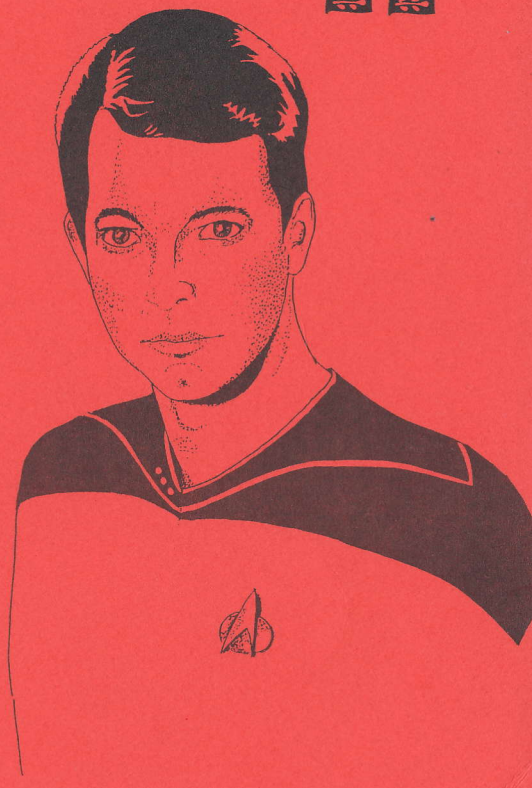
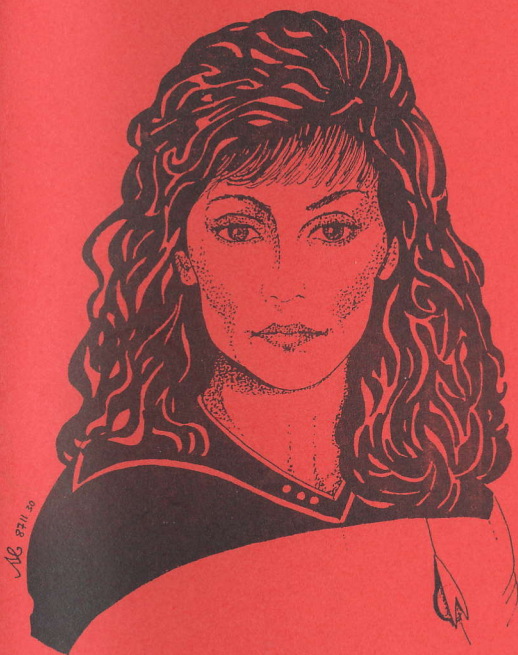


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Rutte 93

HOLODECK HOMICIDE

by

Christine Carr

CRACK!

The shot rang out and echoed in the cramped alleyway. From where he was crouching, Geordi La Forge saw Data's sensor harness flare red for a moment before the android collapsed. La Forge watched, stunned, as Data pitched forward, his pale face burying itself in the detritus of a trash-filled gutter.

There is no doubt about it, La Forge thought. This holodeck programme feels incredibly real. The smells, the squalor, the general seediness of it all had impressed him from the start. The scenario, as Faja had explained, was based very loosely on a generic North American city as it would have appeared in the late twentieth century. They were playing the roles of cops staking out a house full of heavily armed criminals. Simply put, the aim of the game was to stay alive. Capturing the crooks would be a bonus.

Data had not done well.

La Forge threw another glance in the android's direction and sighed. Data, the Engineer decided, was overdoing things a bit. Hamming it up, one might say. It was about time that the android resigned himself to the inevitable, stood up, dusted himself down, and got off the game grid.

Data didn't move.

"C'mon, Data! Don't you think you're getting a little carried away?" Geordi hissed, knowing that Data's hearing was sensitive enough to pick up his words, even though they were separated by a distance of some thirty feet.

There was no response.

"Data?" A note of concern crept into

La Forge's voice. He dragged his attention away from the programme and focused more carefully on his fallen colleague. "Data?" he queried again as he sifted through the confused messages his visor was receiving.

La Forge rose from his hiding place and picked his way through the alley's debris towards the stricken android. He swore softly as he heard another shot and saw his harness flare red as Data's had done moments earlier. Unlike Data's, however, the Human's retained its new colour, and Geordi suddenly realised that Data's harness had malfunctioned. His nebulous concern for his friend intensified.

The Human crouched down at Data's side, took a good hard look at him, then shouted, "Computer! End programme! NOW!"

The grimy streets, the trash cans, cars and buildings vanished abruptly, and Geordi La Forge found himself in the main holodeck of Starbase 193. Various other people appeared, as if from nowhere, as the buildings and vehicles which had hidden them dissolved from view.

Startled by the sudden cessation of the programme, Commander William Riker rushed forwards and demanded, "Geordi, what the hell happened? Why did the programme terminate?"

La Forge did not look up as he answered. "I ended it. Data..."

Riker looked down at his fallen colleague for the first time, and saw what Geordi was staring at. "Oh, my God..." Riker's words were a plea, a prayer.

The sensor harness Data wore was shattered, and beneath it fluid was pooling

around the wound where a bullet had exploded into the back of Data's shoulder and chest. The damage looked severe, and Data's systems had shut themselves down, leaving the android stiff and lifeless.

A small crowd gathered as the game's other participants closed in, curious to see what the fuss was about. O'Brien and Worf looked down at Data without speaking, though a slight rumble echoed deep in the Klingon's throat. Ensigns Joia and Brenn, Starbase personnel, gasped and averted their eyes. Only Naatali Faja said anything. "That's impossible," she breathed. "No-one can be shot on the holodeck. The mortality fail-safe..."

"Has been circumvented," said Riker.

Data lay face down on a sickbay bed as Lieutenant Commander Geordi La Forge and Dr Beverly Crusher looked down at him. They had carefully wiped the excess fluid from the wound, and now they were doing their best to determine how much damage the bullet had actually caused.

Sickbay's door slid open to admit Captain Picard and Commander Riker. The Captain looked down at his insensate Second Officer and said, "How is he?"

Crusher looked up and ran a hand through her hair, a nervous gesture borne of the tension she felt, and said, "It's too early to say, Captain. Neither of us have much experience with Data's chest cavity."

The Captain nodded slightly, then said, "Damn stupid thing to happen." The comment was not directed towards anyone in particular, and Picard was slightly taken aback when he got a response.

"Um. I've been thinking about that," Geordi said. He had thought about the actual shooting while waiting to transport with Data back to the Enterprise's sickbay; it had kept his mind from dwelling on the possibility that the android might not recover.

"Oh?" Picard looked at the Engineer, curious.

"Commander Riker, do you remember, after Data was shot, I went over to see if he was okay?" Geordi asked.

"I didn't actually see you. I couldn't from where I was standing, but... What about it?"

"I was shot, too."

Riker nodded. "Yeah. I noticed that your harness was red when the programme ended."

"Well?" prompted Picard.

"If the mortality fail-safe was inoperative, the bullet that hit me would have injured me, too."

"But it didn't. So what are you saying, Geordi?" Dr Crusher asked.

Picard felt the muscles in his face tighten. He had a terrible feeling that he knew what Geordi was going to say next.

La Forge took a long, deep breath before he spoke. "I think that the mortality fail-safe was still in place. That someone on the holodeck shot Data deliberately." The Engineer looked from one face to another, watching the tell-tale physiological changes as his words sank in. "I think that someone tried to murder him."

Captain Jean Luc Picard doubted that the Commander of Starbase 193 would appreciate finding out about recent events via the usual communications channels. Any communications network could only be as secure as the people operating it. The gossip value in any crime was legion and news of an attempted murder would spread like wildfire. Picard had no wish to start a panic by spreading the news indiscreetly.

Upon reflection, Picard decided to beam over to the Starbase unannounced.

Once there, he made his way to Admiral Keyte's offices.

The Enterprise's Captain had never actually met the Admiral before, but he knew something of his reputation. In his day, Keyte had been a great explorer. Now, though, his career in Starfleet was drawing to a close, and he was allegedly quite content to take things easier, leaving the Starbase to more or less run itself. Picard, however, was soon to discover that the Admiral's laid-back manner was a carefully cultivated illusion. If the Starbase seemed to run itself, it was because Keyte worked hard to make it appear so.

A young Ensign in one of the outer offices paged Keyte on Picard's behalf then said, "The Admiral will see you now, sir."

"Thank you, Ensign." Captain Picard headed off in the direction the aide indicated, and entered Keyte's office.

A tall man with a thick crop of white hair rose from behind the desk and stepped around it, hand outstretched in greeting. "Ah, Captain. It's a pleasure to meet you. What can I do for you?"

"Admiral," acknowledged Picard, taking Keyte's hand. The Admiral, Picard noted, had a firm grip and his skin felt cool and dry against Picard's own. "I'm afraid that I have a rather serious matter to discuss with you."

"Oh?"

"Attempted murder."

The expression on the Admiral's face hardened. "I would say that that's serious, yes. Perhaps you'd better sit down and explain."

"I assume you heard that one of my officers was injured on the holodeck this afternoon?"

Keyte nodded. "Yes. That android fellow. Commander Data. How is he, by the way?"

"We're not sure yet," Picard replied. Then, returning to the reason for his visit, he continued, "Certain facts have been pointed out to me which would seem to indicate that the shooting was not accidental."

"Carry on, Captain."

Picard told the Admiral about his conversation with La Forge and the Admiral's expression grew even grimmer. When the Captain finished speaking, Keyte said, "We'd better get my Security Chief in here." He tapped his communicator and said, "Commander Filmore. Please report to my office."

A tinny voice replied, "I'm on my way, Admiral."

"Filmore's a good officer. Very thorough. If there's anything to find out, I'm sure he'll do it."

Picard pursed his lips thoughtfully then said, "If it's all right with you, given that several of my crew were involved in the incident, I'd like one of my officers attached to the investigation, too."

The incident had occurred under Keyte's jurisdiction and it was therefore his responsibility to sort it out. Picard's request was perhaps unorthodox, *but*, the Admiral decided, *not unreasonable*. "Very well, Captain. Any ideas who?"

"Under normal circumstances, I'd say Lt Worf. He's my Security Chief. However, he was on the holodeck when the incident took place. So I'd have to suggest Counselor Troi."

"Fair enough. Can you get him down here?"

"Counselor Troi is a woman, Admiral," Picard corrected gently.

"My apologies."

Picard tapped his communicator and proceeded to make the arrangements for

Troi's visit to the base.

Commander Filmore was already in Keyte's office when Deanna Troi arrived. Like the other two men he had made himself comfortable in one of the Admiral's armchairs, and he nursed a cup of coffee. Picard poured a cup out for Deanna as introductions were made.

Both Picard and Troi noticed the cool tone with which Filmore greeted his new partner, and it was obvious to them that Filmore was unhappy about something. The Counselor suspected that he objected to her secondment to the investigation, only tolerating it because Keyte had personally authorised the arrangement.

When the officers sat down again, Picard recounted Geordi's story for the benefit of the two newcomers. At the end of his recitation the three men were surprised when Counselor Troi was able to supply yet more background to the case.

"It started a couple of days ago," Deanna said. "Will - that's Commander Riker - was in Ten Forward with Naatali Faja. I think he'd met her earlier on that day when he was on leave on the base. Anyway, several of us drifted over to join them." The Counselor thought back to recall those present. *Commander Riker, Lieutenant Commanders Data and Geordi La Forge, Lts Worf and O'Brien, Naatali Faja and, of course, Deanna Troi had all been there*, she remembered. "After about twenty minutes of general chit-chat, the conversation turned towards favourite leisure activities, and then to favourite holodeck programmes. It turned out that Naatali makes her living by writing programmes; she's even won awards for several of them.

"Commander Riker expressed an interest in trying out one of her programmes, and everyone else seemed to think that'd be fun, too. So Naatali agreed to organise a visit to the holodeck here on the Starbase."

Picard asked, "Why didn't you use the

Enterprise's holodecks?"

"Several of Faja's programmes have recently been installed here: I gathered that that's why she's been staying here. We don't have them on the Enterprise."

Filmore pursed his lips thoughtfully, and looked at Deanna through narrowed eyes. "You weren't on the holodeck when the incident occurred. Why not?"

"Beverly - that's Dr Crusher - and I had decided to go for a meal together while the Enterprise was here, and we'd booked a table at Holmer's. The two things clashed." Holmer's was the base's pride and joy, a gourmet restaurant which served "real" food rather than replicated meals. Filmore and Keyte nodded at Troi's explanation: no-one would willingly turn down the opportunity to dine at Holmer's.

"So," said Filmore, "Faja wrote the programme, but it was Riker's idea to try it out."

"Yes, I guess so. But I don't know whose idea it was to try out that particular programme. I mean, content wasn't discussed when I was in Ten Forward."

"Hmm. Well, I'm going to have to talk to everyone who took part," said Filmore.

The Counselor raised her eyebrows slightly and said softly, "Don't you mean, 'we'?"

"Yes, of course. But first, I think a look at the programme might be in order. Don't you?"

"Damn!" Commander Filmore swore bitterly.

Picard, Keyte and Troi had waited patiently as Filmore tapped the last commands into the holodeck computer's keypad.

"What is it?" Admiral Keyte asked now.

"The programme's crashed."

"What do you mean, 'crashed'?" Keyte asked.

The Starbase Security Officer switched his attention away from the keypad and turned to face the other three officers. "Somehow, when it was cancelled, the programme corrupted. All we've got now are fragments of code, and I don't have the expertise to resurrect it again." He shook his head, frustrated. "When La Forge terminated the programme, he destroyed any evidence that our would-be murderer might have left on the deck. You know, fingerprints, footprints, stuff like that. I had hoped, though, that by reconstructing the programme itself, we might at least get some feel for the scenario."

Picard's lips tightened thoughtfully. "Why did it corrupt? Do you know?"

"No."

"Could it have been deliberate?"

Filmore looked at the Captain. "I'm not an expert in holodeck programming. I don't know." He shrugged, annoyed. "It seems to be too much of a coincidence that it was this programme that crashed. Of course, if it *was* deliberate, it means that there was something in the programme our murderer didn't want us to find."

"Which makes it doubly important that we reconstruct the programme." Keyte waved away Filmore's protestations. "I know, I know. You don't have the expertise, and the only person who does is one of our prime suspects."

Filmore nodded.

Counselor Troi spoke up. Tentatively she said, "We could always ask Lt Barclay."

The name meant nothing to Keyte or Filmore. However, Picard's instinctive

reaction did nothing to reassure them: their eyebrows rose slightly as the Captain visibly flinched at the suggestion. "Do you think that's a good idea? Encouraging Mr Barclay to go near a holodeck?"

Despite the seriousness of the circumstances Deanna Troi had to smother an amused smile. "You must admit, Captain, that Barclay has an... affinity... for programming."

Picard conceded the point reluctantly. "Very well, Counselor. Get Mr Barclay down here - if that's agreeable to the Admiral and the Commander?"

"Certainly, Captain Picard."

"Fine."

"But," Picard said, directing a piercing look at the Betazoid woman, "you sort it out."

The two detectives had said nothing to each other during the ten minutes since leaving Picard and Keyte on the holodeck. The tension between them was palpable, and Troi felt uncomfortable in the charged atmosphere. They turned a corner in the corridor and came to a halt next to a nondescript door. Filmore palmed the controls then gestured for the Counselor to enter.

Filmore's office was cramped and dingy, partly the result of being located in a section of the base which lacked windows and viewing ports, and partly because the Commander had done nothing to alleviate the starkness of the bare walls.

The Security Officer moved behind the desk and waved Troi towards the seat opposite. While Filmore busied himself with organising them each a drink, Troi let her gaze covertly wander around the room.

"So - what do you think, Counselor?" Filmore asked, letting Troi know that he was aware of her careful scrutiny.

Feeling rather like a little child caught with one hand inside a sweet jar, Troi lowered her eyes slightly, pursed her lips and sat up straighter in her chair. "It is not a welcoming place. It feels rather cold." *Rather like its owner*, she added privately.

"I don't spend much time here," Filmore admitted. "It doesn't need to be anything more than functional. However, we ought to discuss the case and how we should set about our investigations, and we can be fairly certain of not being disturbed here."

Deanna Troi took the steaming mug that Filmore now held out to her. "Thank you."

"This android, you know it well?"

Deanna possibly caught more meaning in Filmore's words than he had intended because she said, "Yes, I know him very well." Filmore frowned at Troi's reply and the careful emphasis she had placed on the "him". The Counselor felt obliged to elaborate. "Lieutenant Commander Data is a good officer, and a friend." It was a statement of loyalties, almost a reprimand.

"I see," said Filmore, his tone a little defensive.

Irritated, Deanna was stung into saying, "Even if you do not think that Data is deserving of the respect due to any organic being, you'd perhaps do well to remember that there are others who do. Data is designated as male. He is also a very popular member of the Enterprise's crew; any dealings you have with them will be greatly facilitated if you try to bear that in mind. Geordi La Forge and Commander Riker, in particular, can be rather... protective. They will resent any behaviour which is less than courteous towards Data."

"As it appears do you." There was a stiffness in his tone that Deanna Troi did not appreciate. "I will attempt to remember your advice. However, I've never met it... *him*... and, pardon me for saying this, I find it hard to envisage anyone willingly serving with a

machine. Or according it full "Human" respect."

"Is that what your problem is, Commander?" Deanna asked, wondering if he thought that she, as a Betazoid, was undeserving of his full "Human" respect, too. She decided that she didn't really want to know the answer to that. "I've been sensing antagonism from you ever since we met. I'd assumed that you objected to being ordered to work with me.

"But perhaps you simply think that this investigation is a waste of time. A murder investigation for a hunk of metal and circuits that's probably not even alive to begin with? Is that it?"

Filmore bit back his automatic reply, counted to five slowly, and said, "You're right, Counselor. I do object to you. You're not trained for this kind of work. And to be honest I don't see how your presence will be of help. In fact, I object to this whole business. However, I have my orders, and I know what my duty is. I'll do this job to the best of my ability whether I like it or not. Is that acceptable to you?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"No. Not really."

They sat silently for several minutes, Filmore's antagonism sparking the atmosphere between them. It was Deanna who finally broke the uneasy silence. "Well, at least we know where we stand. However, I think that perhaps a truce is in order. How else will we get any work done?"

Filmore nodded reluctantly. "Very well. Now. I've got a list of suspects we'll need to interview..."

Lieutenant Commander Geordi La Forge, Chief Engineer of the USS Enterprise, had a recurring nightmare. Even now, after several years of being the closest the Enterprise had to a resident expert on androids in general, and Lieutenant

Commander Data in particular, there was still much about his colleague that he didn't understand. Only Data knew more about Data than Geordi did, but that often didn't count for much because, under the circumstances where such expertise was required, like now for instance, Data was usually not in a fit state to provide it.

Geordi's fear was that one day the damage to his friend would exceed his ability to repair. Every time Data was injured Geordi would think, *is this the time I fail?* Now, though, Geordi looked down at the still insensate form of his friend with a feeling of profound relief. One day, perhaps, his nightmare would come true. *But not today*, he thought. *I can fix this, and he'll be all right.*

Geordi's musings were interrupted by Counselor Troi and someone he'd not met before. The Counselor introduced the stranger as Commander Filmore, Chief of Security, Starbase 193.

The Security Officer eyed La Forge warily. Filmore thought it odd that a suspect in a case of attempted murder should be given full access to the victim, and he'd expressed his concerns to the Counselor. She, however, had dismissed them in what, to him at least, appeared to be a completely cavalier manner. She had pointed out that no-one else was as qualified to tend Data as the Engineer, and she seemed to think that that was an end to the matter. Filmore, still uneasy with the situation, had decided to drop the subject for the moment.

"How is he?" Deanna asked.

"He'll be okay. It's just going to take time to fix the damage."

"Geordi -"

"You know, Dr Crusher says if he was Human, he'd have been killed."

Deanna Troi absorbed that information, realising how close they had come to losing the Enterprise's Second Officer. However, mindful of Filmore's presence, she kept her thoughts to herself,

saying only, "Commander Filmore would like to ask you a few questions."

"Okay."

Filmore stepped forward and said, "Could you describe what happened when the Commander was shot?"

Geordi shrugged slightly. "I told the Captain."

"Yes, but I'd like to hear it from you, myself."

Geordi La Forge glanced across at Deanna Troi who nodded mutely. The Engineer shrugged again, and proceeded to recount the events that had taken place on the holodeck.

"Could you draw us a map of where you were, what else was in the alley? Where the other participants were?"

"I guess so," Geordi said doubtfully. "But I'm not the galaxy's greatest artist, you know."

"That's okay." Filmore held out a padd and stylus to Geordi. La Forge took them and proceeded to sketch the street's layout, explaining it as he drew.

"You see, we were in a blind alley. Fence at this end. Data was hiding behind some trash cans, like so, and I was behind the car, here. We were staked out, watching this house. Riker and Faja were somewhere on the main street up here, and Worf and O'Brien were in their car, here. I don't know where the two Ensigns were."

"Did you see where the shot came from?"

"No. I assumed that it came from the house." Geordi broke off, as if realising something for the first time. "But it couldn't have!" His voice was intense and he waved his arms and hands frantically as he often did when excited. "From the wound, and the way Data fell, it must have come from up towards the street!"

Filmore merely nodded, as if La Forge had simply confirmed something he had already known. "When the programme ended, did you see anything unusual?"

"Like what?" asked Geordi.

"Anything at all?"

Geordi thought for a moment, then said, "No. I don't think so. But I was too busy with Data to pay much attention to anything else."

"Well, thank you, Commander. I think that's about all for now."

Geordi nodded, his attention already drifting back towards the android. However, before he became completely engrossed in his work once more, he said, "If you need anything else, you know where to find me."

Outside, in the corridor, Deanna asked, "What did you mean by 'unusual'?"

Filmore smiled thinly, thinking that this was just the sort of inane question someone who was not Security trained would ask. "What happened to the gun that was used to shoot Data? It's not easy to hide a shotgun. So what did the killer do with it?"

Ensigns Joia and Brenn shared an apartment with two other people, one of whom answered the door in response to Filmore's insistent knocking. The Andorian showed the visitors through to the living room and then abandoned them on its threshold.

Troi did not quite know where to look. The furniture had been pushed back against the walls and Joia and Brenn stood facing each other in the middle of the cleared area, lobbing juggling clubs in what, to Troi at least, looked like a complicated kaleidoscope of glitter and colour. The pattern finally fell apart when Joia missed catching a pass and Brenn dropped one of his own clubs in quick succession. Troi and Filmore chose that moment to address the jugglers.

This time it was Filmore's turn to introduce Troi. By mutual consent, one of the few things they had agreed on so far, they had decided that she would question the Starbase residents.

As with La Forge earlier, the Ensigns were prevailed upon to draw a sketch of the area in which the crime had taken place; it did not differ greatly from the drawing the two detectives already had, although the Ensigns seemed less than sure as to where the other participants had been positioned. Joia and Brenn had been stationed on the fire escape of a building which had a view towards the back of the house under surveillance. As a result, they explained, they had been out of sight of all the other game players; they'd known nothing about the shooting until the programme had terminated.

"How did you come to take part in the programme?" Troi asked.

It was Joia who answered. "We just happened to be in the area. We'd gone to the holodeck to see if any of the facilities were free. They weren't, but Faja invited us to join her party. The more the merrier, she said."

Brenn nodded agreement, and looked at his companion. "It wasn't quite what we'd had in mind, but..." His wistful expression left Troi in little doubt as to the type of thing they had had in mind.

"And," asked Troi, "when the programme terminated, did you notice anything odd? Unusual?"

"You mean besides the android with a chunk blown out of his shoulder? No, I don't think so," said Brenn.

Joia simply shook her head; she hadn't noticed anything either.

"Well, thank you," said Troi. "We may want to talk to you again, but that's all for now. Unless you've anything else to add, Commander?" Troi looked across at Filmore.

"Not at the moment, Counselor."

"Can you show yourselves out?" Brenn asked hopefully, as he bent down to retrieve the scattered clubs.

"Certainly."

As Troi and Filmore left, they heard Joia saying, "Okay. Three, three, ten." Then the rhythmic slap, slap, slap of the juggling clubs hitting against the Ensigns' palms started up again.

Starbase 193 didn't get that many civilian visitors and, as a result, its spaceport was tiny. It had a small cafeteria, and it was there that Filmore and Troi finally tracked down Naatali Faja. She sat in a corner, empty coffee cup in front of her and two valises on the ground beside her.

She looked up incuriously as the two Starfleet officers approached.

"Ms Faja?"

She nodded.

"We'd like to have a word with you."

"You'll have to make it quick," Faja replied. "I've got a passage booked to Centaurus."

Troi and Filmore exchanged glances, then the Counselor said, "I'm afraid, under the circumstances, we have to ask you not to leave the Starbase for the time being."

"Circumstances? What circumstances?"

"We are investigating the shooting of Lieutenant-Commander Data on the holodeck."

"But that was an accident. What's it got to do with me?"

Filmore gave her a mirthless smile. "Besides the fact that you wrote the programme, you mean? You're the expert on that scenario: do you still really think that it

was an accident?"

"What else could it have been?"

Odd, mused Filmore, that La Forge should be the one to realise that the incident was more than an accident. Odd that the programmer had not. But then, perhaps she felt responsible and was being wilfully ignorant. Or perhaps she was as guilty as sin.

Filmore tended to suspect the worst of everybody. It was his job to do so. La Forge had successfully wiped out any evidence left in the programme, Faja had written the damn thing and was now trying to skip town, and the two Ensigns had given each other an alibi. But since they lived together, and no-one else could substantiate their story, he didn't think it counted for much. As far as he was concerned, all their interviewees thus far had big black marks hanging against their names.

The Counselor, of course, was being of little help. She seemed convinced that none of the Enterprise personnel could have been involved. She said that she'd have sensed it if they were. *What rubbish!* Filmore thought. *They're her friends, and she's biased. Hardly a good basis for an independent investigation, is it?*

Filmore wanted clues but, thanks to La Forge, they were few and far between in this case. He shrugged, realising that his thoughts were going round in circles.

As with the other suspects, Filmore held out his padd and stylus. Faja's sketch, which should have been the most accurate of all, given her total familiarity with the scenario, turned out to be sloppy in the extreme, and she feigned complete disinterest in the proceedings, whingeing repeatedly about how holding her on the base would put her behind schedule, that she had a job lined up on Centaurus, that she'd booked this passage weeks ago, time was money, etcetera, etcetera.

Troi could feel Filmore's irritation towards Faja; whatever his personal attitude towards Data might be, he had a job to do and Faja wasn't making it easy. Then Troi

realised that she was picking up on something else as well, something emanating from the other woman. It was as if her boredom was cloaking something, keeping something out of view. But what? Troi frowned to herself, unable to "read" Faja clearly. Reluctantly she drew her concentration back to the conversation.

"And where were you when the shooting took place?" Filmore was asking.

"With Commander Riker, in the porch of the Cantonese Sun Chinese Restaurant."

"You're sure of that?"

"Ask him if you don't believe me."

"Don't worry, we will. You didn't see the shooting?"

"No. How could I? I couldn't even see the alley from the porch."

"You wrote the programme, right?"

"Yes."

"Can you think of any reason why it might have crashed when it was terminated?"

"No."

Faja's monosyllabic replies grated on Filmore's nerves. "Aren't you the least bit curious? I mean, it's not exactly a good advertisement for your programmes, is it?"

"I guess not," Faja said with a shrug. "Look, what's this got to do with anything?"

Deliberately copying her gesture, Filmore said, "Perhaps it's got nothing to do with anything at all."

Troi stepped forward, her soft lilting voice in sharp contrast to Filmore's argumentative tone. "What do you think might have happened?"

"I don't know. Really."

"And, if you did know, you would tell us?"

"Yeah. Of course."

Troi felt an unspoken "not" tacked onto the end of the phrase. However, just for the moment, she chose to give the appearance of taking Faja at her word.

Filmore and Troi traded glances, well aware that they were getting nowhere fast. "That'll be all for now, Ms Faja. However, we must insist that you stay on the base. We might need to speak with you again."

"So you've said." She turned her attention away from them and ignored them as they left.

Once away from the cafeteria, Troi said, "She's hiding something."

"Like what?"

"I'm not sure. But I feel sure that she knows more than she is saying."

Filmore stopped short and looked at Troi, irritation clearly written across his face. "We need more than feelings, you know!"

"I know, but surely it's a place to start."

"She says she's got an alibi."

"I know that, too."

"And if that alibi checks out?"

Troi shook her head wordlessly, well aware of the unspoken subtext to the conversation: her "feelings" would be worthless if Riker supported Faja's story. But still...

"I'll admit she has an attitude problem," said Filmore condescendingly, "but that doesn't necessarily mean that she's guilty of attempted murder, does it? What we need is evidence."

Troi did not reply, just started striding down the corridor once more. She must not

let her irritation at Filmore interfere with her attempts to do her job properly, and she knew that any response she gave now, in anger, would only make things worse between them. *But, she thought to herself, how dare he dismiss me so lightly!* She was an empath, her ability to sense the emotions of others as natural to her as his senses of smell, taste, touch were to him. If he said something was hot, she would not doubt him. So why should he doubt her when she said Faja was not telling them all she knew, that Faja was lying?

Filmore stood still for a moment with a "what now?" expression on his face, then, almost reluctantly, he jogged after the stiff-backed Counselor.

They found William Riker in his quarters fiddling with his trombone. Deanna sensed the tension in him, and knew that he was still worried about Data. She suspected that he had not played a note.

Yet again Filmore got his suspect to sketch a map of the streets involved in the programme. As Troi had feared, it pinpointed Riker's and Faja's location in the doorway of the Chinese restaurant and supported Faja's alibi. The Counselor was uncomfortably aware of the "I told you so" look Filmore threw in her direction.

"And you're certain that the two of you were together when the shooting took place?" Troi asked.

"Oh, yes. Naatali had gone into the restaurant to get some prawn crackers, but she was back well before the programme ended. She'd got through half the bag by then."

Filmore took over the questioning. "And then what happened? After the programme ended, I mean."

Riker's brow furrowed as he tried to remember. "I went towards Geordi, wanting to know what had happened. The others sort of gathered around, too."

"Why didn't you simply ask Faja what had happened? I mean, it was her programme. Wasn't she more likely to know? You couldn't have known it was La Forge who'd cancelled the programme, could you?"

Riker considered Filmore's questions. Finally he said, "I didn't think about it. I mean, it's habit to ask Geordi about engineering things. Besides, Faja was with me, and she didn't seem to know what was going on any more than I did."

"Just a couple more questions, Commander."

Riker nodded.

"Whose idea was it to run that particular programme?"

"Well, mine, I suppose. Faja showed me a list of the programmes she'd developed. I just happened to choose that one."

"One last thing. Did you notice anything odd when the programme ended? Anything on the deck you wouldn't have expected?"

"No. But then I wasn't looking."

Filmore nodded. "I'll probably want to talk to you again, Commander."

Riker watched as Filmore left, Troi silently following in his wake. He wished he could ask her how the investigation was going, but, under the circumstances, he knew it would not seem proper for him to do so.

Deanna Troi clutched a glass bowl in her hand and stirred its contents vaguely. She stared down at the rich brown mass of chocolate ice cream and decided that she had better eat it before it completely disintegrated into a pile of formless goo.

Funny how, now she'd received her order, she no longer felt hungry.

She and Filmore had gone on to talk to Worf and O'Brien after leaving Riker's quarters, but had learned nothing new from them. The most satisfying thing that had happened, at least from her point of view, was that Worf had actually growled at Commander Filmore. The interview had ended when Worf, with ill-concealed anger, said, "If I wanted to kill someone, I would be open about it. A sniper attack is hardly honourable!" and then proceeded to bare his teeth at the other Security Officer.

Troi felt relieved that she and Filmore were having a few hours apart from each other. They had failed to get on from the start, and their wildly opposing attitudes to the investigation procedure had only caused the rift between them to widen. They'd tried to cover over their differences, but the strain was beginning to tell on the Betazoid empath.

She wished she could talk things over with Will Riker as they had often discussed problems together in the past. Unfortunately, his involvement in the case only served to keep them apart, and she felt a little lost without his ready support.

The trouble was, of course, that Filmore wanted to find clues as to who the murderer was. She, however, was pretty certain that he was chasing shadows. After all, they hadn't been very successful at finding anything thus far, had they? He was all method and no intuition. She relied heavily on her sixth sense, and felt ill-used when he dismissed her hunches so easily.

Thinking back on their interviews so far, the Counselor was certain she knew who had attacked Data. Unfortunately, however, her feelings were not admissible as evidence Filmore was right about that, at least, and while she was increasingly sure she knew who, she did not know how or why. Moreover, Filmore still seemed unwilling to go in the direction her instincts led them.

To hell with Filmore, she thought with uncharacteristic bitterness. He had been unwilling to help her, so she had gone ahead and organised her own computer search,

determined to find out all about Ms Faja's background. Now all she had to do was wait for the computer to produce some results. And if Filmore didn't like her method of doing things, well, it was just too bad.

Counselor Troi's communicator twittered softly, and she put her spoon down as she gave it an answering tap. "Troi here," she said.

"Ah. Counselor." Picard's voice echoed from nowhere. "Mr Barclay has signalled to say that he has reconstructed the programme as best he can."

"I'm on my way, Captain."

Troi abandoned her chocolate dessert without regret.

Captain Picard was waiting for her in Transporter Room 3, curious to find out for himself how the investigation was going. She gave him a hurried and sketchy description of the depressingly limited progress they had made on the way to the Starbase's holodeck.

When the four officers had gathered together, they went in search of Mr Barclay who greeted them nervously. "I'm sorry, but I had some problems... I mean..." He took a deep breath, got a hold on himself, and started again. "I couldn't reconstruct the whole thing, so all I've got is a static snapshot, if you will. I'm not even sure of when in the programme it occurred."

Not for the first time, Picard wondered why it was that Barclay could never look directly at the person to whom he was speaking. His eyes would wander around, focusing on everything else, but never on that other person. However, the Captain refrained from commenting, and merely said, "I'm sure you did your best, Lieutenant."

"Oh, yes, sir! I did. But..." Barclay's words trailed off, and he punched in the commands to open the holodeck doors.

Troi looked around her and said, "This is really quite disgusting."

They stood in the centre of a street, surrounded by cars and litter. To either side were buildings, all about six storeys high, blotting out the sun. These were uniformly encrusted with grime, and several of their windows were boarded up. Black sacks of rubbish were heaped together on the pavements, and dustbins, their contents spilling into the gutter, rolled on their sides.

Deanna fastidiously picked her way through the litter-strewn street, wondering what appeal Riker could possibly have seen in this locale. A thought crossed the Counselor's mind, and she turned towards Barclay. "You didn't do anything to augment this programme, did you? I mean, it is supposed to be like this?"

Barclay nodded furiously in agreement. "Oh, yes, Counselor. It.. it is. Quite accurate. I mean, this is how it was!"

Filmore joined the conversation. "Garbage strike?" he queried.

"Let's hope so," said Troi. "I'd hate to think that anyone was naturally this untidy."

Deanna then smiled inwardly as she saw what Filmore was holding in his hand. She should have known! Filmore had come prepared with a diagram of the crime scene, a composite he'd made using all the maps submitted to him by the various interviewees. He stared down at the piece of paper, oriented himself, and said, "Okay, according to this, the alley should be over here. Yes, right - here's the car La Forge was hiding behind. See?" He pointed out the corresponding locations on the diagram and the ground. "Data was over here..."

The little group retraced their steps back up the alley and onto the major thoroughfare, its holocars frozen eerily in position.

"Worf and O'Brien were over there. And there's the Ensigns' car." He took a few more steps along the pavement, looking for

the recessed porch of the Cantonese Sun. "Ah hah! And that's where - " He suddenly fell silent. Then, more slowly, in wonder, he said, "And that's where Riker and Faja were, but..."

The other four officers stopped as one and stared at the porch. For there, frozen in time, stood the unmistakable figure of Naatali Faja, her hand poised above an open bag of prawn crackers.

"I think," said Troi, "we've found that clue you wanted."

"Looks like you were right after all," said Filmore. "She *was* hiding something."

It was such a little thing in itself, but for the first time Troi and Filmore smiled together, a hint of something more than simply duty hovering between them.

Faja's holodeck image stood exactly where Faja had claimed to be when the shooting took place. Even more damning, it was doing precisely what Riker said Faja had been doing. It begged the question, if Riker had been staked out with a holodeck construct, where had Faja been?

In their own minds, the Starfleet officers were sure that they knew the answer: it was so obvious that no-one bothered to say what was uppermost in all their minds. Even so, they wanted to confirm what, by now, they were sure was true; that Faja had tried to kill Lieutenant Commander Data.

"What about the gun? What happened to it?" asked Filmore, more desperate than ever to solve that aspect of the mystery.

"What gun?" asked Barclay.

"The gun that was used to shoot Data," Filmore replied impatiently. "What happened to the gun?"

Barclay frowned. "I don't understand. Surely it would have vanished along with all the rest of the images when the programme ended."

"What?" Filmore and Troi asked together.

"Have you been looking for a 'real gun?" asked Barclay, curious.

"Of course," said Filmore, as if talking to a retarded child. "How else could Data have been shot?"

"Holodeck gun. Real bullet." Barclay's reply was brief, pointed, and, Picard, Keyte and Filmore suddenly realised, made sense.

"Would that work? Could you fire real bullets from a hologun?" Troi asked doubtfully.

"I don't see why not," replied Barclay.

"What about the mortality fail-safe?"

"The fail-safe is designed to protect participants from the programme, not from other participants."

Deanna Troi still looked puzzled, an expression that Barclay decided looked pretty good on her as he tried to explain further. "Look," he said. "I brought these tools onto the holodeck with me." He indicated a small selection of instruments. "If I were to throw one at you, it could hurt you. Yes?"

Deanna nodded.

"They're not part of the programme so the mortality fail-safe won't work on them."

Deanna nodded again.

"Similarly phasers will work on the deck."

The Counselor nodded yet again, feeling foolish as she did so.

"Imagine that I brought a bullet onto the holodeck and got the holodeck to produce me a gun."

"I see," said Deanna. "The bullet isn't part of the programme. The gun could fire it and..."

This time it was Barclay's turn to nod.

"If," said Picard thoughtfully, "the gun was produced as part of the holodeck programme, it should be here somewhere. In this image. All we need to do is find it."

"And that," Keyte interjected, "helps to explain why someone fixed the programme to crash. Lieutenant," he went on, addressing Barclay, "you are to be commended for your work here."

"Thank you," said Barclay, slightly taken aback by the Admiral's sincere praise.

Naatali Faja was killing time in her hotel room when the Security team came for her. The room smelled stale, and various bottles made it apparent what Faja's preferred pastime had been recently. However, the Starbase only stocked synthehol, and Filmore knew that any drunkenness on Faja's part was merely play-acting.

They escorted her to Keyte's office, and sat her down before his desk. The Admiral sat opposite her, flanked by Captain Picard and Counselor Troi.

"Why am I here?" Faja demanded.

"You," Admiral Keyte said, in his most official sounding voice, "stand accused of attempting to commit a murder. More precisely, of attempting to kill Lieutenant-Commander Data."

"Preposterous! I didn't do anything. Anyway, how can you kill something that's not alive to begin with?"

Filmore watched, amused, as Picard's expression hardened, a mirror image to Troi's. The Counselor had not exaggerated the protectiveness of the android's fellow crew members.

To the Counselor's surprise, it was Filmore who bothered to answer Faja's question. "It does not matter what you think

about Commander Data's status as a living being, Ms Faja. He has been designated as a lifeform in his own right, and his status has been established in a court of law. So, in the eyes of the law at least, it was an attempted murder. An attempt was made to terminate his existence."

Troi threw an astonished glance in Filmore's direction. He shrugged slightly. "After our conversation before, I decided I'd better look him up. I'm still not too sure what he is, but the court's ruling is a good enough place to start."

"Now," said Keyte, getting back to business, "we have a few questions for you, Ms Faja."

"Oh?"

"For one thing, why was there an image of you on the holodeck? As an extra in the programme?"

"We managed to patch up the programme," said Troi, in response to Faja's startled reaction. The Counselor deliberately refrained from saying how little Barclay had been able to do with the code; it had been the purest fluke that Faja's image had been in that doorway.

"But that's..."

"Yes?" Troi said, invitingly.

"... wonderful. So you know what went wrong with the programme? You can tell me?"

"Just tell us, why is there a holoconstruct of yourself in the programme, Ms Faja?" Keyte asked again.

"It was a joke. You know, an ego trip if you will."

"I see. Nothing more?"

"No. Of course not."

"Let me tell you what we think happened," said Filmore. "Then you can

correct me where I go wrong. Okay?"

Faja nodded, dumb.

"I think you programmed an image of yourself into the scenario, and when you went into the Chinese restaurant to get some prawn crackers it wasn't you who came back out, but your double. You headed up to the fire escape, and shot the Lieutenant Commander." They had eventually found the gun lying on the latticed metalwork of the escape, abandoned. Its purpose there had seemed obvious. "Then you went back downstairs. You must have hung around near the doorway so that you could replace your double when the programme ended without Riker being any the wiser. So, how did I do?"

Faja's face had paled considerably. "Okay. Okay. I'll tell you. I did swop over with my double. But it was just a joke, you know? I just wanted to see if anyone could tell the difference. That's all! I didn't shoot the android. Believe me!"

Troi's lilting voice hid her certainty that Faja was still lying. "Why didn't you tell us this before?"

"Because I knew you'd react this way."

"I think you're lying. I think you did try to kill him," said the empath coldly.

"No! What possible motive could I have had?"

"Look at it from our point of view," suggested Filmore. "You are an expert holodeck programmer. You designed the scenario. You skipped off on your own during the game, for a joke you said. What would you have us think?"

"Why would I want to kill him, huh? Tell me that, if you can. What was my motive?"

"I have to confess, I'm not too sure about that."

"See?" cried Faja. "I had no reason to

kill him. I didn't do it!"

"Oh," said Deanna. "I think you had a reason." All eyes looked at her, astonished, and Deanna knew she was going to enjoy her moment of triumph. "You're Kivas Fajo's sister, aren't you?"

Naatali Faja crumpled back into her chair. "How... how did you?..."

"She's still not saying anything," Filmore said later. "Her lawyer advised her not to." The two ex-detectives were sitting together in Ten Forward, any remaining vestiges of the conflict between them buried so deep as to be unnoticeable now. "However," he continued, "one of my security officers intercepted this. Turns out a civilian was trying to smuggle it off the Starbase on behalf of our prisoner."

Deanna Troi took the folded paper from Filmore and read the letter. It said:

"Dear Kivas,

"I'm pretty certain that they'll never let this reach you. I'm told that rehab colonies are pretty strict about such things. Still, maybe we'll get lucky, and I'm writing to you in case that is the case.

"You'll be hearing a lot about me soon. You see, I've finally followed in the good old family tradition, and I've got myself arrested.

"Kivas, whatever happens, please remember one thing: I did it all for you. Mama always said that my attachment to you was unnatural, and that it would be my undoing. I guess she was right.

"You see, I knew you blamed that android, Data, for all the misery that's befallen you. And I knew that you were in no position to exact your revenge.

"I was, though. I planned very

carefully. I thought I'd planned for every possible contingency, but I was wrong. I should have known. I mean, if the Enterprise could find you out, what possible chance did I have?

"I wouldn't have minded being arrested if I'd succeeded in my plan. I didn't, though. I did shoot it. But I'm sorry, Kivas, I didn't know enough about it to kill it.

"Data's still alive. You remain unavenged, and I've ruined everything. Only a miracle can get me out of this mess now.

"For what its worth, I send you all my best.

"Love, Naatali."

Troi raised her eyes and said soberly, "Well, it's as good as a confession, anyway."

"Yes. The only guilt she feels is that she didn't succeed in killing your friend. It'll be a real pleasure seeing her in court, I can tell you. By the way, how did you know about her being Fajo's sister?"

"I had a hunch." Troi smiled. "I was sure that she was hiding something, so I did some computer research. I couldn't find her name in any Federation records, but I did manage to find a match for her face. She was in court when Fajo was sentenced to that rehabilitation colony. Made quite a scene, by all accounts. After that, well, it was easy."

"What are we going to do now?" asked Filmore. "You said you'd got the evening planned out."

The door to Ten Forward slid open, and Deanna looked up to see Geordi, Riker and Data come in.

"Now? Now I'm going to introduce you to some friends of mine. Including someone you haven't met before."



THE ANSWER



The Bringloidi are so backward
 The Mariposans so high tech
 But their lives without each other
 Would be a total wreck.

The Bringloidi called for help
 Though it wasn't intended
 They didn't know how
 Didn't know they had sent it.

They caused quite a ruckus
 When they boarded the ship
 Picard's crew's well mannered
 So they all stayed tight lipped.

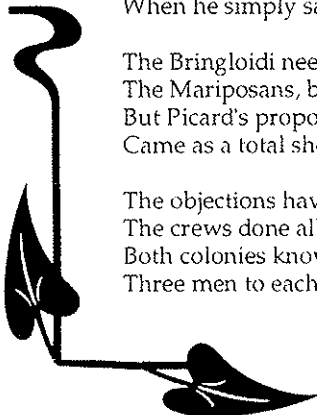
Once they were settled
 Danillo dropped the bomb
 There is another colony
 The search must still go on.

Riker was puzzled
 Worf was bemused
 But Pulaski knew the answer
 She never was confused.

The Mariposans need some help
 They need fresh D.N.A.
 But Riker answered for them all
 When he simply said, "No way!"

The Bringloidi need a new home
 The Mariposans, breeding stock
 But Picard's proposed solution
 Came as a total shock.

The objections have been settled
 The crews done all they can
 Both colonies know the rules now
 Three men to each woman.





Kari melissa

ONE OF THOSE DAYS

by

Carol Sterenberg

Captain Jean-Luc Picard awoke in the quiet darkness of his quarters aboard the USS Enterprise. He glanced anxiously at the chrono, then sat up on the edge of his bed. He did not swear (at least, not audibly), but those who knew him well would have detected a note of pique in the sniff he emitted as he pulled his pyjama jacket straight.

Eternity stretched away on the other side of the viewport. The stars burned placidly. All was right with the cosmos. He sniffed again and reached over to the intercom.

"Picard to bridge."

"Data here. Good morning, sir."

"Current status?"

"Unchanged, sir."

Picard grunted an acknowledgment and snapped off the comlink. It was going to be another one of those days. He wondered if he could chance taking a shower before the crisis should come upon them: but a Captain had a duty to keep up appearances, no matter what the situation. There could be only one decision.

He made a brief toilette, and as he dressed before the mirror, he took a few seconds to study himself closely. The strain was beginning to tell upon him, and would soon be evident to the most casual observer, even to Data. Troi had already taken Picard aside and advised him to spend some time on the Holodeck;

and it was only a matter of time before Beverly Crusher would all-too-casually suggest a visit to downtown Los Angeles. And given the way she looked in that outfit, that was an offer he couldn't refuse...

With a final bleak stare he smoothed his fringe of greying hair and ordered breakfast, not that he expected to finish it. He ate the croissant in his usual small mouthfuls: he hated speaking with his mouth full, even in reply to the combadge pinned to his uniform. At intervals he reminded himself to drop and release his shoulders, tensed in anticipation of interruption. He followed the croissant with an antacid, as he had for days past. Crusher would suspect before long, would realise that her Captain was no more immune to the unaccustomed malaise sweeping the ship, than was the rest of the crew.

But it was up to him to set an example. No matter what the circumstances, a Captain should not allow his frayed nerves to dangle publicly. Imperturbability and readiness for action must be the keynotes. He squared his shoulders and left his quarters.

The turbolift arrived promptly. It was empty of any intruder. Things were going from bad to worse. Picard's heart would have rejoiced at a sudden loss of power, finding himself stranded in there at the mercy of an underpowered suspension field... but the journey to the bridge was without any such incident, nor was he abducted in transit. Picard

emerged from the lift a very unhappy man.

Data rose to greet him and formally relinquished the bridge at this, the start of alpha shift. *At least we have one reliable crew member, Picard thought with a bitter relief. One officer I can trust not to lose his head...*

Picard remained standing, scrutinising each face for signs of It. All appeared to be working normally, although Data was the only one who did not look haggard. Occasionally a response was unusually curt, sometimes only just the right side of rude, but tempers were holding well, and Picard felt proud of his crew. But after all, what else could one expect from the cream of Starfleet?

Riker was the one to watch, though. Despite his sense of humour, Riker's decisiveness was allied to the shortest fuse of all the bridge personnel. This was not usually a problem, but under the present circumstances his volatility made him a risk. Even now Riker was prowling the deck, leading rather pugnaciously with his shoulder.

Put him to work with Data, Picard thought shrewdly. Will can't pick a fight with him... keep him well away from La Forge... we should be all right then...

Picard cast a sidelong glance at his Second Officer, sitting immobile at Ops. Picard waited for him to blink, but Data seemed to have forgotten, for once, and Picard conceded the game as his own eyes started to water. If Picard had known Data less well, he might have suspected him of being in pseudo-conversational mode due to the lack of incoming information.

Picard eased himself cautiously into his seat and drummed on the arm of the command chair with his right-hand

fingers as he chewed the knuckles of his left. Worf, at Picard's shoulder, shared his captain's frustration. He ground his teeth as he completed the hourly status check recently ordered by Picard. All crew and civilians aboard the ship were monitoring each other constantly for unusual or aberrant behaviour. Sickbay was carrying out checks at random for odd symptoms, physical or mental. Every diagnostic on board was running, alert for any abnormal occurrence in Enterprise's operation. Picard was determined that nothing should escape his notice.

Worf glowered as he delivered his status report: negative. Picard acknowledged him curtly, and returned to his thoughts. It was up to him to do something about the situation: but what? His active mind, accustomed to dealing with the unknown and unexpected, balked at the problem.

Q, he thought despairingly. All the times I've wished you off my ship and out of my hair - out of my way, he corrected himself hastily. ... Q, I take it all back... Q?

No reaction. He sighed. Crusher had warned him of the seriousness of their position. He had signalled Starfleet Command days before. Enterprise, caught in the grip of an effect dreaded by all Starship Captains, hitherto unknown and unheard of this far into uncharted space.

An effect under which his crew laboured to keep some semblance of order, their nerves stretched almost to breaking point under the strain of the situation. Tempers had frayed. Tranquillisers had been prescribed, as had compulsory recreation periods, all to no avail. Picard saw his crew sliding inexorably toward the abyss as the hours passed, and he with them. Soon Data would be the only sane officer aboard. A glimmer of hope shone upon that

thought. All might not be lost.

The name of their affliction sounded like a death knell in his mind.

The Normality Effect.

You know where you are with the unexpected, he thought resignedly. Normality was not something his crew was accustomed to, and they found it hard to handle. Something was bound to happen soon: but to whom? The ship was alive with rumours, the most recent suggesting that one of them was going to be abducted, to be replaced by an exact alien replica. They'd had several false alarms of this category recently, leading to embarrassment all round. Data had been pulled in to Engineering three or four times already that week.

How much longer could they endure the torture of Normality? How much longer could their sanity hold out? Surely it was only a matter of time before they'd receive a distress call from a long-dead civilisation; somebody might try to wrest away control of the ship; or then again, a crowd of irritated aliens might materialise on the bridge; something...

Picard rose abruptly to his feet, and leaving the con with Riker strode into the ready room to watch his spiny fish: that never failed to soothe him. He was about to nerve himself for a further uneventful spell in the command chair when Riker's voice sounded from his combadge.

"Riker to Captain Picard."

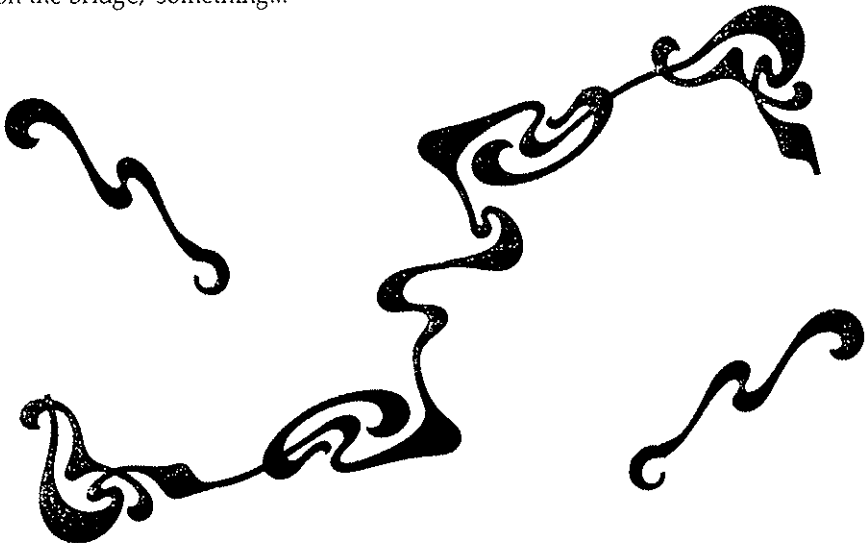
"Go ahead, Number One."

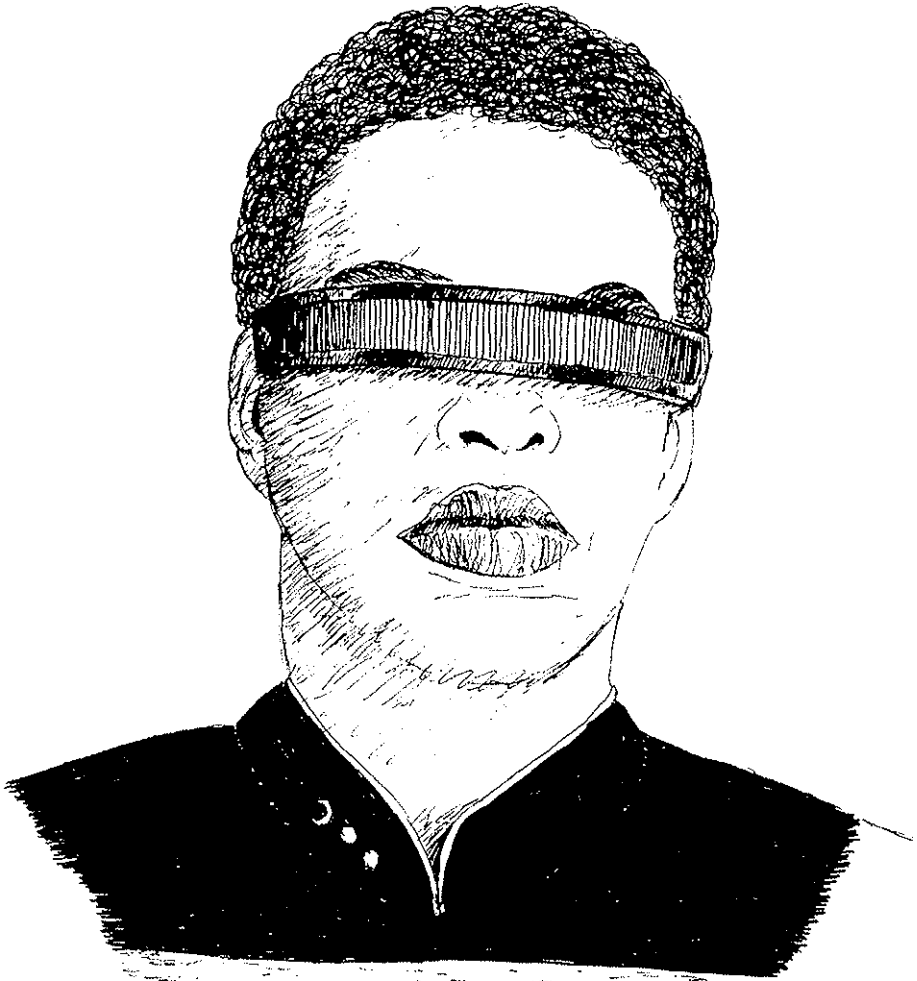
"Three Romulan vessels have just decloaked in our immediate vicinity. An ion storm has blown up out of nowhere, and Data has dematerialised."

"I'm on my way."

Despite the gravity of the situation, Picard paused for a moment to grin at his reflection in the viewport. The grin disappeared almost instantly as he emerged onto the bridge: but inside, he was happy.

It's all right now, he thought. *All is well: the crisis is past.*





AJShearman

THE WANDERER

I was travelling round this universe
Learning all I can
When I came across this species -
They call themselves Human.

I wanted to learn more about
How they live and play
So I became what they call
A little Human baby

I spent some time among them
Especially one called Troi
You see I had become for her
Her little baby boy

I found my mother cared for me,
She helped me as I grew;
She taught me about many things
That were so strange and new.

And when I had to leave her,
I hurt her - this I know;
But I know she understood the reason
I really had to go.

In my travels round this universe
I have learned of many others;
But I still have my memory of
She who was my mother.

Helen Connor



ELEGY FOR LAL

Flesh of my flesh you were not, could not be;
 Only your brain, the power to think, deduce,
 The knowledge that was Lal
 I gave you,
 With the choice
 (Not given to Human offspring nor to me)
 To fashion for your android circuitry
 A male or female form.

I am not programmed to feel grief for you
 Or mourn, as Humans can,
 A child that dies;
 Yet this I knew
 (And knowledge is an android's only truth)
 That there would always be
 A space
 Where you once stood.

But now that part of all my growth
 (Even an android gains experience)
 Which I transferred to you,
 Has been restored,
 Enriched by what you learned;
 And I,
 Who cannot feel or love,
 Can know at last
 The love you felt for me.

Lyn Muir



SPACE TRIAL

by

Debbie Lee

The doors of truth are guarded by paradox and confusion.
If you should attempt to handle them by turning your back
upon them, the truth will remain closed on you forever.

Vulcan Proverb

ONE

Kappa III, the auditorium at Starfleet Academy, was silent - so silent that you could have heard an optic pin drop at a distance of 20 metres within its darkened stillness. Yet, for the last lecture of the semester to be given by a visiting speaker, attendance was excellent. No less than 150 Starfleet cadets from Academy years two and three sat in its sound-proofed confines, their attention transfixed by the diminutive form occupying the platform situated to the centre front of the hall.

The object of their attention was attempting to manhandle a particularly large and detailed chart from the left hand side of the platform to its right hand side - a manoeuvre being attempted with far more determination than strength, or so it appeared to the fascinated audience. The speaker moved around the awkward visual aid in order to gain an improved grip upon its structure and the cadets could do nothing except watch as if mesmerized, guiltily aware that they should really offer to help but at the same time terrified of the potential for a very public rejection in front of their assembled peers. Finally one brave soul got up from his seat, distinctive in the predominantly black uniform of the Academy, and made as if to mount the platform and aid the visiting speaker.

The speaker paused in her efforts to turn one sharply directed look from beneath her finely drawn brows, the frown on her face clear as she hefted the display into its final required position with one last heave. That one look was enough to make the almost helpful cadet retreat speedily to his seat - his face becoming almost as red as his shock of chestnut hair.

"And so," the speaker resumed, with a slightly breathless note to her voice, "with the two diagrams next to each other, it should be possible to see more clearly the corresponding arrangement of matter - " she stepped to one side to indicate the chart she had just struggled so manfully to move - "and antimatter reaction injectors. Okay - so... any questions so far?"

Silence.

Dr Leah Brahms, Starfleet Research Engineer, Graduate of the Daystrom Institute's Theoretical Propulsion Group, originally one of the youngest Senior Design Engineers of Utopia Planetia Starfleet, regarded the sea of Academy faces before her with a sinking feeling in her stomach.

Some of the faces before her looked thoroughly confused, others appeared genuinely interested, and a few just looked plain bored. They were the ones

who had probably attended the lecture hoping to catch a glimpse of the reputedly dashing figure of Dr Ordan Burns. Personally, Dr Brahms considered Burns an unworthy figure for such adulation, her own assessment of him being less than complimentary, but that was no consolation for those in the audience having to make do with a thin lipped, somewhat brusque replacement. Known as an ostensibly cold, cerebral woman lacking in humour, more comfortable with engine schematics than people and so-called honours such as this lecture, Dr Leah Brahms had been reluctantly seconded by the Academy's Head of Propulsion Technology at very short notice indeed when Burns' unavailability had become known.

"So much for the youthful cream of the UFP... " Dr Brahms muttered to herself as she turned to change the engine schematic displayed on the main screen to that of the matter/antimatter reaction chamber or M/ARC. "And God help Starfleet!"

She took a deep steadying breath.

"So, as you all probably know, the key element in the efficient use of M/A reactions is dilithium crystal. The most important property of which is that...?"

She looked to her audience for the answer in vain. All she was met with was a deathly silence.

"Is?" she urged.

"Porosity," someone whispered near the back of the auditorium.

"What was that?" No-one could fault Leah Brahms' hearing.

"That it is porous to antihydrogen," came a voice, and a female voice at that. "when subjected to high frequency EM in

the megawatt range."

"Correct - and your name?"

"Haro... Mitena Haro."

A ripple of displeasure briefly disturbed the silent disposition of Dr Brahms audience. It would appear that Cadet Haro was most definitely NOT an Academy favourite.

"Well, as Cadet Haro has correctly pointed out, dilithium permits the antihydrogen to pass directly through its crystalline structure without actually touching it. How?"

Yet another silence. Leah Brahms sighed, long and hard. This time a male voice towards the rear of the auditorium answered.

"Due to the dynamo effect created in the lattice due to the presence of additional iron atoms."

Dr Brahms looked towards the voice and nodded.

"Which gives us the forced matrix formula as displayed, $2<5>5$ dilithium $2<>1$ diallosilicate 1:9:1 heptoferranide."

"Six," came yet another male voice, only this time it was fractionally nearer the front of the auditorium.

"I beg your pardon?" Dr Brahms looked up from her notes into the sea of faces once again.

"Six, not five. The formula is $2<5>6$ dilithium $2<>1$ diallosilicate, 1:9:1 heptoferranide."

"Ah - indeed it is." Dr Brahms turned to study the visible, and apparently incorrect, information above her head. Her attention was caught by a

hiss of noise.

"And so Wesley Crusher strikes again!" came a voice barely above a whisper from the front row.

Dr Leah Brahms turned her back on the Academy students and allowed a small smile of modest triumph to twist her full lips as she changed the overhead.

"Well spotted, Mr... er?"

Geordi La Forge studied his open equipment case, his hands deftly checking the tools therein with all the surety of a highly skilled surgeon.

"Commander, is it worth packing my tricorder?" Robin Lefler moved across Engineering to stand at her commanding officer's side.

"Robin, we're going to Ceranti One - not the outer rim. It is probable that the premier annexe of Utopia Planetia may have such a thing as a tricorder within their equipment manifest."

"Ah, but not like this one particular tricorder." Robin waved the hand held device in question to draw the Chief Engineer's attention to it. "This is the one that Data adapted the interface on -"

"Lieutenant-Commander Data."

"That Lieutenant-Commander Data adapted the interface on," Lefler amended obligingly, "and it's nice to have equipment around you that you really know. I see -" Robin peered over Chief Engineer Geordi La Forge's shoulder into his open tool case - "that you are taking your favourite laser drill when no doubt there will be infinitely superior drills available on Ceranti One."

"Okay, okay." Geordi walked back into the Chief Engineer's office and opened yet another storage berth. "Go, pack your favourite tricorder. But remember, Robin, you are the one who is going to be responsible for any extra stuff you choose to take."

A familiar set of footsteps rang out within main Engineering and stopped abruptly between the two frenetically active figures of Lefler and La Forge.

"Captain Picard sent me down to remind you to please leave us a few basic tools, just in case something - anything, God forbid - should go wrong with the Enterprise in your absence."

"Don't worry, Commander," Geordi replied from his position crouched over the open storage access. "We're leaving you in good hands. The only thing anywhere near a real problem is a sensor glitch which Lt Barclay is well on his way to resolving, and Data could probably run the whole of this section on his own anyhow."

"Hmmm," was all that Commander Riker would commit himself to as he observed his two colleagues hard at work, preparing for their unexpected departure. "I was also dispatched to inform you that we are 20 minutes from coming into transporter range of Space Station Terminus. Either the USS Hood or the USS Galaxy will rendezvous with you within two hours, guaranteed time frame. And Geordi, if it's the Hood, please convey my compliments to Captain De Soto." A smile creased Will Riker's face as he mentioned the name of his former Captain.

At his words, Geordi la Forge looked up at the USS Enterprise's First Officer. "Sure thing - you can count on it, sir."

Riker turned, his attention caught by Lefler's producing a large transport carton from apparently nowhere, and then returned his attention back to La Forge, his eyebrows raised.

"Okay. So I have ascertained that *you* are going to leave us at least some of Engineering. What about Ensign Lefler?"

"Robin is anxious that Ceranti One will not have quite the calibre of equipment we're used to here," Geordi confided, not without some humour in his face and voice. "My reassurances about it being probably more than adequately equipped appears to have fallen on deaf ears."

Robin had clearly overheard Geordi's last words. "Don't forget to tell the Commander that you've 'borrowed' the station 12 laser drill, sir," she reminded him innocently.

"I consider myself duly informed." Riker grinned at the barely concealed audacity of the young engineering Ensign. "Wesley sure is going to be disappointed he missed you both. It's a shame that this surprise trip has coincided with the Academy vacation. Any idea of exactly what you are going to be doing on Ceranti One yet, Geordi?"

"Nope," Geordi replied honestly. "If I did, it would probably mean that Ensign Lefler and I could put three quarters of this stuff back on the shelf - but as it is..." He shrugged, his uncertainty clear in his expression, despite the masking presence of his visor.

"Your assistant on this trip would appear to be very thorough." Riker indicated Robin Lefler with a nod of his head as she carefully tested each item of equipment with utmost care prior to packing it into the transport carton.

"She's a good kid, Commander - and she'll be worth her weight in gold," La Forge assured him. "If I tell Robin Lefler to do something, I know it will be done - and to a standard that I consider acceptable."

"And there was me thinking you were just making sure that Wesley would *really* miss you not being around!" Riker grinned unashamedly.

Dr Leah Brahms collected together her graphics chips and reference PADDs as the last of the Academy students filed out of the auditorium. She never failed to marvel at how disorganised one could become during the course of one lecture, as one reached for a specific graphic display to illustrate a particular point, whilst simultaneously disregarding several others. As the Doctor worked on, she became aware of a presence in the central aisle of the auditorium, silently watching her efforts. This would appear to be the last student to leave, as she had already worked through an extensive and exhausting questions and answers session, at the end of her talk. Then again, perhaps this student had not wanted to table his or her question in front of the massed attention of Starfleet Academy years two and three.

"Can I help you?" she asked the shadow politely.

At first the shadow said nothing, and then finally took a single step that brought the individual out of the dark of the auditorium and into the light of the presentation area. "Why did you deliberately misstate the forced matrix formula for dilithium?" asked Wesley Crusher, his notepad held up in front of him almost like a shield protecting him from an unknown quantity.

Shields up...until one has ascertained the friendliness of the subject in question. Leah smiled to herself wryly. *In true Starfleet manner.*

"Maybe I didn't," was what she said.

"But everyone knows the formula, Dr Brahms. The theta-matrix compositing techniques utilizing gamma radiation bombardment will invariably result in the 2:5:6 ratio."

Leah Brahms smiled at him, suddenly, briefly. "How much in-depth reading have you done with respect to Zefram Cochrane and Dr Stephen Channing, Wesley?" she asked.

"Not much. Channing is not actually part of the study syllabus this year - but I know from my physical science studies that he maintained it was possible to force dilithium into even more useful forms if they could be realigned... How did you know it was me?" he asked, suddenly self conscious.

"You have more than a little look of your mother about you, Wes," she smiled, "and Geordi made sure I had ample opportunity to meet Dr Crusher, mother of the USS Enterprise's very own boy genius."

Wesley Crusher looked at the floor and then back at Dr Brahms with a wide, if still slightly self conscious, grin.

"And I will not even ask if you recognise me!" she continued with mock ferocity.

"No. I helped Geordi with the holodeck... um, the engineering model..."

Leah allowed Wesley to stand in acute embarrassment for a few moments before letting him off the hook.

"It's all right - I know all about the holodeck simulation of Utopia Planetia - complete with a me! I think I made my sentiments to Commander La Forge about that particular matter quite clear."

"Oh, yes." The toothy grin was once more in evidence. "Geordi said there had been some fireworks when you visited 44614."

"Then he lied." Dr Brahms' tone was cold, but she relented on seeing Wesley's face drop suddenly, and admitted, "A photon torpedo barrage was a little closer to the truth."

That proved sufficient to break the ice, and Wesley offered to help Dr Brahms with her copious presentation materials.

"So, Wesley - what did you think of Utopia Planetia Mars Station?"

"The holodeck simulation? Exciting," Wesley stated honestly. "To be there, right at the beginning... To see the Enterprise, our Enterprise, as it started - as a plan, an idea..." He sighed. "It must have been amazing to have actually been there at the start - I mean, *really* at the start."

"It was. Ceranti One is also quite interesting, you know."

"Yeah, I bet it is. But that is one place we can't even visit through the wonders of holodeck technology - the records regarding Ceranti One are too highly classified to be used like that!"

"Would you like to see Ceranti One, Wesley?"

"Where the galaxy class engines were designed? Of course I would! Who wouldn't?" he breathed, before adding curiously, "How? Have you access to an

authorised holodeck simulation?"

"Er... no. I can actually do a little better than that. That is providing you have the time, and would like to accompany me."

Wesley Crusher suddenly went still, very still, and stared at the petite dark haired woman before him. "But it's systems away, and restricted."

"That, Wesley, is not the issue. The issue is, would you like to go there?"

"Are you asking me... I mean *really* asking me?"

Dr Brahms tucked one hand onto her hip and fixed Cadet Crusher to a patient, if slightly frosty glare.

"Then yes. I mean yes, please, *yes!*" Wesley burst out hurriedly, terrified the offer would be withdrawn as unexpectedly as it was offered. "When?"

"Day after tomorrow."

"I can't... I can. I mean I can. I'm due to rendezvous with the Enterprise, but I can put it off - er, delay it, whatever. No trouble."

"Wesley - I would also ask that you tell no one about exactly where you are going." Dr Brahms licked her lips, and then went on to explain haltingly, "As you so correctly pointed out, Ceranti One is a restricted area - and too much attention to our trip could mean questions are asked that could jeopardise it before we even get to make it."

"Sure. Fine. I understand. Don't worry. I'll sort it out." Wesley backed away in his excitement, almost tripping over the edge of the auditorium steps as he bounded away towards the exit. "No problem, Dr Brahms..."

"Wesley, I'll be in touch." Leah had to raise her voice in order to be heard by the rapidly retreating figure. "And remember, Wes... No-one!"

With that, Leah Brahms then allowed herself to cast a suspicious look about the auditorium as if it might have suddenly sprouted ears. She then continued packing her equipment away, but now with a greater sense of urgency about her movements.

Robin carefully balanced her own Starfleet issue holdall atop one of the larger, rather euphemistically so-termed 'portable' cartons on the transporter pad of Transporter Room three. She stepped back and regarded the small pile with a long gaze of calculating reckoning.

"There, that's about it. I'm ready to go."

Chief O'Brien glanced up as Data, Worf, Riker and Troi came through the transporter room doors.

"We've come to see you off," Troi smiled.

"And to make sure you don't take half the transporter room with you as well," Riker added mock seriously.

"As if we would," Robin replied quickly, before catching Commander La Forge's eye and adding promptly, "sir."

"And Geordi... I'm trusting you to work that Ensign of yours hard. None of the cushy tasks she gets handed aboard the Enterprise."

La Forge simply smiled at Commander Riker, aware of the strong note of humour underlying his ostensibly strict tone. Ensign Lefler, however, not as

familiar with the First Officer's manner, glanced towards Commander Riker momentarily, her face vulnerable. *In my excitement, have I unknowingly stepped over that fine mark that lies between being pert, and being impertinent to a commanding officer?* she wondered, a worried knot promptly forming in her stomach.

"I am sure that Commander La Forge already has a number of interesting tasks in mind," Deanna said gently, aware of Lefler's sudden concern.

"You bet - one of them no doubt manhandling that pile of equipment on and off the transporter pad at Terminus. I hear the operators are very fussy there, Robin - be careful the Commander doesn't work you into the ground before you even get within transporter range of Ceranti One!" O'Brien smiled.

"Don't listen to them, Robin," Geordi reassured his assistant, "they're just missing us already - and we haven't even gone yet!"

Robin simply allowed herself a wary smile, suddenly shy at the number and rank of people present at their departure. It was not every day that a humble Ensign had the ship's First and Second Officers at their send off, not to mention ship's Counselor and the Head of Security of the Fleet's flagship to boot.

Ensign Lefler took a deep breath, bit her lower lip and made a mental note to amend her famous, and infamous, personal set of rules for life...

Watch your mouth Lefler, she told herself sternly, and know your place.

Only then did Robin Lefler turn to bid her senior colleagues aboard the Enterprise a polite farewell.

The lab area was dimly lit, the door to the connecting exterior corridor wide open, as Dr Leah Brahms loaded yet another isolinear optical chip into the computer interface before her. Due to the position of the computer terminal, she stood with her back to the door and a perspex case of chips at her side as she speedily, competently, scanned the data held upon each one of them before making her decision. Some she slipped neatly into her carry-all, others were discarded into a second smaller box - but all activity was accompanied by nervous jerky movements and frequent checks over her shoulder to check that the corridor outside remained empty.

Then, distant yet distinct, the sound of footsteps became obvious at the far end of the complex. Stopping, starting, the owner of the footsteps appeared to be checking each of the labs - looking for something, or even someone.

With an almost reflex action, Leah switched off the terminal and hit the manual override that killed the laboratory lights in one fluid move. She then made for cover within the shadowy recesses of the office, almost tripping over in her haste to hide herself away.

The footsteps came closer, closer, and yet closer still, unhurried, unflustered, until a large framed body paused in the open doorway to the lab, her lab, before actually stepping inside. The whole room seemed to be filled with the dark form as it moved inexorably towards the desk, casting its attention over the work clutter that covered its expanse.

Please don't let them turn the terminal on, Leah prayed fervently, her fists clenched, convinced that the intruder would activate the monitor and realise the nature of the chips that lay scattered across the open manuals.

But a loud bang from the far end of the corridor made the intruder freeze, silhouetted momentarily by the external light source of the corridor before melting away as if never having been there.

Once the unwelcome visitor had been gone some moments, Leah finally ventured out from her hiding place, purpose and urgency written into her every movement. Dr Brahms reached for the next box of neatly packed isolinear chips and swore fluently as she dropped them across the floor in her haste.

"Heil. Heil!" Leah fell to her knees, scabbling at the offending storage devices in her efforts to retrieve them from their position on the ground, her breathing becoming increasingly laboured.

"Careful - you will damage the interfaces," came a quiet cool voice from behind Brahms' shoulder.

Dr Leah Brahms emitted a shrill squeak, which she instantly silenced herself, by clamping a fear-dampened hand over her mouth as she spun round on her knees to confront the owner of those words.

"Oh my God! Oh my - It's you!" Brahms issued the command for light before sinking back onto her knees once more, clutching at her fiercely thumping heart. "Are you trying to kill me, Spaaruk? Where do you get off creeping up on people like that?"

The dim lights of the office had dutifully increased in intensity to reveal the angular face of a female Vulcan whose high cheekbones and upswept eyebrows gave an almost ethereal, satyrish air, enhanced by her unexpected appearance from apparently nowhere.

"I can assure you, Dr Brahms, I have

no such intention. It would be most illogical." The Vulcan finally frowned, her aloof reaction one of intense puzzlement at Leah Brahms' all too Human reaction to the fright she had just experienced. "It is likely, after all, that these chips have not been treated with the tripolymer sealant required to protect the interactive interface."

Dr Leah Brahms regarded the face of her Vulcan colleague with some misgiving as the expression of puzzlement gave way to one of almost irritation at Dr Brahms' reluctance to climb to her feet and move on from the fact that Spaaruk had surprised her to the point of real fear. Such an emotive response made Spaaruk obviously uncomfortable, as she was still relatively ill-adjusted to working so closely with a Human.

"I am sorry to have distressed you," Spaaruk finally managed in a somewhat awkward tone, and Leah Brahms, recognising that in the Vulcan's voice there was an edge of discomfort, climbed to her feet after collecting the last of the isolinear chips from the floor.

"It was not your fault," Leah said quickly in her most matter-of-fact tone. "It was the uninvited guest who preceded you in here, and if you were the one who made that loud noise in the corridor, the one that you in fact managed to frighten off."

"There was an intruder?"

At Dr Brahms' brief nod, Spaaruk's face seemed to become even more shuttered.

"Yes, indeed there was. It would appear that someone feels they may have something to gain from poking around in our old files, so we had better be extra careful to delete everything that we are

not going to use and wipe clean anything that may be used in some way against us." Brahms indicated the small box of isolinear discards with a nod of her head. "And those, by way of example, will have to be destroyed as soon as possible."

Spaaruk immediately picked up the box of discards, and tucked it beneath one arm with an air of strong resolution. "They grow ever more audacious as time goes on," she observed, "and careless too."

"All the more reason for us to be even more vigilant, Dr Spaaruk," Leah Brahms answered promptly, struggling to keep any nuance of Human emotion from her voice in the presence of the Vulcan, although why Spaaruk should be so discomfited by her earlier lapse she had no idea. Dr Spaaruk acknowledged both this, and the words, with a brief nod of her head.

"So, Doctor, any more news?" Brahms asked.

"One moment please, Dr Brahms."

As if following completely normal office etiquette, Spaaruk coolly produced a tricorder from the pocket of her Vulcan-style cloak and then ran it around the walls and other surfaces of the office before giving a brief nod of approval and manually closing the door. Only then did she start to speak in her smooth, precise tones.

"I have obtained passes to Space Station McKinley. Two. They will allow you to talk with some of the Alpha unit prior to your official rendezvous with the ship due to take you to Ceranti One. The three members of Alpha you will meet are Commander Nathan Johns, Lt Commander 'Halo' Jones-McKintyre, and a Commander Shelby."

Leah Brahms accepted the two

passes drawn from the opposite pocket to the one that held the tricorder. "Will you be meeting the Starfleet shakedown team reps with me, Spaaruk?"

"No. Unnecessary and risky. The two of us being seen meeting with any crew of Alpha unit now could give rise to much unnecessary comment and speculation. Commander Shelby I have not met, but Commander Johns and Lt Commander Jones-McKintyre I have had dealings with before. They have proven themselves most trustworthy."

"What of you, then - and why two passes?"

"I shall go on ahead and meet you at Ceranti One. I obtained two passes as it seemed wise to assume that your errand this afternoon would prove successful. Did it?"

Leah looked up from her final packing of the data chips and associated PADD documentation to give her partner a brief smile.

"Actually, yes, it was successful. And a lot easier to convince him than I had anticipated. In fact Wesley cannot wait to get to Ceranti One."

"Then you have neglected to tell him the whole?" The tone of Spaaruk's voice was vaguely disapproving.

"Yes, Spaaruk, I have, for now. The more detail he is aware of now, the bigger the potential for his letting slip enough to make someone start asking questions, and so jeopardise our position. Considering that he has yet to explain to his mother why he will not be visiting her this Academy vacation, it seemed wiser to wait. There is the duration of a long forthcoming trip in which to explain everything to his satisfaction."

"Your logic is acceptable. But the boy is Human -"

"And his mother has the ear of Jean-Luc Picard." Dr Brahms paused long enough to allow the name to perforate her companion's implacable attitude. Her statement was met with a concerned silence.

"Indeed. I see that although you may not be familiar with the name of Dr Beverly Crusher, the name of Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the Enterprise has travelled as far as the Galen IV annexe. Don't look so worried, Spaaruk, not much longer and you and I will be out of here!"

"I do not worry. It is most illogical to concern oneself over things that are beyond your influence. However, the boy must be told the whole. If you genuinely think he will be of some use to us, it is the *only* way," Spaaruk insisted.

"Spaaruk, if Wesley Crusher is even a quarter as good as Geordi La Forge maintains, he'll be more than of use to us - he'll be a solid, 24 carat asset!"

"24...?"

"Never mind. I just hope and pray to goodness that this necessary deception does not alienate him from us and the project. If I can just convince him that it's all truly necessary... and that goes for Geordi as well. I'm not looking forward to being the one who has to do the convincing either. Oh, yes, yes, I know it is the decided way - but I still hate doing it." Brahms released a long distracted sigh.

"Then may we together become greater than the sum of all of us," Spaaruk observed sagely, putting her thin, long fingered hands together, tip to tip, almost as if at worship.

"A wish or a prayer, Dr Spaaruk?" Brahms quizzed her.

"A statement of intent, Doctor," was her reply.

Wesley viewed the message awaiting him when he returned to the Academy's Residential Halls with a sinking heart. One of the cadets sharing his dorm had expressly pointed out the fact that a communication, tagged subspace, no less, was there for him. As a result, he could not even pretend that he had missed it, or forgotten to check. The note was enough to strike fear into the heart of anyone preparing to embark on the deception of a fond parent. It said simply,

Wesley,

I have arranged a subspace relay. Call at your convenience.

Mom.

And so now all he had to do was think up a simple story to explain why he would be missing the rendezvous with the USS Enterprise for the long vacation, without carelessly either upsetting his mother or putting his future trip with Dr Brahms at risk.

The resulting conversation with his mother was an uncomfortable one, and went pretty well as he had pictured it in his worst imagined scenarios. The ordeal was made worse by the fact that one of the relay beacons used en route appeared to be the victim of target practice by idle Klingons, the net result of which was that every few minutes, or at a particularly

difficult part of the conversation (whichever came the sooner), the whole of the relayed communication would break up, and then take 30 seconds, at least, to re-establish itself.

"...so as a result I'm going to have to stay and finish the additional work set by Professor Collistor."

Shzzzrk...szzzrk.

Wesley stared at the shifting picture and waited for it to settle down, wondering whether he should take the risk of repeating what he had just said. The problem with half truths was that the substance of what you said tended to shift slightly the more you repeated them, and Wesley had learned a long time ago never to underestimate his mother.

"So you're telling me that Professor Collistor has given you so much extra work that you haven't even enough time for a vacation, Wes?"

Maybe the story concerning Prof. Collistor was not such a good idea after all, conceded Wesley glumly, as his mother sounded far from convinced.

"No. Well, not exactly..."

Shzzzrk...szzzrk.

"It sounds to me like Professor Collistor is picking on you, Wesley. Everyone needs a break at some time, and this has been a particularly hard year for you at Starfleet Academy. Wes - are you worried at all? Are people making things hard for you?"

His mother's face was concerned, frowning, as she tried to discern what the problem was with her son.

"Perhaps I should speak to Jean-Luc about this -"

"No, Mom! No, don't...!"

Shzzzrk...szzzrk.

"For goodness sake!" Wesley exclaimed noisily, drawing the attention of several people around his communication booth. "I said no, don't, Mom - did you hear me?"

"I heard you, Wes. I heard you. Are you sure that Professor Collistor's sudden load of extra work is *all* that is keeping you from joining us this vacation?"

"Um... Well, there is something else," Wesley admitted finally, reluctantly.

"Wes, you don't have to tell me if you don't want to," his mother told him, her face understanding.

"Oh no, Mom, it's nothing like that.."

Shzzzrk...szzzrk.

Why not tell his mother? It was not as if she was likely to run and tell anyone, particularly as she was AUs away in deepest space on the latest mission of the USS Enterprise. Surely there could be no harm in telling her of all people, and Wesley Crusher did not want to lie to her at all. No, Dr Brahms would surely understand that his only close family deserved an honest explanation as to what he was intending to do this vacation.

"It's not only work that has come up, Mom, although I *have* got an extra project that has to be worked on."

Beverly sat there, light years away in her familiar sickbay office aboard a distant Starship, watching her son with almost saintly patience as his innate honesty came through. He squared his

shoulders and pushed his chin up.

Shzzzrk...szzzrk.

Wesley Crusher waited patiently this time for the screen to clear so he could resume his conversation.

"An opportunity has come up - a really great opportunity, and one I can't, and don't, want to miss. But it's a secret."

At this the Chief Medical Officer of the USS Enterprise raised one delicate eyebrow at her son's obvious reticence, and said, "Well, I am really pleased for you Wesley, but I would be a little happier if I knew slightly more about this so-called 'opportunity'."

Her misgivings were obvious, and the delicate eyebrow remained gently elevated. Wesley felt a prickle of sweat break out on his brow as he faced her calm obduracy and Cadet Crusher started to realise why Captain Jean-Luc Picard was so loathe to cross his mother. In her own way, she was a formidable adversary.

Shzzzrk...szzzrk.

"Well..." Wesley started again, pulling a reluctant set of fingers through his hair as he looked back at his patiently waiting parent, "it's sort of like this..."

TWO

Terminus Starbase was busy - too busy in the main to take any notice at all of a young Starfleet Ensign sitting atop what appeared to be her luggage, but maybe not so busy as not to notice that that same luggage clearly carried the distinctive logo of Starfleet Engineering.

Robin Lefler sat patiently, watching the throng of life going about its business marvelling at how such a remote Starbase could be so busy, her head propped up on a hand supported by one of her knees. She looked for all the world like a weary young space traveller in transit between ships. Her face was lined with fatigue, her whole demeanour lying somewhere between boredom and impatience. The truth of the matter lay in a small Mark I phaser, nestled deep in the pocket of her fleet issue jacket, comfortably close to her free hand. Geordi La Forge had discreetly handed it to her after giving the Ensign under his command strict instructions about *not* leaving the equipment under *any* circumstances. La Forge's immediate concern upon arrival had been to identify the ship due to pick them up, and to ensure that their connection was aware of their presence. To that end, he had disappeared in the direction of the Administrator's office not ten minutes since. Shifting her position slightly, Robin moved her head in an effort to ease her stiff neck and promptly caught the gaze of a man watching her very closely. Robin's first reaction was to glance behind her to see what else the man might be looking at, but swivelled round to face a completely blank wall. She turned swiftly back to get a proper look at him, but he had completely disappeared, almost as if he had never been.

"Curious," Robin muttered to herself, casting her gaze around the busy thoroughfare to see where her mysterious observer could have got to. An exclamation burst from her as she turned straight into the man's gaze again, only this time he was three metres nearer.

But as soon as she had caught sight of him again, his gaze dropped and he melted away yet again. Curiouser and curiouser.

"Hey Robin - good news, and hot drinks!" that?"

Robin Lefler was sufficiently distracted by the sight of her commanding officer balancing two steaming vessels on top of what looked like the PADD he had taken with him to the Administrator's office to stop her visual sweep.

"Thank you, Commander," Lefler responded with no little enthusiasm as her eyes alighted upon the large cups of steaming liquid being proffered, and her stomach growled noisily in accord.

"Robin - do you think we could relax the formalities a little, starting with you calling me Geordi for the duration of this trip? Not sir, not Commander - Geordi."

"Of course Comm... Geordi," Robin amended quickly.

"Great. And the next thing - why didn't you tell me you were so hungry?"

Robin carefully removed the hot cups from the Chief Engineer's care and placed them atop the equipment carton.

"Well, I wasn't then - hungry, I mean. I guess I was too excited." She grinned suddenly, her infectious enthusiasm bringing a grin to Geordi La Forge's face also.

"This is a big deal for you Robin - this trip, the recognition."

"Too right. How often would someone like me get a chance to actually visit somewhere like Ceranti One? I thought I'd used all my luck up when I was assigned to the Enterprise so early on in my career!"

"And what has luck got to do with

in - "Well, everything. Less than one

"I know the statistics, Robin, but don't underestimate yourself. When it comes to ensuring quality personnel for the USS Enterprise, there is a formidable team at work."

"Sure. I've heard all the horror stories about Starfleet assignments," she replied dryly, "and first hand too, from my friends."

"I'm sure you have, but it was not Starfleet Command that I meant. Nope. I do believe that it was due to an interest in your work record that led to a certain First Officer drawing the attention of a certain Captain to the question of your availability."

"No. No, you are surely teasing me!" Robin said in a disbelieving tone, her face a little paler as Geordi did not deign to answer.

"Well, I wouldn't have said it if I thought you were going to go all silly on me, Robin." Geordi smiled, returning his attention to his broth.

"No. Well, I don't believe it. I always work hard, damned hard. But then, doesn't everyone?"

Geordi shrugged, and Robin fell silent for a few moments, content to nurse her hot drink in her hands as she mulled over Geordi's words. The truth? *Don't be stupid, Lefler*, she told herself, shortly.

After a little while, Geordi finally drained the last of his drink and got to his feet.

"Okay, so now the good news. You'll be no doubt pleased to know we

are due to rendezvous with the USS Galaxy in approximately..." he glanced at his wrist chronometer with a deliberate flourish... "25 to 30 minutes. They have, according to the most helpful Terminus Administrator, made excellent time across the neighbouring quadrant. As a result, they are well ahead of schedule."

"Hmmm," Robin responded wryly, wondering where Geordi La Forge had learned that particular art of managing to inveigle information from virtually any source. Commander Riker maybe? Speaking of which...

"Commander Riker may be a little disappointed that it's not the USS Hood."

"I said 'good' news, not necessarily 'great' news," Geordi replied, ducking down to retrieve his carry-all.

It was then, as she looked past Geordi's gold clad back, that Robin Lefler saw *him* again, staring, watching, and the object of his attention was most definitely them. Whether it was more specifically her, or Geordi La Forge, or indeed both, she could not tell. All she was aware of was the alarm bells ringing in her head.

"Commander - " Robin started with some urgency.

"Robin - I thought we'd gone over this once before already."

"Commander, I think we are being watched," Robin insisted.

But in the time it had taken her to inform Geordi, her silent observer had once more melted away into non-existence.

"He's gone again!" She sighed angrily, looking around at the passers-by with a frown on her face.

"Well I'm not about to insult you by asking if you're sure it was not just your imagination - maybe you frightened him off?"

Robin simply shot Geordi a deeply offended look, at which La Forge threw up his arms as if in mock surrender.

"Okay... Okay, but - " He looked around himself, studying those personnel closest to their position - "maybe, just maybe, he was a potential admirer, Robin. Saw you sitting there on your own and thought that it was an opportunity to strike up a conversation. Could that be one explanation you could possibly give some thought to?"

Robin gave her commanding officer a somewhat quelling look before releasing something of a long sigh. "Excuse me for begging to differ, sir - "

"Which means you are probably about to do just that - and it's still Geordi, Ensign Lefler."

" - but he appeared to be interested in both of us. Not just me, although it was at first, probably only because I was the one sitting here at the time. Both of us... and this." She pointed down at their equipment and tools. "We do appear to be under observation, sir."

"If that is the case..." Geordi sighed, but his tone still carried a lack of conviction. "Why? Why would someone consider us worthy of scrutiny, and here of all places? I hate mysteries, I really do. One reason why I always wanted to be in Engineering and not Security."

La Forge stood with his hands on his hips and glanced around. Ordinarily he would more than likely discounted have such a claim as more due to an over-active imagination than reality, but Robin Lefler was a good kid, sensible, level

headed and was not given to such flights of fancy as this suggested. Indeed, she was normally a very sound judge of any given situation, technical or otherwise.

"What do you reckon to this, then, Ensign?"

"Robin."

"Pardon?"

"I didn't really want to call you Geordi, sir, if you are going to resume calling me by my rank. It could well appear somewhat... ill mannered on my part, I believe," she pointed out.

"Of course. So, what do you reckon to all this, then, Robin?"

"Don't ask me, Geordi, I'm just the assistant."

Dr Beverly Crusher allowed yet another long, heartfelt sigh to whistle through her lips as she toyed somewhat dolefully with the large chocolate sundae set before her.

When Deanna had suggested that she take a break and go to Ten Forward, instructing her to order one of the Counselor's chocolate specials from Guinan, it had seemed almost like a good idea. But now she was here, with the exotic chocolate confection in front of her, Beverly Crusher found herself forced to concede that what worked for Counselor Troi did not necessarily work for her. Yet another sigh bubbled up, and Beverly swallowed hard, doing her best to push it firmly back down and vowing to do her best to cheer up a little.

"Come on, Dr Crusher," she chided herself crossly. "It's not good for morale, senior officers being seen wishing away

their spare time in such a morose manner."

Beverly planted her chin on her hand and turned her attention to her lemon tea, moodily chasing the slice of lemon around its depths with the thoughtful spoon.

"At least," Beverly muttered thankfully, "people know when to leave you alone around here."

Maybe not always. For no sooner had the good Doctor said these very words and withdrawn her spoon from the tea before her, than she became aware that somebody had chosen to settle themselves down in the opposite chair at HER table. There were only two people she knew of that would be brave enough, or indeed foolish enough, to approach her in her present mood.

"I know it's either Troi or Guinan there," she growled unsociably, not breaking eye contact with her swirling slice of lemon for one moment. "Please go away. However it may appear to the contrary, I am having a great time."

But the voice that answered belonged to neither Guinan or Deanna. "Really? In that case, may anyone join in?" came the familiar clipped tones of Jean-Luc Picard.

Beverly glanced up, startled, to see indeed none other than the Captain ensconced in the seat opposite her.

"I thought you were on the Bridge," she grumbled.

"I was. And now I'm here. I fancied a walk." He smiled almost genially. "One of the few good points about being Captain is that one can go for a walk when one feels like it, not when allowed to by a senior officer."

"I'm almost convinced, Jean-Luc. No, I mean really." Beverly's sarcasm was voiced with a wry smile that announced that she was anything but. "Did Guinan put you up to this?"

The CMO glanced over towards the mysterious bar-keeper of Ten Forward, but Guinan had suddenly found polishing her counter an all-consuming task, one of her remarkable hats doing a fine job of masking her face almost totally from view.

"No. Not at all."

"Then Troi. It had to be Troi. Was it?" she asked him sternly.

"No. For heaven's sake, Beverly, allow me a little credit!" Jean-Luc Picard exclaimed, throwing up one hand in an attempt to halt her cross-examination.

"Talking to yourself, working yourself so hard that Nurse Ogawa has already been to see Will Riker, and with a face so long that your chin is almost in... that." He nodded with no little distaste in the direction of the sundae. "I have no need of either Counselor Troi or Guinan to tell me that you are, perhaps, a little out of sorts."

"Is it that obvious?" She grimaced. "And there was I thinking I was managing it rather well."

"Hmmm, of course." He paused momentarily before going on. "I have also just received a very polite, if slightly apologetic, note from a certain Cadet at Starfleet Academy. It appears that he will not be joining us aboard the Enterprise within the next few days after all."

Beverly returned her attention once more to the unfortunate slice of lemon in her tea. "No, Wesley will not be joining us for his long vacation as arranged." She

smiled a little sadly. "And yes, I know I'm being foolish. The art is in knowing when to let go. He's not a child anymore - it was only a matter of time until it happened." The melancholy sigh finally found its release. "But even knowing all that doesn't seem to make it any easier; if anything it seems to make it harder. Where has all the time gone, Jean-Luc?"

"You should be pleased that he has found something that has excited his interest sufficiently for him to delay his visit to us on this occasion." Picard leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs before him as he regarded Dr Crusher hunched over her cooling tea. "And a delay is all it is. It's a big universe out there, Beverly, and there had to come a time when even the Enterprise would seem a little too restrictive for all the things he wants to do and experience. It was inevitable. But he will be back, because this, when all is said and done, is his home - the place where he belongs most."

Beverly looked up and swallowed, managing a crooked smile at the man sitting opposite her. Picard looked steadily back, totally at ease and patiently awaiting her response in his most diplomatic mode. Beverly could do no less than appreciate his efforts to comfort and reassure.

"You're right. Of course you are right - as always." The smile became less crooked. "And thank you for understanding enough to say the words. I needed to hear them spoken by somebody other than myself." The smile then became a moue of distaste as she looked down at her chocolate sundae. "How can Deanna eat stuff like this?" Beverly marvelled as she pushed the offending confection to one side.

"Years of practice - and a hedonistic streak that our Counselor would appear

to hide extremely well," Picard responded astutely, and with no little humour, before going on to say, "So you no doubt have more than a little free time due to you over the next few weeks then, Dr Crusher?"

"Indeed I have. I had tried to save as much as possible so that I could spend plenty of time with Wesley when he arrived." She gave a small disconsolate shrug, and took a minute sip of her tea. "I suppose I could always postpone some of it until his next visit."

Captain Picard moved to perch on the edge of his chair and rested his arms on the table. "Well, I'm due for a break myself soon. I had thought I might make use of one of the holodecks, and either go exploring Andean VII on horseback, or maybe the Pacifica basin under sail." He paused momentarily and gave a slight cough. "Um... Should you like to accompany me, you can choose which of them you think you would enjoy more. Or, indeed, something else should you prefer it."

He looks so tired, Beverly suddenly realised with a jolt. *How could I have missed that?* There had been a run of far from routine missions recently, and for Jean-Luc in particular, one name sprang to mind. That of Kamala.

"Why, Jean-Luc, I would be delighted." Beverly accepted the invitation in a soft voice, much softer than she had originally intended it to be, her own present troubles forgotten as she regarded the carefully shuttered features of the man before her. "But only if you want the company. Don't feel you have to offer..." Beverly purposely allowed her voice to trail away as she moved to touch Picard's hand, but then thought better of it. To potentially embarrass the Captain in the middle of Ten Forward was not what he needed at this precise moment in

time.

"You are an exceptional and perceptive woman," he said softly, his expression enigmatic, his touch surprisingly warm as he moved his hand to cover her own, "but on occasion you can be a little obtuse."

Beverly regarded her long-time friend with an element of concern. She had borne witness for at least twenty years now to some part of this remarkable man's life, and at times she had despaired at the way he would periodically and systematically isolate himself from those around him, herself included.

Crusher looked into his face and hesitated. The vulnerability she glimpsed there reminded her of the Jean-Luc Picard she had known so well almost two decades ago - a Jean-Luc Picard she knew could all too easily perforate her professional defences. But this Jean-Luc was not *her* Jean-Luc; he belonged to Jenice... Vash... Kamala, and to pretend otherwise at present, on whatever mad impulse or good intention, would only lead to hurt. She smiled into his intelligent hazel eyes and took her refuge in the safest place she knew - humour.

"Jean-Luc," she said, very deliberately moving her free hand to trap his own, waiting for him to recoil with his customary unease at such a display, "at the risk of repeating myself - if I didn't know you better, I'd say you were playing games with me."

But this Jean-Luc Picard did not recoil. "The point about games," he replied, equally deliberately, "is that they are an imitation of life, Beverly."

Beverly looked at him, and then in spite of herself, started to laugh. "Jean-Luc Picard," she said, "if you are willing

to put up with me moaning and complaining about Andean VII weather, AND you promise not to provide me with that evil little beast of a bay that cannot be anything other than a holographic programming glitch... how can I refuse?"

"Ah, yes... the bay. I remember your last encounter quite vividly." An all too rare chuckle came from Picard, the unexpected laughter creasing his eyes and relaxing his expression as he glanced at her, the recollection obviously a source of great amusement to him. "I'll take that as a yes vote for Andean VII, then."

Dr Crusher raised an elegant eyebrow and inclined her head slightly to one side in a nod of agreement, to which Captain Jean-Luc Picard responded with a complete change of subject. "So then, Beverly, tell me what vacation pastime Wesley has discovered that could possibly compete with the attractions of the USS Enterprise?"

"Not so much a pastime, Jean-Luc, as some one-off trip to a Starfleet facility."

"Really? I shall rephrase my question then. What Starfleet facility has proved so much more attractive than the Enterprise, I wonder?" Jean-Luc Picard, by now, looked genuinely intrigued and continued to hold Beverly Crusher's gaze until she realised he was actually expecting some kind of reply.

"Oh... er... I don't really know, Jean-Luc. Something to do with a place called Ceranti One... but he had some bee in his bonnet about it all being incredibly confidential, so he wouldn't tell me any more than that."

Picard frowned, his expression vaguely perplexed. "Ceranti One? Outpost Ceranti One?"

"Honestly, Jean-Luc, I have no idea. He wouldn't tell me any more than that, and even that I had to draw from him with all the skill of an old Earth dentist pulling teeth."

"Colourful analogy, Doctor." Picard grimaced, before leaning back once more into his chair and rubbing his chin thoughtfully with his hand. "Outpost Ceranti One. Interesting."

"What?"

Instantly, CMO Crusher's professional antennae were up, her expression now wary as she recognised Jean-Luc Picard slipping neatly back into Starfleet Captain mode at the mention of her son's proposed destination.

"What, Jean-Luc?" Dr Crusher insisted. "Tell me!"

"Oh... um, well, nothing much really." Picard regarded the Doctor with a serious face. "It may just be an odd coincidence, but Geordi La Forge and Robin Lefler were bound for... ah... a somewhat similar destination when they left earlier. Very curious."

Beverly looked hard at Captain Picard, her azure gaze suddenly narrowed. Both officers had been involved in Starfleet long enough to know that such a complete coincidence was a rare occurrence; both of them were, however, apparently reluctant to admit it.

"Doctor... Beverly. It's a coincidence, nothing more. A simple coincidence." Picard's tone was firm, carrying an implicit warning against becoming alarmed.

"Of course," Dr Crusher acknowledged, but her face was now shuttered, uncharacteristically devoid of all expression.

Picard leant forward and touched her arm. "But just in case, I will see what else I can find out," he assured her. "No promises, mind you. Now - please, if you will excuse me."

With that Captain Picard left Ten Forward without delay, leaving Dr Crusher looking long and hard at her tea before she took an extended sip of the now cool, lemon-spiced liquid.

"Problems, Dr Crusher?"

As if from nowhere, Guinan had suddenly materialised in the recently vacated chair and was watching the CMO with her chin resting on her hands, elbows resting on the table.

"Maybe." Beverly brushed her thick red hair back from her suddenly anxious face. "Maybe not. There doesn't seem to be much I can do either way."

"Nonsense!" Guinan announced in her own particularly forthright way. "Find out what it is that's troubling you, and do something about it."

"That's easy to say, Guinan," the Doctor sighed, "but the Captain is unconvinced there is a problem at all! It's probably just a case of me putting two and two together and getting a grand total of five!"

"But you're not as unconvinced as Captain Picard, Beverly?"

"Um... no. But if the Captain is unconvinced, what can I say or do, or present by way of factual evidence, that could prove anything worthwhile to the contrary. But something... instinct? I don't know... tells me something IS not quite right. I know it."

"Oh, Dr Beverly Crusher, surely you have noticed that this is Starfleet."

Guinan moved her arms to encompass the whole of Ten Forward, the Enterprise and Federation space beyond. "Starfleet is a hungry animal - it feeds on information and lots of it. Lists, orders, manifests, reports, commands, instructions... which means there is always the means to find out more information. The questions may have to be a little more... subtle than usual, but the information is all there."

"You sound like something of an expert, Guinan." Beverly smiled.

"I have my methods," was all the curious Hostess of Ten Forward would say by way of reply. "By the way, did Wesley tell you who was due to speak at the Academy this semester? In fact, if my memory serves me right, about three days ago?"

"No." Beverly frowned. "Who?"

"Dr Ordan Burns," Guinan told her with some relish.

"Should I know that name?" Beverly asked her, her own face bewildered.

"I don't know - but he didn't actually get to speak."

"He didn't?"

"Nope." Guinan looked from left to right, before signalling Dr Crusher to move closer, and whispering, "Food poisoning."

"Really? But that's easily treatable, Guinan."

"Oh no, not when its due to an ill-prepared Vulcan delicacy; a rare root plant with highly toxic tubers. Dr Ordan Burns fancies himself as something of a bon viveur you see - and a non-Terran bon viveur at that!"

"Fascinating, Guinan," Beverly replied with the slightest tinge of sarcasm.

"Yes, it is. Because the only person available to step in at such short notice was Dr Leah Brahms. Who, by the way, is much more one for your regional delicacies - Terran European Italian, in fact."

"Dr Leah Brahms?" Beverly's sarcasm suddenly vanished, her attention firmly caught. "Guinan, how do you know all this?"

"Well you see, Starfleet is like a hungry animal -"

"This is the same one that feeds on information, right?"

"Yes, it is."

"Okay." Beverly settled herself down for what could be a lengthy explanation, moving her chin to rest on her hands, elbows on the table opposite Guinan. "Tell me what you know about this hungry animal..."

The silence in the conference room of the USS Galaxy stretched on and on, and on... and on. All those present appeared to be extremely unwilling to break it; they just kept looking at each other as if trying to divine what each of them was doing there without actually saying anything.

It all proved too much for the Galaxy's Commanding Officer, Captain Penniston.

"Ahem," said Penniston, with forced brightness. "Well, now that I have performed the necessary introductions, I am afraid that my duties mean that I must

return to the Bridge." He eyed his guests uneasily, his eyes flicking from one of the occupants of his conference room to the other. "Should you - er - need anything, my Exec will be along shortly. You need only ask. So, Ladies... Gentlemen."

With that, Captain Penniston exited the room with as much speed as could be deemed courteous under the circumstances.

Coward, thought Wesley Crusher, well aware of the undercurrents of tension present in the room. *Captain Picard would never have given in so quickly to such an uncomfortable situation!*

Robin Lefler glanced at Wesley across the shiny ebonite conference table, her expression in total agreement with Wesley's general thoughts concerning the USS Galaxy's Captain, but she also was uncharacteristically silent. It seemed that all present were waiting for just one person to speak, and that person was Geordi La Forge.

Once Captain Penniston was gone, La Forge did not leave them waiting for long.

"OK, Leah - what, exactly, is going on?"

Dr Leah Brahms licked her lips nervously, well aware that despite appearances to the contrary, Geordi was rather more than just a little angry at what he would probably consider to be completely unnecessary cloak and dagger theatrics. "I can explain, Geordi."

"I damn well hope you can, and I am certainly not about to insult everyone's intelligence here by pretending otherwise."

Geordi could see Leah's natural reticence in front of Robin Lefler and

Wesley Crusher. She did not seem at all at ease with the task of explaining their presence aboard the USS Galaxy, heading for Ceranti One. In fact, Brahms moved around the whole of the conference room prior to even opening her mouth, fiddling with ornaments, playing with unoccupied chairs.

"I am waiting, Dr Brahms." Geordi's use of her title was deliberate; his tone brooked no argument, his face growing more stony by the second.

"Burns. Dr Ordan Burns. *He* is the reason that we are on this ship bound for the Ceranti system," Leah finally started, pausing to lean on the back of the chair at the head of the conference table.

"Dr Ordan Burns, the warp propulsion expert due to speak to us at the Academy?"

"The one and the same, Wes." Leah sighed and ran a weary hand over her eyes before continuing. "Dr Ordan Burns is an old... *adversary*, let's say, of mine. Our 'professional' association goes back some years and it has never been a particularly pleasant one. Dr Burns, in my opinion, is ambitious, almost totally without talent and totally untrustworthy. My reasons for such a view? Once, some time ago now, when I was a mere junior with the theoretical propulsion group, I was instructed by one of my seniors to dispatch part of my research work to Burns as part of a study to be assessed by Starfleet. I sent it in good faith; it was something I had worked long and hard on, and was justifiably very proud of. Burns... Burns did more than discredit it. He almost destroyed my young career with his comments regarding my work. But I survived... I survived long enough to be promoted from junior and to witness Burns produce something awfully similar to my original work, as *his* own original idea some time later.

"I've never forgotten. Since then I have always been incredibly careful to whom I show my preliminary work, and for years now Burns has never caused me, or anyone working for me, any problems. I had always thought that maybe he dare not - concerned that I could, should I wish to, discredit him publicly, now that I possess the position and reputation to do so."

Leah Brahms paused to draw a deep breath.

"But?" prompted Geordi La Forge, his hands steepled before him, his demeanour very still.

"But," continued Leah Brahms with a deep sigh, "somehow - well, it's happened again. I never thought I'd hear myself say that; it's happened again."

"Go on."

"I had been working with an excellent Benzite molecular chemist, Murdo, who had approached me with an innovative idea concerning the forced matrix arrangement of the dilithium crystal. Murdo had found an interesting new angle on not only Zefram Cochrane's work of some years ago, but Channing's. One that could enable us to squeeze an additional 1% cruising speed from existing M/ARC configurations."

"Had he managed to force dilithium into more useful crystals by realignment?" Wesley asked her, obviously intrigued by what she had said.

"He had - but not by conventional bombardment techniques. Murdo had found a way to 'cheat' the crystal into a more efficient alignment."

"How?" Wesley Crusher and Robin Lefler chorused instantaneously.

Leah looked at Geordi, who shrugged briefly at her rueful gaze.

"If you want our help, we're going to have to know," he stated reasonably.

"Murdo had worked extensively with respect to 'contaminating' the dilithium crystal lattice with trace elements. Pure crystal is great, but there have always been attempts made to improve the lattice structure by introducing minute amounts of trace elements. A one percent gain at the top end of the Galaxy class warp range could mean cruising speeds as high as warp 9.9, no mean improvement.

"Murdo had hit upon the idea of using the rare 'earth' element Uthium, a very rare trace element found in the Betastrom System. Then - there was an accident."

"An accident?" Robin Lefler echoed, her tone questioning.

"An incident ruled an accident by the subsequent inquest held by Starfleet Utopia Planetia. Murdo died in a mysterious lab fire sixteen months ago, just as he was getting close to something. And I mean *really* close to something. I was left with only half the research that we had managed to complete, as Murdo had become obsessively more thorough the closer we came to a workable solution - and the more thorough he became, the more secretive he became. But I had enough, just, and so I pressed on, convinced I was on the edge of some kind of breakthrough."

Leah paused, stretching back from her chosen supporting chair, using her arms to brace herself as she carried on.

"Then, suddenly, Burns produces this revelation concerning dilithium crystals, based on my work - I mean *my*

work, out of nowhere, but using the synthetic dense star element Elecon instead of Uthium - ironically, an element we had briefly considered and then had disregarded."

"Is it possible that Burns had chanced upon the same idea and using his own research had come up with a better result, Leah?" Geordi asked her, his own expression unconvinced.

"Geordi, you know as well as I do how strict Starfleet is concerning duplication of research. No, it's impossible - and I said so in no uncertain terms."

"To whom, Leah? Who was it that you told in no uncertain terms?"

"The board of inquest, chaired by Admiral Stevenson. I never have liked her, you know, and that whole fiasco on Utopia Planetia just about settled it to my mind. Admiral Stevenson was more interested in Dr Ordan Burns than in finding out the truth of the matter; the whole inquest was a complete and utter farce!"

Wesley Crusher caught Robin Lefler's eye at this point, and both did well to control their amusement at Dr Brahm's words. Geordi La Forge, however, was not at all amused. As far as he was concerned he still had to ascertain why they were bound for Ceranti One, and Geordi felt more than a little responsible for the two young representatives from the Enterprise present. With this weight on his mind, he got up from his seat and went to stare considerably at the moving starscape outside the USS Galaxy.

"So you are convinced that Dr Ordan Burns has stolen your work - and enough of it to present working evidence to Starfleet?" he asked.

"I'm not sure how much he has, but I'm damned well convinced he's stolen at least as much of the work as was represented by what Murdo and I had worked on together. So convinced, I'd stake my reputation on it... and have."

"Have? Leah, if this has gone past the inquest stage... Leah, what have you agreed to?" There was a sudden urgency in Geordi's voice that both Robin and Wesley recognised but did not fully understand, all humour vanishing from their young faces as they observed the Commander's animadversions.

"Geordi - I had no other choice, there was nothing else to do. I couldn't just sit there and accept the sexually motivated justice being meted out by Burns' puppet Admiral. I couldn't, I just *couldn't*! That was not Starfleet justice being dispensed - and that's what I deserve. Dammit, that's what I have a right to!"

"Leah, you still haven't answered my question. What was the next designated step of the proceedings?"

"I had no other choice, Commander," she finally snapped out, turning her back on the assembled team. "I demanded a trial. His theories cannot work, they just don't make sense - in fact they read like nonsense. I've seen the results of Elecon on dilithium crystal lattices - and those are not the results Burns has presented to Starfleet!"

"Okay, so a lab trial, that I can understand. Get enough data to base a computer model on and then show Burns up as the fake you say he is."

"Already done. But a computer model is only as good as the results it is based on... so that was not sufficient to discredit his claims either."

Geordi's face became very still, almost wary. "So what's the bottom line, Dr Brahms?"

Only silence greeted his question. Dr Leah Brahms refused to turn round, her gaze steadfastly fixed to a large painting of the USS Galaxy adorning one wall. Robin and Wesley could only look at each other in puzzlement as Geordi repeated his question again and then said, "Leah?"

"I asked for a trial."

"But you said - "

"No, no, not a lab trial, Geordi. A space trial." She finally turned on her heel to face the stunned features of Commander La Forge. "With warp run," she added, as if it was significant.

It seemed to prove significant to the Commander, as the additional three words were enough to make him collapse into the nearest available chair. "A *space* trial, Leah? You've forced Starfleet to hold their first space trial in 18 years?"

Geordi put his head in his hands as if it was a lead weight, and said simply, "Hell."

Dr Beverly Crusher sat in her office with her attention focussed firmly on its one almost blank wall. Her eyes were narrowed in fierce concentration and she was chewing absently on her thumbnail - a despised habit, but one that had a habit of re-emerging in times of stress. Her computer screen displayed various Enterprise medical logs that were in the process of being updated and finally closed off as part of her end of week workload, but her attention was anywhere but on standard sickbay commitments at that particular moment.

Finally Dr Crusher halted her study of the office wall, and turned to her computer terminal with a small frown marring her fine-featured face.

"Computer," she said abruptly. "Access all logs regarding present research activity on Utopia Planetia and Outpost Ceranti One, Starfleet."

"Access denied."

"Why?"

"Access authorisation insufficient for inquiry."

Hardly surprising as both locations were known to be amongst the most secure in Starfleet. It made sense that the logs would be protected to a high level.

"Okay. Computer, access all MEDICAL logs opened by Utopia Planetia and Outpost Ceranti One over the last... four months."

"Working."

She leaned back in her chair, and put her head against the headrest as she awaited her reply.

"Access authorisation is not sufficient. Access denied," was not the response that Dr Beverly Crusher had been expecting. Instantly she was sat forward, almost on the edge of her chair regarding the computer terminal as if it had sprouted arms and legs.

"What do you mean, access denied? I'm Chief Medical Officer of one of Starfleet's premier starships! If I haven't got access to those files, who the hell has?"

"Access authorisation is not..."

"...sufficient. Access denied,"

Crusher joined in with the computer voice. "So, tell me something I don't know, why don't you - on second thoughts, no, don't."

Beverly Crusher tapped her hard desktop in an irritated tattoo with one delicate finger.

"Computer... what authorisation access would be required to access medical records logged by Utopia Planetia and Outpost Ceranti One, say six months ago?"

"Authorisation access, Beta provisional required."

"And twelve months ago?"

"Beta non-provisional required."

Beverly raised an eyebrow in elegant surprise. "Computer, what is my access authorisation level to Starfleet records?"

"Crusher, Beverly. Chief Medical Officer. Staff rank, Commander. Clearance Alpha non-provisional."

"But still they are off bounds to me. Why?" She spoke to herself, but the computer took her muse literally.

"Access authorisation insufficient for inquiry."

"Thank you," Beverly replied dryly.

The Chief Medical Officer sat back in her chair and listened to the bustle of sickbay outside, her eyes closed in apparent repose - but inside her head, a thousand and one questions chased themselves around, demanding answers the CMO just did not have.

Why has someone seen fit to put additional protection on medical records? And

who on Earth within Starfleet would have authorised it? "No idea, on both counts," she said aloud.

Why the big secret? Why lock away information usually so readily available? Locked away even from those who should have instant access to it. What is there to hide?

"And is it going to hurt Wesley?" Beverly finally said aloud, her eyes snapping open.

Dr Crusher sat upright in her chair and put both hands on the desk before her, drumming her fingers as she assumed an expression of intense concentration. "So - you want to play it awkward. So let's play..."

She clicked her fingers and stepped neatly to her feet, pacing her CMO's office with the grace of a dancer. "I'm going to assume that whoever has secured those records has a damn good reason for doing so. Therefore, people like myself will be kept out... but this is Starfleet, and therefore by definition some people will have to be allowed access."

A slow uncertain smile crossed her face and Dr Crusher pressed her fingers against her forehead as if trying to remember something long forgotten. Then, "Okay - here's hoping. Computer, identify Crusher, Beverly - access code Beta Kappa Thi Five Five Four. Clearance Alpha." A slim hope, but worth a try.

"Working."

Beverly took another turn around the office, expecting the computer to negate even this attempt with its next set of impassive words. But instead the CMO got, "Working."

Another pause.

"Working."

Beverly sat in her chair, half alarmed, half unwilling to believe she might have a chance to pull such a long shot off. She turned her gaze back to the computer terminal once again, as the computer said, "Working," and then finally, "Access recognised. Crusher, Beverly. Clearance Alpha, access code Beta Kappa Thi, Five Five Four. Post - temporary acting Chief Starfleet Medical. Please proceed with query."

Beverly could not restrain a triumphant shout, but it was one she speedily muffled particularly as it brought Nurse Alyssa Ogawa's head around her office door. "Doctor - is everything all right?"

"Fine, Alyssa, fine. In fact it couldn't be better." Beverly beamed at her.

Alyssa pulled a doubtful face and withdrew, taking comfort in the fact that at least the CMO was looking a little more cheerful.

Dr Crusher swivelled her chair to face her terminal, her tone suddenly very businesslike. "Access all recent records with respect to medical injury on Outpost Ceranti One and Utopia Planetia. Include both civilian and Starfleet databases; priority search strings - 'warp field', 'containment', 'matter', 'antimatter', 'plasma', 'radiation', 'hyronalin' and/or 'fatal exposure'."

"Working..."

Wesley and Geordi followed Robin and Dr Leah Brahms into one of the USS Galaxy's holodecks after the Doctor had loaded a program into the facility from a suite of isolinear chips in her possession.

The doors to the holodeck facility drew back with the familiar whine, and the assembled team entered the program to be greeted by what was obviously a working laboratory on Utopia Planetia Starfleet Yards, Mars. But it was not a familiar one.

"Have you had a change of lab, Leah?" Geordi asked Brahm as he moved behind a particularly large engine schematic.

"Er - no." Dr Brahm shot Commander La Forge a somewhat uneasy look. "It... um... is Dr Burns' lab."

Geordi emerged from behind the schematic to look at her with mock disapproval.

"Well, he seems to know all about *my* work," she defended herself hotly.

"Right." Geordi nodded, looking around at the development work that Leah had managed to purloin from some shady source.

"Hey, Geordi, take a look at this!" came Wesley's excited voice from the far end of the experimental lab. "This is great. You can actually model different arrangements of dilithium in a Galaxy class M/ARC."

"Really, Wes?... I'll be over."

Geordi turned to Leah Brahm as Robin Lefler speedily negotiated the lab to see what had excited so much interest in Wesley, and pulled her to one side.

"Leah, in your honest opinion - how do you think you stand with respect to this space trial? I mean, I can see evidence of Burns' work here, but what of yours? I only have your word for it that what you propose is workable, and let's face it, Starfleet has come down pretty

heavily on the side of Ordan Burns in this matter. How do I know you're right?"

"I can't really prove or show you anything, Geordi. Until we get to Ceranti One, I can't really show you anything that could convince you. All I can do is ask you to trust me on this."

"Trust you... sure." Geordi put a weary hand to his forehead and rubbed his temple.

"As a friend, Geordi. Geordi, I am telling you the truth - like I've told everyone the truth all along but nobody will believe me. I got you here hoping that you might."

"Because I'm a friend. A friend that you got here almost under false pretences. A friend who you never actually asked whether they minded becoming involved in something as dangerous as a space trial," Geordi said in a harsh whisper.

"Geordi..." Leah looked at him, on her guard, but the Commander hadn't yet finished.

"And what about Robin and Wesley, Leah? Why involve them? Damn it to hell, Leah, this whole thing is not the kind of thing to spring on two people about to embark on promising Starfleet careers! Think about it."

"I... I know. Geordi, I *know*. And I give you my solemn word that no harm will come to either Robin or Wesley, or their careers. I need your help. More than I have ever needed anybody's help in my whole life. Please, Geordi - don't let me down now." Her voice was strained; it revealed in part how hard it was for her to admit that much.

"What about Robin and Wesley, Leah?" Geordi insisted.

"If you wish it, Robin and Wesley can be left planetside and then returned to the Enterprise the moment we reach Ceranti One. I promise." Leah looked at him, her face as anxious and as vulnerable as he had ever seen it.

"Leah, have you had any second opinions on this work? What about Kosinski?"

"Kosinski? No, more's the pity. Kosinski could have well proved a clincher of an ally, and perhaps one with enough clout in certain circles to have stopped this farce before it even got this far. But unfortunately he has been involved in a highly confidential project for some time now. So confidential that we have been, so far, unable to contact him. You will come with me to Ceranti One, won't you, Geordi? You will at least come and see what I'm proposing to test?"

"And if I don't?"

"The trial goes on, whether you are with us or not. It's just more likely that Burns will succeed. But think, Commander - it's not just my career that's at stake here. Do you really want someone like Burns responsible for the development of your future engine replacements?"

The implications of that question hung in the air until the two of them were distracted by Wesley's return from investigating Ordan Burns' lab.

"Commander..."

Geordi straightened up as Wesley addressed him, the younger man self-consciously using La Forge's Enterprise title.

"I'm sorry, but I couldn't help overhearing what you were saying to Dr Brahms, and although I respectfully

appreciate your efforts to look after me, I'm not a child any more, sir." He paused, looking from Dr Brahms' face to Commander La Forge's in the stark, pale light of the Utopia Planetia lab facility. "And to be honest - if Dr Burns really has done all that Dr Brahms has claimed, and Starfleet has decided to side with him... then I'm not so sure I want a promising career in that kind of organisation anyway."

Geordi sighed ruefully; for a brief second he had a vivid mental image of him having to explain all this to his Captain, at some future date. "Okay, Wes, point taken," he conceded.

"And there is something else..."

"Uh huh?"

"Well..." The young man frowned and then said, "All this... I mean, everything here is pretty impressive, but... it's sort of missing something."

"Missing something?" Leah looked around at the holodeck program. "What makes you say that?"

"I suppose it's that when you are working on a specific project, you surround yourself with personal things... useful, but personal too, if you know what I mean. Reference materials, diagrams, lists... favourite equipment. We all do it... but in here, it's, well..."

"It's what, Wes?" Geordi pressed him.

"Well, it's almost as if it's all for show. There's some formulae, a pile of test results. It could be anyone's guess as to whether they are real, valid data... or just nonsense. Some coded tables, and the simulation program... nothing else. Almost as if it has all been laid out ready for us to spend time on it."

"The logical course would be to work through that information," Leah replied, "and see if it gives us any indication that it may be useful."

"That," pointed out Geordi, "would take time, and plenty of it."

"Time, unfortunately, is a commodity we do *not* possess in abundance, Commander," Leah told him quickly.

"I can think of someone who could work through that pile of stuff in no time." Wesley's face split into one of his most engaging grins.

"Who, Wes?" Brahms asked him, her tone sharp.

"Why - Data, of course!"

The doors to the Captain's Ready Room swished back and Captain Jean-Luc Picard strode out onto the Bridge of the USS Enterprise, his face a stern mask.

"Captain." Deanna Troi stood to address him, her dark eyes watchful as Picard paced towards his centre seat, which was being vacated by Will Riker even as the Captain moved. "Sir, Dr Crusher is on her way to the Bridge on a quite urgent matter. She was unable to contact you herself, as you were in conference."

Which, indeed, Picard had been. More specifically, a private conference with a Starfleet Admiral, on a secured priority channel - and as Counselor Troi was well aware of the present mood of her commanding officer due to her Betazoid empathic senses, she could only conclude that it was the content of the confidential transmission that had somewhat unsettled Captain Jean-Luc

Picard.

"Have you any idea what the Doctor wishes to discuss with me?" he asked, his voice almost tinged with irritation.

"No idea, sir," Troi responded, intercepting Will Riker's quizzical look as the Captain turned away to face the Bridge viewscreen.

"Commander, what is the status on the sensor malfunction at present?"

"It's been positively located. The next step will be to isolate and repair the affected circuits, sir, with minimal disruption to the system. Lt Barclay seems to have it all well in hand."

Jean-Luc Picard then moved towards the con, and checked the course heading over Ensign Ro's shoulder before returning to his seat. The Captain's whole demeanour seemed to be that of almost restless frustration. Commander Riker observed this in the Captain's attitude and realised that he was getting all the signs of an impending, unscheduled, and potentially unauthorised course change. But the command never came.

"Sir?"

"What, Number One?"

"Is everything... as it should be?" Riker's face was serious. He knew his Captain too well to discount these signs, but he never received an answer.

At that moment, almost as if on cue, the CMO erupted onto the bridge like an avenging, flame-headed Valkyrie. She made straight for the Captain's Ready Room, her one fulminating glance in Captain Picard's direction indicating clearly that she fully expected him to

follow her without procrastination.

"The Doctor is both angry and worried, Captain." Troi put in her observation quickly, her own tone concerned. "Desperately so."

"Hmmm."

The Captain paused for a moment in deep thought before taking a breath and releasing it as a short sigh. "I suppose I had better go and sort whatever this is out," he observed on a note of dry impatience. "Until then, you have the Bridge, Number One."

"Of course, Captain," Riker nodded promptly.

"Captain... the CMO is in a highly tense and emotional state. It may be advisable for at least one of you to keep very calm," Troi stated, almost hesitantly.

"I have no intention of losing my temper, Counselor," Picard stated in a crisp tone.

"But forewarned is forearmed, Captain," Riker advised him helpfully, subtly endorsing Troi's decision to state her advice.

All they were awarded was a pair of raised eyebrows and a doubtful look as the Captain turned and walked across the Bridge to his Ready Room, his shoulders set in a way that reminded Troi of a man squaring himself up for battle.

She watched the Ready Room doors finally close behind him before she murmured quietly, "We travel thousands of light years, run a gamut of unpredictable intelligent life and trust his judgement implicitly. The Captain rarely falters, never seems at a loss..." Troi sat back in her chair once more, and watched Will Riker settle himself in the Captain's

once more as she continued. "Yet two things never fail to make him flinch in prospect..."

"Children," the Commander supplied helpfully, the indefatigable Riker grin threatening.

"And the wrath of Dr Crusher," Troi finished for him.

THREE

"So what does this do? And what is this doing here? That's the DCAF... is it wise to have it so far from chamber centre point?" Geordi moved around the engine schematic at the centre of the room and shook his head. "Do you know something? I hate development engineers. They can never leave anything where it belongs. Change for the sake of change, that's all it is."

"You tell me why it won't work Geordi, and I'll move it right back to where it was before," was Dr Brahms' obliging response as she shifted through a pile of PADDs balanced across several surfaces, including the cabin floor. "Now where did I put that...?" She stood with her hands on her hips, a frown on her face. "I swear some jokester must be beaming the contents of my cabin out into space. You put something down, and it's gone in less than ten minutes."

Geordi tore his attention away from the schematics to view the vast trail of clutter spread across the unexceptional living space. "I'm glad you're no house guest of mine," he observed drily. "By the way, there's a PADD next to that flower arrangement... There, behind you."

"That's it. That's the one! Well, if you think this is bad, you should see home! *That's* bad."

Geordi raised his eyebrows at this, and turned back to the schematic. "Excuse me for asking, Leah, but what does your husband think of you warping across Federation Space to risk your life in some damn fool experiment?"

There followed a revealing silence - a silence that made Geordi La Forge think that maybe this time he had stepped a little too far over the mark.

"He... um... doesn't know."

At that reply, it was La Forge's turn to fall silent. Stunned. "Leah - you can't be serious. Can you?"

"Oh yes I can. And I am - deadly serious. Make no mistake on that point, Commander," Dr Brahms replied, her tone hard.

"But why?"

"I do not think, Commander La Forge, that it is any business of yours whatsoever. It neither pertains to our present work, or indeed the project in hand."

That put him in his place, La Forge accepted wryly, as he answered simply, "Yes, ma'am."

The two of them worked on in an uneasy silence until La Forge finally abandoned the engine schematic before him with a weary sigh. "Leah?"

"Yes?" Her response was glacier-like, her voice cold enough to freeze a pulsar.

"Can we expect any more help with this?" he finally asked.

Once it was clear they were back on professional territory, Dr Leah Brahm's manner underwent an almost visible

thawing. "Spaaruk will meet us at Ceranti One."

"Spaaruk? Not the infamous Spaaruk of the Vulcan Science Academy, surely?"

Leah regarded Geordi somewhat disapprovingly as he continued in his mildly teasing tone, aware that he had ground to make up if they were to return to their previous easy footing.

"Dr Spaaruk - not twelve months ago you were describing the good Doctor in less than flattering terms, I believe, the 'Vulcan stick insect' being one of the milder ones."

Leah Brahms shot him a somewhat superior look as she continued collecting her PADDs together. "Dr Spaaruk has been invaluable to me. She may not inspire feelings of great friendship in co-workers... but you can at least count on her integrity. An increasingly rare commodity in Starfleet at present, Commander."

Geordi found himself unsure as to whether he was actually included in that last remark or not.

"So, Dr Spaaruk is to meet us at Ceranti One. Who else? Johns, maybe, he would be an obvious... Or even Lt Commander Jones-Mackintyre?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe? Leah, what do you mean - maybe?"

"Half of Alpha unit is due to be there to meet us at Ceranti One; the Kitumba is going to need at least that to crew it during the warp run."

"By Alpha unit, you mean the Cathedral crew?"

"If by that, Commander, you mean the official Starfleet shakedown team, yes!" Leah Brahms snapped, obviously becoming irritated by the frequent clarification required between research and field terminology.

"The USS Kitumba is the warp run vessel?" Geordi sat heavily in the one chair left clear of PADDs. "And you are intending the warp run crew to number only ten?"

"Yes, indeed. The Kitumba has been specially adapted."

"But for a warp run...? Dr Brahms, you're aware of the size and nature of the USS Kitumba, aren't you?"

Dr Brahms regarded the Chief Engineer of the Enterprise with a frosty gaze.

"Indeed, Commander. The USS Kitumba - or should I say ex-USS Kitumba, as it is now a decommissioned Starship - is an ex-Starfleet vessel; an Excelsior class ship built at Starfleet Antares yards approximately 35 to 40 years ago."

"Decommissioned -"

"I've already told you that!"

" - due to persistent and erratic problems with the warp drive systems. You see, Dr Brahms, that was the main reason why the USS Kitumba was retired from Starfleet service."

"Ah."

"Yeah. Ah, Leah. So what else is there? Exactly who will be comprising the Warp Team once we get to Ceranti One, Dr Brahms - or should I wait for another 'ah' possessing two syllables?"

"Geordi... I honestly don't know who will be there for us when we reach Ceranti One apart from Spaaruk. Since this mess started, nothing, no-one has been constant. Staff have disappeared. My long-term assistant Sam Jeffrys publicly defected to Burns' side denouncing my work as he went... and you know what happened to poor Murdo."

"You're kidding! Sam Jeffrys is one of the most trustworthy men I've ever met!" marvelled Geordi, obviously astounded by Brahms' colleague's defection.

"No, unfortunately I am not." With one sweep of her arm, Leah Brahms knocked half a dozen PADDs onto the cabin floor, and sat perched on the edge of the chair opposite Geordi.

The Commander's face in response wore an expression that was both serious and concerned. "Leah, if Burns has managed to turn a man of Jeffrys' calibre against your work... against you..." He paused and shook his head, lifting his VISOR slightly to rub his nose as if the prosthetic was beginning to trouble him. "I suppose that goes some way to explaining why your trial support team comprises one raw cadet, one almost as raw ensign, a 'friend' who just happens to have something to do with Starfleet Engineering... oh, and a Vulcan stick insect!"

"Difficult to explain and even harder to believe, trust me. And there I go again - trust me, trust me. I keep thinking if I keep saying it enough, it'll work like some kind of magic spell and people *will* start to trust and believe in my work at some point."

"Magic, Doctor?"

"You're right, Commander, magic

will not be enough. A miracle maybe. My career hangs upon the outcome of a warp run due to be held within the week and I'm not even sure if I've got a crew for my test ship. If I stop for one moment and start to think - I mean really *think* - I could just end up screaming my head off."

Leah's face became stiff and her tone cold. "Twelve months ago this whole mess had a very different complexion on it, believe me."

"Twelve months ago! This stink has been brewing up for twelve months, and you never said one word! Leah..." La Forge's words failed him, all he could do was to throw his hands up into the air in a gesture of mute helplessness. "I knew you to be single minded - but this, Leah? Stop it. For God's sake, stop it now! We'll find another way to beat Burns at his own game... but this, this is madness. Damn it, it's worse than that! This is suicide!"

But Leah was staring into space, her eyes seeing something else other than the muted tones of the cabin walls of the USS Galaxy. "I couldn't tell anyone at first. No-one, except the immediate team... oh, and of course the counsel at my hearing. The whole thing had been coded priority confidential the moment a space trial was granted. I agreed to it - I had no real choice in the matter and at that time no reason not to. I had Murdo on side, my team at Utopia Planetia, Sam Jeffrys..." Her distant voice changed pitch, became louder, more definite, cynical. "But boy, did I underestimate the personal power of Dr Ordan Burns! Bit by bit, day by day, that man and his damned assistant stripped me of my team, access to the best people on Utopia Planetia, then beyond; Mckinley, and then Starfleet itself. I found myself suddenly isolated, a professional pariah of the highest order, all because I had stood up for what I believe in and had forced Starfleet's hand

whilst doing so."

Brahms took a deep breath and flashed a brief smile at Geordi. "And then - somehow - even some members of Alpha unit appeared to be in question."

"Even Alpha unit?" Geordi could not quite hide the note of alarm in his voice.

"Uh huh. Even the Cathedral crew - personnel I was entitled to as my right for the space trial were suddenly, suspiciously, unavailable."

"Did anyone say how, or why?"

"I wish, Geordi, because if I knew that!... Anyhow, just as things seemed to be at their worst, Spaaruk appeared in my lab with two excellent staff and an offer of assistance. Quite honestly, by that time I was so desperate I would have accepted an offer of assistance from a Ferengi free trader!"

"That desperate." Geordi raised his eyebrows. "Could you not reschedule? Delay the trial until the number of crew you require from the Alpha Unit become available?"

"It's a space trial, Geordi. None of the normal Starfleet rules and regulations apply and everything is at the commanding officer's discretion. I brought the request for a space trial to the Starfleet tribunal, and so the onus is on me to meet the requirements and prove my point in the field. Even a petition to delay the trial could be construed as a failure to meet the requirements of the trial - the trial is declared null, Dr Ordan Burns triumphs without ever having to even raise a finger to prove me wrong."

"That's extraordinarily unfair, Leah," La Forge pointed out, his face clearly showing his disbelief.

"A space trial is an extraordinary event. So extraordinary, it falls no little way outside the normal protocol so obvious in Starfleet under more... mundane circumstances. So - watch your step, Commander."

"Okay, Leah. Let's say that for the sake of argument you do this warp run and prove your theories without question. What then?"

"Then the onus is on Burns to match or exceed my run result. And Geordi - " Dr Brahm's face contained only calm certainty - "there is no way Burns can do it using Elecon - no way. And you know, it's that that makes this whole darned mess so frustrating! I know that somehow, for some obscure reason, I am being manipulated over this whole issue. The closer the warp run gets, the more certain I am about it. But I'll be damned if I let them succeed any more in depriving me of a crew than I did of letting them steal my work!"

Dr Brahm's voice rose a trifle during the latter part of this speech, her voice breaking only slightly on the last word to betray her depth of feeling on the matter.

Geordi gave a deep sigh, shook his head, moved to his feet and crossed the cabin to perch beside Leah Brahm on the chair she had just cleared. "If Burns is so adept at isolating professional rivals, how the hell were you successful in getting orders for me to be seconded from the Enterprise, Leah?"

"Oh - it wasn't me. It was Spaaruk." Leah sniffed and as if struggling to regain her composure, she managed a wry half smile.

"Spaaruk... Dr Spaaruk?" Geordi's eyebrows clearly rose in some surprise above his VISOR. "Spaaruk would appear to be turning into something of a

heroine - if that is at all possible for a Vulcan to be."

"Spaaruk - or rather I should say Spaaruk's family - has some influence within Starfleet," Leah Brahm went on to explain. "She comes, apparently, from a long line of Vulcan ambassadors to the UFP, and would appear to have the 'ouma' - or should I say 'S'haile' - to prove it.

"That, and my own pitifully few strings to pull by comparison, has meant... here you are Commander."

La Forge looked at her, an odd expression clear on his face despite the masking effect of the VISOR prosthetic device. "Thanks, Leah," he relied with a touch of irony before standing to regard the moving starscape outside the USS Galaxy with a decided air of contemplation. "Dr Brahm, between Dr Spaaruk's Ferengi-like 'ouma' and your own strings... what can you pull off?"

"Why?" Brahm's tone was puzzled, clearly surprised by the blunt question.

"Well - Wesley was right, as usual, when he said we could sure do with Data's help on this."

"I know. I had anticipated this request, and I believe that Captain Picard has in all probability received secondment orders for Lt Commander Data, right about... now," Leah replied confidently, glancing upward at the crystal time display built into the cabin wall.

Captain Jean-Luc Picard stood in his Ready Room, his left arm propped up by his right as he pinched his lower lip between thumb and forefinger in his reverie, roused only by the familiar hail

of the door comm.

"Come," he called out abruptly.

Commander William T Riker entered the Ready Room, the hum of the Bridge area promptly silenced as the automatic doors swished shut behind him. "Captain. You wanted to see me?"

Commander Riker regarded the silent figure of Jean-Luc Picard with concern, aware of his own feelings of foreboding, confusion and tense anxiety fuelled by rumours amongst the crew.

"Please, Commander... sit. Thank you for joining me so promptly," he said, as if his order had been a request rather than a directive issued by a commanding officer. "No doubt you are intrigued about my summons." The Captain indicated the chair opposite his own before settling himself across the ebonite desk from his First Officer, steeping his hands before him.

"A few ideas had crossed my mind, sir," Riker replied with a slight smile as he carried out the Captain's bidding.

For some moments Picard remained silent, then he looked up, his face as impassive as ever but his gaze, as it shifted to meet Riker's own, betrayed a deep concern. "Will - you know that I trust your judgement implicitly." Picard moved from his seat to stand before his First Officer, leaning heavily on the back of his chair, "and I called you in here because I need a second opinion."

"An opinion on what, Captain?" Immediately, Will Riker was on the edge of his seat, his attention full-focussed on the Captain.

"I need help in getting some perspective on a matter that could decide a course of action sufficient to make some

question of my standing within Starfleet. And indeed, very possibly by implication should you choose to become involved, your own."

The First Officer watched his Captain as if mesmerized, scarcely daring to breathe in case he missed even one word of what was to follow.

"We have travelled some way together, you and I. And in doing so, I have come to value you as something more than an outstanding First Officer, Will. And I want to assure you that should you not want to become involved in this mess, I would fully understand - and that it would in no way impair our... friendship." Picard looked for some moments at Riker before taking a deep breath and releasing it as a short sigh.

"Captain," Will Riker spoke into the subsequent silence, seeing the Captain apparently about to lapse into silent reverie again, "if you say you value my judgement highly... how about giving me a chance to use it?"

"Oh - yes, of course, Number One."

Picard sat in his chair once more, straightening his uniform top with a quick tug as he regarded his First with something more like his usual animation. "I have something of a puzzle on my hands."

"A puzzle, sir? Concerning what?" Riker asked by way of reply.

"Of all things, Starfleet Exploration Directive 902.3, and I quote, 'To incorporate recent advancements in warp power plant technology and improved science instrumentation'."

"Captain?" Commander Riker's face displayed no little surprise. Of all things sufficient to elicit the concern he had

observed in his commanding officer, it was obvious that such a thing as a standard Starfleet directive had not occurred amongst them.

"Sir, the finer interpretation of directives such as 902.3 are decided by Starfleet as an agent of the United Federation of Planets. It is only in terms of execution that officers such as ourselves become responsible."

"Oh, I agree, Commander. Wholeheartedly. But - " Captain Picard paused - "where does that responsibility truly start for us as Starfleet officers? How far can we take matters when we have a suspicion that things are wrong, Number One?"

"I'm sorry, sir, I'm still a little confused. But to answer your last question, Captain... as far as it takes. Our obligation to Starfleet is more than just taking orders, it's about doing our best - and that's not possible if other things are in question. To serve Starfleet is not so much a duty as a privilege; the duty, *our* duty, is to act promptly when its required of us."

"Now you're starting to sound as cryptic as I am." Jean-Luc Picard smiled briefly. "So - clarification. You, Will, probably know better than anyone aboard this ship my views on those who question direct orders. However, on this occasion I find myself doing just that and it puts me in a very difficult position."

"Orders from Starfleet, Captain?" Riker's blue gaze was deeply concerned.

"Just so, unfortunately, Number One. You are of course fully aware of Ensign Lefler and Commander La Forge's secondment at such short notice to the classified destination of Outpost Ceranti One."

"I think everyone aboard ship is aware, Captain, although they are all trying to pretend otherwise. It was made all the more obvious by the fact that secondments are normally agreed well in advance by you and me to facilitate crew rotation," Riker added.

"Of course. So then there is the matter of Wesley Crusher..."

"Wesley? But Wesley is at the Academy." Commander Riker could not hide his start of surprise at the mention of the Enterprise's young protege within the context of this conversation.

"No, Commander, he is not. Wesley is also bound for Ceranti One," Picard informed him with a sober look of concern in his eyes. "Wesley Crusher has apparently joined Dr Leah Brahms in an excursion to the Ceranti system. There was virtually no notice and - perhaps more importantly - he was sworn to absolute secrecy about the whole affair."

"Coincidence?" Commander Riker finally asked slowly, his question sounding almost deafening in the silence of the Ready Room. "Or contrivance? In which case, what can be going on at Ceranti One?"

"And so we come neatly onto the subject of the CMO's findings." Picard sighed heavily.

"There's more, sir?"

"Oh, yes. There is. Much more." The Captain paused momentarily, sitting further back in his seat. "If I could expand your query about Ceranti One to include Utopia Planetia - quite a lot more." Picard went on, his tone well laced with irony. "According to the good Doctor, the medical logs and records were tied up tighter than a Ferengi loss contract. However, our tenacious CMO

not only managed to find out why, but some interesting statistics as well. She found antimatter exposure accidents up by 500%, and incidents from four actual fatalities due to breach exposure not even included in that number to a lab accident that would make, I quote, 'a Vulcan's hair stand on end', unquote. All classified nil access."

"If the records were marked nil access, Captain, how on earth did Beverly manage to...?" Riker started.

"Number One - trust me, you do *not* want to know," advised the Captain meaningfully before leaning forward, a tired hand going to his forehead. "And now... as if that weren't enough, the latest twist in this puzzle has manifested itself."

"Sir?"

"I have just received priority orders from Admiral Stern, Starfleet Command, on a secure channel. Orders that require me to dispatch Commander Data with all due haste to... I think you'll be more than able to guess the rest." He paused. The silence in the Ready Room stretched on, almost deafening. "Your comment is invited, Number One," Picard added helpfully, with a small smile in the direction of his First Officer.

"What the hell is going on?" Commander Riker enunciated his words clearly and frowned, slowly shaking his head in disbelief. "Did the Admiral provide you with any explanation or justification for these orders, Captain?"

"As before, Commander, the orders were coded 'priority classified', no explanation given and most certainly no justification... but I asked anyway."

"And?"

"And upon my asking Admiral

Stern, in no uncertain terms, to tell me exactly what was going on concerning my crew, the term 'evasive' went on to acquire new limits of definition. Stern was trying very hard *not* to answer my questions."

Suddenly the Captain's tone was icy cold and Riker could almost feel it in himself to feel sorry for the unfortunate superior who had no doubt been impaled like a worm on the hook of his Captain's disapproval.

"Will... is it me? Am I paranoid? Too sensitive concerning what may just be a series of coincidences?"

"No, Captain. Whatever is going on here seems to have little to do with coincidence." Riker's expression turned to one of enquiry as he said, "Have you had any ideas of your own, sir?"

Picard allowed himself a small smile. As if his First Officer ever had any doubts as to that!

"One or two, Number One. Merely on our present evidence, it is clear that someone within Starfleet is assembling a proven team, *our* team, for something without allowing too many people to know about it. Myself included."

"Who? Who, within Starfleet, would have either the means or the motivation? Dr Brahms, or an associate of hers? Wesley's change of heart about his vacation, according to Beverly Crusher, did coincide with a visit by Brahms to the Academy."

"And we have no reason to doubt Dr Crusher. But Dr Brahms? We've both met Dr Leah Brahms. She would seem an unlikely candidate for conspirator."

"So what are you going to do about Commander Data, sir?" Riker asked. "The

secondment is by order of Starfleet Command."

"Indeed, Number One, and as agents of Starfleet, we are here to serve. So to that end, what better way to avoid any further delay than for the Enterprise to deliver Data personally to Ceranti One with as much haste as we can muster."

It was not a suggestion. The Captain appeared to have already decided, and tapped the communicator on his chest accordingly.

"Commander Data," Picard hailed his third in command with his customary abruptness. "Please report immediately to the Bridge."

Geordi La Forge and Wesley Crusher stepped from the transporter pad, their faces a picture of restrained horror.

"It's not very pretty, is it?" Geordi finally observed.

"Er... no. No, it's not," Wesley agreed emphatically. "In fact, Commander, I'd say it's on a par with how the Hathaway was when we boarded her."

"The Hathaway?" Leah Brahms moved away from the controls which she had been operating for their transporter trip from Ceranti One Starbase.

"A long story," Geordi replied, before nudging aside a huge pile of optical fibre left on the deck with his toe. "For a ship decommissioned a mere three years ago, Leah, the poor old Kitumba is one hell of a mess."

"Dr Brahms... the Kitumba *does* possess warp capability... doesn't it?"

Wesley asked her suddenly.

The Doctor simply looked at him as if she expected he was being a little less than totally serious. "Of course it has, Wesley. This may look somewhat neglected, but it is a very different story in the engine room, believe me."

"The nagging drive faults?" asked Geordi, looking inside an open panel as he passed it.

"Gone," Dr Brahms answered promptly. "The old warp configuration has been totally stripped out and refitted with the altered warp drive arrangement."

"I thought you said that one advantage of this discovery was that you could use existing M/ARC equipment?" Geordi challenged her.

"You will, in time. But as the altered warp drive configuration fitted contains the poisoned dilithium lattice at an experimental stage, we have also had to modernise the housing chamber due to an increase in radiation."

"What kind of radiation?" Wesley asked.

"Nothing you haven't met before, just slightly more of it, that's all. If we had wanted a *lot* more, we would have used Elecon instead of Uthium." Brahms allowed herself a grim smile. "That gave off enough to make your starship glow in the dark. Something of a major drawback when you fancy crewing your ship with something as physiologically vulnerable as Humans."

Dr Brahms indicated the transporter room exit and the doors slid back at their approach - something Geordi registered with no little relief, as he had not journeyed all this way to embark on a

program of door maintenance.

"Gentlemen, the grand tour." Dr Leah Brahms started down the corridor towards the drive section and Engineering. "If you would like to follow me."

Geordi La Forge and Wesley Crusher exchanged doubtful glances; they had already seen enough to condemn the ex-USS Kitumba as the flagship of old crates.

Leah Brahms proceeded to give them a whistle-stop tour of the Excelsior class ship, pointing to a minor modification here, an enhanced control system there. On the whole, Commander La Forge and Cadet Crusher followed her in restrained silence. La Forge broke this silence only once, to observe that the amount that had been stripped out of the Kitumba should give them a two point warp advantage over any other starship with a conventional drive before anybody had even ventured near the M/ARC.

Brahms simply threw him a quelling look, prepared to overlook his joyless demeanour in her own excitement at being aboard her trial vessel, at last!

Finally, they arrived in Engineering

"Now this," Geordi said at last, his enhanced gaze firmly fixed on the Matter/Antimatter Reactor, "is more like it."

The Matter/Antimatter reaction chamber stood before them as a column of pearlescent white, but unlike the bluish component of the USS Enterprise, this had a distinctly violet, almost red, tinge to it.

"Wow!" Wesley murmured under his breath, as his experienced eyes involuntarily widened at the sight of the additional cladding shielding the dilithium housing. Then he realised with absolute certainty that this was why he had come all the way to Ceranti One, and that he had no intention of returning to the Enterprise until he had seen the Kitumba complete this extraordinary mission.

La Forge walked into Engineering proper, and looked around. "It seems very quiet, Leah," he observed, hiding his concern at the conspicuous lack of work and personnel so close to the warp run, by resorting to wry humour. "Don't tell me... it's time for a coffee break."

"No. No, it's not, Geordi. Due to the nature of the work at this point we've... ah... had to reduce the engineering crew down to a minimum complement." Dr Brahms then hit her communicator.

Geordi regarded Leah Brahms with a considering gaze. For some reason, he was not getting the whole truth again, but before he had a chance to challenge Brahms on the matter, his attention was distracted.

"Geordi La Forge - I would like you to meet Dr Spaaruk."

Geordi spun round on his heel to face the mysterious Vulcan who had been such a great professional rival of Dr Leah Brahms before the misadventures of the past year had thrown the two warp propulsion experts together into an unlikely partnership.

Like matter and antimatter, Geordi found himself thinking.

"Commander La Forge."

Dr Spaaruk turned out to be small for a Vulcan, and reed thin, her frame so fragile she truly looked as if one adverse blast from environmental conditioning would be able to knock her over backwards. Her hair was cut severely, as seemed traditional amongst both the men and women of the Vulcan race that Geordi had come into contact with. The overall effect of that tiny body frame and the Vulcan racial characteristics, gave the distinct impression of a mystic Terran pixie.

The only thing that destroyed this effect was the voice. Where one expected a lilting, musical quality, one got the flat, emotionless, ice-cold tones of reason. Spaaruk was most definitely a very Vulcan Vulcan.

"Dr Spaaruk - " Leah indicated the Vulcan woman with a sweep of her hand before she turned back to Geordi - "this is Commander Geordi La Forge, Chief Engineer of the Starship USS Enterprise."

"A pleasure, Dr Spaaruk. I've heard a lot about your work."

All from Leah Brahms, and none of it very pleasant until more recent events had thrown them all into this very strange situation, thought Geordi, as the Vulcan held up one tiny hand in the accepted Vulcan courtesy salute.

"Mr La Forge. I have also heard a lot about your work. Some from Dr Brahms, most from Starfleet officers who have worked with you in the past. Particularly Lt Commander Logan."

Geordi felt his eyebrows lift at these words. "Yes, indeed. I most certainly remember Commander Logan... although he was Chief Engineer Logan when we served aboard the USS Enterprise together."

What kind of impression would Logan have given the Vulcan Doctor of his work? As biased in its own way, maybe, as the view he had been given of Spaaruk, if the forthright Logan had had anything to do with it. Geordi acknowledged this thought with a wry twist of his lips.

"Something amuses you, Commander?"

A disturbingly bright pair of dark almond shaped eyes regarded him from beneath upswept brows, her gaze somewhat superior in its tone.

"Not really." Geordi smiled. "I was just wondering what kind of description Logan had given you of both me and my work."

"An inaccurate one, Commander," Spaaruk stated plainly, her face devoid of expression. "As always with Humans, emotion clouded judgement. That much was clear when I undertook to study your Starfleet service record."

"You pulled my service record?"

La Forge swallowed and looked away briefly in an effort to conceal his surprise and a quite unreasonable frisson of chagrin. "I hope you are as thorough with all personnel you come into contact with, Doctor."

"But of course." The Vulcan regarded him steadily, no trace of apology or embarrassment in her gaze. "It is the logical thing to do."

"Including Dr Ordan Burns?" Geordi eyed the Vulcan quizzically.

"I repeat, Commander. Such practice is a purely logical course, to assess both one's allies - and opponents."

"And it is a result of that reasoned

assessment that you decided to side with Dr Brahms?" Geordi asked the Vulcan candidly. "Did your study of Burns reveal some vital professional or personal flaw that you would care to share with us now that we all appear to be part of the same team?"

"No."

"No?"

Geordi stared at the Vulcan's impassive countenance, somewhat dumbfounded for a moment. Did she mean 'No' as in 'No, I do not wish to share that information with you' or 'No' as in there being nothing to share.

"You wouldn't care to elaborate a little on that statement would you, Doctor?" he asked, his tone ice dry.

"Not really, Commander."

There was a pause. Not a small pause, or indeed a medium sized one. This was a long silent gap in the conversation, and as it went on, Geordi realised, with something of a start, that it was Spaaruk who was looking the most uncomfortable; and surprisingly, it was Leah Brahms who broke the silence first, her voice gentle as if addressing an awkward child on the first day of school.

"Spaaruk. Geordi has travelled a long, long way to help us with this. The least we can do is to be honest with the Commander, particularly when his help is so vital to our work."

Spaaruk shot Brahms a look that could have quelled a matter/antimatter explosion, but her resulting words implied she had taken her warp colleague's words at face value.

"I say no, Commander, because Dr Burns has an impressive record in the

fields of research and development. Over the years he has distinguished himself, consistently, across a spectrum of propulsion disciplines. His talent and ability are undeniable..."

"But?" Geordi La Forge prompted, and at the Vulcan's disapproving stare gave a small shrug. "You're here with us, Dr Spaaruk, after all."

"Dr Burns is weak, vain, plagued by very Human insecurities. The very driving force that has led to his many achievements is the weakness that means he will resort to theft, deception and libel to get exactly what he wants, and where he wants to be."

"Well, it seems to work, Doctor. From what I've heard so far, the man's got Starfleet eating out of his hand," La Forge observed.

"Burns is ambitious and apparently devoid of those moral scruples that seem to hold the worst Human characteristics in check," Spaaruk replied primly, a warning note in her voice. "Such people are easily manipulated, Commander."

"I'll take your word for that, Doctor, but from where I'm standing, it sounds like you've given several very good reasons why I should have chosen the other side, given your no doubt very accurate information. Unfortunately, I was never actually given that choice." He glanced at Brahms. "No offence, Doctor."

"None taken, Commander," Brahms replied.

Spaaruk looked first at Brahms and then at La Forge, her face almost verging on the uncertain. Geordi found himself wondering if there were degrees of Vulcan-ness that worked on some sliding scale, as - for not the first time in this meeting - Dr Spaaruk was showing less

than consistent racial characteristics.

"I find your attitude somewhat irrational, Commander," Dr Spaaruk stated in a tone that verged perilously close to irritation. "I put it to you that Burns is easily manipulated. That his - to borrow a Human term - 'blind ambition' means he is so focussed on what he wants to achieve, he cannot or indeed will not see the truth of what is going on around him. And you say that this would form a valid premise to join him?"

"That's not quite what I meant, Doctor." Geordi put a weary hand to his temple. "But from what I've heard and seen so far, there seems to be only one person due to gain from this mess - and that's got to be Ordan Burns."

"Were you attempting humour?" Spaaruk asked him suspiciously.

Brahms took La Forge's heartfelt groan as a sign that it was time for her to intervene. "Let's not get distracted from the point here. Spaaruk, finish what you were about to say with regard to Burns assistant. Tell Commander La Forge the whole story."

"The whole story? Don't tell me - Dr Burns and Admiral Stevenson are all set to stage a military style coup of Starfleet Command... and what do I win if I'm right?" His face wore an expression of open cynicism.

"That has to be a somewhat facetious attempt at humour, Commander. As for Admiral Stevenson, truly she is yet another unfortunate example of how Human emotion - "

"Spaaruk!" Leah Brahms exploded in exasperation. "Just tell the Commander about Burns' assistant!"

"Burns' assistant? What the hell has

the man's assistant got to do with anything?"

"More than you could possibly imagine, Geordi," Brahms informed him, her expression calm now, her voice gravely serious. "For one thing, it was because of Burns' that Dr Spaaruk came to my lab to offer me much needed help. Burns' assistant is the reason why Spaaruk has risked her own eminent career to aid my own. Please do not discount too readily what she has to say, however odd it may sound to you, Geordi. I know you have the heart and soul of an engineer, which means by the same token that you probably possess a practical streak a couple of AU's wide - so please. Go on, Spaaruk."

"I do not know how much experience you have had of the Vulcan race, Commander, but I have to admit that it is not only logic that gives me such a strong... *distrust* of Dr Burns and his entourage."

Ouch! thought Geordi. It appeared to have caused this particular Vulcan some discomfort to admit that much for some reason.

"The Vulcan race possesses abilities that are as fundamental to our judgement and being as pure logic is. We are aware of other sentient beings on a higher level than the purely... physical plane of existence. It is as if an almost tangible presence can be sensed. More normally, the higher the life form, the more distinctive the presence."

"I understand. The Counselor aboard the Enterprise is half Betazoid. If I had ever had any doubts about empathic abilities being the basis for sound judgement, I only have to consider Deanna Troi's invaluable work for the command team. You need have no worries on that score, Doctor."

"I am hardly an empath, Commander, but I appreciate that in this situation some of the underlying principles would apply," Dr Spaaruk replied in the least frosty tone Geordi had heard her bestow on him yet.

"So what is it that makes you so uneasy, Doctor? Is it something that you sense?"

"Not so much *sense*. It is strictly more of an awareness, Commander."

"Okay. Okay. What are you aware of, Dr Spaaruk?"

"That in Dr Burns' assistant, the tangible living presence, normally so evident, is lacking."

"Er - hold on a moment. I need a little clarification here." Geordi paused, raising his hands as if to stall any further words on Spaaruk's part. "You are saying that Burns' assistant is an inconsistent life form of some kind? Could it not be that this assistant is a little different, or even a little alien - alien enough for the 'presence' to be beyond your....um....sensory capabilities?"

"Commander La Forge, all I am aware of is that Burns' assistant lacks the living presence that I can normally sense from all living things. I have drawn my conclusions based on that observation; you must draw your own."

"What? That you mean he has an assistant who is somehow lacking? What the hell am I supposed to conclude from that?" Geordi shrugged his shoulders and sighed. However nonsensical it sounded, Dr Spaaruk's sensing of this phenomenon had resulted in her throwing her lot in with Leah Brahms - if nothing else, the Vulcan herself was convinced it was important enough to matter.

"Then he's not the only one. Lacking, I mean."

All three turned to observe Wesley Crusher picking his way delicately across Engineering, accompanied by Ensign Robin Lefler.

"What do you mean by that, Wes?" La Forge asked.

"The Kitumba needs a lot of work, Commander. It's almost as if Starfleet gave up on her years ago. I can't believe she was decommissioned a mere three years ago. There is so much work that needs to be done. It looks more like she's been out of commission closer to ten standard!"

"I can assure you that is not so," Spaaruk informed him haughtily, at which Wesley Crusher did his best to hide a broad grin.

"I have amused you? Why?" The Doctor's tone was razor sharp and straight to the point.

"I'm sorry - I didn't mean to upset you," Wesley replied hurriedly.

"I am not upset." The tone was even more haughty, if that were at all possible. "Why do you laugh?"

"Wes?" Geordi had an expectant look on his face, his eyebrows raised at his young colleague's solecism.

"I'm sorry, Commander. It's just... It's just that the expression on Dr Spaaruk's face reminded me of what Mom calls Dr Selaar's 'pokey face' ...um, sir."

Spaaruk looked vaguely taken aback at this explanation.

"I am sorry Commander, but you

did ask." Wesley said uneasily.

"I apologise for Mr Crusher, Dr Spaaruk," Geordi felt compelled to explain. "Dr Selaar is an officer on board the Enterprise with whom Wesley is very familiar. I hope you are not offended."

"You are mistaken, Commander, if you think that is so. I am not at all upset by Wesley," Spaaruk returned crisply, before stalking off across Engineering in pursuit of the Starfleet Cadet who had thought it most prudent to make himself scarce as quickly as possible."

"First name! She has obviously taken a shine to your Starfleet cadet," Leah Brahms observed with a smile. "Yet another first."

"Friendly type, isn't she?" Geordi observed, but his ironic tone was not lost on Leah Brahms.

"She's okay. I believe Spaaruk had an incredibly conventional upbringing, and we can only imagine the consternation it caused when she announced she would continue her work at the Daystrom Institute and not the Vulcan Science Academy. As Spaaruk's family have such eminent ambassadorial links within the UFP, I think maybe they could just about cope with that, but for her then to specialize in warp propulsion technology instead of the traditional Vulcan disciplines of math and logic... That may explain much about the way the good Doctor is. Spaaruk is nothing if not single minded, committed, determined - and although it is not very Vulcan to say so, she has a God given talent for her chosen field of expertise."

"Well, then," Geordi pointed out, "no doubt she considered it most illogical to waste it."

Commander William T Riker rose from the Command chair as Captain Jean-Luc Picard strode from his Ready Room to the centre of the Bridge. The Captain's face was set in what, for the present at least, seemed to be permanent lines of grim concern. However, this time those grooves appeared to be etched deeper than ever.

"Success, sir?"

"Some, Number One. Some," Picard answered his First with a slight lift of his fine brows, "although I have had the devil's own time trying to extract any further information from Admiral Stern regarding Data's secondment. I have, however, managed to glean a little more than simply the rendezvous instructions."

"You have?" Riker sat in his customary chair to the right of the Captain's own, as Picard settled in his seat. "Dare I ask how much more, and where are we to rendezvous?"

"We are to rendezvous with the USS Kitumba, at present within the bounds of the Ceranti System. We are advised to make the rendezvous before the end of the extensive refit at present underway."

"The Kitumba, sir? The USS Kitumba was decommissioned from Starfleet service three years ago, Captain," Riker pointed out. "Why in heaven's name would someone want to recommission the Kitumba? She was notorious for having a recurring, apparently incurable, drive fault."

Picard looked at him briefly, his lower lip caught thoughtfully between finger and thumb as his hazel gaze regarded his First Officer shrewdly. "Not someone, but Starfleet. And the 'incurable' drive fault has been removed."

"How? And why?" Riker's

expression of surprise and extreme puzzlement prompted his Captain to turn in his seat towards the First Officer, dipping his head slightly so it fell closer to that of his second in command.

"How is easy to answer, Will. Apparently the whole engine system has been stripped out and replaced. *Why* is a little more difficult, as Admiral Stern was not quite so forthcoming on that point, but the little that he did say was enough. It would appear, Number One, that Starfleet is proposing to hold a space trial. Complete with a warp run."

Commander Riker could only stare at his commanding officer in sheer disbelief, so stunned by this information he was almost at the point of being struck speechless.

"Captain, did I mishear you? You did say a SPACE TRIAL?"

"Indeed I did, Commander. A space trial. And, for some reason, Starfleet seems to be doing its best to sweep it under the damn carpet. I had to use considerable influence with an old and favoured friend to get even that much. My greatest concern at present is that, for some reason even Stern was loathe to disclose, the Enterprise team - *my* team, damn it, is being assembled to carry it out. Or at least some part of it."

"But sir, the last Starfleet space trial to be held was almost twenty years ago and the risks and dangers associated with such ad hoc testing are well documented. Surely Starfleet would not have forgotten so quickly how dangerous such a trial is."

"I, for one, have most certainly not, Commander. I lost a good friend in the last one held 18 years ago - and I thought then that I had seen the last one. And thanked my Maker accordingly." Picard turned to face the front of the Bridge,

tugging his uniform down with a sharp twitch. "Ensign, lay in a course for Outpost Ceranti One, warp factor seven."

"The mapping mission, Captain?"

"Can wait, Number One. This system will be around long enough for the mapping mission to be finished at some point. The Kitumba, however... If the powers that be wish to assemble my people for such a hazardous venture, I want to be there to ensure fair play. Such events have a habit of developing their own agenda - going on past experience."

Picard took a deep breath and looked back towards Will Riker. "What is the present status on ship's systems - oh, and the sensor malfunction, of course?"

"Ready to go, Captain. The sensor malfunction is in hand; Barclay has isolated the fault and is effecting the repair now."

"Good. I have a hunch, Number One, that our appearance in the Ceranti System is not going to be particularly popular in some quarters of Starfleet. Someone has gone to a lot of trouble to keep all this as quiet as possible - so once there, our welcome will no doubt be something less than even lukewarm." Picard sighed, pursing his lips, before adding, "And let's not make our destination too well known, Will. It would be a shame if we received another set of orders en route that meant we would miss the party, would it not?"

Commander Riker regarded his Captain for a full moment before saying simply, "Yes, sir. It most certainly would."

"Commander Data, I suggest you commence preparation for your secondment in the time we have remaining prior to the rendezvous.

Someone else can look after the Ops position."

"Yes, Captain," replied Data, moving the console away to allow him to vacate his post.

Commander Riker silently watched the exchange of Bridge staff, his eyes following the Lt Commander as he left the Bridge via the aft turbolift.

"Are you really going to allow Data to risk himself in becoming embroiled in something as risky as a space trial, Captain?" Riker asked Picard in a quiet voice, his tone one of intense concern. "He is, after all, truly one of a kind. His loss would be... well, immeasurable."

"As would be the loss of any one of the Enterprise team already assembled in the Ceranti System," Picard replied, but he was aware of his First's concern for the continued existence of the one of a kind Soong class android. "But I do appreciate the validity of your concern. However, when all is said and done, it is Data's choice. I have not ordered him to accept this assignment, Will. It was always his own decision, and I made sure that was clear at the time I informed him of the proposed secondment."

Commander Riker still appeared somewhat unconvinced, his blue gaze deeply concerned. Picard intercepted this look.

"Number One, it's Data's decision. He is an individual, with an individual's right to choose. Soong class android or no, it is Lt Commander Data of Starfleet who must weigh up the risks involved in accepting this assignment. It is his right as a free sentient, and as a Starfleet officer," Picard replied, before adding in a soft undertone, "something we have both had to fight hard for, Will. Let's not start to mollycoddle him now."

Will Riker gave a small nod of agreement, and acknowledged his Captain's point with a small smile.

At that moment, the turbolift doors to the rear of the Bridge slid back to admit Dr Crusher. Not one member of the Bridge crew could interpret the Chief Medical Officer's facial expression as being anything other than acutely anxious.

"I came as quickly as I could, Captain. I was finishing the more cohesive study of the medical reports, as we discussed. But you said you wanted to see me now?"

"Yes, indeed, Doctor. Would you accompany me to my Ready Room. Number One, you have the Bridge until further notice."

Commander Riker nodded his assent, and moved to his feet as the Captain stood to escort the CMO to his office, his own face sympathetic to his commanding officer's self-imposed task. It was probably better that Beverly Crusher should hear about what her son was mixed up in from Jean-Luc Picard, before the inevitable scuttlebutt started flying around the ship. But, somehow, the Commander had his doubts about it making the Captain's job any easier.

FOUR

The access ducting of the Excelsior class Kitumba was a far cry from the access ways of the galaxy class Enterprise - a fact painfully reiterated every ten metres or so as Ensign Robin Lefler's head came into contact with yet another piece of system ducting. But Lefler stoically crawled on, tricorder in hand, checking the emergency bypass flues for any signs of leakage or wear. In one hand

was clasped her precious tricorder, the one reprogrammed aboard the Enterprise by Commander Data, and in the other her PADD with its checklist details. Robin's progress was hardly elegant, dictated as it was by the size of the access duct, and handicapped by the carriage of her equipment, she made a curiously irregular clunking noise as she shuffled alongside the Kitumba's flues on her hands and knees.

"At last..." she finally sighed. "Section One complete." And tapping the PADD with evident relief, she came to a weary halt and let out a whooshing breath.

Flipping a stray lock of hair that had somehow worked its way free from her businesslike plait, Robin settled herself into a more comfortable sitting position in order to correlate her results. As she shifted her PADD onto her knees, Robin heard evidence of someone else working their way along the ductway.

"I'm at the end of section one," she called out, her voice echoing eerily back to her through the communicating channels of the Kitumba's superstructure.

There was a pause in the scuffling, but no response. The scuffling recommenced and Robin paused, sitting up as straight as the hairs on the back of her neck, her attention focussed on that distinct sound. "Hello?... Hi... Is there anyone there?" Robin stared into the dimly lit confines of the ducting, her back pressed against a flat piece of panelling, aware of the slightest flutter of fear in her stomach.

Then something, but from the opposite direction to the one in which she was looking, gently touched her shoulder.

With a squeak of fright, Robin raised her PADD in self defence as she

spun round to confront her assailant.

"Woah! Robin, it's me, Wes!"

Robin glanced around the edge of the PADD before reluctantly lowering it.

"Geez, Rob... Will I get to do the self-defence course that includes using Starfleet logistic equipment?"

"You sca... surprised me, Wesley!" Robin accused him hotly, her face beginning to flush with colour as she recovered from her fright. "It's not terribly polite to creep up on people, you know!"

"I didn't creep up on you, Robin," Wesley smiled, shaking his head.

"Sneak, then."

"And I didn't sneak either!"

Robin looked at Wesley, her expression making it clear she was far from convinced, before she returned her attention to her PADD.

"What do you want then, as I'm rather busy at the moment!" she said, hunting behind her for the tricorder.

"Well," started Wesley, somewhat awkwardly scratching his head with one finger as he manoeuvred his lean frame into a more comfortable position alongside Lefler's, "I actually came to ask you if I had said anything to annoy you, Robin. Have I?"

"No, Wesley, don't be silly. Of course you haven't. Why do you ask?"

"Well... I just wondered, as you've been a little more... *distant* than usual."

"You mean than when we're aboard the Enterprise?"

"Yes. I suppose I do."

Robin Lefler hung her head a moment before shaking it briefly, placing the PADD and tricorder down beside her. She finally sat back and regarded him steadily with her clear, direct gaze.

"Wesley Crusher, you have not annoyed me nor offended me. I still think you're rather cute, and if circumstances were maybe a little different I could well be tempted to do something about it. But - " she raised a single delicate forefinger as Wesley opened his mouth as if to reply to this - "Wesley, how can you possibly think of anything else but this! To be working with Dr Brahms...THE Dr Leah Brahms, on the first space trial project in almost twenty years! Come on, Wes..."

"Yes... Well, okay, I admit it IS pretty exciting, Robin. But I had sort of hoped that... well... you know..." He sighed. "That maybe we could get to know each other a little better on this trip."

A reluctant smile twisted itself into his face as he looked into her gaze, before he looked away to break into a laugh.

"What's so funny?"

"Oh, me... you... this situation. I suppose it serves me right for finding an exceptional female engineer so attractive."

Robin found a slow grin of her own starting to pull at her mouth. "Wesley Crusher, you are putting your own interpretation on cardinal rule number 37 - make the most of EVERY opportunity that comes your way. We'll have plenty of opportunities to get to know each other a lot better; but this - " she waved her arms to indicate the grimy ductwork - "this is a once in a lifetime thing for someone like me. Not all of us have been

identified as a warp prodigy, Wes."

It was Wesley's turn to regard her with steady sobriety for a moment. "Even if that was true, Robin, which it is not, would you have a problem with that?"

Robin looked back at him and gave an emphatic shake of her head. "No, of course not, stupid. It's just that I've not been brought up on a diet of action and adventure like some individuals I could mention. This - " she once again pointed towards the Kitumba ductwork - "is all incredibly exciting to me. I still can't believe its me, here, squashed into the conduits of a Starship which with any luck is going to make warp drive history. I'm truly sorry if I've seemed so preoccupied, but I can't seem to think of anything else at the moment."

"I know what you mean," Wesley conceded. "I had just sort of hoped that maybe you'd find the prospect of other things just as exciting, I guess." He laughed again, a laugh this time almost of genuine amusement but tinged with a hint of self-conscious irony. "I suppose I guessed wrong."

"You did no such thing, Wesley Crusher," Robin corrected him, looking directly at him from beneath her preposterously long eyelashes in a way that could only be described as somewhere between sultry and flirtatious.

Why was it that one look from this girl was enough to make him feel as if the ambient temperature had just been pushed up by 10 degrees celsius?

"However," said THAT voice, "rule 89 states..."

"I know. I know. A time and a place for all things," Wesley finished for her with a wince.

"Why, Wesley Crusher, has anybody told you, there's hope for you yet." She gave him a slow smile, pursing her lips to throw an unusually vampish look at her colleague. "And whilst you are here, Wes, there is actually something you could do for me."

"Really?" Wesley croaked, his throat suddenly dry. "I mean, there is?"

Wes could only watch her as if mesmerized as she leaned back to stretch her supple body along the base of the access conduit.

"Uh huh." Robin smiled at him sweetly as she rolled to one side, promptly disappearing underneath one of the flues. "You couldn't do the PADD work while I wriggle under here with the tricorder, could you, Wesley?"

Wesley shot the fluework she had just disappeared beneath a look of pure resignation as he took the PADD up from the floor where she had left it, and propped himself up against the ductwork behind him. "If I believed in reincarnation I could well believe I had done something really awful in some previous life to deserve this!"

"Oh, don't moan Mr Crusher - just read out those listed readings."

"Yes, sir." Wesley moved the PADD onto his knees. "Ready? Ductwork tolerance readings, second group..."

"Captain, incoming message, Starfleet Command visual communication. Do you wish to take it in your Ready Room, sir?"

Worf glanced up from his console towards Captain Picard, who was standing next to the con as if his presence

there would somehow speed the Enterprise on its way.

"Who is it, Mr Worf?" he asked as he turned to address the Klingon Chief of Security.

"The identity code indicates an Admiral Stevenson, sir. Starfleet Command."

Picard's reflex action was to glance across the command area to intercept a look from Commander Riker, who had paused in the midst of working with Chief O'Brien and Lt Barclay on a work station to the rear of the Bridge.

"Trouble, sir?"

"Hmm... could be. I'll take the transmission here, Mr Worf."

"But sir - it is encoded priority confidential," Worf informed him.

"Is it really? Well, I'd still like to see it here, Mr Worf." The Captain's tone, and the fact that he promptly sat in the command chair, made it clear that all discussion was at an end.

"Yes, sir."

The forward view of space at warp speed was instantly replaced by the sight of a Starfleet Admiral sitting at a very large, very imposing desk. The person behind it looked as if she thought she deserved nothing less.

"Captain Picard?" Her tone possessed the cold of deepest space.

"Yes, indeed. I am Captain Picard," The Captain answered promptly. The fact that he did not rise from his chair as was normally his custom was shrewdly noted by Commander Riker, who had left Barclay and O'Brien to the sensor

overhaul, to join his commander.

"Captain Picard, one of my colleagues has just sent me information that implies you have changed course for the Ceranti System."

"That is indeed so, Admiral."

There was the smallest of pauses, but it was enough to indicate clearly that Captain Picard was not about to be the one to elaborate.

"May I ask why?"

Picard's eyebrows climbed another notch at this question. "The edge of the web is vibrating, and the spider is venturing forth to see what it has snared, Number One," he said in an almost silent undertone to the officer at his side before raising his voice to a level suitable for Admiral Stevenson. "Of course, Admiral." His smile was friendly and cooperative in the extreme. "But I am sure that I could tell you no more than Admiral Stern has been able to tell me."

If Stevenson is the spider, then Picard is surely the wily fox, thought Riker to himself at this exchange.

"Of that I am sure." The Admiral smiled too, but the smile did not quite reach as far as her particularly fine, ice blue, eyes. "But please do tell me all the same, Captain Picard... just in case."

At last Picard stood, straightening his jacket as he did so with his characteristic sharp tug, before addressing the figure on the screen. "I have received urgent secondment orders for my Second Officer, and it seemed most expedient to deliver him to the Ceranti System personally." Picard gave his most urbane smile.

"Surely, Captain... a whole starship

to deliver just one officer is a trifle extravagant. What of your present mission?"

"Unfortunately we have had to suspend our present mapping mission due to a sensor malfunction. My engineers required down time to make good those systems required for the task we had embarked on - so it seemed most sensible to suspend the mission and subsequently kill two birds with one stone." Picard glanced briefly at Commander Riker before looking back towards the main viewscreen. "And Admiral Stern did stress that the secondment request was coded Starfleet priority one."

Clever! Riker looked at his Captain with slow admiration as he realised what Picard had done. The sensor malfunction was a valid excuse, a clearly logged one and one that would render the Enterprise at less than full operating status should Stevenson be able to find a timely diversion to distract them from their present course.

"Ah..." The benign smile on Admiral Stevenson's face seemed to freeze there as she realised that to negate a coded priority one directive, with the present ship's status regarding the sensor malfunction, could be achieved via nothing less than a near planetary disaster.

Having ascertained that there was nothing she could do to countermand Picard's move at this precise moment, the Admiral set off on a clearly different tack.

"May I ask who it is that you will be depositing on the Ceranti Outpost? You are aware of the security clearance required to access the facility."

"Of course. Admiral Stern at Starfleet Utopia Planetia assured me that

would not be a problem as Lt Commander Data is due to rendezvous directly with the warp trial starship, USS Kitumba, upon our arrival."

"Lt Commander Data?"

"Yes, indeed, Admiral Stevenson. The secondment orders were for my second officer, Lt Commander Data," Picard replied with patience verging on the patronising.

"We are very honoured to have such a celebrated Starfleet officer participating in the trial run," Stevenson managed to grind out through clenched teeth, her chagrin clear at this unexpected piece of news.

"If not particularly pleased," murmured Riker in a low, low, undertone.

"It would appear you are very well informed, Admiral," Picard observed, an almost caustic inflexion in his voice.

The Admiral drew herself up into a stiff, upright, sitting position. "It comes with the rank, Captain Picard," she countered, her tone no longer pleasant. "And is it not a little foolish to risk a one of a kind android in a space trial?"

"That is not my decision to make, Admiral," Picard responded. "A conclusion that comes from experience. Believe me."

Admiral Stevenson made no show of trying to hide her furious glare at Picard's subtle reminder that although she might have the rank that said 'Admiral', he had the respect that said 'Captain of the USS Enterprise, Flagship of Starfleet'.

"Then we will expect to see the USS Enterprise in orbit of Ceranti One within

sixty hours, Captain Picard," Stevenson managed to bite out through lips stiff with anger.

"Oh yes, Admiral Stevenson. You can count on it," Picard said in that soft way that only he could make sound so menacing. "Enterprise out."

On those words, Picard spun on his heel and walked stiffly into his Ready Room, followed closely by Commander Riker. Riker moved to face the Captain as Picard assumed the seat behind his functional desk, his own features schooled into an impassive expression, proof positive of his own emotional discipline in such situations.

"Well, at least no-one seems to be denying we're not welcome at this fully fledged space trial, sir," Riker pointed out, not fooled one bit by Picard's lack of response to Admiral Stevenson's animosity. The Captain was as angry as he had ever seen him, and he had every right to be deeply troubled.

"Indeed, Number One. But why the secrecy? What's more, to make it so confidential within Starfleet itself. Why? And, more to the point, why is a warp trial being held at all under these conditions in these so-called enlightened times? A propulsion expert of the reputation of Dr Leah Brahms could demand such a trial, and I suppose get one from Starfleet - maybe, eventually. But there are numerous alternatives designed to reach a resolution long before that point should ever be arrived at, damn it! Hearings, investigation, assessment by impartial persons, assessment of their results in turn by even more impartial observers... The space trial is a white elephant, Number One. It's there merely to mark the end point, not as a practical solution to anything!"

"We still do not know if Dr Brahms

is responsible for this Captain," Riker cautioned him.

"Oh. Um, yes." Picard sighed heavily. "I get the distinct impression that all of the normal arbitration has been bypassed in favour of the grand finale; the final, ultimate test. Almost..."

"Almost as if whoever is behind all this wants to force the trial scenario for some obscure reason?"

"Exactly, Number One. Exactly."

"Who could be behind something like this, Captain?" Riker asked the serious-faced man sitting alongside him. "At the very least it hints at someone able to manipulate Starfleet procedure to their own ends. Dr Brahms? Admiral Stevenson also seemed extraordinarily defensive."

"The Admiral *could* just be doing her job, Commander. And what we both know of Dr Brahms would make her an unlikely factor in a scheme that poses such a great risk to Geordi La Forge," Picard replied, sighing deeply as he looked around the Ready Room. "I think whoever is behind this has orchestrated this whole thing for a purpose. Therefore, I want - correction, I *need* the Enterprise at Ceranti One in good time to see the USS Kitumba embark on her warp run, Number One. Someone has gone to a lot of trouble to make sure we would not find out about this - and I want to know why."

"You've got it, sir," Riker assured him promptly, moving to return to the Bridge even as he said the words.

"It is urgent, fool!" Admiral Cassiopeia Stevenson snatched her arm from the presumptuous hold of one of

Burns' aides and marched into the Doctor's lounge area within his private Ceranti One quarters, her entire attitude laced with an air of superior fury.

Dr Ordan Burns' quarters were like their owner, flamboyant yet tasteful, rich without being garish. The vast area was composed of a stylish mixture of objects gathered from cultures varying from Ferengi to Vulcan, Klingon to Syrene. Every diverse type of society and artifact, it seemed, was represented. Ordan Burns' eclectic ways did not stop at the door of his laboratory; that much was obvious to even the most casual of observers.

"Ordan, are you here, damn it, man?!" Cassiopeia Stevenson's form of address in this moment of extreme stress drew more from her Starfleet lifestyle than her social ability.

Ordan Burns was reclining on a long couch within a sizeable, uncluttered lounge area, deep in conversation with a lithe, economically framed gentleman whose skin had the almost luminescent quality of pearlescent white. Spotting the object of her search, the Admiral hurried across in a manner that could be described in no other way but flustered. She made straight for Burns.

"Why, Admiral!" The Doctor's eyes widened at the sight of the woman hurtling across his private quarters. "What a pleasant, and so unexpected, surprise." His tone belied his words only slightly.

"You appear somewhat ...alarmed." The gentleman beside Burns drawled the words out, eyeing the flush-faced Admiral as she halted her headlong progress and made a visible attempt to regain her customary composure. His gaze was cool, supercilious yet amused. To Stevenson that was a constant irritation, for the assistant always seemed

to be entertained by some very private joke.

"I have had news regarding Brahms' trial team, Ordan." Stevenson made no attempt at prevarication. "I think it is something that may well be best discussed in private. Immediately." Stevenson gave a significant look in the direction of her laconic, amused observer.

"Oh, come now, Cassiopeia, you know I have no secrets from my assistant," replied Burns, a smooth smile stretching its way across his handsome features, "particularly where the delightful Leah Brahms is concerned. I simply refuse to exclude him from the proceedings, and if you are going to be so awkward, it may as well if you leave... now."

It was only iron discipline and the fact that Admiral Stevenson had nowhere else to go that caused her to remain stationary. The flush that had been so successfully quashed rose again to stain her high cheekbones, her jaw tight. "You are a damn fool, Burns," she almost snarled, her blue eyes flashing ice diamond bright.

"Then so are you, for letting yourself get snared in my net, Cassie." The smile was one of power. "Possibly your only mistake in an otherwise faultless career - but then you always did possess a very mercenary streak of ambition, Admiral Stevenson."

"Yes," replied Stevenson, her voice almost composed, "but then you of all people should know that."

There followed a tense silence, broken only by the action of Burns' assistant somewhat pragmatically folding his arms. "And so, Admiral, what is your news?" he finally asked her.

"Your assistant seems more interested in the outcome of the trial than you are, Burns," Stevenson observed, deliberately ignoring the assistant's question, her tone malicious.

Burns said nothing. He simply looked first at Cassiopeia Stevenson and then the assistant, as the question was repeated in briefer form.

"The news?"

The assistant's persistent question was accompanied by a battle of eye contact between Dr Burns and Admiral Stevenson, before finally Stevenson conceded. With a deep sigh of irritation she finally snapped out, "I have been contacted by Stern at Starfleet headquarters. Brahms has seconded yet another Starfleet officer to her team in lieu of available staff on Ceranti One."

"Is that all?" Burns face was a polite mask of disbelief. "Is *that* all that is required to provoke a Starfleet Admiral into such an unbecoming display of unadulterated panic, Admiral Stevenson?" The tonal emphasis of this clearly rested on her title.

"No, it is not," the Admiral bit out, her jaw instantly rigid at the criticism.

"Then what is?" asked the assistant coolly.

"The seconded officer is a Lt. Commander Da..."

"You come and waste my time, my very precious time, Cassiopeia, with such trivia? That Brahms has managed to secure herself a lowly Lt Commander? I thought, by your reaction, that it could surely be no less than a Chief of Staff, or a Fleet Admiral... or even the President of the UFP itself!" Burns' attitude was callous, provocative, his interruption

abrupt and ill mannered.

"Lt Commander Data, at present - " she persisted. And it was a worthwhile effort, for on this occasion Burns actually took notice of her words.

"Lt Commander Data? Data? The Soong class android?"

Dr Burns' expression was transformed in a picosecond from complacent tolerance to almost panic, certainly disbelief.

"Hell. Hell!" he snarled.

Stevenson observed Burns' subsequent animadversions as he stamped about the lounge area with an expression of almost sadistic triumph. Her glance at Burns' assistant verged on gleeful, her pleasure the base provocation of her own tormentor.

"So how... *how* did Dr Leah Brahms, outcast, manage *that* then, Cassie?"

A cruel hand snaked out to seize the Admiral's slender neck, quickly reducing Stevenson's small moment of triumph to one seized by nervous fear.

"There were contacts involved that I...we did not realise were effective," she stuttered, her eyes turning helplessly upwards towards Burns.

"Not good enough, Cassie, not good enough!" Burns spat. "That is not what you are there for, Cassiopeia, is it now?" He shook her roughly, once, twice. "Is it?"

"No," Stevenson gulped, moving her gaze defiantly, almost appealing, towards the assistant as Burns' gaze narrowed.

The assistant ignored it. He turned

his back on the pair of them to regard a particularly fine potted specimen of Romulan Rhetse - a palm-like, insectivorous plant.

"Who is this Lt Commander Data who has you all so terrified?" he asked casually.

"Trouble." Burns released Stevenson suddenly, making the woman stagger back. She glowered at Burns, one hand against her neck as the Doctor turned to address the Assistant. "An android."

"You are frightened of a... machine?" The cool tone displayed genuine interest.

"No, *not* a mere machine," Burns corrected him acidly. "A Starfleet officer. A one-of-a-kind, sentient artificial being invented by a Dr Noonian Soong. As such he is of great fascination to a large number of people both in Starfleet and the UFP generally. Do I really need to go on?"

"There is no problem," the assistant stated plainly.

"The hell there isn't! Brahms has just managed to shift more than a little attention onto this space trial in just one neat move. When I say one-of-a-kind Soong-class android, I mean unique. I mean personal friend and study subject to the upper ranks of the Daystrom Institute. Commander Bruce Maddox, Admiral Haftel, most of Starfleet cybernetic research. Like hell there isn't a problem!"

Burns exploded in a single act of physical violence, sending a flower display upon a nearby shelf spinning across the room with his show of unrestrained anger.

"Your response is over-emotional and irrational," the assistant stated coldly.

"Maybe Dr Burns is correct in reacting the way he has," Admiral Stevenson suddenly blurted out with another almost gleeful look of triumph at the assistant, "for the android Data is stationed aboard a Starship, the USS Enterprise. And it is the Enterprise that has undertaken the task of bringing him directly to Ceranti One, which means..."

"Picard." Burns said the name as if it was a foul taste in his mouth, his face becoming hard. "Jean-Luc Picard is coming here to witness the space trial? I'll see hell freeze over first."

Burns turned his back on both of his colleagues, silent, brooding, before he said in a deceptively smooth voice, "I suggest someone thinks of something fast. Because, ladies and gentlemen, Picard's presence is not conducive to our plans and need I remind you all that we are in this together, good or bad. Win or lose."

"There is no problem," the assistant said.

"Oh, wake up!" Admiral Stevenson sniped at him. "If you want to keep on living the technocrat lifestyle like you have so far, you had better think of something fast!"

"Would you calm down?" The assistant's voice was as cold as steel. "I said, there is not a problem!"

"Why the hell do you keep bleating on about there being no problem?" Burns challenged him.

"There is no problem because Dr Brahms is in no fit state to complete the trial. Her total crew at present comprises of herself, Dr Spaaruk, an Ensign named

Lefler, a Starfleet cadet called Crusher - "

"You knew this and did not tell me! You pair of absolute fools!" Stevenson now bellowed at the pair before her, her previous fear driven out by her fury at the information that had just been imparted. "No wonder bloody Picard's on his way. There could never have been any doubt attached to that as soon as the Crusher boy became involved! You damn idiots, we're now all in it up to our necks and beyond. All of us!"

"Not necessarily." The assistant's voice was quiet, in startling contrast to the Admiral's.

Cassiopeia Stevenson looked at him hard, her demeanour caught somewhere between fury, fear and apprehension.

"You, Admiral, have complete control of this space trial. You must move the appointed time of the warp run forward so that it will take place before the Enterprise could ever hope to reach here."

"Yes... Yes, that might work. Brahms could never hope to comply. She would have to admit defeat and accept the consequences. Excellent... Excellent!" Burns observed with ill-concealed satisfaction.

"But how will I justify it? How can I explain the change in... The Alpha unit due for the Kitumba has not arrived, even... You... you are asking me to commit professional suicide!" Admiral Stevenson finally managed between a gasp and a sob, her face suddenly growing pale. "Doctor... Ordan! Ordan, please don't make me do this, I... I... Please. I would have great difficulty in explaining this change to the satisfaction of Starfleet Command, bearing in mind that this whole affair has already gone too far..."

Both men regarded her impassively for a moment, and then Burns stepped forward, putting a now almost tender hand to her cheek. "Cassie. *Cassie*. You know I wouldn't ask you to do this unless it was really important to me. And Cassiopeia - " His eyes hardened momentarily, his fingers simultaneously clenching on her chin with painful strength. "Make no mistake - this IS important to me."

"But... but Dr Brahms is well within her rights still to attempt the warp run - even with the drastic reduction in preparation time and the question of crew status!" Stevenson snapped nervously, her words impeded by the strength of Burns' hold on her jaw. "She's either going to concede, or succeed, or run the risk of destroying herself and the Kitumba in the attempt. Is that also part of your wonderful plan, gentlemen?"

"Of course, Admiral." The assistant smiled coldly yet again - yet was it his turn for his gaze to hold the merest hint of triumph? "I think you'll find our plan most flexible. This has made things even better - in fact, maybe even a shade closer to perfection."

With that, he seated himself with an air of self-confident reverie, his curious three digit hands steepled before him as he closed his eyes and lapsed into a trance of intense concentration.

A lone figure sat hunched over the Kitumba's Ops console, narrow shoulders slumped, fingers playing aimlessly with a thick plait of optic fibre. The Bridge area was only dimly lit by auxiliary lighting, the original systems having been temporarily downgraded to facilitate the installation of the warp run sensor and control systems.

"Leah?"

The figure spun jerkily in her seat, dropping the fibres as she did so. Her face, as she scooted the chair round, tense and vulnerable.

"Hey, Leah... you're as jumpy as a Circasian plague cat. It's only me here." Geordi walked slowly onto the Kitumba's bridge, both hands full of equipment. "Didn't you hear the turbolift doors open?"

"No... No, I guess I didn't." Brahms' gaze drifted back to the main viewscreen with its panoramic views of space and the planet Ceranti One, with its halo of orbiting high tech space stations and docking facilities.

Geordi followed her gaze, moving across the circular Bridge area to stand alongside his friend and colleague.

"It's beautiful, isn't it," Leah stated simply, leaning back in her chair. "The scale is so... so vast, it's more than beautiful, it's stunningly beautiful."

"It sure is that," Geordi agreed, aware that his view of the starscape was probably quite different to that of Dr Brahms, due to the interpretative nature of his VISOR.

"I'm feeling very small at the moment." Leah Brahms glanced up at him as he studied the view of Ceranti One. "Quite insignificant in fact. And powerless..."

"Mmm... Powerless? That's not a good word to use Leah. - not when we're this close - " he held up a thumb and forefinger to show a tiny gap - "to a warp run."

"Yes, I see what you mean. What could I have been thinking of? I mean,

what on earth possessed me to take all this on? I must be mad." She took a deep breath. "It's like running down a slope when you're a child; you start running, so confident that you can reach the bottom, and before you know it, you're out of control and you can't stop."

"Leah," Geordi said softly, sitting at the post beside Ops, "forgive me if I'm speaking a little out of turn here, but isn't it a little late for second thoughts?"

"Sure, I know. But look at it, Geordi; just look at it." Brahms indicated the dimly lit command area by way of illustration. "You were right, it is a mess. An unsavable, unsalvageable mess. And I'm going to end my career sitting right in the middle of it. This was stupid, stupid, *stupid!*"

"And what have I got to put it right... a team of engineers? No, it needs more than that. Two teams of engineers, even, couldn't get it right in time. And so what have I actually got? One engineer, two ivory tower theorists, a cadet and an ensign. What was I thinking of? What AM I thinking of?"

"You were thinking about the truth, Leah, of cutting through all the confusion and deceit Burns has managed to weave around this whole fiasco the only way you know how. By example, by making what to Starfleet is just a bunch of statistics without substance, real. So don't you dare even think of giving up now, and if I was your commanding officer, I'd make that a damn order!"

"Yes, sir." Leah seemed to relax slightly, a rueful smile flitting across her face as she regarded the man sitting next to her. "Shall I tell you what's different about you, La Forge? Oh, not only the fact you are so damn sure of yourself - no, don't tell me. You can't ever remember being any other way."

"Now, I wish *that* were true," Geordi put in, his eyebrows raised.

"We speak the same language, somehow. It's as if when I'm with you, you see me as I really am. Because you understand what I'm saying when I get excited about a certain type of engine configuration or a proposed schematic."

"Doesn't everyone, Leah?"

"Don't laugh, Geordi. Not everyone thrives on dilithium theory and warp fields, believe it or not."

Geordi La Forge pulled his face into a look of mock disbelief, tinged with humour.

"You, Mr La Forge, probably know me better than anyone. You see a part of Leah Brahms that only a fellow engineer could see. In the way I use my creativity to make a good idea something more... and, worse still, you're sweet with it."

Brahms settled her chin on her hand and regarded her main hope with a wistful look in her eye. "If only I'd met you a little sooner, Commander. But then I didn't, did I? It took a witch hunt into the bowels of my galaxy class engines to find who was responsible for fiddling with my engine specs... on a whim."

"On a whim? Leah!" Geordi chided her gently.

"OK - some lame excuse then. Something about it being a little different when you get out into space for real, I believe." Brahms moved her seat round so that her back was to the main viewscreen. "I need more than lame excuses now. I need a team of engineers. Another ten or twenty of yourself, Mr La Forge, would do nicely."

"Your wish is my command, Dr

Brahms."

"Don't tease, Geordi. It's not at all amusing at the present moment."

"Who's teasing? The reason I'm here is that I have just logged a scrambled subspace message from the Enterprise. A basic audio message saying simply that they're all on their way to the party as the Captain thinks we may require a chaperone."

Brahms released a short gasp of laughter. "Cryptic... but I think that I get the drift." She stopped abruptly. "And so *that* is why... Damn! So they were *that* worried that we could have pulled it off..."

"COULD have pulled what off? The trial? It will work, Leah, you'll have your engineers if you have a little faith. The Enterprise is due here in less than sixty hours. Nothing but the best of my team at your disposal. Plus Data... the only person I know who can reprogram any number of isolinears, whilst advising one on the best approach to rerouting control stations!"

Leah allowed herself a sigh and a small smile before climbing stiffly to her feet. "It's not that simple, Commander."

"It is going to have to be." Geordi caught Leah's arm, his face insistent. "It's YOUR career that's on the line here. That's the only reason why I'm still here and not safely back on the Enterprise myself."

"Really, Geordi?" Leah's gaze flicked almost instinctively to Geordi's VISORed eyes, and then down across his face, her own expression composed into a studiously neutral mask.

"Um... yeah." La Forge glanced up at the dark haired engineer standing

before him, aware of her scrutiny, but unsure of her intentions.

Leah glanced down and then back to his puzzled face, slowly, almost hesitantly, stretching a gentle finger out to touch the jawline of the man sitting before her, her palm moving to cup his chin, her thumb moving across to brush gently against the corner of his lower lip.

"Leah..." he said, falteringly, struggling to stop his mind spinning under the suddenness and unpredictability of her change in subject. "Stop it. This isn't like you..."

"I don't want to be like me anymore. I'm sick of being like me. Sober and cerebral and so deathly dull." She caught her own lower lip in her teeth. "Geordi..."

But Geordi La Forge had already caught her fragile hand in his own. "No, Leah, don't. I'm your friend, and because I'm your friend, I am going to be the one with courage enough to say that this is not right."

He had by now moved to his feet also, stretching to take a firm hold of her shoulders to move her fractionally away from him.

"You'll never know how hard it is for me to say so, Leah, and at this moment, I'm finding it hard to believe. But it's the truth, both you and I know that - don't we?"

Leah stared at him long and hard before finally dropping her gaze to the deck of the Kitumba and nodding briefly. "Yes," she sighed finally. "Yes, I suppose we do."

Geordi La Forge studied her bowed head for some moments before deciding it was more prudent to change the subject. "With regard to the warp run, try not to

be so negative, Dr Brahms. We *will* succeed."

"Geordi..." Leah sighed yet again, but this time it was a long heavy sigh, one of resignation, almost defeat. "You're not the only one to have recently logged a subspace message. Only mine didn't come from the USS Enterprise. Mine came from Admiral Stevenson."

"The warp run has been moved forward. We have to be ready to go within 48 hours."

"48 hours! Leah, they can't do that!"

"They can, Geordi. It's a space trial. They can do what they like."

"We can fight this. Lodge a protest - anything! Stevenson must have found a loophole, something, to do this."

"No loophole, Commander. As I've told you before, all conditions of a space trial are under the complete jurisdiction of the Starfleet officer in charge - which appears to have become Admiral Stevenson."

"Who, by some twist of coincidence, just happens to be Burns' pet Admiral." Geordi released a snort of disgust. "Damn it to hell, Leah!"

"I know. Even I didn't realise how involved this had all become until you mentioned the Enterprise was on its way. And that's why, Geordi... When I received the final orders, I couldn't understand why they had been changed, what was going on. My half of the shutdown crew isn't due for another three days. I was so determined to keep them away from Ceranti One until the last moment that I've really blown it. The modifications are barely complete and then these new orders came through. 48 hours! It seemed a most bizarre change

in instructions, but that's why. Captain Picard and the USS Enterprise are bringing Lt Commander Data to Ceranti One, and Burns obviously can't allow that to happen. He doesn't want the Enterprise here as witness."

"Burns is a brave man, trying to put one over Captain Picard like this."

"It's not Burns that's set to take the blame. It'll be Cassiopeia Stevenson who's acting as the fall guy - that poor, stupid woman."

"Leah, that 'poor, stupid, woman' is doing her level best to stamp your career into the ground. Keep some of that sympathy for yourself, Doctor."

"Yes, I know. I'm sorry, Geordi, I really am. I truly didn't realise how far Burns was prepared to push this farce, and I know now that this is all just window dressing for something. What, I don't know. But I do know I'm sorry that I ever got anyone else mixed up in this mess."

"What do you think they're up to?"

"I don't know yet. But I'll work it out. I've had more than my fair share of outfoxing Dr Ordan Burns, Commander."

Moving back across the Bridge, Geordi sat heavily in the command chair, his face uncharacteristically stern, pulling on his chin as he fell into deep thought.

Leah Brahms watched him, remorse written clear over her face as she watched one of her best friends probably contemplating the end of his Starfleet career - due solely to her own machinations.

"God, Geordi. I am SO sorry."

But he didn't answer. Leah stared at

him, at his intelligent face, expressive even with the encumbrance of the VISOR, the wide generous mouth, the dark, almost perfect skin. And still the silence stretched on.

"Yes, I know. I deserve to be ignored," she finally said aloud, most of her vehemence directed at herself and her own stupidity in all this.

"I'm not ignoring you. Quite the opposite in fact... If we had had more time, is it safe to say that you are confident of success, Leah?"

"Of course! I wouldn't have entered into this ridiculous mess on a whim. If I hadn't thought there was a realistic chance -"

"Okay, okay, I hear you!" La Forge was out of the seat in a sudden burst of energy that carried him forward towards Brahms' position to the front of the Bridge. "Then let's go for it. Let's not allow Burns to cheat us of our warp run. Even if we fail to reach enhanced warp speed, we've got to try. If nothing else, it'll buy us some time until the Enterprise gets here - particularly if we do our test run in the general direction of the cavalry. I take it we get to decide the course set?"

"Sort of. Once the warp run commences, the ship's course becomes the responsibility of the ship's commanding officer as opposed to Stevenson. And that will be you, Commander La Forge."

"Me?"

"Uh huh. As project leaders, Spaaruk and myself had already made our decision. But as now it's obvious the Alpha unit are not even going to be here - I suppose that sort of settles it."

"Thanks, Leah." The tone of La

Forge's voice was dust dry in response, but it changed as he went on to ask, "Have you got any ideas what Burns is up to, Leah? What he hopes to gain from manipulating the warp run to your disadvantage?"

"Candidly? My best guess is that he is hoping to get his hands on the Kitumba and claim the latest innovations concerning Uthium as his own. God knows, it's all been kept so secret he might just be able to pull it off."

"And that would be a shame. So, if we give up now, he's going to be handed all this work, all *your* work, on a platter. But if we could muddle together the Kitumba's engines sufficiently to give us warp capability, we could try and get to the Enterprise." Geordi took a deep breath. "If anyone can find a way to prevent Burns from confiscating the Kitumba, it's got to be Captain Picard."

Dr Brahms blinked a little at Geordi's complete faith in his Captain's powers of resolution, but could see no better alternative.

"So - are we agreed?"

"Agreed. I'll have to discuss it with Spaaruk first, but I don't think we'll get any objections from that quarter." Leah smiled briefly. "It is, after all, hardly logical to give up when we have already achieved so much in such a short time span."

"I'll wake up Wes. You go find Robin and Spaaruk. We've got 48 hours in which to get this old lady going above impulse and looking as if she could go even faster."

"Aye, sir."

Geordi moved over to the communications station and started

keying in access codes as Leah moved to watch.

"But first?" she asked, watching his hands skitter over the console with proficient ease.

"But first I'm going to let the Captain know that if he wants to get here in time, he'd better step on it," Geordi replied.

"Cassiopeia Stevenson's math always was terrible," agreed Leah Brahms.

FIVE

Captain Picard and Commander Riker walked briskly into the turbolift from Engineering, obviously satisfied at having left Lt Barclay with sensor diagnostics completed and verified.

"Bridge!" Picard rapped out.

The turbolift emitted its customary whine as it moved to full speed.

"I wonder if we'll hear anything more from Geordi now?" Riker asked as he turned to face the Captain. "The imminent arrival of the Enterprise seemed to be just the catalyst required to throw this whole affair into high gear."

"Yes, indeed, Number One. Unfortunate, but true," Picard agreed. "Geordi has assured me that he will keep us fully informed of any further developments. What worries me most now is that even if we proceed at warp factor nine, the Kitumba's run may well have already commenced by the time we arrive."

"It's going to be close, sir," Riker replied. "Chief O'Brien has already

started work on modifications for warp transportation. A precaution, hopefully - just in case the Kitumba should get into trouble while under way."

"A wise move, Number One. In the meantime, it may be prudent to increase our speed to maximum cruise, as it would be nice to get there whilst we could still be of assistance."

"Nine point one it is, Captain."

The turbolift doors slid neatly back, their only sound, the hiss of compressed air.

"Captain Picard. Commander Riker." Data's voice hailed them from his work station to the rear of the Bridge.

"What is it, Data?" Riker immediately strode over to the Second Officer's position.

"A visual record of Dr Burns and his assistant during the Second Intergalactic Caucus on Chia VII, sir. I thought you might find it of some interest, Captain."

"Indeed. On screen, Mr Data," Picard instructed him, moving swiftly down to his command chair. Counselor Troi, already seated to the left of the Captain's position, watched him pass.

The image of the Chia VII Caucus flashed up onto the main viewscreen.

"Can you get a better focus on the image, Data?"

"I can try, Captain."

Riker had by now assumed his position to the right of Picard.

"Is that better, sir?"

The main image of Dr Burns was

indeed somewhat better, but it had been achieved at the expense of the quality of focus on the figures surrounding him.

"He's a handsome man," Troi observed, her head tilted assessingly to one side. "But he has a certain look of... arrogance, I suppose."

"Hmmm," was all that Picard would commit himself to.

Slowly the Captain rose to his feet, and studied the image before him as if trying to see into the man's very soul. Finally he spun on his heel, hands on hips, and said, "Data, is that Admiral Stevenson I can see in the background?"

"It would appear so, sir. Would you like an enhancement?"

"Yes, please."

The two background figures moved into clearer focus. The high bred, angular lines of Admiral Stevenson's face were familiar, turned as they were towards the figure alongside. The second familiar was tall, rake thin, and...

"Data, can you enhance the image any further?"

Data shook his head slightly, his expression considering.

"Not really, Captain. We are nearing the maximum resolution possible with this particular image... but I will do my best."

There was a tense silence as the main viewscreen became the focus of the Bridge crew's attention.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Will Riker exclaimed on a gust of held breath.

"Agreed, Number One," Picard

concluded. "What is a native of Tau Alpha C doing in the middle of a Starfleet warp trial?"

"Okay, Geordi, we've got one more batch of support staff to leave via transporter room two. Spaaruk is gathering them together now and escorting them here personally, as an extra security measure."

"Good thinking. Wes and I have finished the bulk of the minor pre-countdown checklists. I've sent Robin to stow away as much gear as is physically possible, and to check the status of the shuttlecraft."

"Expecting trouble, Geordi?" Leah smiled to herself.

"Well, you never can tell, Doctor," was all she got by way of a reply.

Dr Brahms' attention was drawn from the control command console as Spaaruk entered the transporter room with the five remaining Starfleet support staff due to return to Ceranti One.

"Thank you for your help." She smiled as the five personnel moved up to take their positions upon the transporter platform.

"Good luck, Dr Brahms, Dr Spaaruk," said their leader, a portly looking man with a worried frown on his face. "And all the best."

"Computer, state numbers aboard the Kitumba excluding transporter room two."

The computer returned the expected value in its standard, co-operative, Starfleet voice.

"Five to transport to Ceranti One. Receiving your revised co-ordinates now, Ceranti One control," Leah Brahms stated. "Energising."

The five figures on the transporter platform shimmered into their component particles and dispersed, at which point Leah Brahms turned her back on the transporter to address the Vulcan Doctor.

At that same instant, Spaaruk's attention was focussed away from Brahms, her eyes becoming creased in puzzlement. Spaaruk then spun on her heel to look towards the closed door of transporter room two. Brahms followed her gaze, yet saw nothing.

"Spaaruk?"

Leah regarded the Vulcan with some concern as her colleague seemed to freeze. Physically, her whole body had tensed and she was poised as if she had seen or heard something that Leah Brahms had missed completely.

"Spaaruk?" she insisted, her tone urgent. "Dr Spaaruk - report. What is the problem?"

"Intruder alert." Spaaruk's voice emerged almost as a whisper. But as she started to move towards the transporter room doors, with an amazing turn of speed, she repeated the words again, only at this time at the top of her voice.

"Intruder alert."

"Computer!" Brahms snapped out instantly. "Intruder status."

"There is no intruder alert."

The calm, almost monotone precision of the computer voice contrasted oddly against Spaaruk's

certainty and struck a feeling of barely controlled panic deep into Brahms' innards.

"Leah? What the hell is going on down there?" Geordi's voice suddenly erupted over the comm during a slight lull in the commotion.

"Spaaruk thinks she's sensed an intruder," Leah managed to gasp out. "and the computer doesn't agree!"

"Leah, we're entering a fifteen minute countdown here," Geordi exclaimed, his voice tinged with foreboding.

"And we'll finish it!" Leah snapped somewhat sharply. "Robin - get down here and collect a phaser. I want you to go find Spaaruk. Hopefully it's nothing. I refuse to believe her Vulcan senses have picked up something that ship's sensors have not."

"Right away, Doctor," Lefler's voice acknowledged over the comm.

"Doctor!" Geordi's tone suddenly possessed a steely edge that Leah Brahms had not been a witness to before. "If there is the SLIGHTEST possibility that Spaaruk is right, we cannot possibly start a warp run with some unknown, unlocated intruder loose on our ship!"

"We may just have to, Commander. If we stop now, we... I... will have failed," Leah pointed out with equal steel. "Burns will be declared the victor by default because I was the schmuck that forced the trial. The Kitumba will be his, my work will be his... My career will be finished."

Leah dropped her voice to a whisper that only Robin Lefler could hear as she slipped into the transporter room. "I'll be finished."

"Doctor?" Although Robin Lefler's voice was soft in the silence, her sudden presence still made Dr Brahms jump slightly. "Is it not possible for us to be granted a retrial under the circumstances? If we inform Admiral Stevenson immediately of our suspicions concerning an intruder, surely they could do little else."

"And on what evidence do we have an intruder?" Leah asked her by way of reply. "Ceranti One control will simply consult the specially-rigged run sensors, which will tell them as much as the shipboard computer seems to know. Nothing."

"Ensign Lefler's suggestion should be given fair consideration." Spaaruk's voice came from the entrance to transporter room two, unruffled, despite the speed at which she had left. "We would be wise to stop this now."

Dr Leah Brahms left Robin Lefler standing at the transporter console and advanced on Spaaruk with an almost martial light in her eye. "Oh yes, let's stop it now, shall we. Let's make it really convenient for Burns. Shall we pull over and invite him aboard, Spaaruk?" Brahms sneered, "or is he aboard already? So, just whose side are you on, Dr Spaaruk?"

Leah Brahms crossed her arms before her, her face grim.

"How mightily convenient for Burns that we have got this far and then have to suddenly decide that we cannot go on. And why? Because we've got an intruder aboard, and a very convenient intruder at that. An intruder that nobody has seen, nobody has heard - not even the ship's sensors. No, no-one - apart from you, Dr Spaaruk. How stupid do you think I am? You are asking me to take your word over the ship's computer, Spaaruk. Whose side ARE you on?"

"The side of logic," Spaaruk returned baldly. "Although my Vulcan senses hint at the presence of an intruder, logic tells me that we cannot be the only ones to know of the intruder's presence. We would be wise to stop now, for should we not, it will be interesting to see what sub paragraph of the warp trial agreement Burns will decide to invoke at the end of our invalidated run, should we not log our objection now. I believe he has a choice of two in our version alone."

"And if we in any way indicate that we question the Kitumba's ship's systems, Stevenson will stop the trial anyway. We will lose it all without even getting one AU away from space dock! And even if Stevenson sees fit not to stop it for some obscure reason..."

"Then Captain Picard will," Robin Lefler said gravely as she scanned the console before her with no little expertise, her hands tapping across the controls as she verified screen readouts. "Dr Spaaruk... Dr Brahms. The Enterprise is just this moment dropping out of warp to starboard of the Kitumba."

Everyone in the transporter room regarded everyone else, for a long moment.

"I believe," Spaaruk said finally, on almost a sigh, "we are in that particular location described most accurately as a portion of planetary strata and a position of acute discomfort."

"A rock and a hard place," agreed Brahms. "Oh yes - we are indeed."

"But Dr Brahms, if there IS an intruder aboard..." As she said those words, Robin Lefler became aware of Dr Spaaruk's very direct look, so she speedily amended her words accordingly. "Ahem - AS there may be an intruder aboard, I mean, how do we know that the

Kitumba's vital systems have not been tampered with in some way?" Robin's underlying nervousness come through in her words.

"We don't, Robin."

Dr Brahms reached back and touched the young Ensign on the shoulder.

"The question, therefore, now is, are we brave enough - or indeed, foolish enough - to find out?"

"Dropping out of warp now, Captain." Data informed the frozen tableaux assembled behind his Ops position. Riker, Troi, Picard and CMO Crusher sat silent, all within the command curve of the Bridge.

"Estimated five minutes' arrival time to the warp run zone."

Beverly Crusher glanced from Data at Ops to Picard.

"Can't we go any faster?" she muttered anxiously.

"Patience, Doctor," replied Picard under his breath before turning to Lt Worf standing behind them at his post.

"Open hailing frequencies to Ceranti control, Lt Worf."

"Open, Captain."

"This is the USS Enterprise, Captain Jean-Luc Picard speaking. I request a halt in the warp run countdown so that we can deliver a crew member to the trial ship USS Kitumba."

There was a brief pause.

"Captain. A message from Ceranti One, audio only." Even Worf could not disguise the surprise in his voice.

"Let's hear it then, Mr Worf," Picard acknowledged.

"Starfleet space trial, number twenty one. Commanding officer, Admiral Cassiopeia Stevenson here, Captain Picard."

Cassiopeia? Crusher mouthed silently at Troi, her face wearing an expression of patent disbelief.

"As you probably know as well as I do, commencement of a warp trial run down precludes all personnel transfers to and from the trial vessel. Therefore I am afraid that your request is denied."

Picard looked at Riker; Riker looked back at Picard.

"Short, but to the point," Riker observed dryly.

"Data, Worf. See if you can establish contact with Geordi as quickly as possible. Find out what the status of the Kitumba is at present and what their intentions are. Ascertain if Commander La Forge considers any intervention on our part necessary at this moment."

The Captain thoughtfully pinched his lower lip between his fingers as Data exchanged with his Bridge relief at Ops.

"What is the Kitumba's present crew complement?" the Captain asked his First Officer.

"As far as we know, five. Dr Brahms, Robin Lefler, Wesley Crusher -"

Beverly's minute wince at this point distracted Riker's gaze but for a second.

" - Dr Brahm's Vulcan colleague, Dr Spaaruk, and of course Geordi," Riker replied.

"Only five - to get that monstrous thing running!" Beverly exclaimed, looking somewhat acidly towards the view of the Excelsior class Kitumba as it hung in space just off the Enterprise's port bow, resembling, to Dr Crusher's way of thinking, a huge white albatross on the main viewscreen.

"The wonders of automation. They are hardly expected to get out and push, Doctor," Picard responded in an acerbic tone. "The aim is to reduce the number of crew at risk, down to the smallest number possible."

"One of whom still happens to be my son," Beverly shot back icily.

"Indeed, Doctor." Picard regarded Dr Crusher with a cool look. "We are aware of that fact."

Chief O'Brien's voice broke the tense silence. "Sir." He spoke from his position at a station to the rear of the Bridge. "Sensors appear to be indicating a crew complement of six, not five."

"Are you sure?" Picard was onto his feet in an instant.

"Can we trust the sensors?" Riker asked immediately. "That array is presumably part of the suite that was affected by the malfunction, Chief?"

"Sir, Barclay and I pulled every circuit on this system and checked it individually, twice," O'Brien started. "No, now the sensor systems report five aboard. I don't understand this... Even if it is the sensors, these results are not making sense."

"Keep on it, Chief O'Brien," Picard

instructed him, marching around to the position occupied by Data and Worf." Six? Any idea who the sixth individual could be, Number One?"

"No, sir. All our records indicate only five in the Kitumba's crew that we know of."

"It could just be an extra hand - " Troi's tone was deliberately calm, aware as she was of the mounting concern on the Bridge concerning the Kitumba's potential interloper" - possibly working in an area of the ship fitted with special shielding. It is possible that the new systems being tested may require enhanced shielding technology."

"Valid point, Counselor. Chief?"

"An alloy incorporating mechnanite would affect sensor readings, sir. And there are others," O'Brien agreed with the Counselor.

"Data?"

"Negative. Although the Kitumba has not signalled an intruder alert, Captain, apparently Dr Spaaruk is adamant that something, or someone, boarded the Kitumba prior to the commencement of the warp run fifteen minute countdown."

"And the countdown now?"

"The countdown continues, sir. However Geordi has requested that we download the entire system of the Kitumba into the Enterprise's own auxiliary data storage immediately."

"Why?" asked Commander Riker.

"Should anything untoward happen, Commander," Data answered him with a wary glance towards the CMO, "Geordi is concerned that the status

of the Kitumba's ship systems should be a matter of record. For future reference."

Dr Crusher moved slowly to her feet, vacating her position sat next to Counselor Troi.

"It sounds like Geordi is not so sure as to whether he'll emerge from this warp run in one piece," she said, her face grave as she looked once more to the Kitumba, now evidently in the first stages of powering up. That much was evident even on the Bridge viewscreen. "If you want me, I'll be in Sickbay."

Picard watched his Chief Medical Officer leave the Bridge in silence, his face as impassive as ever. "Data. Contact Geordi and start the download immediately." He then turned to address Chief O'Brien in his most decided manner.

"Chief O'Brien, I want you to monitor the Kitumba's systems throughout the run, with full logs and 'A' Class traces active. Commencing now."

"But, sir, the sensors - "

"Now, Chief. Full logs, all systems!" Picard barked, before turning to study the main viewscreen. "Presumably we will have to keep within sensor range throughout the trial... Ensign, calculate a course sufficient for the Enterprise to shadow the Kitumba's run, allowing the regulation one eighth AU run margin."

"Aye, Captain."

"Commander Data, will we be able to match the Kitumba for speed?"

"Captain, only two - maybe three - people can answer that question with any degree of certainty, Commander La Forge being among them. I, however, cannot."

"I know that, Data. But they are not here, you are. I want your best... guess, Commander."

Data raised his eyebrows a little at this request from his Captain. "In theory we should be able to match the Kitumba for acceleration and velocity through the existing warp curve. I would suggest that the Enterprise will be able to attain the same warp speed as the Kitumba right up until the point at which the high Uthium-induced warp bands take effect."

"They are using Uthium actually within the crystal lattice structure, Data?" The intrigued exclamation from Commander Riker was sufficient to make the android Bridge officer turn quickly in his chair.

"Indeed, Commander. The most interesting factors in this - "

"Please, gentlemen. Later." Picard reminded them of the task in hand as gently as he could whilst in admiration of their enthusiasm, evident even in the midst of a crisis. "Con, prepare for warp on the Kitumba's mark. 0.125 AU distance."

"Understood, sir."

"Stations, everyone. Prepare for warp engagement immediately."

"Red alert, sir?" Commander Riker inquired of his Captain, his face deadly serious.

"Yes, Commander." Captain Picard nodded in agreement. "All stations, red alert."

Within the cold, deep abyss of black space, the two white vessels gleamed in the combination of harsh starlight and the

fiery warmth of the Ceranti System's central sun. The two ships hung, momentarily poised motionless until the agreed signal for the off finally came - a brilliant white antimatter burst, fired from the support ship, Science Vessel T'Pek, apparently also specially modified for its role in the warp run.

The smaller of the two vessels, marked clearly as the USS Kitumba by the NCC registration markings on its rather portly configuration, moved off first. As it went, its course was shadowed by the larger, yet more elegant sweep of the galaxy class NCC-1701-D behind it.

Within a fraction of a second of each other, the two starships had left Ceranti One in a brilliant burst of white light, matched only by the surveillance vessel T'Pek in pursuit.

"Warp One... warp two... warp two point five..." Data reported calmly from his position at Ops aboard the USS Enterprise.

"Warp two point five... warp three... warp three point five..." Wesley announced, an edge of nervous excitement to his voice as he moved his hands across the Kitumba's Con.

"Warp four... warp five.."

"Warp five point five... warp six... accelerating to warp six point five, Commander."

"Warp seven point five... warp eight point five... warp nine... The Kitumba is still accelerating, Captain," Data observed.

"Con, keep the Enterprise with the Kitumba for as long as possible," Picard stated calmly.

"Aye, Captain."

"Warp nine point five," Wesley Crusher reported, glancing across the Con, then to his monitor, and then back again. Then, suddenly, his eyes narrowed in concern. "Commander!"

Wesley's voice was uncharacteristically sharp, and it brought La Forge instantly his side at the Kitumba's Con. "Hell... Well spotted, Wes."

Geordi moved speedily to one of the engineering stations to the rear of the Bridge, and Leah moved to accompany him, her hands flying across the computer console of the neighbouring work station with a speed and dexterity born of experience.

"Velocity, Mr Crusher?" Brahms snapped out crisply.

"Warp nine point six five... and holding."

"And that's about the only thing," La Forge observed darkly, before hailing Spaaruk in Engineering via the ship's comm system. "Spaaruk, what do the in situ monitors down there say?"

"We are very nearly on the verge of an antimatter overload, Commander," Spaaruk informed him coolly. "Feedback due to inaccuracy of some of the multiple injection streams on hitting the dilithium

crystals is now becoming critical. Level and efficiency are erratic... reactants per unit time is... not constant, Commander."

"We could start to warp bounce," Lefler said suddenly from her position at Ops, her face a frozen mask of control.

"Warp bounce?" Leah asked, confused. "What, for God's sake, is warp bounce?"

"The field term for warp flux, Dr Brahms. If reactants per unit time is not constant, indeed, just as we have here, starting to fluctuate wildly, the ship may well attempt to bounce between two warp speeds."

"Thank you, Ensign, just 'warp flux' would have done." Leah put a hand to her head, her face set in grey lines. "I know what the lab models say. Geordi, please tell me the field prognosis is different enough for us to get out of this in one piece!"

"No, Leah, not a hope. Bounce between warp nine and warp four and we'll have provided enough hull stress to crush the Kitumba like Ooscary eggshell in thirty grav."

"We've got to stop," Leah said, her voice brooked no argument. "The work at the higher end of the warp speed spectrum was always the most theoretical and therefore less complete. We have to stop."

"If we stop now, we will have failed," Wesley pointed out.

"And you'll be ruined, Dr Brahms," Robin chimed in anxiously. "You said so yourself."

"But I'll be alive. As will you," Leah replied. "I have no intention of going down with my ship - have you, Mr La

Forge?"

Geordi La Forge just looked at Brahms, his face carefully neutral.

"Signal the T'Pek. This has gone far enough," was her reply to his silence. "The trial is aborted due to a drive malfunction. The next decision, of course, is actually HOW to stop the trial. Any suggestions as to the best way for us to come out of warp?"

"It may be as well to simply cut the engines," Geordi answered her promptly. "Agreed?"

"Agreed, Commander."

"Then, on my mark, Mr Crusher..." Geordi returned to the command chair and signalled the rest of the Bridge crew to assume their positions.

Robin Lefler looked towards Brahms as she sat at an adjacent station with a puzzled query on her face. "Wouldn't it be quicker to order a full stop, Dr Brahms?"

"Maybe quicker, Robin, but not necessarily better. Hopefully this way we'll gently drift out of warp and to a stop rather than adding to the forces already at work on the Kitumba by actively decelerating."

Geordi La Forge sat rigidly in the command chair, his attention focussed on the engine readouts on the console next to him. "Wesley - cut warp engines, *now!*"

"Warp engines now disengaged."

The Kitumba's crew sat, as if frozen, as Wesley's voice reported their warp status. "Warp nine point six five... warp nine point six... warp nine point five..." Wesley's voice became confused as he continued. "Warp nine point five five..."

warp nine point six. Commander, this can't be happening, I know - but we're accelerating!"

Spaaruk moved from the turbo lift that had brought her to the Bridge, making straight for the aft Engineering stations.

"Spaaruk?" La Forge saw the Vulcan's attempts to stabilise the warp field clearly on his console, but he also saw those attempts fail.

"Attempting now to stabilise the warp field manually, Commander, but for some reason the warp flux effect is..." Her face and tone betrayed intense puzzlement.

The next voice to ring out across the Bridge of the Kitumba had all of their worst fears realised.

"Commander, the hull is showing localized shearing stress damage to the Kitumba's superstructure. Nacelle damage is put at 49% and climbing. If we don't stop soon..."

"How long, Ensign?"

"Five minutes and thirty seconds to break up, Commander," Robin Lefler bit out. "And counting..."

The faces aboard the Enterprise were frozen into grim lines of anxiety, the flash of red alert throwing a rosy pulsing hue over the reluctant spectators of the Kitumba's predicament.

"Status, Mr Data?" Picard snapped.

"Structural tolerances of the Kitumba's hull have reached their maximum, Captain, and at its present velocity the ship will commence break up

in five minutes, fifteen seconds and counting."

"Commander Riker, Chief O'Brien, I want the Kitumba crew transported out of that crate, now!"

Picard did not expect a response, but he got one anyway.

"We're attempting to fix coordinates now, Captain," came the voice of Picard's First Officer over the comm link, "but the Kitumba is showing signs of unpredictable warp flux."

"She's bouncing around in warp like a rubber ball, Captain," O'Brien's voice broke in. "There's no way we can match the Kitumba's velocity with the accuracy required to attempt transportation until she stops doing that."

"By which time there may be nothing to transport!" snapped Picard. "Data - suggestions, now!"

"I have none, sir." Data replied all too certainly. "The Kitumba has attempted to cut her warp drive, but has not been successful."

"Evidently."

Picard spun back, his attention returned to the screen.

"Data - the velocity of the Kitumba..."

"Is increasing, sir," Data confirmed, checking the readings at his position.

It was clear for all to see that the Kitumba was clearly starting to accelerate away from them.

"Riker, O'Brien - attempt transportation now!"

"But, Captain - "

"This is not a discussion. Transport them now!" Picard bellowed. "And that's an order."

"Captain!"

But it was neither the First Officer nor the Chief who spoke next. The voice that rang out across the Bridge came from a quite different source.

Counselor Troi stood, her shout sounding confused, uncertain. Picard's immediate reaction was to do an about face and look towards the Counselor, and on doing so he realised that the attention of the raven haired Betazoid was clearly focused towards the rear of the Bridge. Furthermore, at that moment, the doors to the aft turbolift hissed back to allow a shocked gasp to escape its occupant.

"What the...?"

This time both Lt Worf and Captain Picard turned to see what had the Chief Medical Officer and Counselor so transfixed to the position of the aft Engineering station.

The sight itself was one of the race of travellers native to Tau Alpha C, seated at the Bridge Engineering position. His strange yet unclumsy three digit hands skimmed over the associated consoles with a simple speed that defied physical form. His gaze was downcast, intent on his task, his hands never faltering once until he paused to grip the edge of the Bridge console and started to phase gently.

His form shimmered like the reflection on a becalmed pond once a rock has been dropped into its still depths. The physical manifestation of his pearlescent skin and plain garb rippled into and out of existence with an almost

unhurried ease as he seemed to almost linger between dimensions.

Mesmerized by this entire performance, the Bridge crew were more than visibly shocked by Commander Riker's voice ripping into the eerie silence across the comm system, startling all those present, including the Captain.

"Captain, velocity... somehow matched. Energising - now!"

Picard snapped his attention back to the main viewscreen in sufficient time to see the warp run ship Kitumba sheared down into almost two dimensions in a split second. Then the beleaguered vessel was enveloped in an eye-burning ball of the brightest white light, a spectacular display fuelled by the uncontrolled combination of its complete reserves of matter and antimatter.

The Enterprise responded simply to the con as Picard snapped,

"Evasive!"

Rapidly decelerating whilst turning away from the brilliant demise of the Kitumba, the USS Enterprise dropped out of warp to allow some distance to lapse between the explosion and her previously all too vulnerably close shields.

"Well, I do seem to be making something of a habit of profusely thanking you," Beverly admitted, whilst running a wry hand through her thick shock of chestnut hair. "But here I go again, anyhow. How can I thank you enough for all you've done."

Her smile was bright and genuine, her gaze momentarily touched with maternal pride as it strayed towards her son who was standing some way across

the crowded Ten Forward facility, talking animatedly to Commander Riker and Data.

"Yet again I find myself thanking you for saving us from somewhere almost beyond hope," Beverly Crusher continued, as she returned her attention to the tall thin alien at her side.

"Thanks are not required, Dr Crusher," the softly measured, almost pedantic voice of the alien 'traveller' replied, "for I do believe that on those previous occasions, none were actually your own fault. The first was most definitely not the fault of anyone save myself, and on this occasion, sadly, the fault undeniably lies with others of my own race."

"Maybe," the Doctor smiled, "but on all three occasions I have had some benefit - most particularly, I think, on this last one."

Jean-Luc Picard discreetly rejoined, them having been briefly engaged in conversation with Dr Spaaruk.

"Yes," the Traveller observed, his expression suddenly distant, almost sad. "This latest occasion of our meeting was perhaps the most... unfortunate of the three. The intervention of Burns' 'assistant' in such a manner, for his own ends, was totally unacceptable. It should have been anticipated by us, and therefore dealt with by us."

"Indeed." Jean-Luc Picard's face was grave. "I cannot deny that I find it of no little concern that a being with such 'abilities' was prepared to use them to further his own ends, in a society which, to paraphrase words said by yourself, is hardly ready for such things."

From his voice alone, Picard's disapproval was obvious and the

Traveller simply acknowledged this with a slight nod of his head.

"But what did he stand to gain by discrediting Dr Brahms? And what did he hope to gain by the senseless deaths of those aboard the Kitumba?" Beverly asked, a frown creasing her brow.

"Each aboard the Kitumba was... is... due to make a considerable contribution to what you would call, within your own somewhat limited frame of reference, the future. Burns' 'assistant' sought to gain his own ends by negating their existence, seduced by aspects of your four dimensional physical universe that we do not have. Greed, lust, avarice... and he was prepared, it would seem, to go to any lengths to enable himself to stay here and satisfy those very Human desires."

"How likely is it that a similar individual will choose to impose himself on our all too Human reality again in the future?" Picard asked, his tone cautiously dry.

"That I do not know, Captain. I can only assure you that we will do our utmost to avoid such a thing ever happening again," the native of Tau Alpha C assured him. "But our race is like any race, maybe a little different from yourselves in terms of evolution, but still a mixture of good and bad, each with the potential to go down the path chosen by Burns' 'assistant'. It finally becomes a question of choice and circumstance."

"Indeed," Picard responded somewhat dourly, his misgivings clear.

"Oh, I don't know. Burns and Stevenson seemed pretty open to manipulation, Jean-Luc. You cannot in all fairness blame the 'assistant' for their willingness to be coerced," the Doctor said, coming somewhat surprisingly to the defence of Burns' alien colleague.

"And a future, or 'some other' place filled with totally infallible life forms does seem... well, a little daunting."

"Beverly."

"Well, it does," she justified with no little dignity, her final response from Picard being an uncharacteristic snort of disbelief. "And, having no wish to embark on a full blown argument just now," she went on sweetly, her saintly forbearance aimed directly at the Captain, "I am going to mingle."

But before Crusher could extricate herself from their small group, she found her arm gently caught in Picard's grip as he said quietly in her ear, "Doctor. I hope you have not forgotten - 0800 hours, holodeck three."

Beverly Crusher's mercurial blue gaze flicked from Captain to the intrigued expression on Will Riker's face as the First Officer walked up to join them, her own features hovering somewhere between amusement, genuine surprise and mock distress.

"Oh my God. I thought that you'd actually forgotten about that, Jean-Luc."

An involuntary smile cut into her fine boned features, making her eyes dance mercilessly.

"I mean, in between saving Starfleet as we know it, and snatching my son from the jaws of death, I thought the last thing on your mind would be relaxing on a holographic beach somewhere. Umm, Pacifica, I think you said..."

But Picard was not thrown for a moment by either the change of venue or by the subtle opportunity she had allowed him - an opportunity to bow out gracefully should he wish to do so.

"Not Pacifica. No, if I remember correctly, Doctor, it was Andean VII. Providing you were not given the... er... 'evil little bay' I think were your exact words used to describe that particular mount. The weather will be excellent, and, to be honest - I think Wesley could use the space."

He looked significantly over to where Wesley Crusher and Robin Lefler were sitting in deep conversation at one of the tables in Ten Forward.

"Are you suggesting that this invitation is for my son's benefit?" Beverly Crusher's tone was intriguingly dry.

Will Riker turned his highly entertained gaze from the CMO to his Captain, but the Captain's expression gave nothing away. The only thing that did emerge was the slightest of gallic shrugs and a poker straight face, betrayed only by the merest twitch of his stern mouth.

"If that is what it takes," he said simply, "yes."

"Jean-Luc Picard - you are incorrigible," she sighed finally, throwing her hands in the air as she admitted defeat. "Okay. I concede, this time. And Lefler's rule number thirteen holds true."

"Rule thirteen, Doctor?" Riker asked, a familiar grin on his face, "And what is young Lefler's thirteenth axiom of life then?"

"Never underestimate your Captain, Number One," Jean-Luc Picard replied crisply, before CMO Crusher even had a chance to draw breath.

were seated at one of the Ten Forward tables, small piles of food arranged in curious heaps before them.

"Now, if this were the shielding on the chamber..."

"But that is not the shielding on the chamber," Spaaruk observed without humour. "That is a canape."

"Hey, ladies... ladies!" Geordi bore down on them bearing a tray full of drinks, accompanied by Data balancing more food on his hands than he could credibly hold. "This is a social occasion, not a time for talking shop."

"Shop, Geordi?" Data paused in the midst of his skilful act of equilibrium.

"Later, Data," Geordi replied. "However, before a much needed change of subject, I just want to ask our associates here, what's next? The Kitumba's in tiny pieces spread over half the galaxy. Dr Burns has been totally discredited due to the disgraced Admiral's revelations concerning Burns' experimental methods AND his use of his assistant's abilities to dupe Starfleet. Is this the end of Uthium induced warp?"

"Why should it be?" Leah Brahms regarded La Forge with a steely glare.

"It doesn't work, that's why. Sure, it looks good on paper, but out here... Out here where it really matters, it has yet to prove its practicality.

"You know, it's one thing for you theoretical warp engineers, pottering around in your ivory towers..."

Leah Brahms appeared not to hear Geordi La Forge's teasing tone, and instead fixed the Chief Engineer with a sharp stare. "Ivory towers! May I remind you, Commander - " his title came out like an insult - "exactly who it was who designed your beloved warp engines in the first place? If it was not for we so called 'ivory tower' engineers, you and your ilk would still be sputtering around the galaxy on impulse engines only!"

"That is a logical conclusion," Spaaruk added a little too innocently, even for a Vulcan, one eyebrow gently elevated.

"Oh no, Spaaruk." Geordi groaned in mock anguish. "Don't say you agree with her! Whatever happened to you two being such great rivals? And I thought Vulcans were supposed to be a sensible, logical, race. Data! At least say you agree with me, Data."

Data regarded his friend and colleague with a quizzical look, opened his mouth, and then appeared to think better of it, closing it again. Finally he tilted his head to one side, and said in his soft precise tones,

"I believe the appropriate response to be, Geordi...No comment."



LIKO

I awoke in a strange place
 With different beings there.
 I really thought that I had died
 So at first I didn't care.

But then I saw a being
 Respected well by others
 Could this be the Overseer
 Spoken of by our mothers' mothers?

Nuria was unsure
 But she listened well, that's true
 And when we found the Palmer
 She told us what to do.

When Riker stole the Palmer
 I wanted to hurt Troi
 But Nuria wouldn't let me
 And I was quite annoyed.

When Nuria arrived with the Picard
 I thought our troubles past
 But he was not the Overseer -
 I saw the truth at last.

Margaret Connor



