewscreen, and the Captain's ready room door slid open, the presence of Jean-Luc Picard bringing the bridge crew to silent attention; including, much to Geordi's relief, Lt-Cmdr Data.

"Ever get the feeling you weren't wanted?" Riker dead-panned, rising from the command chair as Picard strode across the beige carpeting toward him.

"I beg your pardon, Number One?"

"Vel-Two Research informs us they no longer require assistance."

"Do they indeed." Picard indicated for his First Officer to be seated, both men settling themselves in the comfortable command horse-shoe of the Enterprise's spacious bridge. "And what is Professor Lester's excuse for wasting our valuable time?"

Riker glanced briefly at Yar with a do-you-want-to-tell-him-or-shall-I look. The Lieutenant rolled her eyes expressively before scowling down at her console readings.

Picard noted the puzzling exchange. "I take it they did give a reason for this abrupt turnabout?"

"None, sir," Yar protested, obviously annoyed with her lack of facts. "Valid security codes were employed, though. There's no doubt that the cancellation was initiated by authorised personnel."

"Could be they have the situation under control," Riker suggested. "After all, Enterprise wasn't the only ship in response range."

Picard nodded in agreement. "Have any other vessels directly acknowledged the distress?"

Data spun his chair round. "Two Federation starships beside Enterprise have responded, sir. The rescue vessel USS Watson and the USS Rochester."

Jean-Luc Picard visibly stiffened,

facial muscles quickly constricting to present an emotionless mask that would have been the envy of any skilled poker player.

Yet he had a long way to go before he could successfully bluff his First Officer's shrewd observational abilities. Riker was a supreme master at displaying the traditional 'poker-face', and under the impression that nothing ruffled Picard's equable exterior, his curiosity was immediately piqued.

Riker had only served on Enterprise for a few months, but already found himself able to distinguish the subtle changes in Picard's usually enigmatic features that betrayed specific moods - and it was clearer than dilithium that mention of the Miranda-class Rochester had struck a bad chord.

Nor had the Captain been alone in his reaction to Data's information. Disgruntled undertones were rippling through the air like warp-field currents, wiping out the calm easy atmosphere of the bridge in one frigid pause.

Riker's ears had little difficulty intercepting the hiss of whispered profanities that drifted his way, and with a great deal of self-control refrained from voicing a couple of his own.

The USS Rochester was not a popular ship. Postings to the Siberia - as she was generally referred to - were regarded as some sort of Machiavellian punishment by Starfleet Personnel. Bordering on the infamous, the vessel's reputation was rivalled only by that of her Commanding Officer - Captain Roland Paice.

"A problem, sir?" Riker ventured, sensing Picard's sullen silence did not simply originate with the prospect of crossing the Rochester's path. This

brooding grimness seemed to go much deeper; *perhaps even*, Riker thought with a frown, *to a personal level?*

"No. No problem, Number One," Picard assured him with a feigned sang-froid. "Please, Mr Data, continue with what you were saying."

"Yes, sir. It is logical to assume that the Rochester has already arrived as she was en route to Vel-Two Research with general supplies when the distress was first initiated." Data's soft tones were a sharp contrast to the tense attitude of those around him. "Watson will arrive in less than one hour. On our present heading Enterprise will arrive in two hours, sixteen minutes, thirty four sec..."

"Thank you, Commander." Picard's hand batted the air absently. "That will be sufficient for now."

Sitting back in his seat, he drummed his fingers on the chair arm, staring thoughtfully at the star-streaked viewscreen before him.

"Watson will easily beat us to the Veldrani system, and from a medical stand-point she can offer much better support than our own teams," Riker reported, checking the read-outs beside him. "This termination business puzzles me, though. Simone Lester is one tough administrator. No doubt her pride stopped her requesting help until she desperately needed it. I just can't see her crying wolf."

"Then let's hope for Professor Lester's sake that she has an exemplary excuse for this false alarm. Roland Paice literally thrives on Starfleet regulations and doesn't suffer irregularities lightly." Picard's tone was far from reassuring. "You can be sure that someone will be raked over the coals for this."

"We could proceed to Vel-Two," Riker proposed. "Take a look-see?"

Picard shook his head. "I don't believe Dr Makvia would appreciate our leaving his expedition to freeze on Pio III for another day while we satisfy ourselves regarding an erroneous distress call. As you say, the Watson is more than well-equipped to deal with any medical emergencies, and the Rochester is already on hand to provide any back-up that may be needed."

"Simone's a real charmer," Riker mused, smiling warmly at a fleeting memory of the tall, blonde scientist. "She shouldn't have any trouble exonerating herself."

"Paice is not the sort to be swayed by a pretty face, Number One," Picard said, remembering the sour, disdainful young man who had shared several of his classes at the Academy. In his youth, Paice had managed to shatter his glass of the milk of human kindness before ever taking a sip; and Picard was certain that the android seated in front of him would be much more capable of showing compassion to a fellow sentient than Roland Paice.

"Oh, I don't know," Riker replied. "I had heard that Paice has mellowed somewhat since the arrival of his present First. Navarr, I think the name is. Tall redhead... arrogantly efficient."

The First Officer lowered his voice discreetly. "Particularly nasty temper too, by all accounts."

"Damn right she has!" Picard had not intended to be overheard; yet the disgust in his voice carried, attracting bemused stares from every officer within earshot.

Data and La Forge traded

surreptitious glances, keeping their faces toward the viewing screen. Others were not quite so lucky in avoiding notice; Picard swept the bridge with a long, hard scowl, his piercing eye contact redirecting attention to respective consoles with exaggerated conscientiousness.

Lowering his own voice a notch, he turned back to Riker, confiding, "Whoever is responsible for relegating Pascale Navarr to the uncongenial ranks of the Rochester's crew is to be commended for his insight.

"And as for mellowing..." The Captain tugged at his uniform jacket in irritation. "Well... it's hardly the effect she has on most people. The woman delights in the role of devil's advocate far too much to inspire anything other than discord."

Curiouser and curiouser, Riker thought, struggling hard to keep his face straight. The cat had clawed its way out of the proverbial bag and if Picard's description was anything to go by, it certainly was not of the furry variety.

"Academy days, sir?"

"First assignment days," Picard returned with an abruptness that brooked no further comment.

It was apparent to his deeply amused First Officer that Picard was battling desperately to maintain his usual aplomb, and failing miserably. The clipped orders coming from the command chair were as subtle as a barrage of phaser bursts: "Lieutenant Yar, discontinue alert status. Mr La Forge, resume course for Pio III, warp six. Mr Data..."

"Yes, Captain?"

Data's mild enquiry halted Picard in

mid-flow, his glare dissolving disconcertedly into a tight-lipped frown as he realised he actually had no orders for the patiently waiting android.

Clenching his jaw, he took a controlled, steady breath. This was not the place to allow personal feelings to surface, and he felt suitably ashamed, knowing that the bridge crew were quite unjustly on the receiving end of his ill humour. He had not been this choleric for a long time, and was far from pleased that it should be the mention of Navarr that produced such a response.

Time was supposed to be the Great Healer; yet it had achieved nothing in the way of diluting the inner resentments that still hove between Navarr and himself like a Klingon *bat'tehl*. Plainly he had not harnessed his negativity toward Pascale as tightly as he chose to believe.

Jean-Luc sighed inwardly, wondering whether this bitter childishness they insisted on sharing would ever be resolved. There was little prospect of Pascale volunteering the olive branch of her own volition; so it looked like he would have to be the one to muster enough maturity to pour oil on troubled waters, yet again.

After all, a bit of pride-swallowing had never killed him, and Enterprise could be in the Veldrani system in just over two hours, warp eight getting them back on course to Dr Makvia before he kicked up too much fuss with Starfleet Command.

"Captain?"

Picard looked up to see his Science Officer regarding him expectantly. His back stiffened under the covert scrutiny of his bridge staff. Thank heavens that ship's counselor had not been on hand to witness his bout of irascibility. The

empathic Deanna Troi was not a person he could, as yet, say he felt completely at ease with, and learning to confide in the Betazoid would no doubt be an even greater challenge.

The Farpoint incident had not given him time to acquaint himself fully with his new crew, and they in turn were as much in the dark about their new Commanding Officer. It was a well-known fact that gossip spread round a Starship faster than the Coridan flu and Picard-scuttlebutt was still rife throughout the Enterprise's decks. A private audience with another Captain's First was not liable to pass without comment; especially considering the kind of verbal fireworks that invariably ended his discussions with Pascale.

No, Picard concluded. It would be far more prudent to give the Veldrani system a miss, and conduct any personal business on neutral ground. Besides, knowing Navarr the way he did, it was highly likely that she would exit her corner with rapier bared, and he preferred to be in a position where he could defend himself in kind.

"Captain?" Data repeated. There was no impatience in the android's voice, of course, Picard's discomfiture arising from the amount of attention his odd behaviour was drawing.

"Just... just continue doing whatever it is that you are doing, Mr Data," he ordered, deliberately ignoring Riker's frank gaze and slumping back into his seat, mulling over how appealing his ready-room door appeared.

Earl Grey and petulance were hardly the ingredients for a relaxing mix though, and he refused to retreat from his own bridge for the sake of brooding over the likes of Navarr. He grimaced sullenly, convinced that even the Bard

himself in his worst nightmare could never have dreamed up a better shrew than Navarr!

No doubt Ol' Kate the Curst was enjoying the amber delights contained in a glass of Professor Lester's excellent Cognac by now - and quite uncharitably, Picard hoped she choked on it.

"Forget it, Navarr. No-one could survive down there."

"Your opinion, Lewis," the Rochester's First Officer snarled back, punctuating her reply with an elbow to the CMO's unprotected midriff. Lewis doubled over with a satisfying grunt of pain, but refused to relinquish his hold on her jacket.

"Brady! McGarry! Help me restrain the Commander!"

The two security men hesitated. Streaks of mingled sweat and blood lined their exhausted, smoke-blackened faces. McGarry looked helplessly from Navarr to Lewis in total confusion. This was one scenario Starfleet training had never prepared him for: two senior officers brawling in the middle of a disaster zone. He had been warned of unorthodox practices on the Rochester; but striking a fellow officer still remained a court martial offence, no matter whose ship you were serving on.

The attitude of the grizzled Security Chief beside him did little to instil confidence, either. Brady was watching the developing situation with cool detachment, his expression disapproving rather than concerned. As a Rochester veteran, the copper-haired Irishman knew that a tour of duty on Paice's ship did not follow the Starfleet norm - it was more like a trip through Wonderland,

adhering to an equally bizarre set of rules.

"That's an order, dammit!" Lewis persisted, managing to put a little more force behind his demand, as he slammed Navarr against a stack of supply units.

The empty containers collapsed with a whoosh of escaping air, spilling the two officers into the fizzing remains of a ruined operations console, its damaged circuitry spitting fierce showers of searing blue sparks over the struggling bodies. McGarry started forward, almost choking as he was roughly hauled back by the scruff of his collar. Twisting round he saw Brady calmly shaking his head.

Michael Brady knew exactly where his loyalties lay, but he wasn't about to let the young Ensign make the mistake of taking sides. This was the first time he had ever seen Navarr overstep her authority, and when Lewis made his report there was going to be hell to pay.

A moment later and both officers were back on their feet, but the hostilities were far from over. "I'm still in command here, Doctor," Navarr asserted threateningly, her breath coming in short angry gasps. "Now I suggest you get your hands off me before I start a dissection with your own scalpels."

In spite of his shaking hands still locked on her throat, Lewis was no fighter. The chilling stare from Navarr's steel-grey eyes, mere inches from his own, instantly triggered his fingers loose.

McGarry released a long held breath, running a hand across the back of his sweating neck. It was hardly surprising that nerves were fraying. Over fourteen hours had elapsed since the Rochester had entered orbit around Veltæ II and there was still no evidence of any further help arriving. This had hit

the senior officers hardest, since they had remained planet-side taking charge of fresh teams as they beamed down to relieve their crew-mates.

The last twelve hours had been spent painstakingly checking through the eerily deserted, subterranean levels of the research installation looking for survivors and finding virtually nothing. The intensity of heat and smoke filling the narrow corridors had seriously hindered the efforts of the away teams, increasing noxiously as laboratory explosions constantly ignited further sections, adding to the general difficulties as stocks of volatile substances reacted.

The Rochester had repeated warnings of a potential generator overload, and if the fail-safes refused to kick in soon, the eruption of raw energy would propel the installation into a synchronous orbit with the Starfleet vessel when it blew.

"Brady, keep trying to raise Osbourne," Navarr ordered huskily, rubbing at her sore throat, and moving once more to the freight elevator.

Staring down into the blackness of the empty shaft, she could see distant flashes of flame some thirty miles below, a tiny vicious dot spewing out acrid clouds that coiled up from deep within its blazing heart. It was like looking down the maw of hell - a fitting location for Lt. Aiden Osbourne to have disappeared.

"Could be Osbourne took a nose-dive," McGarry stated matter-of-factly, peering over Navarr's shoulder into the smouldering abyss.

"No such luck. He's down there all right," Brady muttered. Gung-ho mavericks like Osbourne were gifted with the Devil's own luck, and in possession of an equally potent kiss of death.

At times like this, Brady often remembered the quotes of his old Academy instructor, and in regard to Osbourne, one gem in particular. 'Away team mission - watch your back. Maverick on a mission - watch everyone else's.' Seasoned wisdom that had preserved him alive throughout a very long and dangerously active career.

It was no secret that Navarr had tried to block Osbourne's transfer from the USS Clipson. Personal dislike had been implied as the motive below decks, yet Brady had spent enough time with the First Officer to know it was based more on an instinctive distrust. Navarr had pored long and hard over the personnel files of every crew member during her first months on board ship, asking for Brady's recommendations on frequent occasions. The simple truth, as Brady saw it, was that she genuinely wanted to turn things round for the Rochester's much maligned crew.

Brady remembered Navarr's initial arrival speech to senior staff, outlining her plans for ensuring that Rochester would one day be mentioned on a par with such Fleet notables as Enterprise, Intrepid, and Belvedere. Discipline had been laced tighter than a dress uniform collar; a move that had earned a good deal of begrudging respect for Paice's aloof Number One. It was obvious that she viewed Osbourne as a stumbling block to the fruition of that plan - one added troublemaker to be routed out of an otherwise potentially decent crew.

"Okay, so why hasn't he contacted us?" McGarry wanted to know. "He's been down there long enough, and... wait a second." The Ensign let loose a long, low whistle of disbelief, punching up the section schematic on his tricorder.

"There!" He tapped the screen as a wealth of data scrolled upward.

"Osbourne's in the Classified Information Repository."

"How the hell did he get in there! The CIR's supposed to be security sealed during an emergency alert. You know what this means." Brady's face turned sour. "If those seals have been tampered with, we'll have Fleet Intelligence crawling all over us for months."

"How long before Enterprise arrives?" Navarr growled, kneading her knuckles into the tightness behind her temples, self-control almost at breaking point.

"A-1 priority means she'll be warping here at best speed from Dela Maigra," Brady reported. "If she risks the Truarian trade route and plays safe with the engines she should get here within the next hour or so."

"Make that twenty-five minutes," Navarr corrected. "I hear Jean-Luc Picard recently accepted Captaincy of Enterprise. Knowing that stubborn streak of his, he'll order a sustained warp nine and to hell with his Chief Engineer."

McGarry was staring down into the shaft when Navarr prodded him in the back. "Get a good grip on this rope, Ensign. I'm going down."

Positioning herself on the edge of the sheer drop, she tried to locate the open doorway four levels below where Osbourne had gained access. The fumes coming from the CIR level were overpowering and she doubted that the cocky Lieutenant could possibly be still alive if he were anywhere inside the vaults. The next level down, however, was a different matter entirely.

The environmental units on E-level were labouring to stay active; but from the way the smoke swirled away from the

elevator doors on that floor, it was plain that some sort of air-circulation system was continuing to operate. H-level was a secure section which meant that it had to be manned at all times - if they were going to find anyone down here, then that station was the safest bet.

Hoisting the oxygen packs more securely on her back, she turned to McGarry, "Eight minutes, Ensign. Then you haul me up."

"Aye, sir."

"You'll get yourself killed, Navarr." Lewis grabbed her arm as she prepared to lower herself into the steaming void.

"I believe that's my decision to make," she informed him tightly, yanking her arm free of his grip.

"All for casualties who don't exist?!"

"You have no way of guaranteeing that. This is the last section we know for a fact was manned. And I have absolutely no intentions of leaving the area until we've checked every square inch of it. Is that clear, Doctor?"

"Commander!" Brady gestured with his tricorder. "I've got a definite fix. Interference makes it impossible to define any life-readings, but the freight elevator is about three levels down and wedged tight. Could be they were trying to get up here when the power linkages imploded."

Lewis snatched the tricorder from the security officer's hand, and waved it accusingly. "There are firedamp build-ups registered here! When they blow it's going to turn this whole section into twisted slag."

"If they blow, you mean," Brady corrected. "Those pockets could stay

unstable for years without ever igniting."

"They could also go at any minute!"

"You'd sure be whistling a difference tune if that were you trapped down there... sir," McGarry mumbled, disgustedly.

"Maybe it was the hypocritical oath you swore to at the Academy - eh, Doc?" Navarr agreed sarcastically, fiddling with her oxygen mask.

"Brady's just confirmed there are no life-readings," Lewis shot back defensively. "Your actions are putting us all in serious jeopardy, Navarr. As Chief Medical Officer, the safety of the away team is my prime concern, and under the circumstances I think we ought to let the Captain decide what measures are to be taken down here."

The man reached for his com-badge, nearly making it before Navarr jumped to her feet, almost breaking his wrist as she savagely knocked his hand away. "No, Hippocrates! You aren't going to -"

"Rochester to Navarr."

Navarr slapped her own communicator impatiently. "Navarr here, Captain. Go ahead."

"I issued an away team recall over fifteen minutes ago, Commander. All other teams have reported in." Paice sounded far from pleased. "I want you back up here, now. Every member of your team is to report to sickbay."

"Sickbay??"

"That's what I said, Commander. We've determined there's a risk of zenite gas contamination. Three poisonings have already been confirmed; Lt. Cmdrs Jarvis and Pake! and Lt. Harrison. I can't

afford to lose any more of my senior staff. Pakei succeeded in breaking four of Jarvis' ribs before they were parted. I trust you've experienced no aggressive behavioural problems with your team? It's a tell-tale sign according to Professor Lester, the zenite being extremely potent on the levels below your present location."

Navarr glowered at Lewis, running a hand over her throat again. "Not that I've noticed, sir. We do have a minor problem, though. We appear to have... misplaced... Lt Osbourne."

"How hard are you looking for him, Pascale?"

Navarr chose to ignore her superior's sarcasm; experience having taught her there was little point in trying to convince him of her suspicions. Paice might have given her free rein on board ship, but he seldom offered support when her actions were challenged - legitimately or not.

"Osbourne volunteered to recon the lower levels," she explained. "Tricorder readings are all but useless. We're strolling blind down here."

"We have the same problem. Sensors aren't penetrating below E-level so there is no way we can... Did you say Osbourne volunteered?" Paice was hard put to keep the astonishment from his voice.

"Exactly my point, sir." Navarr's voice wavered as she tried to secure the lid on her bubbling anger. Paice could be so infuriatingly slow at times. The zenite gas was obviously beginning to weave its magic on her already recalcitrant temper, and it was a wonder she had resisted its effects for this length of time. Both Lewis and herself, along with the rest of the Rochester's senior staff fronting the

teams, had been exposed to the substance much longer than anyone else.

An all too familiar sigh whispered from her communicator, and Navarr bit down hard on her lip, tasting blood. Paice had slipped into the defensive, the old deaf ear policy about to come into play.

"This is hardly the time to start indulging in your usual brand of bigotry, Commander. Frankly, I'm getting a little tired of your obsession regarding Lt. Osbourne. When we reach Starbase 198, I think you should talk to a counselor about it."

"Dammit, Roland!" she yelled, slamming a frustrated fist into the elevator jamb. "This has nothing to do with bigotry. This is internal security!!"

"I am not prepared to begin a session of verbal jousting over the communications channel." Paice's anger equalled her own. "Now get a grip on your paranoia."

"After that fiasco on Cordiban Eta, I believe I'm entitled to be paranoid. It seems that every time Osbourne joins an away team, I end up shipping body-bags back home!"

There was an ominous silence, and when Paice finally spoke his voice was painfully noncommittal. "You will reassemble your team and return ship-side forthwith. That is a direct order, Navarr. Rochester out."

The communications link was severed abruptly. Navarr closed her eyes, releasing a slow, ragged breath. "Damn. Where are you when I need you, Picard?"

"The intrepid Enterprise is probably half-way back to Dela Maigra by now."

Navarr's eyes snapped open, narrowing as she watched a tall, gangly, thin-faced man saunter arrogantly into the wrecked room. His uniform was badly torn, its operations gold stained dirty yellow by the smoke and dirt clinging to its material. A phaser hung loosely in his hand, and more than one of his team colleagues wondered what occasion he had had to use it.

"What are you talking about, Osbourne?" Brady demanded. "Enterprise hasn't even got here yet."

"Nor will she, Chief," Osbourne supplied, toying with the settings on his phaser. "I informed Enterprise that her services would not be required after all."

"You did what?!" Brady took a step forward, fists clenched whitely at his sides. "You had no authority to initiate such a communication."

"So arrest me," the Lieutenant jeered. "That's what you always wanted isn't it, Navarr? Aiden Osbourne behind the brig's force-wall?"

Navarr seriously doubted that she would get what she really wanted; the transporters were far too efficient to accidentally scramble the son-of-a-bitch beyond all hope of putting him back together.

"I aim to please, Lieutenant," Navarr retorted, gesturing to the Security Chief. "Take charge, Mr Brady. You have the dubious honour of escorting Mr Osbourne to the brig."

"Aye, sir," Brady acknowledged with obvious relish.

"Belay that order, Chief," Osbourne mimicked Navarr's Breton accent perfectly, slowly levelling his phaser and halting Brady in his tracks, the weapon's

rapidly blinking warning light reminding its user that the energy setting was lethal - though Osbourne needed no such reminder.

"Osbourne, don't be an idiot," Lewis choked, moving cautiously toward him. "It's all over! They know where you've been. It's only a matter of time before - "

"Shut up, Lewis!" Osbourne snarled viciously. "Shut up - and keep your distance too."

Lewis shuffled to a stop, eyes widening as the weapon was pointed in his direction. "For crying out loud, take a moment to think. How many more 'accidents' do you reckon you can get away with! I can't falsify any more death certificates for - "

Brady and McGarry were still reaching for their own phasers when Osbourne opened fire. The intense energy charges ripped through their chests, and hurled them backwards against the wall like sawdust dummies. Lewis gaped in horror at the two dead men sprawled across the floor, watching in dismay as his unwanted confederate calmly turned the weapon on Navarr.

"NNNoooooo... " Lewis moved quickly to shield the First Officer.

"You'll do as I say, Lewis - or you know what'll happen." Osbourne smiled coldly as the Doctor flinched slightly at the threat.

Taking advantage of the distraction, Navarr edged back towards the elevator shaft, listening intently to the arguing men. She hoped that Lewis' interference would give her enough time to implement a plan that might save her skin. The area was too open to attempt making a break for it, and Osbourne's keen eye would have no difficulty in

cutting her down before she made cover. She had competed against him too often in the holo-target games to underestimate his abilities.

The sulphurous fumes rising from the shaft at her back set her nose twitching, the smell pointing out the only viable plan of action left open to her. McGarry had still been holding the rope in his hand when Osbourne appeared, dropping the thin coils close to the elevator door as he had reached for his phaser.

Slowly, Navarr toed the rope toward her, gently rotating a good length round her booted ankle. There would be no way of testing its potential and the First Officer mouthed a quick prayer regarding her sense of timing and the strength of the rope's anchorage.

"What kind of threat do you think you have now?" Lewis was blurting to his companion. "I've got to the point where Damocles can drop his sword and be damned." The physician was sweating heavily, but stayed firmly between Navarr and the pointed phaser.

"Yes," he admitted. "I killed six people through negligence. It was a mistake - a mistake I'll have to live with for the rest of my days. This, though..." Lewis indicated the bodies at his feet with a shaking hand... "this was deliberate. Cold-blooded murder!"

"You're conveniently forgetting Cordiban Eta, Doctor," Osbourne reminded him. "I don't seem to remember it bothering you when I... retired... Cerdi and Bates."

"Well, it bothers me now!" Lewis snarled, wringing his hands. "Cerdi and Bates were as corrupt as you. It was their own greed that killed them. This is different. I can't stand by while you tot

up your own personal body-count. How do you expect us to go back to the ship and act as though nothing has happened?"

"Accidents happen," Osbourne answered, chillingly. "Besides, I never planned on going back to the ship."

A single pulse of the phaser ended Lewis' moral dilemma once and for all, the CMO's lifeless corpse flying backwards under the energy blast. It collided heavily with Navarr, knocking her feet out from beneath her.

The woman screamed as she felt herself toppling over the edge under Lewis' dead weight and a second later she was hurtled downwards into the densely rising sulphur clouds; damp, scalding air currents seeping through her uniform.

Stardate: 44955.7

Captain Jean-Luc Picard glanced quickly through the window of the tiny isolation cubicle and felt his stomach twist. The technician's injuries were far worse than his CMO had led him to believe, causing him to raise an eyebrow questioningly in her direction.

"Complete autopsy report like hell." Crusher muttered angrily, shoving clenched fists into the pockets of her blue medical smock. "Is this supposed to be some sort of sick joke, or what?"

It was fairly obvious that the good Doctor had not expected this grisly presentation either, leaving Picard with the distinct impression that someone, somewhere, would be very 'sick' by the time Beverly Crusher finished with them. However, he had no chance to voice his own opinion, turning as the doors behind them swished open to admit the

unmistakable figure of Ambassador V'Tae. The official glided slowly toward them, his ceremonial chains of office jangling noisily at his waist.

Picard fought down that irritating impulse to smile which threatened to get the better of him every time he saw the Veltaen official. The Ambassador's clanking silver links and smooth gait reminding him of Jacob Marley's ghost. Yet, next to this sombre creature, Dickens' morbid literary creation could have been described as positively jovial.

"Wish you to speak, Picard Captain?" V'Tae whispered croakily from beneath the folds of his heavy cowl.

"Yes, Ambassador. Thank you for responding so promptly," Picard replied politely. "I believe there may have been a mistake. Doctor Crusher and I were to be shown the remains of Jonathon Tarn... the Federation mining supervisor?"

V'Tae lifted a bony, parchment-skinned hand and pointed to the cubicle. "Error, not," he grated. "Federation person of Tarn. In order is all."

The Veltaen was a good head and shoulders taller than either Crusher or Picard, its face unnervingly concealed within the folds of its hooded robe. The Doctor, though, refused to be intimidated by its imposing stature. Folding her arms across her chest in a deliberately aggressive pose, she addressed the Ambassador directly, ignoring Picard's audible intake of breath at the diplomatic breach.

Crusher was well aware that Veltaens regarded it as a serious insult for a female to speak in the presence of males; yet after the treatment she had endured while trying to conduct a medical check on Brinaille personnel under the watchful eyes of Veltaen

bureaucrats, she couldn't give a damn.

"I studied what there was of your morgue's autopsy report," she informed him. "By Starfleet medical standards it was sadly incomplete and exceedingly misleading." She turned to Picard. "I'll need to conduct my own autopsy, Captain. In my own sickbay and with my own staff."

"Request denied," the official stated bluntly, deliberately addressing Picard. "Error not. In order is all."

Crusher's face darkened. "That was a long way off being a request, Mister!" She was sick to death of being told 'in order is all'. The Veltaens knew very well that this situation was far from 'in order'. "This happens to be a Federation facility, and under Starfleet regulations I have the right to..."

Picard glared warningly at his infuriated CMO. There was little point in arguing with Veltaen bureaucracy and Beverly was just going to make things worse. The Veltaens were never overly communicative when it came to dealing with Starfleet, a lesson he had learned on previous visits to this harsh, storm-ravaged planet, while commanding the USS Stargazer. The four year old V-Two catastrophe had not exactly improved relations either, the accident having not only succeeded in destroying one of the Federation's most prominent research facilities, but also seriously jeopardised the environmental integrity of its host world. Only by the skin of its teeth had the UFP managed to avert irreparable damage.

Ironically, the accident had unearthed several lodes of highly valued metals; a discovery that had brought a much needed avenue of prosperity to the ailing Veltaen economy. Impressed by Starfleet's humanitarian efforts, the

planet's Presidium had grudgingly agreed to the construction of a new facility, accepting the Federation's proposal to site the Brinalle mining installation there on one far from simple condition. The Veltaen government would have final approval on all work carried out at the facility and monitor the export of any refined ore. In other words, Starfleet regulations meant as much here as an exhalation of breath into a windstorm.

"Thank you for your assistance, Ambassador," Picard said, subtly guiding him to the door, and darting an annoyed look at an unrepentant Beverly Crusher. "There is just one other matter I would like to discuss. It pertains to Ensign Tarn."

"Female of Tarn?" asked V'Tae.

"Yes. That is, Supervisor Tarn's wife. I would much prefer that she did not have to participate in this identification. It would be far more practical for Dr Crusher and myself to perform this duty and at the same time, avoid a great deal of suffering on Susan Tarn's behalf."

"Possible not," the Veltaen refused flatly. "Female comply must."

"With all respect, sir," Picard grated, trying hard to keep control of his temper. "This is the man's wife we're talking about."

Throughout his career, Picard had relied heavily on his ability to gauge his diplomatic wrangling in relation to the facial responses of his listener. Under the circumstances this was impossible, and looking at the grey folds of V'Tae's cowl, Picard felt as though he were trying to negotiate with an inanimate object rather than a living, reasoning individual.

"Honour consider it, female of

Veltae."

"Susan Tarn is not a Veltaen female, though," Picard snapped harshly, then bowed his head slightly in apology. "Forgive me, Ambassador. I have no right to criticise your customs."

"Feel you strong, Picard Captain," V'Tae nodded, his tone holding a hint of admiration.

"Let's say that I am concerned for the well-being of one of my crew. This is obviously a difficult time for her, and I know that I certainly would not wish a loved one of my own to suffer this kind of trauma, simply because I happened to die on the wrong planet." Picard spread his hands placatingly. "I must object to inflicting any unnecessary emotional agony on this woman simply for the sake of ruffling some bureaucratic red tape."

V'Tae's chains rattled jarringly as he stepped toward the isolation cubicle. Lifting one hand, he made an intricately ritualistic sign with his slender fingers, intoning, "Tarn is Tarn. In order is all."

"Thank you, Ambassador," Picard said, acknowledging the Veltaen's accedence to his request. "I'm sure Ensign Tarn will appreciate your kindness."

The Ambassador's answering bow was so low that he almost seemed to fold in two, and with a discordant symphony of clinks and clanks he drew himself upright and glided gracefully from the room.

"Incredible!" Crusher exclaimed, shaking her auburn head as the Captain rejoined her. "They actually expect us to believe that this is the body that goes with that autopsy report. How naive can they be?"

"Not exactly the word I would have chosen, Doctor," Picard replied, eyeing the tiny surveillance studs sprinkled liberally across the low ceiling.

The Presidium had become increasingly tight-lipped over the Jon Tarn affair, meeting even the most innocuous of questions with paranoid evasiveness. Under normal circumstances Picard's experience with the culture would have put it down to usual Veltaen arrogance - but these were far from normal circumstances.

A rather puzzling communique had come to light at Starfleet Command, and Admiral Ramont had promptly dropped the matter squarely in Picard's lap. Intuition and the obtrusive attitude of the Presidium told the Enterprise Captain that it would be a mistake to leave this world before he was completely satisfied that Tarn's death was no more than an unfortunate accident.

"The postmortem conclusion said that Tarn was caught from behind by a robotic mining tapannier." Crusher sounded sceptical.

Picard's eyes narrowed perceptively. "And you disagree with that?"

"The charring on the lacerations would suggest that they were made by a laser-aided cutting head. Yet, from what I can see, this kind of damage was inflicted by a lot more than a 'glancing' encounter with a malfunctioning machine."

Picard depressed the wall control and the aseptic field gently rotated Tarn's remains to present another viewing angle. With a muffled gasp, Crusher stiffened, her suspicions bluntly confirmed. Patches of shredded blue uniform clung to the body, contrasting vividly with the blackness of congealed

blood. The limbs on the right side seemed to have been wrenched free of the body, and Picard could see that it was only the surgical confines of the gravity field that was actually holding the pieces together.

Crusher put a hand to her mouth, turning her back on the isolation window. "You can't expect his wife to see him like that!" she exploded, quickly lowering her voice as she remembered the other occupants of the room waiting a short distance away. "If they insist on being so damn insensitive, they could at least have cleaned the body up."

Picard forced himself to look through the window again. Beverly was absolutely right, of course. The Veltaens could have attempted to make things easier on Tarn's widow; so why had they not done so?

This visit to Veltae II had not been an easy one, and looking at the body brought back a nightmarish selection of guilty thoughts that Jean-Luc preferred to keep locked away deep in his mind; thoughts that usually only got the better of him while he slept.

Picard often having sat in his ready-room aboard the Enterprise, wondering how his Starship's presence would have affected the end result of the Vel-Two disaster. The Galaxy-class Enterprise had carried specialised equipment and skilled technicians who could have greatly improved the odds of getting the installation's generator stabilised before it went critical.

Consequently there would have been no generator explosion; no radiation poisoning; no need for the construction of Brinalle; no dead mining supervisor; and most of all, the USS Rochester's First Officer and her away team would still be alive.

He had finally brought Enterprise to the Veldrani system: but it was four years too late. Throughout history, 'if only' had come to be the lament of many Starfleet Captains, and Jean-Luc Picard knew he would certainly not be the last.

The sound of choking sobs reminded him of his more immediate duty. Yet, under the circumstances, facing Susan Tarn was the last thing he wanted to do; especially after the alarming, hysterical distress he had witnessed when first informing the young Ensign of her husband's tragic accident. He had never coped well in dealing with the grief of others and was glad that Counselor Troi was on hand to lend support.

Taking a deep breath, he walked toward the two women waiting at the back of the dimly lit room. Troi rose gracefully from her seat at his approach, a comforting hand resting lightly on the shoulder of the woman at her side.

"I am truly sorry for your loss, Ensign," Picard began in a low, sympathetic voice. "I appreciate how difficult the last few hours have been for you. Therefore I believe it would be best if you returned to the Enterprise and tried to get some rest. I'm sure Counselor Troi will escort you safely back to your quarters."

The Ensign rose awkwardly to her feet. The naturally commanding lilt of his voice seeming to register beyond her emotional stupor. She stood, swaying slightly, staring blankly into his face, utterly withdrawn into the depths of her grief. Beside her, Troi seemed uncharacteristically uneasy, her dark eyes mistily intent on the glowing isolation cubicle.

"Counselor?" Picard gentled, concern edging his voice as he noticed her

hands beginning to shake. "Counselor, are you all right?"

"Captain. I... I..."

Picard watched in alarm as Deanna's face drained of colour. The Betazoid's knees buckled, pain etched clearly into the lines of her beautiful face. Reaching out to catch her, he held her up, steadying her as she swayed drunkenly.

"Captain, we have to get out of here - now!" Troi urged, her face dominated by the inky blackness of her terrified eyes. The urgency in her voice postponing any questions.

Picard's finger immediately reached for his communicator and -

The room exploded!!

Commander William Riker strode up and down the Enterprise' bridge grappling with his temper. The meeting with the Veltaen Presidium had been an absolute farce and how the Captain had stayed so calm throughout the whole fiasco was beyond him. Ambassador V'Tae had translated all questions clearly and precisely, but the Veltaen politicians had responded by framing their answers in a such a way that they were no more than questions themselves.

No matter how Riker looked at the problem, he failed to understand their reluctance in co-operating. After all, it had been their request that a Starfleet vessel collect Tarn's body for immediate return to Earth. Surely it would have occurred to them that certain questions would have to be answered.

Riker was sure that Picard had ordered him back to the Enterprise to allow him time to cool off. Not that he

resented the ploy. He'd hardly relished the idea of accompanying the away team to the Brinalle morgue, their destination when he left them almost an hour ago.

"Commander? There appears to be some sort of disturbance at the Brinalle mining installation." Data's fingers danced over his Ops console, trying to piece together some order from the disjointed information.

Riker moved forward to join him. "What kind of disturbance?"

"Unclear at the present time, sir. Reports tend to conflict in many areas, although structural damage and several casualties have been confirmed." The android turned his chair slightly to face the Commander. "Veltaen security teams are converging on the medical section."

Riker didn't need to hear it twice. "Worf, you're with me," he ordered, heading for the turbolift. "Mr Data, the bridge is yours."

"Jean-Luc! Look out!"

A loud rumble of falling masonry drowned out Crusher's warning as Picard awkwardly picked his way toward her through what was left of the room, showers of dust and debris raining down from the badly damaged ceiling. At her shout he started to turn, grunting in surprise as something thudded painfully into his left shoulder, the velocity of the thing spinning him full circle before slamming him into the remains of the shattered viewing window, searing agony clawing through his neck and back as he crashed to the floor. He could feel his chest heaving, yet seemed unable to force any air into his badly winded lungs.

Crusher, scrabbling over broken

glass and concrete, fell to her knees beside him. Placing a cool, shaking hand against his sweat-drenched forehead, she stared in mute horror at the metal shard protruding from ripped flesh a fraction below his collarbone.

The entry wound was far from clean and without a medical tricorder there was no way she could determine the full extent of the injury. A surge of firmly restrained panic drained the remainder of colour from her face, mirroring the chalky pallor of her patient. There was little point in trading concerned looks with Troi, as the empath would probably already sense her growing anxiety. Besides, Deanna had her own hands full with Susan Tarn.

"What the..." Picard's eyes flickered open, dilating wildly as they tried to focus. For a moment he simply stared at the length of jagged metal resting snugly by his cheek, fighting an overwhelming urge to laugh out loud. The scorching pains biting deep into his back told him the head of the thing was buried somewhere in the vicinity of his left shoulder blade.

Pulsating coldness was beginning to settle uncomfortably into his limbs, and feeling the need to keep them moving he tried to shift position. The effort to do so was incredible.

"No." Crusher gently touched her fingers to his cheek, smiling reassuringly as he tried to focus on her face. "Stay as still as you can."

Opening a channel on her communicator she tried to keep her voice level, but the shock of the sudden attack had left her badly shaken. "Crusher to Enterprise. Four to beam directly to sickbay."

The words were hardly out of her

mouth, when a familiar tingling sensation washed over her, and she felt the pull of a transporter beam.

Transporter Chief Miles O'Brien glanced up from his console as the doors to Transporter Room Three opened. Since the call had come through about the Brinalle explosion he had been trying to lock onto the missing away team. The problem was that whenever he managed to get a fix, the signal would skip and wink out as though the com-badge sensors were playing a game of electronic hide-and-seek with the ship's computer.

"Any luck, Chief?" Riker asked, stepping onto the transporter pad alongside a grimly impatient Lt. Worf.

O'Brien gingerly prodded at his console controls. "Sir, if I didn't know better, I'd say there was a whole batch of gremlins loose aboard ship."

"I can assure you, Commander Riker, there is nothing on this ship that should not be here," the Klingon Security Chief growled, failing to appreciate the Irishman's sarcasm.

"I'll take your word for it, Worf," Riker said, exchanging looks with O'Brien, and tapping his communicator which was chirruping for attention.

"Commander." It was Data's voice. "A routine scan of Veltae II has revealed a severe ion storm crossing the Manitba Sea. It will reach the Brinalle complex in nine minutes. The Veltaens are initiating storm protocol."

"Ion storms," O'Brien muttered to himself. "That explains it."

"I have persuaded them to hold closing their deflector shields for five

minutes," Data continued. "They are extremely reluctant, even though the delay will in no way endanger them."

"Understood, Mr Data." Riker nodded to O'Brien. "Whenever you're ready, Chief."

After the unexpectedly abrupt departure of Crusher and Picard it was with some relief that Deanna Troi witnessed the shimmering arrival of her bridge colleagues. For some reason neither Tarn's nor her own communicator were working. All attempts to raise the Enterprise ending in crackling static. The intense panic she had experienced just before the explosion was still lingering in her mind, and the Betazoid could not shake the feeling that the danger was far from over.

Taking in the devastation at a glance, Worf drew his phaser and began a cautious investigation of the area. Commander Riker dashed to Troi's side. "Deanna, are you all right?"

Troi nodded wearily as he gently wiped a trickle of blood from her cheek. "I'm fine, Bill." She coughed, taking his outstretched hand to pull herself upright. "It all happened so fast that..."

"Explanations will have to wait. Data says there's a storm front almost on top of us, and if we don't move fast we'll be stuck here until O'Brien can safely use the transporters again."

Hauling a dazed Susan Tarn to her feet, Riker palmed his com-badge. "Enterprise. We have two to beam directly to sickbay. Stand by." Worriedly, he turned to Worf who was still sifting purposely through the rubble, a tricorder having replaced the phaser in his hand. "Worf. Any sign of the Captain or Dr

Crusher?"

"No, sir," the Klingon rumbled, his eyes intent on the tricorder. "Readings reveal no bodies, alive... or dead."

Deanna listened intently to the exchange, frowning in growing concern. "But the Captain and Beverly beamed back to the Enterprise ten minutes ago..." From the expression on Riker's face and Worf's murderous glower, she didn't need to tap her empathic abilities to know something was very wrong. "...they did... didn't they?"

The sound screeched through Picard's head like a demented banshee. Stygian blackness pressed down like a slow, suffocating blanket; dark, black on black images, swirled and cavorted before his mind's eye in a mad, frenzied revelry. He could feel his entire body moving with them, shaking under the onslaught of anxiety as caged memories burst from the confines of his subconscious in an eruption of pure terror.

This disturbingly bizarre reality into which he had awoken was filled with terrifying tableaux of a thousand Borg; vivid, violent images rushed and roared through his mind with startling clarity, crowding it with heightened feelings of frustration; denial; retreat; and pain, agonizing pain.

He thrashed about wildly, feeling hard steel-like fingers sink into the flesh of his shoulders, pinning him down. The air froze in his throat. Icy sweat streamed across his skin. It was about to begin again. The recurring nightmare that was no fantasy of restless sleep... once more it was real... the inhuman mechanoids had found him... the dehumanizing treatment would begin - the rebirth of Locutus of Borg.

He opened his mouth to scream but only the insane howls of the banshee reached his ears; and then came the sudden, humiliating realisation, hitting him like a fist to the stomach. These unearthly shrieks rending at his hearing were not those of some Celtic wraith - they were the whimpering cries erupting from his own throat!

The discovery seemed to phase him. Disciplined instincts viciously clamped down on the abhorrent hysteria. He stiffened, muscles protesting at the sudden tension.

Slowly the pressure of unseen hands hesitantly released his shoulders, unknown fingers travelling up to brush lightly against his face. Picard shuddered apprehensively, waiting. Yet this was not the cold, metallic touch of a Borg ready to inflict pain: this was a soft, Human hand, its touch warm and soothing.

Taut muscles visibly relaxed, and in his relief he hardly noticed the hiss of a hypospray pressed to his temple. A mild heat washed across his forehead, draining the tension from his throbbing brow. Opening his eyes again, he found that the darkness had lifted, revealing hazy shapes wavering against a backdrop of flickering yellow light, a light that was gradually growing brighter.

Focusing blearily, his eyes wet with unshed tears, he glanced about the room. It was small and low-ceilinged, its irregular dimensions literally blasted out of the surrounding stone, the cleanly vaporised furrows suggesting the use of a phaser or similar device. Apart from the makeshift cot on which he was laid and a scattering of battered supply containers, the room seemed empty.

A strong supportive hand reached out to pull him into a sitting position, and leaning against rough rock he tried to

shake off his mental fugue, eyesight improving by the second. "Where... is... this place?" he rasped, coughing violently as the raw soreness of his throat caught him unprepared.

A bowl was quickly placed to his parched lips, and he gulped gratefully of its tepid contents. Nodding his thanks he returned the bowl to his silent samaritan with a hoarse, "Merci."

"Je vous en prie."

The sound of his native French was startling, to say the least, and Jean-Luc instinctively leaned forward as the figure stepped from the shadows. For the first time he was able to see his companion clearly - or as clearly as his weakened vision would allow. The hood of the Starfleet issue jacket was now pushed back, Picard's eyes widening in shocked disbelief.

Ignoring his sudden intake of breath, the woman calmly lifted his wrist, checking his pulse. "The metal removed from your shoulder was chemically contaminated. I was able to restrict the flow of the substance through your system and neutralize the amount that had saturated your optic nerve. You were lucky. Your eyesight won't be permanently impaired."

She dropped his wrist to reset the hypo. "The rest of the poison will have to be diluted gradually to reduce the risk of any further allergic reaction. To say you responded violently to the initial dose would be an understatement." She whistled softly. "Those hallucinations must have been pretty vivid! When your Medical Officer wakes up I'll provide her with a phial of fresh antitoxin."

"Kate the Curst," Picard whispered, placing a tentative hand on her slim fingers, fully expecting it to pass right

through this figment of his imagination.

Grey eyes regarded him almost gently for a moment, then with an expletive she snatched her hand away and stalked to the foot of the cot. "Insulting as ever, Scupper?" she snorted. "I don't think this is the time to adopt the role of Petrucchio, though. You're hardly in a fit state to cross swords."

Scupper! He hadn't been called that in years! There was not the slightest doubt in his mind, now. "Pascale Navarr. It really is you, isn't it."

"Jean-Luc. C'est moi." Navarr ran a hand through her cropped, bronze hair, grey eyes never leaving his face as she began agitatedly pacing the floor - an old habit that gave the unnerving impression that she was following every nuance of his innermost thoughts.

A riot of emotions was running rife within him, the most powerful of which was betrayed anger; anger at the years he had spent living with a guilt that was misdirected. It was obvious he was not conversing with a corpse, so why had Paice confirmed his First Officer's death when she was very much alive? Was the rest of the away team still alive? And if so why had they thought it necessary to remain hidden all these years?

"I assume Starfleet Command is still under the impression that you are..."

"Dead," Navarr finished curtly. "Which is exactly how it's going to stay." Sitting down heavily on the cot she fixed him with a cold stare. "Starfleet Command is surviving well enough without me, and I'll probably last longer if they remain in the dark."

"Damn it, Pascale! For once in your life stop being so bloody cryptic and tell me what is going on!" Picard grabbed her

arm as she tried to move away. "Since arriving on this planet I have been lied to; blown up; skewered; poisoned; and almost given heart failure - all in the space of six hours."

Navarr tried to yank her arm free, but Picard secured his grip, having no intentions of letting go until he had some satisfactory answers. "Not only that, but now I'm supposed to somehow omit your miraculous resurrection from any report I have to make!" Picard sighed in exasperation. "You should know better than that."

With a black look, the woman surrendered and sank down next to him again. "What the hell are you doing here, Scupper? It's blatantly obvious that you don't have a clue what's actually going on."

"No. I don't, Commander," he admitted, reluctantly. "Yet what I do know is that I expect a full briefing." His voice turned diamond hard. "Whether you choose to acknowledge the fact or not, you are still a Starfleet officer and it's entirely your decision whether you give a report here and now, or in my ready room on the Enterprise."

Navarr stared mutinously at the far wall and Picard swore under his breath. He knew this tactic well enough. "This is serious, Pascale," he warned. "If Starfleet Command decides you have deliberately failed to inform them of your... predicament, it will mean court martial for both you and those here with you."

She turned a cool gaze on him. "So. You've tagged me as a deserter then?" She started to laugh and the sound was far from pleasant. "You hear that, McGarry? Brady? We're in deep trouble now."

Picard's eyes darted disconcertedly

about the room, narrowing as he confirmed that the only other occupant besides Navarr and himself was Dr Crusher. The CMO was curled up on a blanket a metre or so from the foot of his cot, still sleeping peacefully despite the raised voices; a fact that left him wondering whether the gentle rise and fall of her chest was natural sleep, or if Navarr had perhaps administered some form of sedative.

One thing he was certain of, though; this was not the coolly conceited, in-control-of-the-situation Pascale Navarr he had said his adieus to nine years ago at Starbase 73. This slightly wild version of a woman he knew perhaps better than members of his own family was jittering around like a hyperactive child, an almost persecuted savagery to the brightness of her eyes - eyes that appeared to have lost all traces of rationality.

"No, Jean-Luc," the woman admitted. "You may not be able to stomach the word enough to say it. You damn well thought it though, didn't you."

"Don't start telling me what *you* think is going on in *my* head," Jean-Luc growled back. "I would have thought your past failures in that department would have put a stop to the practice."

"Old dogs and new tricks, Captain." Abruptly pushing herself away from the cot, Navarr began pacing the room again. "And speaking of dogs, I believe the usual advice is to let sleeping ones lie."

"Starfleet Command has already been alerted to a problem here. As investigating officer I can't simply report what I choose."

"Why not?" Navarr responded bitterly. "It's been done before."

Picard frowned at the remark,

deciding to take another tack. "I don't suppose Brady or McGarry will wish to remain here when presented with the chance to go home?"

"Dead dogs don't wag their tails at the prospect of treats, Picard."

Pascale sank down onto a supply container, struggling to get her anger back under control. The trip down to the lower levels for the medical packs had severely exposed her to zenite gas pockets, and now she was indirectly unleashing its effects on Picard.

It was difficult enough to think straight as it was, and his questioning was just confusing her more. Massaging her temples she tried to relieve the pounding pain in her head, knowing it would take time to recover fully and time was not a luxury she could afford. If she didn't make the rendezvous point on the other side of Brinalle before nightfall Brogan would leave without her, and she'd end up rotting on this alien rockpile, no-one for company but the corpses below her feet.

"Go back to your ship, Jean-Luc," Navarr advised, all the fight draining from her. "The last thing I need down here is another dead officer."

"I'm afraid it's a little late for that."

Navarr sat bolt upright, ice spilling down her back. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"You wanted to know what Enterprise is doing here? A Brinalle supervisor was killed two days ago. We're here to collect his body for return to Earth." Navarr turned white, half listening as Picard's voice reached her from a distance. "It was an accident by all accounts. My CMO has her doubts as to the accuracy of the autopsy report,

though. The Veltaens claim he was struck by a malfunctioning machine, yet..."

"Which supervisor?" Pascale snapped abruptly. "Porter or Phelps?"

Picard swung his legs to the floor, perching on the side of the cot, frowning into her ashen face. The habitual arrogance was gone, slim hands jerking nervously, fingers twisting against each other in agitation as she awaited his reply. *She's scared*, Picard realised incredulously, the very notion making him decidedly uneasy. In all the years he had known her, Pascale Navarr had never shied away from anything.

"Neither," he answered, watching her reaction closely. "I believe he doubled as the Federation trade liaison here. Jonathon Tarn. His wife recently joined the Enterprise for a brief research project."

"Tarn! That's impossible. Tarn died of viral pneumonia over a month ago."

"What!?" Picard stared as Navarr chewed nervously at her lower lip. "Pascale, we saw his body in the morgue."

"It certainly wasn't Tarn." Navarr was adamant. "The Veltaens are paranoid about disease and immediately incinerate any bodies they consider contaminated. Are you sure it was Human?" Her eyes were dancing almost as erratically as Data's. "Veltaen vagrants get killed regularly in the tunnels while trying to steal ore fragments. The decontamination lighting in that place can play some pretty mean tricks."

"I can still tell the difference between a man and a seven foot Veltaen," Picard shot back. "Besides, who else could it be except Tarn? All other personnel have been accounted for by Dr

Crusher. Our visit here gave her the opportunity to conduct a full medical check on all Federation employees."

"Merde." Navarr sprang to her feet, yanking open the supply container she had been sitting on. Inside, amidst an array of salvaged equipment, was a compact Federation transmitter. Picard listened intently as she sent out several urgent bursts of code, waiting anxiously for a reply. The high-pitched series had the familiarity of a Starfleet pattern and Picard knew that his Science Officer would have made short work of deciphering it.

"What's wrong, Pascale? Who are you trying to contact?" Picard staggered to his feet. "What's going on!"

"They found out about Brogan!" she cried. "The body in the morgue... it's Brogan. We've got to get out of here. Right now! I'll wake your CMO."

"No need," came Beverly Crusher's voice from the corner of the room. "What's going on, Jean-Luc?" she asked, dusting herself down as she joined him.

"I wish I knew, Doctor."

"I remember the Enterprise trying to beam us aboard and..."

"It wasn't your ship that tried to beam you out of the morgue, Picard," Navarr interrupted. "I found you both unconscious in the old reactor room. The oxygen down there borders on unbreathable. Another few minutes and -" Navarr dramatically switched a thumb across her throat.

"Reactor room?" Crusher was having no luck following this conversation even though she had lain quietly, listening to the heated exchange between Jean-Luc and this stranger who

appeared to be the missing First Officer of the USS Rochester.

"The incoming ion storm played its usual havoc with the cargo transporters during their 'clean-up' attempt, otherwise it's a certainty you'd both be floating about in the anti-matter core by now."

"Whose attempt at what?" Crusher asked irritably, starting to feel a little dim.

"I believe it's time we continued this discussion elsewhere." The Captain tapped his communicator. "Picard to Enterprise." The com-badge fizzed quietly to itself. "Enterprise, this is the Captain, respond please."

"We haven't got time for this, Jean-Luc," Navarr gritted, swaying agitatedly from one foot to the other. "They aren't going to let you contact your ship."

Crusher tapped her own badge. "This is Dr Crusher. Come in Enterprise." Static crackled back and Crusher shrugged her shoulders. "Nothing."

"Looks like the ball is in your court, Pascale," Picard acceded. "How do we get out of here?"

"This way." Navarr turned and was almost to the doorway when a rumbling sound shook the room.

"What the..." Crusher glanced up as a fine rain of rock fell from the heaving ceiling. Springing sideways, she roughly shoved Navarr out of harm's way; a deluge of rock and dirt swallowed up the doorway and engulfed where they had been standing.

The accompanying roar was deafening, billows of choking, gritty dust filling the air. Picard backed away from the slowly encroaching avalanche,

watching in confusion as a huge fissure rippled outwards from its heart, the rock melting and folding in on itself. Rounding on Crusher and Navarr in shocked realisation, he yelled, "Hit the floor!" diving low as several tons of mechanical mayhem ploughed through the rock-slide; a barrage of intense-heat, laser lances searing the air above his head.

The mining tapannier pulverised its way toward them at an incredible rate, spitting rocky debris into neat piles at its sides, its programming efficiently intent on transforming the room into a makeshift tomb.

"Down here!" Navarr hollered, scrambling on her knees. Shouldering the supply containers out of her way, she brought her heel down hard against the floor. There was a metallic clunk, and a circle of flooring fell away into the echoing void below. The two Enterprise officers squinted through the dust-thick air, watching as Navarr disappeared through the narrow gap. The opening was about as appealing as space without the stars and looked claustrophobically tight.

"Have we an option?" Beverly shouted over the crunching din; yelping as the answer came from a scorching beam that shot uncomfortably close between Picard and herself, singeing the skin of their cheekbones.

"Afraid not, Doctor," Picard returned with a firm shove, pitching her forward into the darkness. Crusher tumbled downwards into the unknown like Alice down the rabbit-hole, her yells echoing incoherently as she fell and Picard knew that she wasn't shouting her thanks for his helping hand.

The drop to the level below seemed to take forever, concluding with a far

from soft landing. Crusher winced loudly, her ankle crunching awkwardly beneath her, jarring fiery pain through shocked cartilage. A muffled 'oommph' somewhere to her right determined Jean-Luc's arrival, his muttered oaths assuring her that nothing more than his pride had been injured by the fall.

"Doctor? Are you all right?" Picard called into the icy cold, stale-smelling nothingness. He started slightly as strong fingers gripped his booted ankle.

"Yes. I'm fine, Jean-Luc," Beverly replied, a little breathlessly. "Where's Navarr?"

"Here." There was a snicking sound and the musty room came into illuminated focus under the dim, reddish glow of an emergency lantern. Navarr held the compact unit aloft, shuffling through the rubbish on the floor and coming up with another slightly dented version of the lamp. Tossing it to Picard, she paused, listening to the rumble of machinery high above their heads.

The sound was muffled by the insulating layers of decaying synthepias that coated the ceiling. However, an acute ear could detect that the noise was steadily growing in volume and seemed to be stationary... concentrated.

Navarr shook her head as she said, "They don't know this place is still here. We'll be okay..." Her voice trailed off as the structure above groaned balefully. Picard fixed her with a questioning look that set her hands jerking nervously. "I know what I'm talking about, Picard," she snapped, face hardening. "I'm the one who survived down here for four years, remember! It wasn't easy!"

"Where are we?" Crusher asked, scanning what little of the room was revealed in the pools of light from the

lanterns. Judging from the amount of bulky equipment it seemed to have once been an operations room of sorts, its pale syntheplas walls periodically warped as if from intense heat and scarred with melted smoke-spirals. Blown-out consoles, supply crates and general debris littered the floor; every surface was inches deep in grimy dust.

"Vel-Two Research," Picard guessed, glancing up sharply as a fine sprinkling of dirt filtered down from the vibration-wracked ceiling.

Crusher took the lantern from Navarr and played it across the walls. "G-level," she informed the Captain, directing the beam onto the identification symbol stencilled on a nearby door. Picard directed his own beam upwards. "It won't take them long to figure out what happened to us, and I don't hold out much hope for the ceiling at this rate."

"They can't find us," Navarr muttered, almost as though she were trying to convince herself. Pacing the dusty floor in a tight circle and nodding vigorously. "I'm proof of that, aren't I? Four years without being caught."

Crusher shook her head slightly at Picard. Even without her medical tricorder, she was still a professional physician and quite capable of recognising the symptoms of mental exhaustion. Navarr seemed to be in a particularly advanced stage. Yet Crusher had a feeling that there was something more to it; some aggravating factor.

"They can't, I'm telling you," Navarr insisted, vehemently, mistaking Crusher's concern for disbelief.

"They could be tracking our life-form readings," Crusher suggested in a deliberately calm voice.

"Impossible," Navarr flashed back, impatiently. "At these levels the gases in the rock confuse sensor readings. They couldn't find us even if we were twenty feet in front of them. Besides, they have nothing to lock on to."

"Yes, they have."

The two women turned to stare at Picard as he quickly stepped forward, reaching out to snatch Crusher's combadge from her uniform. Dropping it to the floor, he ripped off his own communicator, grinding the delicate devices beneath the heel of his boot.

The noise from above slowly wound down, dying away as the tapannier automatically shut itself down, no longer having a signal to focus upon. Picard stared grimly at the shattered components. His action had rescued them from the immediate danger; but now they had no way of contacting the Enterprise or for the Starship to re-establish communications with them.

"Captain! Over here!"

Crusher had gone exploring and was now kneeling near the open doors of a wrecked elevator shaft. Picard ran to join her, a very subdued Navarr following on at a snail's pace; she knew only too well what the Doctor had found.

Crusher had placed her lantern on the floor, and its red tint cast an eerie, bloody glow over her grisly discovery. Picard grimaced at the sight, turning to look at Navarr for some sort of confirmation of his suspicions.

"Brady. McGarry." She gestured emotionlessly from one skeletal corpse to the other, a strange expression on her taut, white face. Slowly she backed away, eyes still locked on the men's remains, until her heels teetered on the edge of the

yawning elevator shaft. "You'll also find your professional counterpart down here, Doctor."

"Pascale!" Picard lunged forward as he realised her precarious position, jerking her away from the edge. "Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

The horror in his face seemed to burst her barrier of introspection, tears rolling down her face as she stared into the darkness of the shaft. "Why not?" she choked. "I should never have got out of there. All this was my fault. If we'd gone back to the ship on the first recall, none of this would have happened." Navarr's face suddenly contorted with pure hatred. "We should have left him... left him to rot!"

"Who, Pascale?" Picard took hold of her face, making her look at him. "Who should you have left? What happened here, Pascale? What happened to your away team?"

Navarr stared blankly into his eyes. She was slipping back again, his words unheard. "Paice must have known. They'd have come looking for us otherwise. Paice was working with him."

"Jean-Luc? Take a look at this." Crusher came to stand beside him, what looked like a tricorder in her hand. "The power cell still has some charge left in it, and if I'm not mistaken, it's in security record mode."

Picard maintained a firm grip on Navarr, afraid that she might try to step into the shaft again. He looked at the device in Crusher's hands and nodded. It was a tricorder; a fairly obsolete model. Reaching out he clicked the data-storage play button, and the tiny screen sprang to life. The picture was too blurry to make anything out, but the audio reproduction was perfect:

"That's what you always wanted isn't it, Navarr? Aiden Osbourne behind the brig's force-wall?"

"I aim to please, Lieutenant. Take charge, Mr Brady. You have the dubious honour of escorting Mr Osbourne to the brig."

Picard recognised Navarr's dulcet accent, listening with growing concern as the tape continued.

"Osbourne, don't be an idiot. It's all over. They know where you've been. It's only a matter of time before..."

"Shut up, Lewis. Shut up... and keep your distance too."

"For crying out loud, take a moment to think. How many more 'accidents' do you reckon you can get away with! I can't falsify any more death certificates for..."

The screen flashed twice with snowy static, accompanied by the unmistakable whine of a hand phaser, then the tricorder closed down into standby mode once more.

"It must have got knocked off when it was dropped," Crusher said.

Navarr made a tiny strangulated sound. "I killed those men," she said quietly. "Just as surely as if I'd fired the phaser myself. I was in charge... it was my responsibility... I killed them... I killed them all..." She turned to stare at the bodies on the floor. "I'm sorry. It was my fault. I'm so sorry," she cried repeatedly, pressing back against the wall, her breathing coming in panting gasps.

"Damn. She's going into shock!" Crusher yelled.

"Pascale!" Picard thundered, slapping her hard across the face. "Snap out of it!"

Navarr went rigid, eyes staring emptily into his face. Slowly she slid down onto her haunches, pulling her knees into her chest, rocking slightly back and forth like a frightened child. "I have to get out of here, Jean-Luc," she said in a hushed voice. "Promise you'll get me out of here."

Picard crouched down in front of her, his voice soothing, "It's going to be fine, Pascale. You just rest here, now. I'm going to get you out of here as soon as I can." Navarr obediently rested her head on her knees and Picard stood up, an unspoken question in his expression as he looked at Crusher.

"She'll be okay, Jean-Luc. It looks a lot worse than it really is," she reassured him. "Once we get back to the Enterprise, I can sedate her. A week or so of uninterrupted sleep periods should help, but I think this kind of problem is more in Deanna's line."

"Well," Picard noted, glancing at the remains of Brady and McGarry, "at least we have a good idea of what really happened to the Rochester away team."

"Cold-blooded murder," Crusher breathed, hugging herself and shuddering.

"We'll only know for certain if Data and La Forge can restore the clarity to this tape. Or when Pascale recovers enough to give a coherent account."

Crusher turned sympathetically to Navarr who was rambling away quietly to herself, withdrawn into the tragedy of the past. The woman's irrational behaviour had been an almost classic text-book response and Crusher had expected this total collapse: the discovery of the tricorder recording had simply pushed the final button.

"There was obviously nothing she could have done to stop it," Crusher observed. "How can she blame herself?"

"Quite easily, Doctor." The voice close behind them made both her and Picard spin round. Hovering in the shadows just outside the scope of the lantern's glow, a tall figure slowly began to approach, its clinking jangle of chains echoing sinisterly in the oppressive silence.

Picard blinked in astonishment. "Ambassador V'Tae?"

"Navarr always had to do things by the book when dealing with her Commanding Officer: a rather foolish approach. One should always trust their first impressions." V'Tae halted an arm's length from the Enterprise's CMO. "You, Doctor, unfortunately made the same mistake."

Navarr slowly rose to her feet, pushing herself up against the wall, a single, hissing word escaping her lips. "Osbourne."

"What?!" Picard stared at Navarr who was glaring mutinously at the heavily robed Veltaen.

"Touche, Commander. There never was any fooling you." Reaching up, he wrenched the Veltaen cowl from his head, quickly shrugging the enveloping folds of the gown off his shoulders. The thickly embroidered robe dropped to the floor with a thud, revealing the secret of Osbourne's unusual height.

The anti-gravity plates were a common sight in the Brinalle facility; used to move heavy equipment with greater ease of manoeuvrability in the narrow tunnels. Osbourne's was a much-scaled down version, the surface area just enough for him to stand on, yet a very

effective disguise.

Picard started to move toward him, but Osbourne was far quicker, leaping from the disc with all the dexterity of a Capellan cat. Grabbing Crusher by the throat, he squeezed painfully, smiling a deadly warning. "Ah, ah, Captain. Stay exactly where you are, or I may be forced to throttle your charming CMO."

"You so much as bruise that woman, Osbourne, and I'll gut you," Navarr snarled. Osbourne dragged Crusher two steps back, his face losing its assuredness as Navarr advanced on him like his own personal Nemesis. "Let go that choke-hold - now."

"I don't take orders from you any more," he spat, increasing the pressure of his fingers until Crusher reached up to claw at his hand, fighting for oxygen.

Navarr stopped as Picard caught her arm. Osbourne smiled again, his confidence firmly back in place. "I give orders now," he bragged. "I give orders in echelons that make Starfleet look like a child's playtime regiment."

"I know of only one race who would make such a comparison," Picard observed, his hand still resting lightly on Navarr's sleeve. "And they are never too generous for very long. The Romulan military tend to be extremely fickle in their loyalties, Osbourne. No matter how indispensable their ally may believe he is."

"Oh, I'm sure my Romulan friends will be more than accommodating for quite some time to come, considering what I provided them with... and can still provide."

"There's a contradiction if ever I heard one," Navarr sneered. "Romulan and friend mentioned in the same

sentence."

"Friendship... What would you know of such a concept, Navarr?" Osbourne jeered. "You've never had any to mourn over you... and never will." Maintaining a tight hold on his hostage, he slipped a phaser from his jacket and levelled it menacingly.

"Why did you kill Brogan?" Navarr grated. "He was no danger to you."

Osbourne seemed genuinely perplexed for a moment. "Ah, yes. The gentleman in the morgue; another piece of guilt to add to your conscience, Navarr. You should never have contacted him. He was simply regarded as a nuisance, just as you were, until your information made him a threat.

"Besides, I didn't kill him. He stumbled across a couple of 'foreign' delegates. The Presidium started to panic when they found out he was a Starfleet Intelligence Officer and... well, you can guess the rest."

"They obviously thought Starfleet had discovered that the Vel-Two disaster had been engineered," Picard broke in.

"Well done, Captain," Osbourne congratulated. "And what brought you to such an accurate conclusion?"

"A communique regarding an ore requisition from Brinalle," Picard explained. "Conflicting estimates alerted Admiral Ramont to potential illegal trading; probably Ferengi. Which would, if proven, put the Veltaens in violation of signed trade treaties."

"A common problem," Osbourne noted, "hardly worthy of the attention of an Intelligence operative."

"Quite so," Picard agreed. "Only

that spark of suspicion led to the disappearance of substantial quantities of refined quality ore. Federation members were losing large amounts in reference to commodities they had paid for. Starfleet could hardly ignore the practice."

"I don't see how Vel-Two Research fits in with this?" Crusher said, her voice choking slightly under Osbourne's grip.

"Simple, Doctor," Osbourne supplied, helpfully. "The Ferengi wanted to trade for the ore they knew the Veltaens were sitting on. The Veltaens wanted to trade too, only they already had an agreement with the Federation regarding their research installation. In a purely logical manoeuvre, the Veltaens got rid of the obstructing factor, which at the same time unearthed the ore."

Osbourne laughed. "Ironically the Federation petitioned to build the Brinalle station and the Veltaen Presidium 'begrudgingly' accepted. The fact is they were rubbing their hands."

"The Federation does all the work, lays out all the initial expenses and the Veltaens reap an easy profit," Picard nodded.

"Profit - such a wonderful word." Osbourne took aim at Picard with his phaser. "Veltae II is no place for the innocent, Captain. The entire population is as crooked as any Ferengi profiteer, from the vagrants in the streets to the officials in the luxury blocks.

"Now... regretfully I must say adieu." His fingers tightened round the weapon in his hand and...

"DROP YOUR WEAPON."

A blaze of lights suddenly illuminated the room, momentarily blinding the small group. Osbourne

twisted toward the sound, wrenching Dr Crusher with him. The huge Klingon repeated his command, phaser extended, a fully-armed security team fanning out behind him.

The renegade officer glanced quickly to his other side. A second security team fronted by Picard's First Officer were deploying themselves in a wide arc, effectively blocking off his only other escape route.

"Release the Doctor, Osbourne," Riker shouted. "You aren't going anywhere."

With a lightning move, Osbourne shoved Crusher away from him, bringing his phaser to bear on Picard again. Navarr screamed in fury and before any one could react she hurried herself across the intervening space, smashing into the startled man. Osbourne's phaser flew into the air as they both crashed heavily to the floor.

They grappled violently, Navarr experiencing a sudden flash of *deja vu* as she felt his fingers close on her throat. She started to laugh and the sound had a chilling touch of hysteria to it. Osbourne faltered, staring into the maniacal coldness of her eyes, realising too late his mistake.

Navarr, taking full advantage of his hesitation, broke his hold, securing one of her own. "C'mon, Osbourne. Let's pay Lewis a visit." Flipping him over, she rolled bodily into the gaping emptiness of the elevator shaft, dragging him with her. Picard and Riker lunged toward the struggling pair, but it was Worf's massive hand that succeeded in grasping a leg as the bodies slid over the edge. A terrified scream echoed from the darkness and then there was silence.

Picard and Riker drew back as with

one fluid hoist, Worf hauled his panting catch back onto solid ground, grimacing down at it with suppressed admiration. "Nice move," the warrior admitted in a deep, grudging basso.

"I aim to please," came the breathless reply.

Jean-Luc Picard picked up two cups of steaming hot tea from the replication terminal in his ready room and moved to join the figure staring out of the star-window.

It had been six weeks since the Enterprise had left Veltae II and Starfleet Command had granted his request that Navarr remain on the Enterprise. She seemed much more relaxed now, her sessions with Counselor Troi having broken the strongest threads in the complex net of guilt she had almost strangled herself in.

"Pascale, how long are you going to stand with your nose pressed to that glass like a street urchin at a toyshop window?" he chided. "Come and drink your tea while it's hot."

"Earl Grey?" Navarr asked, turning reluctantly from the starfire shooting past the warping ship, and accepting the cup. She sniffed at its contents, smiling in confirmation. "Of course, what else. You never change, Scupper."

Picard grimaced at the name. Pascale had tagged him with it after he had refused to participate in any of her shore-leave charades. Why she had targeted him for her attention he had never fathomed, but he had come to be grateful for it and was honoured that she once again called him friend.

Trouble had always seemed to

gravitate towards Navarr whatever the situation and consequently she had never made friends, only acquaintances, all of her ship-board colleagues, himself included, preferring to give her a wide berth. Yet it had been Pascale Navarr who had saved his life on Starbase Earhart, after his heart had been pierced in a bar-room brawl with a Norsican blade. Navarr had patched him up long enough to get him to a medical facility, but not before she had settled the score with the coward who had speared him - an action that he had never forgotten.

The cup in Navarr's hand started to shake and quickly she placed it on the table, gripping her shuddering wrist. She laughed a little self-consciously as Picard leaned forward in concern. "Don't look so worried, Jean-Luc. It's nothing.

"Dr Crusher's done a marvellous job in repairing the neural damage, although it may take a few more weeks for my motor reactions to calm down." Navarr flexed her hand, and the shaking began to subside. "It would appear that I'm highly sensitive to zenite. Where an average person would suffer from the usual symptoms of raw zenite, I have a heightened sensitivity that can cause severe neural dysfunction. I guess that's why I really lost it down there."

"Doctor Crusher confirmed that the zenite toxicity levels in the Vel-Two ruins were exceptionally high."

An uncomfortable silence fell and Navarr retrieved her cup of tea, sipping at it, her eyes pained as she looked toward the window. Picard knew she was thinking about Osbourne.

"How does it feel to be back in uniform, First Officer?" he asked cheerfully, grinning as she tugged at her wine-coloured jacket.

Starfleet Command had recently confirmed that the matter regarding Veltae II in connection with Commander Pascale Navarr was closed. There was to be no disciplinary action and they had accepted his recommendations regarding her immediate Fleet reinstatement.

"Damn good, Jean-Luc," she smiled, "even though I hate to admit it." Suddenly she frowned, fingering the pips on her collar. "I'm not sure how I feel about my posting though."

"Captain Paice requested you back, personally," Picard assured her. "He still can't believe how easily the Veltaens duped him into thinking you were all vaporised in that carefully staged generator explosion. No doubt they'll be serving humble-pie in the officer's mess when you get back."

Navarr smiled again, settling herself

into the seat opposite him. "I've a lot to thank you for, Jean-Luc Picard - damn your eyes." Taking a long draft of tea, she looked over the rim of her cup. "I suppose now we're friends again, this means I won't be able to enjoy any more of our wonderfully heated debates?"

"Not necessarily." Picard placed his cup on the desk. "Do one thing for me and I promise we're quits."

"One thing?" Navarr waggled a single, solitary finger. "Just one?"

"Captain's honour," Picard nodded gravely, raising his right hand.

"Okay," she agreed charily. "Name it."

"DON'T CALL ME SCUPPER!!"

