

MAKE IT SO 25



CONTENTS

'Necessary' Evil	by Anne Keown	P 3
<i>Post The Mind's Eye - Can Starfleet trust Geordi again, or is he really a traitor?</i>		
Fledgeling	by Sandra Edge	P 27
<i>Sequel to Cuckoos in the Nest, MIS 24. Children have been kidnapped for sale as slaves. Can Riker use the rescue attempt to help him find his lost daughter?</i>		
Just Desserts	by Liz Aris	P 58
<i>Worf, Riker and Geordi get involved in a shore leave fight...</i>		
Aftermath	by Christine Carr	P 61
<i>After the Borg and Soong incidents, Picard and Data have doubts about themselves.</i>		

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STAR TREK

THE NEXT GENERATION!



1993

C. MacLeod

USS ENTERPRISE-D
Flux Plot 10

'NECESSARY' EVIL

by

Anne Keown

Beverly Crusher was in Ten Forward with Troi when the Captain's voice came over her communicator. "Doctor, could you meet us in sickbay please; and bring Counselor Troi with you."

"Aye, sir."

"Picard out."

"Let's go!" Abandoning their unfinished drinks, and meeting Guinan's enquiring look with a shrug, they left.

The turbolift stopped on deck 10 and the doors opened to reveal Data and the Captain, who were on their way up from the cargo bay. Troi and Crusher stepped on and the doors closed. As the lift started to move Crusher shot Picard a questioning look.

"Halt!" the Captain ordered before addressing her. "La Forge just attempted to shoot the Governor of Krios."

"What?" both women said in unison.

"If it hadn't been for Worf's warning to me he would have done it."

"Why?" Beverly asked.

"I believe Mr Data has a theory on that."

Data took this as his cue. "Ever since Geordi returned from Risa I have been detecting E-band transmissions which originated either on the ship itself or on Krios. When I analysed the nature of the transmissions it became apparent that the only device capable of using them was

Geordi's VISOR, which would interpret such signals and pass them as direct commands to his brain. Since we only started detecting these signals when he rejoined the ship I inspected the shuttle in an attempt to find out if anything unusual had happened during Geordi's trip. It turns out that not only was the shuttle captured by a tractor beam during that time, but all the chips containing details of the approach to Risa were replicated using Romulan technology."

Data paused briefly before continuing. "When I discovered this I tried to contact Geordi to get him to report to sickbay. He did not respond so I contacted Worf and told him to detain Geordi until we had a chance to analyse what these instructions were making him do."

Data stopped at this point and the Captain took over. "When Worf tried to do this two of the Governor's guards stopped him so he shouted to me. One second later and the Governor would have been dead."

"Where were the signals coming from?" Troi enquired.

"Ambassador Kell," Picard informed her briskly. "It would appear that he is actually a Romulan accomplice who was trying to break up the treaty between the Klingons and the Federation, not reinforce it as he had claimed. Data discovered that Kell and I were the only people present at the source of each transmission and told the governor that if Kell were searched they would find the transmitter on him. The governor has

taken him back to Krios for that purpose and I've asked for the transmitter to be sent up when it's found. Beverly, we need to know how this was done and - more to the point - how we can stop it being done again. Will you be able to find out?"

"I can run tests but they may not be conclusive."

"Whatever they did he's totally unaware of it," Troi put in. "He was telling me about the trip to Risa and there was no indication of any deception."

"Well, do what you can, both of you. If possible I'd like to get this cleared up internally but it may be taken out of our hands. Resume!"

Two minutes later they walked into Beverly's office, where Worf was sitting with Geordi. Beverly and Deanna had agreed between them not to ask any questions until La Forge was being monitored by the medical scanners, consequently all the Doctor said to him was, "Do you want to come through, Geordi?"

He followed wordlessly and lay down as indicated on the diagnostic couch. Beverly brought the overhead displays on line. "Geordi, what do you remember about being captured by the Romulans?"

"Huh?"

The displays gave no indication that he was lying and Deanna's nod confirmed that Geordi didn't have a clue what she was talking about. This time it was the Counselor who spoke. "Geordi, what did you just do in cargo bay 4?"

"I helped O'Brien check out the pattern buffer."

"What about after that, Commander?" Picard put in.

"I came up here with Worf - why, I don't know."

The Captain quickly filled him in on the reason for his presence in sickbay. La Forge was stunned into silence. Taking advantage of the pause, Beverly spoke up. "Geordi, we think you were being manipulated via your VISOR, but we need to know how this was possible. I'll need to run some tests. O.K.?"

"No problem."

Crusher turned to Picard. "This'll take a couple of hours, sir. I'll contact you when we're finished. In the meantime, I need to see that transmitter as soon as possible."

"I'll contact Krios now, Doctor." He left sickbay, accompanied by Data and Worf.

"How did they do it?" the engineer asked Troi.

"That's what we're trying to find out. Data picked up signals which would be detectable by your VISOR. He thinks you were brainwashed. Conditioned. They might have used some kind of post-hypnotic suggestion which was triggered by these signals."

"What do you mean?"

Troi thought for a moment before answering. "Well, you would have to be unaware that you were being manipulated or you would fight it, so if you were hypnotised and then conditioned to respond to these signals, then when you woke up you would respond without thinking about it or being aware of it. In fact, the signals might have brought about a temporary state of hypnosis which would explain your not being able to remember what happened."

"But when they tried to hypnotise me in the Academy they had the greatest difficulty, and I was co-operating with them. I imagine that I would resist any attempts by the Romulans to do it."

"Yes, but there are ways round that. Drugs can make you think you've been hypnotised and psychologically that can make you easier to actually hypnotise." Troi looked round as Data came in with the transmitter.

"Geordi, I need to see how your VISOR interacted with the transmitter. Could I borrow it, please?"

"Sure, Data." He slipped it off and handed it to his friend, who moved to a computer console in the corner of sickbay. At that point Nurse Ogawa approached Troi and La Forge.

"Commander, I'm just going to take a blood sample. Okay?"

Geordi nodded and obligingly pushed up the sleeve of his uniform.

What the nurse saw when he did this brought a shocked expression to her face, but she said nothing, not wishing to cause undue alarm. When she had retrieved the required sample she went to prepare it for analysis, stopping briefly to talk to Beverly en route.

Crusher came in and examined his arm. She saw the puncture marks which the nurse had told her about and which were pretty clear evidence that he'd been drugged - evidence that his captors had not been able to erase.

"Is everything O.K.?" Her patient sounded slightly anxious.

"It's fine. I think we've just confirmed Deanna's theory about you being drugged."

Data called them over to look at the display of how the transmitter's signals had been interpreted by the VISOR. "It's like some kind of telemetry," Crusher observed. "Can it be altered, Data?"

"Not as far as I can see, Doctor."

"Why don't I put the VISOR back on and then try it?" Geordi called over.

"I'd rather not do that unless we have to. We don't know enough to predict what might happen. Look, I'll have to analyse these results. Would you go with Deanna and see if you can remember anything about what happened?" She walked over and returned the prosthetic to him.

"Yes. Let's go to my office," Troi suggested.

"Fine." He stood up. "Thanks, Doctor."

"Don't mention it. I'll contact you when I have something to tell you."

When Troi and La Forge left, Crusher turned to Data. "Data, could you do me a favour?"

"Certainly, Doctor."

"Go and find out all you can about brainwashing and conditioning. See if you get anything that will help us sort this mess out."

"Well, gentlemen, that's the situation. What should we do?" Admiral James Hanson looked at his two colleagues who were seated on the other side of his desk.

He had called the meeting after receiving Picard's report concerning the recent events both on Krios and the Enterprise.

"Well, one thing's for sure - we can't just leave it as it stands and do nothing. It's obvious he's a high security risk. He's been got at once and it could happen again." This was from Admiral Ken Jamieson.

"But we have to remember that we are dealing with a respected Starfleet officer. If we treat him as a traitor and then he's exonerated it will look very bad. What do you think, Skel?" Hanson turned to the Vulcan Ambassador who had been included in the discussion chiefly for the impartiality and logic which he would bring to it.

"Under the circumstances a full investigation into the matter is justified and probably expected, if only to reassure the Klingons. This would naturally lead to questioning of the officer involved. It would seem logical that this be carried out by persons experienced in that kind of work and would therefore have to take place at a secured facility."

"And given the nature of the incident and the service records of the officer, this could probably be carried out with the full co-operation of himself and his commanding officer. I am sure they are as anxious as we are to have the matter dispensed with once and for all," Jamieson put in. "I'll contact the ship and tell them to head for Jarrus II. Jim, you contact Tom Adams and tell him what's required."

"I'll get on to that right away," Hanson assured him. "Thank you for your help, both of you."

When Jamieson and Skel had left his office Hanson touched the intercom on his desk.

"Yes, sir," his aide replied.

"Mark, set me up a secured channel to

Tom Adams at the facility on Jarrus II."

"Aye, sir. I'll let you know as soon as the link's established."

"Thank you."

Ten minutes later he was winding up his discussion with Adams. "So you're clear about what's needed, Tom?"

"Very. This threat has to be neutralised."

"Preferably by establishing what happened and making sure that he can't be got at again. He's a good officer and we'd rather not lose him." Hanson was very firm on this point. "And remember, you are dealing with a respected officer who has not actually been convicted of anything. At the moment this is an investigation, not a prosecution. We don't want any repercussions as a result."

"I understand. It should make a nice change from the usual insubordination cases. I haven't had a possible traitor in for years. Rest assured we'll find out what happened and make damn sure it can't happen again."

Three hours later Deanna sighed in frustration. "Come on, let's go."

"Where?" her patient asked.

"Ten Forward. You need a break and so do I."

"Fair enough." Geordi stood up to leave.

"Picard to Counselor Troi."

"Troi here."

"Could you and Commander La Forge

report to my ready room, please."

"Aye, sir. We're on our way." She closed the channel. "So much for Ten Forward".

When they reached the ready room Beverly was already there. The Captain waited till they were all seated before he spoke. "We've been ordered to report to the security facility on Jarrus II. The orders arrived as soon as I filed my report. I'm sorry, Commander. I'd hoped we might have been allowed to clear this up on the Enterprise but the matter has been given an 'in the interests of Federation security' rating."

"Fame at last, huh?" Geordi replied with a lacklustre attempt at humour. He had heard the same rumours concerning Jarrus II as the others. "Well, if there's to be an investigation I guess it's as well to get it over with."

"Geordi, the initial blood tests I did don't reveal any traces of any drugs. I've ordered an atomic analysis but that'll take about seventy-two hours. In the meantime Troi and I can both file a request to go with you," Beverly told him.

"Do you think that's necessary?"

"Certainly won't do any harm," Troi put in. "Maybe between us we'll be able to come up with a solution."

"Fair enough."

"In that case the three of you will be notified when we arrive, which should be in approximately four hours."

"Aye, sir." All three got up to leave. "Geordi," he added as they headed for the door.

"Yes, sir?"

"Good luck."

"Thanks, sir. I'm just hoping I won't need it."

As it happened the ship had no sooner arrived at Jarrus II than it was diverted to try and arbitrate a dispute which had broken out on Talsis. La Forge met Deanna and Beverly in the corridor en route to the shuttle bay. "Look, this thing on Talsis could be pretty bad. You two would be better staying with the ship."

"Are you sure?" Crusher said doubtfully

"Honestly, I'll be fine. It's not as if they're going to murder me."

"Oh, well, Beverly. We know when we're not wanted." Troi turned to walk away pretending that she was slighted.

"Well, if that's how you want it." Beverly made to do the same as Troi but at the last moment turned round and hugged him. "Take care. Okay?" Troi followed suit.

"I will."

"I'll send across all your medical records and everything we've found out. I'll also forward the test results when they come through," the doctor promised. "See you when we get back."

When Geordi entered the shuttlebay he was surprised to find Worf waiting for him.

"I've to take you down and bring the shuttle back."

"Fair enough." Geordi followed him onto one of the shuttles. Jarrus II had been specifically chosen as the site for the

security facility because transporter beams could not penetrate the planet's natural magnetic field.

They were met at the landing pad by two guards and escorted to a small room which already had three occupants, two guards and one older officer who immediately made it clear that he was in charge.

"Lt Worf?"

The Klingon nodded.

"I'm Commodore Adams. I officially accept custody of Lt Commander La Forge. He is no longer the responsibility of the Enterprise Security Department." He looked over his shoulder at one of his associates. "Log that, will you."

Geordi gave Worf an incredulous look, and muttered, "I was unaware that I ever was the responsibility of the Enterprise Security Department."

"The nature of the orders we received placed you in that category."

"Oh."

Adams once again addressed Worf. "That will be all, thank you, Lieutenant. You may return to the Enterprise."

"Aye, sir." He acknowledged his friend with a nod before following their escort back to the shuttle.

When Worf had disappeared Adams finally addressed Geordi. "Please take a seat, Mr La Forge." He indicated the two chairs which faced each other over a square table. When they were both seated he spoke again. "The way I've heard it, Commander, we have three problems here. First of all we need to be sure you're

telling the truth. Next, if you are telling the truth we'll need to find some way to help you remember what happened and finally we'll need to make sure it can't happen again. Before we go any further would you give me your communicator, please."

Geordi had arrived with every intention of co-operating in every way but what had transpired since had made him uneasy so there was a slight edge to his voice when he responded to his request. "Why?"

"Because it is against procedure, not to mention risky, for someone in custody in a security establishment to be in possession of a communicator. I'm not saying you would try to use it but someone else could steal it and use it. For similar reasons, and your own safety, I need you to change into this." He handed him a blue coverall and picked up his communicator which had been placed on the table.

"Now wait a minute. I am here to answer what questions I can about the incident with the Romulans. I am not a convicted criminal and I don't really enjoy being treated like one."

"I know that, but you will be in contact with people who are - and some of them have cause to resent Starfleet uniforms. It is possible that someone might take that resentment one step further. If we go out, will you change, or do you need some help?" He smiled sarcastically.

"I can manage just fine, thank you." Geordi wasn't going to give him the monopoly on sarcasm.

"Great. This will all be wrapped up that bit sooner if everyone co-operates." With that, Adams and the two guards left

the room, locking the door behind them.

After giving Geordi sufficient time to change, they went back in. Adams took back the seat he had occupied previously while one of the guards took the engineer's uniform and communicator to place them in storage.

"Want a coffee?" Adams offered.

"Since you're offering, milk, double sweet."

Tom Adams ordered the coffees from the replicator and placed them on the table.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome. Okay, what can you tell me about your time aboard the Romulan ship?" the Commodore took a seat.

"Absolutely nothing. The last thing I remember is putting out a call for help when the ship appeared on the viewscreen. My next verifiable memory is docking with the freighter. I've been told that all the stuff about Risa didn't happen."

"You seem to have a very convenient memory, Commander."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Despite himself Geordi knew he sounded defensive.

"You've forgotten that particular period of time completely?"

"That's right."

"You wouldn't by any chance be just saying that to avoid answering our questions?" There was something very

disturbing about the way Adams said this.

"Why would I do that?"

"Well, it's just possible that the Romulans had some questions of their own which you might have been persuaded to answer. Now if I was in that position I think I would be reluctant to admit to co-operating with them."

"Are you saying I concocted this whole thing as a cover-up so I wouldn't have to admit the Romulans got me to talk?" Geordi asked incredulously.

"You tell me. Did you?"

"No, I didn't. Anyway if that was the case how do you explain the incident with the Klingon ambassador?"

"The Romulans could have threatened to tell Starfleet about your helping them and used that to get you to do a few extra things once you were back on the ship," Adams suggested calmly.

"And the transmitter?"

"That could have been a ruse to make it look as if you were being manipulated via your VISOR. For all we know they might intend to use you again."

"I can't believe I'm hearing this."

"Is it true?" the Commodore persisted.

"No, it's not true. I take it you've read all the reports from the Enterprise."

"I have."

"Well, they clearly state that I was conditioned by the Romulans and was not aware, let alone in control, of what I was doing when I was receiving those signals."

"You could be a very good actor."
Again Adams spoke calmly.

"I could see that being plausible if it wasn't for the fact that Troi would have picked up on any deception on my part." La Forge was making a conscious effort to keep his temper in check.

"You could be right, I suppose."

"Believe me."

"For the moment I'll give you the benefit of the doubt."

"Thanks!"

"Don't mention it. A word of advice though. Since we're going to work on the assumption that you genuinely don't know what's happened, the good news is that our medical team have something that might help you to remember what happened."

"What's the bad news, Commodore?"

"It's not without its price. There will probably be some unpleasant side effects."

"Such as?"

"I won't spoil the surprise."

Geordi glared at him, but he merely smiled before adding, "It's quite late so we'll leave it till morning. If your memory returns miraculously overnight you can tell me then, before we begin. In any case somebody will bring you to the medical section some time before midday. Meanwhile these gentlemen will take you over to the residential block." Adams stood up and left the room. Just before he closed the door he gave another of his sarcastic smiles. "Goodnight, Commander. Sleep well".

"So you're the traitor that sold Starfleet out to the Romulans."

La Forge looked up from his meal to see a tall, dark haired girl standing behind him. "Looks like it," he said non-committally. "Is that what you've been told?"

"Yip."

"Do you believe it?"

"Nope. Not entirely, anyway."

"You're the only one." He was already quite depressed and it showed.

"Mind if I join you?"

"Why not, everyone else has left."

"They do believe it." She sat down opposite him.

"I see. Why don't you?" he asked, genuinely curious.

"One: I make a point of not doing what everyone else does. Two: it's not your style."

"How do you know what my style is?" He smiled for the first time since he had arrived.

"Oh, come on, La Forge. You're more usually quoted in connection with acts of engineering brilliance, phase adjusters for instance. You don't seem the treacherous type."

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it." She matched his grin with one of her own.

"Have you got a name? I'm beginning to feel at a disadvantage since you obviously know who I am."

"Call me Laren."

"Only if you call me Geordi."

She held out her hand. "It's a deal."

Next morning he was dressed and lying on top of his bunk, for lack of anything else to do, when the guards came in to get him. Again one of them trained a phaser on him while the other handcuffed his hands behind his back for the walk to the medical facility. When they arrived Adams was already there with a woman about the same age as Pulaski. "Hi. I'm Dr. Kay Stewart," she said with a friendly smile which Geordi returned somewhat hesitantly.

"I think we can lose the handcuffs, guys," Kay told the guards. They looked to Adams for confirmation then released the handcuffs.

"You want to lie up." Stewart indicated a diagnostic couch. When he had accepted the invitation she picked up a hypospray. "Here's what we're going to do. This stuff responds to the electrical signals in your brain. Different levels of brain activity cause it to show up differently on the display. It'll let us see what parts of your brain are storing the memories to do with this Romulan business. Once we know that, we can stimulate those parts and that'll help bring back your memory. Okay?"

"I think so."

"Good." She applied the hypospray to his neck and then activated the overhead displays and waited for the substance to work its way through his system.

"Right, what can you tell me about being captured by the Romulans?"

Geordi told her what he'd told Troi but there was nothing beyond the journey on the shuttlecraft and being captured by the Romulan transporter. For the moment, however, it gave Kay what she needed.

"Great. You want to take off your VISOR? The process might upset it."

While he slipped it off and handed it to the Doctor a technician wheeled across a machine on a trolley. Stewart touched a switch on the diagnostic couch and her patient suddenly found that he couldn't move at all, not even to protest as the Doctor pushed a long needle-thin probe into the relevant part of his brain. When she was satisfied it was in place Kay released the restraining field enough for him to talk and breathe.

After a few seconds the pain all but disappeared and he was able to concentrate once more on the events aboard the Romulan vessel. The probe delivered tiny electrical shocks to its immediate surroundings.

"Can you remember anything else, Commander?" Adams prompted.

"Bits," he said. "I remember that there was this guy that looked like me, with a VISOR. Mine was taken off and I was hooked up to this machine. It plugged into my neural inputs." Suddenly he blacked out.

Despite Adams' protests Kay withdrew the probe before reviving him. "That's enough for just now. Overdo it and he'll end up comatose or dead. Geordi, that's us finished for the day. Go back to your quarters and rest. We'll try again tomorrow."

When he was left alone once more in

his cell Geordi lay on his bunk, his face buried in the crook of his arm, and waited for the pounding headache to subside. Within an hour he heard the door activate. Teeth clenched, he rolled over to pick up his VISOR.

"I wouldn't bother, Commander."

He recognised Adams' voice before being pulled roughly to his feet and his arms pinned behind his back.

"What's going on?" he demanded.

"That's what you're going to tell us," the Commodore informed him.

"What?"

"Oh, come on, La Forge. Who are you trying to kid? 'Can't remember what happened!'" Adams' tone inspired in Geordi a feeling of dread as he guessed what was about to happen. He kept his tone light, however.

"That's right."

"If you genuinely can't remember then the neural stimulation should have brought it back. I think there's something you're not telling us."

"Maybe it takes a while. One session was bad enough. Do you think I would deliberately subject myself to more if I could help it?"

"Perhaps, if the alternative was the end of your career and the possibility of a very long term in this place." Adams paused. "Look, La Forge. We need to know what happened. Either you're going to tell me, with if necessary a little gentle persuasion, or if you really can't remember, Dr Stewart will do the trick. It makes no odds to me."

"Oh, so the rumours are true. In case

you're not aware of it, sir - " the last word was said in a tone of anything but respect - "you're not allowed to acquire information by means of physical violence."

"Are you afraid?" Adams sneered.

"I'd be a fool not to be, at least a little, since I know that whatever I tell you you're still going to try and 'persuade' me to tell you something I don't know myself."

"You listen to me, Commander. It's all very well for you starship types advocating that we sit down with every traitor, terrorist etc. that comes along and ask them nicely to tell us what secrets they've given away, or where the next bomb is to be planted. We need to know these things right away. Before any lives are lost."

"There are non-violent ways of getting at that kind of information. Telepathy, hypnosis, drugs."

"These things can be stalled - not permanently, but long enough to do real damage." It was obvious that the Commodore firmly believed what he was saying.

"The type of people you're talking about are just as capable of putting up with physical violence. They'll pride themselves on holding out against it."

"Nobody yet has held out indefinitely, and I don't see you establishing a precedent. And on a similar note, if you ever get out of here don't bother making any complaints to Starfleet Command. You're the only one that's likely to be affected."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Geordi was genuinely alarmed this time.

"What it means is that Starfleet Command is not unaware of what we do here. They don't advertise it, it doesn't quite fit the image, but they do know about it - and when this incident was given an 'in the interests of Federation security' rating I was given free licence to do whatever it takes to find out what happened on that Romulan ship. If you start making a fuss about it there's a fair chance that the wrong people might get the wrong ideas, and we couldn't let that kind of thing go on, could we? Let's face it, at the end of the day we're doing a job that needs to be done. You wouldn't be prepared to do it yourself so don't interfere with the people who are."

"Well, no amount of beating up on your part can make me tell you what I don't know myself."

"We'll see. Oh, and while I remember - no matter what we do here, someone will come along later to repair any damage that Dr Stewart might see. It's in your own best interests. The quicker we get this sorted out, one way or another, the sooner you can rejoin your ship, and if you're not fit to undergo the medical procedure it'll just hold things up, won't it? Now, Commander; tell me what happened on that Romulan ship."

Adams and the two guards left about an hour later, no wiser.

Their victim eventually drifted into an uneasy doze and the nightmares which had plagued him since his return from the hands of the Romulans and which he could never recall on waking caused him to toss and turn and call out in his sleep. This roused Laren, who was next door.

An individual's accommodation was only sealed while guards were in a particular section for the purpose of

collecting or bringing back their charges. At other times sections were protected by a force field which allowed movement within the section, say from one room to another, but not movement between sections. Consequently, when she was roused by her neighbour, Laren was able to go and investigate.

To try and offset any fright she might give him she picked up Geordi's VISOR and put it in place before grasping him by the shoulders and shaking him awake. "La Forge! Geordi! Wake up!"

"Uh... What! Where am I?"

"Honestly! How cliched can you get? You're in the security facility on Jarrus II. What were you dreaming about?"

Geordi grinned, an expression which was both sheepish and rueful. "I don't know. Now that I think about it I've been doing this ever since I got back to the Enterprise."

"Well, try and do it a bit more quietly. You woke me up." She smiled to show him she was joking. "Do you think it's got anything to do with what happened?"

"Probably. It is so frustrating, not being able to remember."

"Don't try so hard. Maybe it'll come back to you when you forget about it and you're thinking about something else."

"Possibly."

"Do you want a drink?"

"Yeah. Please." He took the glass of cold water she gave him and drank it. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it. You have a bad time this morning?"

"That's one way of putting it. Though this afternoon ran it a pretty close second." He told her what had happened. As promised, someone had come a few hours after Adams left and erased all visual traces of what had happened.

"Well. You'll have heard the rumours."

"They've never been more than rumours, though."

"That's because nobody has officially complained and lived to tell about it."

"Is that a fact?" he said thoughtfully.

"It is indeed - and you know what else?"

"What's that?"

"You're not going to make any complaints either." Her tone was one of absolute conviction.

"What makes you so sure? The things that go on here go against everything I thought Starfleet stood for."

"Somehow Adams has convinced Starfleet Command that he can get life-saving information from people in a few hours that would have taken days using more acceptable methods. All that seems to bother them is that he gets the job done. If you complain about what's happening one of two things might happen. Either you'll be declared a permanent security risk and spend the best part of your life in here or you'll meet with a very convenient accident. So before you go rushing off to make a stance weigh what you think you'll achieve for Starfleet against what they'll certainly lose - namely one of their best engineers." She watched him think about what she'd said. "When's your ship due back?"

"They thought about a week."

"You should last that long, anyway."

"There's a comforting thought. Thanks, Laren."

"All part of the service. Try and get some rest. Don't let them see they're getting to you - even if they are. Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

For the next five days Stewart and Adams repeated their procedures during the day, and Laren repeated hers at night. She was secretly shocked at how La Forge apparently aged by about ten years in that short space of time. He also got considerably thinner, having lost all interest in food. What none of them realised was that his VISOR implants were amplifying the output of the probe by about a factor of 10. Geordi had just assumed that what he was experiencing was par for the course.

For the seventh time he was escorted, handcuffed, into the medical suite. As usual Adams and Stewart were waiting.

"Morning, Geordi," Kay offered while the guards released him.

"Hi," he replied amiably.

"Okay, Commander. Sit down for a minute." This was from the Commadore.

"That sounds ominous," he said, taking the seat Adams had indicated.

"The Doctor and I had a meeting yesterday. This isn't getting us anywhere. We're going to try a different tack."

"What, like boiling in oil?" he

quipped.

"Nah. We'll leave that till tomorrow," Kay told him

He grinned, genuinely amused. "So you're going to try the transmitter."

"How did you know?" Adams asked.

"Lucky guess."

"It's only fair to tell you that we have no idea what will happen." The Doctor felt she should point this out.

"Well, the sooner we try it the sooner we'll know," he replied

"Fair enough." Adams picked up the box from a nearby table and activated the switch.

For the next two minutes La Forge did absolutely nothing. Just as Kay was about to order the two guards to move him onto the diagnostic couch he shook his head sharply, like someone who has been daydreaming and suddenly snaps back to reality.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Absolutely nothing," Kay told him.

"That was a bit of an anticlimax!"

"Looks like it. Geordi, I've got something else that might just do the trick but I'll have to work out the fine details. Why don't you go and have lunch and I'll get you back when I sort something out?" She smiled reassuringly.

"Okay." He stood and allowed the guards to handcuff him once more. "See you later, then."

Geordi finished eating and stood to take his dishes back to the servery. Laren followed him. When he got there he stopped suddenly, slightly short of the hatch. His companion wasn't ready for that and she walked into him, jarring his right hand slightly and causing him to drop the tray.

"Sorry. But it serves you right for stopping like that," she said putting her own tray down and bending down to help him pick up the things. Between them they managed to put everything up onto the hatch. By this time other people had stepped past them and were putting their trays away also, and in the general hubbub no-one noticed that a knife was missing.

"Comms centre to Commodore Adams." The speaker in Adams office blared into life.

"Adams here."

"Message coming in for you, sir."

"Patch it through."

"Aye, sir."

Adams heart sank when he activated the viewscreen, but he didn't let it show. "Captain Picard!"

"Commodore. I'd like to request a report on Commander La Forge's progress."

"Not as much as we'd hoped, Captain. But we're getting there."

"Well, Enterprise is standing by to transport him back when you're ready."

"Captain, that could be upwards of a week!"

"Nevertheless. It will let us run some maintenance which we'd been planning to do. In the meantime some of the Commander's colleagues wish to beam down and visit him."

"I'm afraid that's out of the question, Captain. This is a high security facility with some very dangerous inmates. I have no wish to risk a possible hostage situation."

"Commodore, without wishing to be rude, Starfleet regulations clearly allow any officer in custody to receive visitors." Picard was polite as always.

"Very well, Captain, if you must know Commander La Forge has just got himself out of this place."

"When?" Picard enquired.

"About three hours ago. I've got people on the surface now looking for him."

"In that case, Commodore, the Enterprise would be more than glad to help you recover your escaped prisoner." Having gauged Adams' attitude the Captain adopted what he thought would be a fruitful attitude.

"Really, Captain, we can manage."

"I insist, Commodore. To think that one of my senior officers would execute a jailbreak is a source of great embarrassment to myself and my crew. I will despatch a shuttle party immediately." Picard saw Troi nod indicating that Adams was convinced. The Captain hammered the point home. "After all, the officers up here have worked with La Forge for four years and might be able to predict where he's likely to go."

"In that case, Captain, they'll be a

great help. Thank you." Adams' gratitude was clearly mixed with surprise.

"You're welcome. They will be with you in approximately twenty minutes. Picard out."

"Channel closed, Captain," Worf announced.

"There's something he's not telling us, sir."

"Agreed, Counselor. Number One, take what people you need and find out what the hell's going on down there."

"Aye, sir. Data, Worf, Troi, you're with me. Riker to Crusher."

"Crusher here."

"Doctor, could you meet us in shuttlebay two with a field medical kit."

"Right away, Commander. Crusher out."

"Data, what's the weather like down there?"

"Air temperature is currently 3 degrees centigrade, Commander, and falling. There is no cloud cover so the temperature may drop considerably as night falls."

"Wonderful! Okay, Data, would you go and check that suitable outdoor clothing for the away team is put in the shuttle. Include something for Geordi. We'll be there in about five minutes."

"Aye, Commander." Data stood up and made room for his replacement.

The shuttle, piloted by Data, took off on schedule. Once they had cleared the

Enterprise Riker addressed his team. "Don't be surprised at anything I say or do down here. I want this guy to think we're completely behind him. That's one of the reasons I restricted the away team to just us. The other reason is that although he probably had a very good reason for doing it, Geordi *has* escaped from a Federation security facility which is not exactly commendable behaviour. I'm going to suggest to Adams that we form one search team and that he accompanies us. We're going to have to convince him that our sole reason for being here is to assist him in recovering his prisoner. Therefore that is exactly what we are doing until I say otherwise. Oh, and until we can tip him off without Adams realising what we're doing, Geordi's going to have to think we're out to get him as well. Clear?"

"Yes, sir." There was a chorus of assent.

"Will, you'll have to try and find out if there was any particular reason why he escaped. Anything that happened," Deanna told him.

"I know. I'm going to. While we're on the subject I want Geordi's side of it as soon as possible, so preferably we need him conscious."

"Coming in to land, Commander," Data told him

"Right. This is it, people. Watch me and follow my lead."

They were met on the landing pad by three guards. Two of them stayed to watch the shuttle. The third accompanied the away team to Adams' office. "That's the party from the Enterprise, sir."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Dis-missed."

When the man had left Adams introduced himself and Kay Stewart, who was with him. Riker introduced his party who seated them-selves, at Adams' invitation, around the room.

"Before we go any further, sir, we all know La Forge quite well. If you could tell us exactly what has happened since he arrived it might give us some idea of why he's escaped and what he's likely to do." Riker was the first to speak.

"Very well, Commander. I interviewed Mr La Forge on his arrival and as you said in your report, Counselor, he couldn't recall anything. Since then Dr. Stewart has been trying to restore his memory with standard medical means, mainly neural stimulation." It was obvious that Adams was still slightly suspicious of their intentions.

"Doctor, did anything happen today that didn't happen any of the other days?" Beverly asked mildly. Inwardly she was seething. Her report to the facility had specifically recommended against using neural stimulation because of Geordi's VISOR implants.

"Yes. We decided to see what he did when we operated the transmitter."

"And?"

"He did absolutely nothing for two minutes; it was as if he was in a trance. Then he came out of it on his own."

"Did you monitor his brainwave patterns during that time?" Again Crusher's tone was deliberately non-hostile.

"No. As it happens I was just about to start that when he did come out of it." Although trying not to show it Kay was beginning to feel slightly guilty about them.

"Personally, I think this escape attempt is linked to the transmitter," Crusher speculated.

"Really, Doctor. In my opinion he just couldn't take any more." Adams sounded slightly surprised at Beverly's analysis.

"Any more of what, sir?" Deanna's tone was deliberately kept neutral.

"Being in here. He knew that the neural stimulation wasn't really working. We got a few odd details but nothing significant. When we tried the transmitter and that didn't work either he must have realised that we weren't going to be able to find out what had happened and therefore couldn't release him."

"I see. That's what I wanted to know," Deanna answered him. At the same time Riker received the thoughts she had sent him. *He's lying, Imzadi. There's more to this, and he nearly gave himself away there.*

Meanwhile Stewart addressed her commanding officer. "But Tom, I told Geordi this morning that there was something else I was going to try as soon as I'd worked out the fine details."

"Maybe he didn't believe you," Adams told her. Troi was aware that he was starting to get anxious and mentally communicated this to Riker, who made the next move.

"Commodore, let's not beat about the bush here. We know the job you've got to do here and we also know that sometimes talking just won't do the trick. Let's face it, I've interrogated a few people myself. Didn't you use more persuasive means to try and find out what happened on that Romulan ship?"

Worf saw Adams hesitate and decided to reinforce Riker's point. "If this investigation was being carried out by the

Klingon Empire there is no doubt that such methods would be employed."

The Commodore nodded slowly. "We did."

"What did you do?" Will Riker forced a tone of mild interest to cover up his anger.

"Just roughed him up a bit. It was intended to scare him into telling us rather than do any damage."

"Did he tell you anything?" Will continued.

"No."

Kay looked at Adams in shock. "I didn't see any evidence of this."

"You wouldn't. Bradley was always sent over to patch him up for that very reason."

"When you say 'always', Commodore - how many times did you do this?" Beverly asked. Like Riker she had to force a neutral tone.

"We started on his second day here. We've done it every day since."

"That was a bit excessive, wasn't it?" Riker felt a slight protest was in order. "I mean, under those circumstances I might have been tempted to make something up just to get you to leave me alone."

"We figured he wouldn't do that because he had such a lot to lose if he confessed to co-operating with them. The way I saw it, either he was telling the truth and couldn't remember anything, in which case Dr Stewart should have been able to help him remember it, or he was deliberately withholding what had happened and only pretending to have lost his memory. In that case he wouldn't

have been able to hold out indefinitely."

"You've certainly been very thorough." Riker commented. "To think that such a person was Chief Engineer of the flagship. Frightening, isn't it?" His sarcasm escaped Adams, as Riker had intended. "Well," he continued, grinning evilly, "I'm beginning to realise why he made a break for it. He was probably on the brink of cracking. Now, the way I see it, he'll probably do anything to stop your guys recapturing him. If, on the other hand, he thinks we're here to *rescue* him, suitably outraged at his treatment, he might come out of hiding in which case we'll get him."

"Don't worry, Commodore, we'll find your prisoner for you and if he really is on the verge of cracking we'll add a personal touch to take him over that verge. When you work with someone for four years you get to know their strengths - and their weaknesses."

"Yes," Worf put in. "I would not like to be La Forge if I discover I've been friendly with a Romulan collaborator for four years." His tone made his apparent intentions very clear.

Adams sat back amazed. "And you said I was excessive. We should have left it to you in the first place."

"Perhaps," Beverly said quietly. "Just so we know what kind of area to cover, what condition was La Forge in when he escaped?"

"Well, it was when Bradley and Holtski went over to patch him up that he got out so he'll have some cuts and bruises and probably a couple of broken ribs. Oh, and a dislocated shoulder. He put up a bit of a struggle today, which, come to think of it, was quite unusual. One of the guards put his shoulder out to make him keep still."

Beverly didn't trust herself to speak, so she merely nodded.

"It won't have hampered him that much, then," Riker remarked.

"Probably not," Adams agreed.

"Commodore, if you wouldn't mind, would you accompany us? That way you can be sure that we're not up to anything." Deanna had sensed that he didn't completely trust them.

"Certainly, Counselor. I might even get some new angles on interrogating prisoners."

"You might," Worf said dryly

"Oh, and while I remember," Troi added. "Would you instruct your teams that if they find him they are to do nothing except notify us. If he's still under the influence of this transmitter, that might help us to find out what happened. If he's stunned or anything we might lose that advantage."

"Very well." Adams issued the appropriate instructions and at the same time notified his second in command of his departure.

"Are you coming, Doctor?" Riker asked Stewart.

"No, Commander. I'll go back to the medical suite in case anyone needs treatment."

"Very well. Commodore, what's La Forge wearing?"

"Standard issue coverall. Come to think of it, it's not really the weather for it. He might even be glad to come back in."

"Shall we go?" Without waiting for a

reply Riker led them back to the shuttle.

The landscape of Jarrus II consisted of stretches of coniferous forest separated by swathes of open moorland. Guided by Deanna they set down on the far side of one of the forests, trees on one side of them and a small lake on the other. Riker took charge. "Beverly, you and the Commodore stay here, please. Data and Troi, if you form one team Worf and I will form the other. Data, have you adjusted the tricorders?"

"Yes, Commander. They will home in on the energy signature of Geordi's VISOR."

"Well done. Let's go."

Geordi had lost count of how long he'd been out of the compound. Exhausted, he sank to the ground to rest against a tree. He figured that his position in the woods would help him avoid recapture since he would see any guards before they could see him. The niggling voice in his head told him to get on with what he had to do and consequently he carefully scrutinised the knife. *Quick*, the voice said. *Just plunge it into your heart. Make it quick and thorough.* The point was, after all, to kill himself so they couldn't find out what had happened.

There had been no point in him doing it in the stockade - somebody might have found him in time and revived him.

Come on, if they get you back they'll be even tougher on you. End it now.

There was something, though, that wouldn't let him do anything that drastic. Something that kept telling him there was still a chance of getting out of this alive.

His gaze wandered from the knife along his left wrist.

A moment later he watched in calm fascination as the blood welled out and soaked his coverall. He was about to finish the job off when suddenly, without warning, a hand landed on his shoulder in an unshakable grip. He looked up at its owner. "Worf!" His tone was one of profound relief.

The Security Chief ignored him. "Commander! Over here!"

"Have you got him?" Riker yelled even as he headed in the direction of Worf's voice. It was already nearly pitch dark as well as being numbingly cold.

"Yes."

The beam from Riker's torch fell on the knife in Geordi's right hand. "Drop the knife, Mister," he said dangerously, backing up the point with his phaser.

Geordi let it slip to the ground, from where Riker retrieved it. "On your feet!" he ordered. Data had outlined a plan to them, based on what Adams had told them in the shuttle, and the research carried out at Beverly's request, and impressed upon them the importance of convincing Geordi that they were as much of a threat to him as any of Adams' guards.

Riker reached out a hand to pull Geordi up. When La Forge reached up with his left hand to take advantage of this the torch beam fell on his wrist.

"What the hell?" Instead of pulling the Engineer up Riker knelt down beside him to get a closer look at the injury. He handed Worf his torch. "Hold that, would you? This idiot's just tried to kill himself. Maybe he does have something to hide." After using the knife to cut two strips

from Geordi's coverall he took off his combadge and bandaged it tightly into place over the cut, then used the remaining strip to tightly bind the Engineer's wrists together.

"Commander, what's going on?" Geordi asked him, alarmed by their unexpected behaviour.

"Save your breath, La Forge. You'll need to it tell Commodore Adams why you staged a jail break." Riker pulled him roughly to his feet and covered him with his phaser. "Worf, signal the shuttle and tell them we'll be there in ten minutes. Can you walk?" he demanded.

"Yeah, I can walk." Geordi's tone said it all and despite his concern Riker had to suppress a grin.

"Then walk."

When they reached the shuttle the rest of the Enterprise team was waiting for them. Riker addressed Worf. "Take him inside. We'll follow you in a moment."

"Let's go," Worf told his charge, who soundlessly moved off.

When they were out of earshot Riker told the others what had happened. "I'd better go and fix his wrist," Beverly said, starting to move off.

Data's voice stopped her in her tracks. "Doctor, do not give him any drugs."

"Data, I'll have to use a laser scalpel. He'll need a local."

"It would be inappropriate to demonstrate that kind of concern. This might be our only opportunity to discover what happened; we cannot take the chance of either Geordi, or Commodore Adams discovering our true intentions. On that point you'll have to

get Geordi to remove his VISOR. This will not work if he knows I am the person questioning him."

"Very well," she conceded. "Deanna, you and Will had better come with me. Data, I'll send Deanna out when we're ready."

"Thank you, Doctor."

She went into the shuttle where Geordi was sitting on the port bench glaring at Worf and Adams. Like Riker and Worf she had to stifle her amusement. After scanning him with the tricorder, and confirming that he was indeed in a state of hypnosis, she sat down beside him, undid the outermost bandage and took the injured arm across her lap. Meanwhile Deanna had come in and was leaning against the bulkhead.

"Counselor," Geordi acknowledged her and waited to see how she would react.

Sensing his concern and confusion, and knowing that they might help them clear the matter up, Deanna merely nodded.

Beverly took the laser scalpel from her medical kit and put it on the appropriate setting. Seeing her look, Worf laid a restraining hand on each of the patient's shoulders, with due regard for the injuries inflicted by Adams, and Riker took a firm hold of his left arm. As quickly as she could Beverly unwrapped the other bandage, and training the laser scalpel on the still bleeding wound, switched it on. Geordi tensed sharply but said nothing. Seconds later, having repaired the damage, she switched the instrument off. "There now. Can't have you bleeding to death on us, can we?"

"Right now it's looking more favourable by the moment," Geordi

assured her.

"Take off your VISOR, Commander," she ordered.

"Why?"

Beverly's response was one she'd sworn never to use. "Because I said so." She took the VISOR from his hands and nodded to Troi, who in turn alerted Data.

Even though they were aware of his intentions none of them was prepared for the full impact of hearing the voice from their past - Tasha's voice. As far as Geordi was concerned it was Sela who said, "Well, Commander. What will we talk about now?"

"You said you didn't want any information."

"Is that a fact? Well, it is of no consequence just now. There is someone with me who is going to help us with the next stage of our plan. Why don't you tell him what we have done so far?"

"Tell him yourself!" Geordi snarled. It was all starting to fall into place. This was just some simulation. These were not really his friends, they were just holographs. This actually came as something of a relief. It was also exactly what Data intended him to believe and a crucial part of the plan the android had outlined to Riker, Worf and Troi.

Suddenly he was hauled to his feet. "No, Commander. I want you to tell me and I do not want anyone to have to prompt you." The voice Data used was male this time and very chilling.

For the next five minutes the rest of the party listened in silence to everything that had happened aboard the Romulan ship. When Geordi had finished Data let him sink back onto the bench and then

reverted to Tasha's voice to say, "Thank you, Commander. That will be all for now."

Beverly had moved up front beside Adams. "Well, Commodore. Satisfied?"

"You seem to have cleared the matter up, yes."

"Any ideas for getting him out of this?" Beverly addressed Troi.

"We'll just need to try standard hypnosis revival techniques."

For the next thirty minutes Troi, Beverly and Data, as himself and Sela, tried in vain to bring their colleague out of the hypnotic state indicated by the brain wave pattern on the tricorder. They turned as Worf spoke suddenly. "Excuse me." Stepping past them he effortlessly picked La Forge up and, ignoring his protests, carried him over his shoulder out of the shuttle.

"Put me down!" Geordi ordered for the umpteenth time as Worf came to a halt.

"As you wish."

Within a second of Worf's releasing his hold Geordi was submerged in twelve feet of ice-cold water.

He struggled to the surface and treated them to a torrent of abuse. Beverly looked up from the tricorder and grinned at her colleagues. "Worf, you're a genius. Geordi, put your hand out and I'll give you your VISOR."

He took the VISOR from her and put it on before the Security Chief pulled him, shivering, from the lake. "Go into the shuttle and get changed," Beverly told him. "There's some stuff in the port locker."

"Don't put off any time," Deanna warned. "There's a few people anxious to know why you escaped from a Federation security facility." Troi gauged his reaction to see whether Data's commands, given before they had tried to bring him out of hypnosis, had enabled La Forge to remember what had happened during the last few hours. The sudden suspicion, anxiety and confusion she got from him, as he realised that it hadn't been a realistic simulation, indicated that he remembered all too well. She decided to set his mind at rest without tipping Adams off. "Well might you be afraid, Commander. What we did is nothing to what the Captain's got in store for you. Now move!"

By observing Deanna's physiological responses as she said this Geordi picked up on the lie immediately, as Troi had intended. "Huh, so much for loyalty." He turned on his heel and returned to the shuttle.

While they waited for him to change, Riker addressed Adams. "If you don't mind, sir, we'll take him back to the Enterprise. As Counselor Troi just said, the Captain is very anxious to find out what happened. Perhaps you and Dr Stewart would care to come and tell your side of it?"

"Yes. Although we seem to have cleared up the Romulan issue there's still the matter of the breakout," Beverly backed him up. "I would also like Dr Stewart and yourself to witness how I ensure that this can't happen again."

"That seems reasonable," Adams acknowledged.

"Good." Riker saw La Forge emerge from the shuttlecraft. "Let's go."

Ten minutes later they stepped out of

the shuttle onto the Enterprise. Riker had signalled ahead to Picard to let him know what had happened, and had done so in such a way as to indicate the tactics they were adopting. He didn't want Adams aware of their true intentions until he'd had a chance to speak to Geordi on his own.

Consequently it was only with a great effort that the Enterprise crew stopped themselves laughing at the look of utter contempt which Picard gave his Chief Engineer. "Dr Crusher."

"Aye, Captain?"

"Would you and Mr Worf accompany Commander La Forge to sickbay. I intend to have a little chat with him about this matter and I wouldn't want him to have an excuse to collapse during it."

"Yes, Captain," Beverly responded. "Worf."

The Security Chief moved his hand towards his phaser. "Move, La Forge."

Geordi actually flinched most convincingly before glaring at them and heading towards the door.

"Doctor, Commodore. It will probably take Dr Crusher some time to attend to her patient. You have both had a long day. Would you allow Counselor Troi to show you to the guest quarters?"

"Yes, Captain. That would be fine," Adams replied.

"Captain, Dr Crusher said she had some way of making La Forge immune to this kind of manipulation. Could you ask her to let us know when she's ready to implement that?" Stewart requested.

"Certainly."

"Doctor, Commodore, if you'll come with me?" Troi invited. As soon as they had left Picard turned to his second and third in command.

"Now, gentlemen. An explanation, if you please."

It was the following morning, Jarrus II time, when the Captain contacted Stewart and Adams and asked them to report to the bridge conference lounge. They had both already been in sickbay to see the chip which Data had made for his friend's VISOR while The Enterprise was on her way back to collect her Chief Engineer. As Beverly had explained, it was designed to filter out the types of waves that the Romulans had used - or could use - to manipulate the wearer and at the same time send a pulse at another waveband to alert him that such waves were being sent. Both of them had expressed their satisfaction with the solution.

When they entered the conference lounge they were rather surprised to see Geordi quite relaxed and engaged in conversation with his shipmates. Adams stopped dead in his tracks as realisation struck him.

"So it was all an elaborate show for my benefit," he said quietly.

"Have a seat, Commodore, Doctor," Picard said quietly.

The officers present had arranged themselves in such a way that the only seats left were opposite Geordi. He grinned at them somewhat unnervingly as they occupied them. When they were settled Picard addressed them.

"I have just contacted Admiral Hanson, off the record. He confirmed that any complaint we might make as regards

your treatment of Commander La Forge would in all probability be 'lost in the system', although he also pointed out that we do have enough evidence that if we were to be persistent eventually someone would have to do something. However we do still have to clear up the matter of a jailbreak, though in all probability, Mr La Forge, I don't think you can be held completely responsible for that."

"Thanks, Captain."

"In light of that we've discussed this among us and if you are prepared to take no further action over the escape attempt we will restrict our official protests to entries in the ship's log. Would that be acceptable, Commodore?"

"Yes, Captain, it would," Adams replied.

"Doctor?"

Kay nodded. Although she hadn't actually overstepped her mark she knew Beverly Crusher could bring a case against her over disregarding the medical recommendations. "If you don't mind my asking, Doctor, how did you make the connection between the transmitter and the escape attempt so quickly?"

"Well, we had already guessed that all the transmitter did was put Geordi into a state of hypnosis where he was conditioned to react, either to specific people in the vicinity, which explains the incident in ten-forward with O'Brien, or sought out instructions from Keil. On the last occasion he could do neither. Now the Romulans were probably pretty sure that the Governor would be killed and that there would be an investigation. They also know our capabilities so they probably built in the condition that if there was no instructional trigger from the surroundings and no-one to get instructions from, Geordi was to do

something to prevent anyone from finding out what had happened. Now on all the previous occasions the trigger for ending the temporary states of hypnosis was either built into the situation or came from the ambassador. On the last occasion there was none. There shouldn't have been any need - Geordi was supposed to be dead. Fortunately Lt Worf's cold bath did the trick."

"How did you know what to do, Data?" Kay asked.

"While we were on the shuttle Commodore Adams told us that Geordi had mentioned a voice which resembled that of someone called Tasha. Tasha - Lt Yar - was our Security Chief and I can reproduce the voice patterns of anyone I come across so I decided to pretend I was this person and find out if I could persuade the Commander to tell me what happened on the Romulan ship. It seems random factors acted in our favour."

"If you're ready to go back to the surface I'll take you in the shuttle. I've some stuff to collect and there's someone I want to say goodbye to." Geordi looked at Adams.

"That would be fine, Commander. Thank you."

"Is that okay, Captain?" La Forge enquired.

"Yes, Commander, but I'd like a private word with our guests before they go. They will meet you in the shuttle bay in ten minutes."

"Aye, sir." Geordi led the others from the room.

Picard waited till the door was closed before turning on Adams.

"Despite what has been said here,

Commodore, I would like to make one thing perfectly clear. Starfleet may think that the end justifies the means but I do not. What you did, and do, amounts to torture. It is disgusting and sadistic and the fact that you have to stoop that low suggests a severe deficiency in your abilities as a security officer." Picard paused, but Adams, seeing how furious he was, said nothing.

"It would seem that these methods have brought results in other cases but you will never convince me that those answers couldn't have been obtained by legitimate means. You and Dr Stewart have just come, literally, within minutes of severely upsetting the equilibrium of this command crew. If Riker and Worf hadn't found La Forge when they did he would have died. It's that simple. As it is, the show they had to put on to get you to trust them may yet have damaged the trust that is so vital between people who have to rely on each other for their very lives, apart from holding up the search for almost another hour."

"Now just a minute, Captain. If La Forge had died it would have been by his own hand."

"He was not properly monitored, especially given the fact that you experimented with a transmitter that had previously led to anomalous behaviour and didn't even bother to check properly what effect it had. Please leave, Commodore. As I have promised, our official protests will be restricted to log entries but I think you will find that if another officer, from this ship or any other, ever comes to you for questioning, you will not be given the opportunity to treat them the same way that you treated Commander La Forge. I believe you are both expected in shuttlebay two."

They left without another word. Adams did not know exactly what Picard

had meant by his last statement but he was sure that Kay Stewart, for one, would be keeping a more careful eye on what happened on the base from then on.

"Okay, Commander, just signal us when you're ready to go," Bradley said as she prepared to leave him in his cell.

"Thanks." He put his holdall on the bed and started to pack the few things that he'd been allowed to keep with him during the stay. He was just putting the last things in when there was a knock on the door.

"Yeah?"

Laren entered.

"I was just coming to look for you," he told her.

"Well I've saved you the bother. I guess this is goodbye then."

"In the sense that I'm leaving, yes. But it doesn't have to be as final as that."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"If you'd give me your full name we could always keep in touch. You've been

a good friend."

"If you don't mind, I'd rather leave things as they are. If you found out who I was and why I'm in here you might not be as inclined to think of me as a friend. Please, Geordi. Don't ask."

"If that's how you want it. Will you let me know when you get out?"

"If I get out I will, yes."

"If I'm in the vicinity I'll drop by," he promised.

"You do that. Do me a favour, huh?"

"Name it."

"Don't fall foul of any more Romulans." Laren spoke with mock severity.

"I'll make it my top priority. Goodbye, Laren." Not wanting to seem forward he held out his hand but she ignored it. Instead, she leaned over and kissed him before leaving without another word. Geordi tapped his combadge. "La Forge to Bradley."

"Aye, sir."

"I'm ready to go."



FLEDGLING

by

Sandra Edge

In a previous story, Commander Riker met an old love, Maya Roche, and was told that he was a father and that his daughter had been abducted in a Cardassian raid. With the help of his friends on the Enterprise they had managed to 'hack' into the Cardassian central database for information about border raids and abducted children. Currently the Enterprise has been ordered to track down and recover a cargo stolen by the "Kerguekuk Faction" a group known throughout the quadrant as "the Faction", made up of mercenaries, slave traders and pirates.

Captain Picard, all the senior bridge crew and an emissary sat quietly in the observation lounge around the table looking at, and listening intently to, Data.

"Starfleet Intelligence has been able to trace the Faction to Koralen-C; almost all of the known ships involved have at one time or another used the space-dock facilities. Information about Koralen-C and why their Federation membership was withdrawn has been updated to your padds."

Excerpt from Federation Security files: Koralen-C

Rainbow Dragons: Designed to be a security alternative to large sophisticated sensor arrays, use anti-insurgency, anti-terrorist and personnel security devices. Manufactured on Koralen-C in a range of sizes, dependent on the type of role requirements.

Characteristics: Anti-terrorist version, the most frequently used, has a wing span of 86mm and is 36mm wide; low flying up to two meters from ground level, has infra-red heat-seeking sensors to seek and identify possible intruders. When locked on a target, it is programmed to hover while assessing opponent's potential capability and the necessary required response.

Modes: Security mode, intruder response is ranged from stun to complete obliteration up to a range of 12 square meters.

Note: This device was banned many years ago by the Federation and an embargo on sales to unstable areas was approved and agreed by Koralen-C government. Twelve Terran years ago, renegade leader Colangrk from the planet Arafuralsee in the Malor sector acquired some of the devices and modified them to actively seek out and destroy all his planet's hill-tribes because they chose not to follow the religion and the beliefs of his tribe. Subsequently a Federation council ruled that the crime of genocide could not be directly attributed to the manufacturers. However, they found that the manufacturers were culpable, by putting profit before the consequences of selling armaments to a prohibited unstable world. The council's judgement affected the growing trade between the Federation and Koralen-C, and what had been a thriving interplanetary route, almost overnight become a redundant country lane. In order to infuse some commercial life back into his planet's economy the president of Koralen-C invited the Cardassians to use their

facilities and enhance their trading alliance. During the last decade Koralen-C's reputation as a base of operation for any renegade life-form was well-known throughout the quadrant. Any and all raiders, traders and buccaneers were made welcome; as long as they paid their fees and stayed within the designated areas, no questions, no problems.

Supplemental: Shortly after the forming of their trading ties, reports of Koralen-C's being the major route for unauthorised sales to the Cardassian Empire from the Federation was established. It was also reported that many of the Cardassian skirmish vessels used the planet for their trade in abducted children and enslaved races. Some unconfirmed reports have buyers and sellers coming to Koralen-C sales on an annual basis; the last reported organised sale was almost a Terran year ago. Most recent intelligence shows that another sale is imminent, as many of the Cardassian ships associated with the most recent border skirmishes came directly to Koralen-C ostensibly to use the planet's refitting facilities.

"Given the nature of the Faction's latest cargo, Koralen-C is their most probable destination. Recently there has been a change in policy and the current President has been trying to restore relations with the Federation by reducing the number of bases for the Cardassians and space dock facilities for the traders. However, it is felt that there still remains a large element of pro-Cardassian interests within the government, and at this time the President does not have a sufficient power base to throw out the Cardassians. He believes that there are members of the government who could be persuaded to remove the Cardassians if the Federation were to make a sufficient gesture towards a reconciliation. Next

month is the anniversary of Koralen-C's independence and the President has invited the Federation to send representatives to the celebrations. As the flagship of the Federation, the Enterprise has been ordered to attend, affording us the opportunity to test the validity of the President's overtures and allowing us to search for the Faction and the stolen cargo. Great care will be required as members of the Faction, on previous occasions when faced with capture, have killed themselves and any captives, leaving very few bio-traces. Because of that very little is known about them."

Completing his report, Data walked from the viewer and sat in his chair at the table, all eyes still fixed on him, each of them measuring the problem and its possible consequences. Finally Captain Picard looked away and proceeded to tug at his tunic while casting his eyes around the table. "Thank you, Data. Our task will be to identify the Faction's vessel and locate the cargo, without compromising the President or any of his potential political allies. Options, please."

The discussions lasted for more than two hours before they devised a suitable plan of action.

Some time later, in Commander Riker's quarters, Data began his report. "Commander, information from the Cardassian central database has a Terran female of the correct age living with a General Morg-Anan, from about the time of her abduction. There are no records of her DNA or of her origins, simply that she and the General have not been apart for the last 10 years. So far we have managed to obtain mostly military information about him, but we do have some personal details. He did have a wife, but she died almost 11 years ago while giving birth to their only child, a girl who

died only hours after her mother., It seems that the child had inherited a fatal genetic defect from her father.

"His personal logs contain references to weeks of depression and bouts of drunken stupor; though a later reference almost 6 months afterwards has the then Captain Morg-Anan literally throwing himself into his work. He volunteered for every mission on the border - in fact, anything that was dangerous, he went for. I believe he wanted to die; at about this time he engaged in the skirmish on Darus-B. While he and his men were destroying the village and everything that came into their path; he came across the child. Later records show that shortly after the raid, wherever he went she was with him; she is never far away from him. Shortly after that he was promoted and his previous apparent desire to die was quelled, replaced with a determination for success, culminating in his promotion to General four years ago next month.

"Every year at this time he comes to Koralen-C to pay his diplomatic respects to the President and his government, thanking them for allowing the Cardassian fleet landing rights and access to their spacedocks. This year the visit coincides with the anniversary of the independence of Koralen-C from one of the other planets in the system, Koralen-B. It may be possible to see the General and the child - or, rather, the young woman he calls Raya!"

Data's words echoed around the room and he watched the Commander's obvious pain as his usually blue eyes looked like large black pits, bottomless, filled with anguish. He turned to stare into the star window opposite, stroking his beard, and for several minutes the only sounds were of him and Counsel Troi breathing softly. After what seemed like an eternity, he closed his eyes and his demeanour showed that he had made up

his mind; opening his eyes again he turned back and he smiled at Deanna.

"Thank you, Data," he said, rising and indicating that Data should leave.

"Commander, should you need any further assistance - "

"Thank you, but for the moment I need more time to think about all this!"

After Data had left, Riker turned to Deanna. She could feel his inner turmoil - he was fighting for control and losing. She walked over to him and led him to a couch; sitting down with him she reached for one of his hands and gently stroking his hair and cheek with her other hand, she sat with him, gazing into his blue eyes. Her presence radiated calm and quelled some of the rising pent-up emotion.

"God, Deanna, is it possible that it is her?"

"Will, it certainly seems as though the General's child is the child of Maya Roche! But we don't have any conclusive evidence; small children change as they grow up, and this girl is not really a child any longer. To be certain, we need a DNA scan - and to get that someone will need to be on Koralen-C when the General is there!"

Sighing deeply, he said, "I know that... but everything in me tells me that she is Maya Roche's daughter. Maya made me promise that if I found her, I would rescue our child and take care of her! The thing is, I do want to rescue her, but then again I'm not sure if I should; or even if I did, whether I could take care of her the way she deserves to be taken care of. What would it be like to be taken from your mother, then kept with an obsessive Cardassian soldier and finally to have some stranger tell you he's your long-lost

father who's 15 years late in finding you? My god - how would that be?"

Very gently Deanna said, "What do you think that Akira would want?"

"I don't know! Maybe she doesn't remember her mother and can't wonder about her roots - she was only 5, and 10 years is a long time to be conditioned. You know, since finding out about the trade in abducted children I've done some research into the problem and into the medical histories of those children who were rescued. In the majority of cases, even those children who were older and did have some memories of their real parents can't easily accept life back in their original communities with their relatives. Most choose to return to their captors or spend the rest of their lives trying to live normal lives but mostly ending in failure. The suicide rate is extremely high; a few, a very few manage to have useful lives, but only after many years of therapy and de-programming."

Pausing only to hold both of Deanna's hands, he continued. "Do I have the right to put Akira through any of this? Part of me says she would want to know about her mother and me; part of me says it was too long ago and she has another life, why change it? Yet I must do something or I will never know if she wanted to come back. I think... I have to see her and ask her what she wants to do."

"Will, it's not just your decision. Have you contacted Thomas?"

"After finding out about Maya and her daughter, I contacted him and explained everything, all the known details about the Cardassian raid and the possibility of us having a daughter, somewhere in Cardassia. I will of course send him all the new information."

Some silent moments later he looked

at her, and she saw in his eyes that he had made his decision. Before he said it out loud she knew what it was. Looking into her deep dark eyes, he said, "Deanna - I must and I will be on Koralen-C when General Morg-Anan arrives. I have to try and see her. *I have to!*"

Eight days later, Commander Riker was in transporter room 3 waiting for a visitor. Chief Griffiths almost did a double-take when the transport cycle completed, leaving a duplicate of Commander Riker on the pad; only the beard and the colour of the uniforms distinguished them. A curt nod passed between the two men and Commander Riker indicating towards the door caused Chief Griffiths to wonder if the two brothers were always this hostile to each other.

Commander Riker showed Thomas Riker to his assigned quarters, neither man speaking a word. The air around them almost crackled with the tension between them. As the door to the quarters opened, Deanna was inside smiling towards both of them. Thomas rushed to her, gathered her in his arms, picked her up, nuzzled her left ear and the back of her neck.

"Thomas! Oooh! ... Thomas, please put me down; I'm glad to see you too, how are you?"

"Mmmmm! Deanna! I'm fine, and you look wonderful. I've missed you!"

Watching them, William Riker felt very uncomfortable; an odd feeling seeing *him* behaving like that with her - it felt almost like jealousy of his other self. Deanna, still wrapped up in Thomas's arms, sensed William's discomfort and yet she was being bathed in Thomas's radiated deep feeling of love and

affection. A large part of her wanted very much to remain within the wonderful sensations, but William's pain intruded too much for her to ignore.

"Thomas, please put me down. You and Will have much to discuss and plan. There will be time later for us to talk."

Thomas gently put her down. His hands caressed her face, his fingers lingered over her full lips; his deep blue eyes gazing into hers he said, "I will see you later... Thank you for being here to meet me."

Deanna nodded in agreement and smiled as she walked towards the door; leaving the two men in the room in an uncomfortable silence. Several moments later, Thomas turned to look at his other self.

"Commander, I don't know if we will ever be able to consider ourselves friends, but if we are to succeed in the next few days, we have to try and find some common ground."

"Agreed, Lieutenant. I have a plan to enable us to get to see Maya Roche's child. Some of the details need some work, but I believe it should be possible; the main problem was having a legitimate reason for being there. However since the President has invited the Federation to their celebrations of the centenary of their independence from Koralen-B, we are being sent to show the flag. We also believe that the Kerguekuk Faction have a base of operation on Koralen-C and that is where they will be storing the cargo of a recently "hi-jacked" vessel. We have been ordered to find and recover the cargo. Using the celebrations as a cover, we should be able to meet and talk to Akira as well as fulfil our diplomatic and Federation orders. Lt Worf has volunteered to help train us and he will be joining us later, but for now the

plan so far is to..."

Some hours later, Thomas Riker found himself outside Counselor Troi's quarters, clutching a box of her favourite chocolates and wearing a big smile. The doors to her quarters opened before he'd had time to press the buzzer.

"Come in Thomas, I felt it was you. Mmmm, chocolates; please come in!"

At 07.00 the next day, Commander Riker, Lt Riker and Lt Worf entered the holodeck, which had been programmed with Koralen-C's presidential palace layouts and grounds, including all the known security systems, guards, and the usual Cardassian protection complement. During the next 4 days the team practised and honed their skills for their assault on the real palace and their mission.

Thirteen days after the original briefings, the Enterprise reached Koralen-C and was instructed to park in an equatorial orbit. Sensors located many ships including the flag ship of General Morg-Anan; and that a force-field covered the palace and the grounds for 5 kilometres, making covert transportation to the palace impossible.

"Commander, I have identified the force-field harmonics and this device should allow you to make a hole in it. Please remember you cannot make the hole at ground level; it has to be at least one metre from the ground so that it will not break the field resonances. Also the maximum hole size is only one metre square. I suggest you dive through it, keeping as straight as possible; one touch and we will be able to hear the alarms up here!"

"Thanks, Geordi, we'll be careful. Remember, if anything goes wrong, you never saw us and you didn't transport us to the surface. Energise," said Commander Riker as he took the device and stood with Thomas and Lt Worf on the transporter pads.

Materialising a short distance from the edge of the force-field, they could see lights glowing in the semi-darkness. They began to make their way down into the valley and towards the light.

The building was a huge biosphere with several subordinate ones and other small satellites, all interlinked, looking like jewels sparkling and shining against the clear night sky, much like a large fluorescent spiders web; they all wondered whether its occupants were in the mood to bite.

"Commander, the force-field - it's here," softly growled Lt Worf.

"Time to use Geordi's device; Worf, monitor the field for fluctuations."

As they jogged in from their hole in the perimeter, the dry ground beneath them crunched loudly. Worf ran some 10 meters in front of Commander Riker with Lt Riker trailing a further 5 metres behind. When they had been jogging for 20 minutes and had covered almost 3 miles, Worf stopped suddenly and signalled that the other two should stop and listen. The Klingon's sense of danger had detected some movement in front and to the right of them. He signalled his intention to circle around and that they should wait a few seconds before executing a pincer movement towards an outcrop of boulders with some low level bushes - rare on this very arid planet.

It took almost two minutes to get into

position. As they crouched they strained to hear and see what had been spying on them. Suddenly some of the dried twigs of the bushes cracked - a noise of something breaking cover - then the sound of footsteps, followed by a deep throated growl, more footsteps and rasping sounds. Both Commander Riker and Lt Riker stood up and ran towards the sounds.

At first they couldn't make out who or what was rolling on the ground with Worf. On closer inspection, they found that Worf's opponent was a humanoid, though they couldn't identify what race he belonged to as he was dressed from head to foot in black; even his skin was blackened. Worf managed to encompass his attacker's head with his arm and apply sufficient pressure to render the attacker unconscious.

Worf stood up looking towards the Rikers, but before he could call out a warning they were surrounded by a group of ten beings. Like Worf's attacker, they were clothed from head to foot in a black velvety cloth, which hung in such a way it was very difficult to determine what race of beings they were. All were very big and powerful looking. As the group closed in on the team, the tallest of them came closer and his scent wafted past Worf's nostrils. Quite suddenly Worf let out a roar and in one stride stood in front of the being. Laughing he reached out his arms and physically encompassed and lifted the being up into the air. A strangled sound emerged, followed by, "Brother, brother we are together, for the hunt and glory of finding the Faction dogs."

Commander Riker walked towards his Klingon officer and looked intently at the being dressed in black. "Kurn." Turning back towards Lt Riker, he explained, "Kurn is Lt Worf's brother."

"We must go now, the RDs will be patrolling this sector soon! We have a place, we must go *now!*" announced one of the beings who surrounded the Enterprise team.

They jogged in silence until they came to the rim of the gorge that separated them from the palace grounds. The sound of a waterfall pounding in the distance and thunderous rushing water below was deafening. Visibility was limited. As the group traversed the pathway down into the gorge Lt Riker thought that he probably wouldn't like it any better if he could see where he was putting his feet. The deeper into the gorge they went, the warmer it became and the more intense the smell of sulphur became. Everyone was well aware that one slip would be fatal - if the fall didn't get them the rushing fluid would; it wasn't water in the waterfall or the gorge but a type of sulphuric acid, almost a thousand times more corrosive than the Terran variety. They continued downwards for almost 35 minutes. Had it not been for the "breathers" the team would have been overcome by the gaseous cloud that hung over the sulphuric river. Eventually Commander Riker made out the lip of an entrance to a cave. About two metres above the lip was an immense overhang of rocks; he had the distinct impression of them being a door - or was that a coffin lid? Inside the cave there were several tunnels leading off in different directions. The being who had issued the RDs warnings led them off to the right.

Some three kilometres later they emerged into a well illuminated cave; the ground vibrated with the power of the generators and even the lingering sulphuric odour that had permeated the tunnel gave way to almost mountain pine fresh air. Both Commander and Lt Riker inhaled deeply and were pleasantly reminded of Alaska in the late Spring.

Worf's nostrils twitched and he inhaled in short sniffs, identifying more Klingons and another group, not like those with his brother. Turning to face Kurn, he asked, "Who else is here?"

Inhaling deeply, Kurn smiled at his brother. "Ah! You mean the Khuk-Khi from Cocos System. They arrived today, some assorted mercenaries from two of the outer rim systems. Their leader is JuCara."

On the far side of the cavern four huge viewscreens had been erected and each showed a representation of the planet's surface from space, sensory interpretations of the vessels in orbit, the topography of the Presidential palace and outer compounds. The fourth screen showed an area of the outer compounds, specifically the concentration of buildings and levels of security. The group converged to the viewers, arriving moments before the other groups in the cave. The being who had led the Enterprise team to the cavern stood on the raised platform in front of the view screens.

"I am Tsingtau. I have been instructed by my President to help you all in the recovery of the missing children and cargoes from your worlds. Our President will be very soon now wining and dining your respective representatives and the members of other parties and vested interests. So now is the best and only time to attack the holding bays, before the auction begins. As you can see that many other outer rim vessels are approaching, time is short. You have all received our emissaries and the layouts of the compounds and you know your specific roles and targets. To the right of this platform are the arm-bands you must all wear. Each group must take enough bands for their selected juveniles. Without them the RD's will be able to track and destroy you and any others around you.

For those requiring cargo bands the table to the left of this platform."

"A warning; those bands can only be used once. The RDs will automatically ignore their signals on their next encounter. Until you need them, avoiding the RDs is the safest solution. Commander Riker and Leader JuCara, we have little time left; please come with me. The rest of you will follow your guides to the main assault area." Dismounting from the platform he indicated that they should follow him to a smaller cave to the right of the viewscreens.

A forcefield effectively screened off the entrance once they were inside. Tsingtaw indicated they should sit at the table in the middle of the cave. Once they were seated, he said, "Your requests to enter the Presidential Palace have been provisionally permitted, but before I acquiesce and issue you guides, I want to know your reasons. Be brief but do convince me that it is worth risking my men's lives. Perhaps Leader JuCara would like to begin?"

Minutes later all three emerged from the cave. Tsingtaw issued orders to the waiting men who were to act as the guides. Commander Riker walked over to Lieutenants Worf and Riker; after a few minutes Worf nodded, turned and headed off in the direction of his brother on the far side of the cave. Shortly after that Commander and Lt Riker joined the guides and the Khuk-Khi group, and began jogging steadily along the dark dank tunnels to the right of the main cave hall. For one kilometre they jogged together, until they came to a junction, where the two teams split up. Following the right hand tunnel, Commander Riker's team began the upwards climb. They navigated large and small boulders, rough and smooth going. At one point

the terrain consisted of very loose shale and the footing was extremely hazardous. Their guides continued to urge them to move faster as the banquet would be commencing soon and their opportunity to gain access to the palace unobserved would be missed. Abruptly the tunnel levelled out and in the distance they could see a luminous glow and hear a low hum of indistinct sounds.

In a barely audible voice the leader of the assigned guides said, "We are very close now to the inner courtyard of the palace. This tunnel's entrance is at the bottom of an old well. This cave system in ancient times was filled with water, before our leaders thought they could do anything to make a profit, interfering with our planet's ecology without a thought for the consequences. Around the walls of the well are two ladders; near the top is a section of mesh, from which you should be able to ensure you are not seen emerging into the courtyard. The sentries patrol every six minutes and have to be recognised by the RDs every 10 minutes. If you are seen or if the sentries are not recognised then the RDs are programmed to go into hunt mode and then they will be unstoppable - anyone in the compound out of doors will be destroyed. You are on your own now! Good luck, Commander - you will need it." With that the guides turned and started to descend into the tunnel system.

At the appointed time, specific transporter co-ordinates were relayed to the Enterprise. Captain Picard, Commander Data, Counselor Troi and a small security complement transported to the Presidential Palace to meet and greet the assembled dignitaries. At the reception, Captain Picard and his away team were mingling with the other guests when General Morg-Anan entered with his security guards; and slightly behind

and to the left of the General was the person that all the members of the Enterprise crew wanted to see most. She was tall, a slim athletic figure with dark curly hair, oval face and the deepest blue eyes under very long dark lashes. General Morg-Anan crossed the room towards Captain Picard and Counselor Troi; Commander Data positioned himself slightly behind the group so that he could make the required DNA scans of the Cardassian group.

"Captain Picard of the Federation flagship Enterprise, your reputation precedes you. I have wanted to meet you for some time. I particularly thought your solution to Romulan interference in the Klingon internal problem and their ultimate defeat was quite brilliantly handled - I believe by your android officer?"

"Thank you, General Morg-Anan. May I introduce my officers - Counselor Troi and Lt Commander Data. He is the officer that you referred to. And your companion? She is?"

General Morg-Anan stared at Commander Data for several seconds before turning and gently sliding his arm around the girl's waist, pulling her to his side. Counselor Troi almost stepped back a pace, her senses bombarded with the surrounding emotions of the group as they gathered together. Summoning all her will, she gradually 'tuned in' to the girl, sensing feelings of deep loyalty and affection for the General and almost indifference to everyone else. The girl had no interest in anyone other than the General. Tuning into the General's feelings towards the girl, Counselor Troi, felt waves of pride, devotion, love and protection; he would not willingly give her up.

"This is my beloved daughter, Captain Picard - Raya. She is the light of my life,

without her my life would be meaningless."

General Morg-Anan's intensely emphatic words weighed heavily on the away team, knowing that very soon now Commander Riker and his team would be here, possibly trying to take Raya away from the General. Several more minutes of diplomatic chatter later, the Captain and the rest of team drifted away from the General and Raya.

"Well, Data, the DNA scan? Is Raya Commander Riker's daughter or not?"

"Yes, Captain. She is the biological daughter of Maya Roche, Commander Riker and Lt Riker."

Captain Picard asked, "Counselor, were you able to make any judgements about them?"

"We all felt the intensity of feeling from the General towards the girl. It's deeper than you might imagine. I sensed that the General adores her to the point of irrational obsession. He will not let her go easily. She is totally focused on him to the exclusion of anyone or anything around her. When we were being introduced, she did not react at all to us. It's almost as though she doesn't recognise herself as a Human, but only as a Cardassian. It worries me that Will and Thomas may not be able to reach her."

Although Captain Picard and his away team all tried to engage the girl in conversation, all but Commander Data failed. He managed to spend several moments alone with her, noticing that she carried a small figure which looked like an animal. Her thumb constantly brushed the top of the object, something she had been doing for a very long time as the shape or type of animal had long ceased to be recognisable. Reporting back to the Captain that when he had

mentioned the animal and asked what type it was, her reaction was most puzzling. She had an expression of unhappiness and he had noted a single tear as she looked at the object. She had called it her 'teddy', but before she could say more the General had noticed them and joined them, asking Data about his creator Dr Soong.

"Did you say she called it her 'teddy', Data?" asked a surprised Captain Picard.

Before Data could reply, Counselor Troi said, "Teddy. That's a toy that Terrans give to their children. My father gave me his when I was a child and it took a long time for me to give it up. It is possible that Raya can be reached - her 'teddy' could be the link to her past. Will or Thomas might be able to use it to reach her."

"I too had a teddy bear as a small child - thinking of it can still evoke happy memories. Assuming that Maya Roche gave the child the 'teddy', it may indeed be the way to reach her. Data, please encrypt the information for the team; if all is going well they should be here very soon now. Counselor, continue trying to talk to Raya, and I will divert the General's attention."

Commander Data positioned himself near the balcony, Counselor Troi made a beeline for Raya and the Captain walked smiling over to the General and his host, the President of Koralen-C.

Peering through the mesh at the top of the well, Commander Riker could see the immediate area was a paved walkway next to a beautifully manicured lawn which gave way to luxuriant shrubs on either side of the courtyard. In the centre of the courtyard was a huge spectacular crystal fountain, its design similar to a

dozen Terran French champagne glasses each standing within another. Each glass was made in a different crystal, causing the light of the twin moons to be refracted into a myriad sparkling colours across the lawn area. Both Rikers thought it resembled an old style laser show. Leading off from the walkway on both sides were arches and beyond them large carved ebony doors. Above the doors and all around the walls of the enclosed courtyard security guards patrolled the palace. From their position at the southern end of the courtyard they timed the patrol and the ever present RDs. To emerge successfully from the well, cross and exit the courtyard, they had 35 seconds. Crouching inside the well they waited for the RDs to circle the courtyard twice and then continue patrolling. The first swept in from the north, circled and then headed towards the southernmost area of the palace. From the east the second RD circled and then hovered over the well. Commander and Lt Riker slowly dropped down another rung on their ladders, hoping their radiated body heat would be masked from the danger above. Slowly, interminably slowly, the RD made another circle and then made off towards the west. This delay left them only 20 seconds left to get out of the well, cross and exit the courtyard. Lt Riker vaulted over the rim of the well, following Commander Riker. They sprinted towards the door. Above them the guards had entered the gantry, but were not yet in a position to see them cannon into the door. The noise brought the guards to the balcony wall, straining to see what had caused the noise. Moments later, the President's Terran peacocks began their mating calls; their shrieks echoed through the whole palace.

The guards looked at each other and grimaced. The older of the two commented, "Damn birds! Another night of interminable mating calls. I know what I'd like to do to them!"

"Yeah! I know what you mean," said the other guard as they continued their circuit of the courtyard.

The door leading from the courtyard led into the corridor directly behind the banquet hall and the guest quarters. It was brightly lit and the arched roof reminded them of a medieval castle. Lining the walls on both sides, depending on their traditional family allegiance, were emblems and chronicles of the six most important families' past glories and continuing roles in ruling and governing of the planet. The current President and the Vice President as well as most of his closest advisors were all from families represented on the left side of the wall. Traditionally their political position was based on the premise of equality of opportunity and freedom of choice, whereas their political opponents were from the families from the right; by tradition, *their* style of government was based more on inherited position and power structures.

Moving stealthily down the corridor towards the stairway, they constantly scanned for guards or servants. None appeared, but they could hear the sound of music and chatter from the banquet hall. Part of the celebration itinerary was that after the meal there would be a short recess before a refracted crystalline energy display in the upper atmosphere would commence, followed by entertainment gathered from several star systems. During this recess, the guests could use their assigned quarters to rest as the planned entertainment was to continue till daybreak.

They had almost reached the end of the corridor when the noise from the banquet hall stopped abruptly. Standing absolutely still, barely breathing, they listened for any sounds that would

indicate someone coming into the corridor. Just as suddenly the silence was shattered as the President began to address his guests; the speech was expected to last six minutes.

General Morg-Anan had been allocated quarters in the east wing of the second floor. As they raced up the stairs, their scanners showed Cardassian guards positioned at the top of the stairs leading to the second floor east wing. Captain Picard and his away team's quarters were directly below the General's. Moments later they had entered and crossed the Captain's room towards the window. Looking out over the domed banquet hall, they stood on the balcony near the wall and began to time the RDs' security circuit. Two minutes later, they had the timing and had located the room that the child had been using. They had barely two minutes left to scale the wall, enter the room and hide before the President concluded his speech. From their packs they took out and donned their protective jackets, gloves and visors, then moved off towards Koralen-C's deadly variety of climbing ivy.

Supplemental Notes on Koralen-C indigenous flora and fauna.

Security Ivy: Genetically engineered from the planet's original variety, it is mainly used as an integral part of security networks. Like the planet's waterfalls its sap and leaves are highly corrosive, and this is coupled with a phenomenal regeneration cycle. This form of ivy also hosts a type of insect similar to a Terran ant which, like some Terran species, fires off sprays of acidic liquid when disturbed. Unlike the Terran plant and insect varieties, once contaminated with the liquid it is quickly absorbed by the flesh and

into its victim's blood stream, immediately beginning to corrode the veins and arteries. The impact of the corrosion, subsequent vein and artery collapse coupled with the cellular decay, is far too rapid for any known medical response. Touching the plant or disturbing the insects without protection invites a very painful, certain death. Both the plant, its insects and derivations of their venom have been sold to many repressive regimes including the Cardassians. It is used primarily on Koralen-C as boundaries for the planet's penal colonies and protecting the outer walls of the residences of influential and powerful families. Cardassians have introduced its use on some of their enslaved worlds with dire consequences.

Standing at the foot of the wall of ivy, both Commander and Lt Riker looked at the thick, lush entangled vines, the variegated leaves with their silver centres shimmering in the light of the twin moons while their edges absorbed the light giving off a blue hue. It was hard for them to believe something so beautiful could be so deadly. Flexing their gloved hands they each looked for a suitable spot to start the ascent.

Commander Riker found what he believed to be a good place to begin and Geordi's words echoed. *"You can only use these protective clothes once. You must discard them immediately you have entered the room. In any event you can only wear them for a maximum of five minutes - after that their cohesion will begin to deteriorate and the venom will seep through."* Grasping the vine with his right hand outstretched above his head he tugged it and found it would hold and as he pulled himself upward, rivulets of venom ran down his visor and he could see insects streaming over his arms.

At the same time Lt Riker was heaving himself upward, trying to find suitable footholds. He looked over towards the Commander and saw that he was covered by venom which under the moon's light made him appear ghostly, with an intermittent glow. He looked at his own arms and realised that the glow was from the ants firing venom at the suit, the spray glinting in the moonlight. Inside the suits Geordi had installed a timing device; two minutes before the expiration of the integrity a pulse would echo inside the visor. They had been climbing steadily for almost two minutes, they still had twelve metres left to climb and very soon now the RDs would be back. Covered in venom, they both pulled, tugged and heaved themselves over the balcony wall, lying as close to the overhanging ivy on the balcony's outer wall as possible, fighting to control the urge to pant and thus increase the suits' internal temperature, both knowing that the RDs took two minutes to circle overhead before continuing their security circuits - also being well aware that their protective suits would decay in three minutes, and if they were not removed that they would be dead in seven minutes. Seconds vanished; the countdown to the protective suits' disintegration was very near, and RDs were still in the air above them. Thoughts of people, places and ambitions passed before them as they lay there, praying that the RDs would leave. A pulse inside the helmets boomed out, warning that they had to remove the suits now. Just then the RDs completed the circuits and headed off towards their next target, the holding bays. Scrambling up from the wall, Commander and Lt Riker removed their helmets and began to peel back their protective suits and finally their outer gloves and inner gauntlets. Both men smiled half smiles at each other, the warm smile of respect and, finally, recognition of mutual admiration; they entered Raya's room and waited for her to

return from the banquet. A few minutes later, they heard the unmistakable footsteps of troopers entering the corridor - General Morg-Anan and his guard; then the steps stopped outside the door.

"Raya, we are expected back in the Presidential Great Hall shortly. You can rest now and change later - I have some work to do. I'll return in a little while." Cupping her face and caressing her cheek, General Morg-Anan turned, nodded to the guards placed outside her room and then continued to his suite.

Raya entered the darkened room, the door sliding shut behind her. She crossed the room towards the window, without illuminating the room. She opened the window and stepped out onto the balcony, being very careful not to get too close to the ivy. She surveyed the palace as best she could, and pondered on how people could survive in such an inhospitable environment. No, it was not her favourite place to visit. As General Morg-Anan's daughter, she had travelled to many very beautiful and wondrous places. She liked, she decided, that planet Khuk-Khi in the Cocos system - they had stayed there for almost a year. Still smiling at the remembered time spent on that planet, she turned and re-entered her darkened room.

"Lights on, dressing table only," she called out as she stopped to look into the mirror on her dressing table by the bedroom door. Sitting down at the table she pulled the 'teddy' from her pocket and placed it in the centre of the table. Still smiling, she picked up her brush and started to brush her curly black silken hair. Out of the shadows came Commander Riker, poised to cup his hand around her mouth. Lt Riker slowly emerged from her bedroom to face the lovely young girl, his daughter.

Looking into the mirror, she caught

sight of a shadow. Jumping slightly and turning away from the mirror, she gave a half laugh, convincing herself that she was imagining things. Who would dare to enter her room? She was the daughter of a great Cardassian General! Turning back to look into the mirror, she saw the shadow had gone, but there was more of a shape... More than that, it was a Human male coming towards her. Before her scream could begin, his hand gripped her mouth and his other arm enclosed her body, pinning both of her arms down by her sides. Panic rose in her chest and the only sound she could hear was the blood coursing through her. She could discern another sound, a gentle soothing sound. At first she didn't understand what she heard - the sounds did seem familiar but her brain couldn't quite fathom the meaning.

"Lights on, full," commanded Lt Riker as he placed the translator on to the dressing table.

Raya stared into the mirror at the two Humans. One had hair growing on his face while the other had not; they were different but somehow the same. As she fought to be free of the hairy one, the sounds changed as the translator interpreted Commander Riker's words into Cardassian. On hearing and now understanding his words, she became still while she listened, hardly believing it.

"Please Raya, listen to us. We have a message from your mother. Do you remember your mother? Maya Roche? Do you remember your name, Akira, and that you were abducted? Do you remember Lakia? Teddy - who gave you Teddy? I am going to remove my hand from your mouth if you will agree to talk to us. When we have told you everything, you can decide what you want to do. We just want you to listen to us. Will you promise not to scream?" whispered Commander Riker.

Raya's eyes looked at the reflection of the Human who was holding her; in his eyes she saw the warmth of honesty and looking at the other Human she saw gentleness. Looking back towards the mirror, she nodded. The Human slowly removed his hand from her mouth and then released his arm from her body.

Rubbing her arms and face, she slowly turned towards Commander Riker and in a small quiet voice asked, "You said you have a message from my mother?"

Lt Riker smiled into the mirror, placed a small cube on the table, and after pressing the play button removed his hand. A microsecond later, the small image of a woman appeared, cradling the charred remains of a doll; her other hand held a picture of a child.

"Akira - my darling Akira, I miss you so much. Every day since you left it is harder to be without you. All I have is your favourite doll, Lakia, and this picture of you. Do you remember when it was taken? It was on your fifth birthday, three weeks before the raid and the fire. My darling, I wish I could be with you. Soon, maybe one day soon." The image of Maya Roche disappeared.

"Who was that? I don't know her and I don't know who Akira is! I want my father, he always takes care of me. Go now! Leave me alone." Despite denying knowing who that image was, a deep sense of something familiar started to permeate her being. Without thinking, she automatically reached for Teddy and began to stroke his head.

Lt Riker saw the confusion in her eyes and watched her picking up Teddy; Teddy was her psychological life raft, something to cling to when events were too much for her to handle.

"Teddy. Remember Teddy. Do you

remember where Teddy came from?" asked Lt Riker very quietly.

"Teddy is my lucky stone. My... my... my father gave him to me when I was very young."

"That is not true, and I believe that you know it is not true. Please, you must look at these pictures of you with your mother, and especially this one. It's you in your bedroom with all the presents for your fifth birthday. Look, there's Teddy, and you with your arms around your mother. She's kissing you and Teddy. General Morg-Anan may have given you many things, but he did not give you Teddy!" Commander Riker's voice was barely audible as he finished showing the young girl, his daughter, the pictures of her mother and their lives together before her abduction.

Raya looked at the pictures of the woman she couldn't remember, and at the child who did look like she did when she was young, but she didn't feel that she was the person they thought she was. She had been brought up as a Cardassian; her father was good and kind. Thinking back, she couldn't remember a time when he wasn't there. He had always been there, even when she had that terrible fever and the doctors feared she would die. He told her afterwards that he didn't believe that she would die and had insisted that the doctors did more, or he would personally ensure that they also would breathe no more. No, General Morg-Anan was her father! He had told her that he found her wandering next to a burning building and she had captured his heart; so he rescued her and brought her back to be his daughter. All this these Humans had told her was to confuse her - it was a trick. As her father had said on many occasions, "Humans are devious and cannot be trusted. They believe that they are the guardians of the Galaxy and that we, the Cardassians, are barbarians." She needed

time, but as her father would be back for her soon she decided to play along until he came for her.

"Why do you bring me this, now? Who are you to try and take me away from my father?" she asked forcefully, regaining her composure.

Lt Riker knelt at her feet and turned her towards him. Holding her hands and gazing into her deep blue eyes, he said, "Raya, we know it's hard for you to imagine, but we did not know of you until very recently. Your mother only told us about you shortly before she died - until that day we did not know that you had been abducted. Raya, once we knew of you, we began to search for you, then we found you were with General Morg-Anan, formally Captain Morg-Anan - the same Captain who led the raid on the Darus-B colony. The same Captain Morg-Anan who has, over the years, captured many children and sold them to slavers. We have the testimony of some rescued children from the same raid, who remember a small dark haired girl being taken away by Captain Morg-Anan. That small girl was called Akira, and that child is you! You asked what right we have in coming to you and telling you about your Human mother? She loved you very much. She thought of you and the terrible day she lost you - it haunted her every day. She wanted very much to be able to see you again. Being captured in that raid deprived you of your mother's love and attention for all these years. It also caused your mother much pain and sorrow; she believed that you had been killed in the fire. She blamed herself for your death and from that day until the day she died, she grieved for your loss. Just before she died, she discovered that you had not died in the fire, but had been taken by a Cardassian soldier. She asked the Commander over there to find you and care for you."

"My father... My father is General Morg-Anan. He was there when I needed him, he was there when I was sick, he was there when I had nightmares. My real father was only there when I was conceived, he was never there when I needed him. Being my biological parent gives him no rights, no rights at all. I recognise a parent as the one who cares for you and who shares your life. You speak of my mother and my real father, but who is this mystical parent? I don't remember him or know his name. I ask you again, who are you?"

Lt Riker continued to gaze steadily into her eyes, and gently rubbing his thumbs over the backs of her hands, began explaining. "We are both your biological fathers, Raya. Some time ago we were involved in a transporter accident, resulting in there being two Rikers instead of one. We are exact biological duplicates, with one or two psychological and personality differences, borne out of our having separate existences and experiences. We know that it must be difficult to accept, but we honestly did not know about you. Having experienced problems with our own father, we would have tried to be a true parent to you, but we were never given the opportunity. We saw you once, a long time ago - it was when your mother was still angry with the Riker she knew, so we didn't even get to talk to you. Raya, all the time that has passed can never be replaced, but we would like to make a start in creating memories and making a foundation of at least friendship with you. Please, Raya, please come with us. We need to know you and very much want to care for you."

Looking back towards the Human, Raya was moved by the intensity of his words and his conviction. His words stirred old memories - it was as if someone had dusted over a long-forgotten book and she could now see the

title. Many memories cascaded into her conscious mind, each giving birth to another. She could see herself as a small child, Morg-Anan carrying her towards the stream by his villa on the home world. They were going to have a picnic and play with another little girl. Another memory dawned - it was another time and another little girl, never the same little girl, always different; she could never remember having the same child as a playmate. Remembering and seeing the faces of the children over the years, she realised they were mostly Human; she couldn't remember ever playing with a Cardassian child. Another memory burst forth. She was on her father's ship, laughing and playing with her father and his most trusted guards. She smiled, remembering them playing games. Through the years they played many games and turned long voyages to the far reaches of the Cardassian Empire into fun. In her mind another face smiled at her, that of a young Cardassian soldier. Her mind flooded with layers and layers of other images and sounds of laughter and sorrow. The noise in her head brought with it immense pain. Cupping her hands over her ears and shutting her eyes, she began to rock to and fro; from the very depths of her being a sob erupted, a truly pitiful sound. Both men felt her pain and wanted desperately to help her. Still rocking she turned towards Lt Riker and laid her head onto his chest; he wrapped his arms around her and began gently stroking her hair.

Eventually, she stopped rocking and was still, breathing steadily. She remained cocooned within Lt Riker's arms. Gradually feeling better, she pushed her head away from his chest and positioned her head so that she could see his face. She was so close she felt his warm breath touching her cheek. Gazing into his face she saw a handsome, gentle man, whose eyes were of the deepest blue, like the oceans of Oceanan II, the water world of

the Empire. Looking into his face, studying all the elements of his face, she could see some of herself reflected there. Not a true mirror image, but enough to know that he was her biological father. In the instant of recognition came confusion. The man she called her father loved her and had loved her for ten years. How could she leave him? Did she want to leave him for these strangers?

"Please let me go now," she said, still gazing into his eyes.

Lt Riker released her and she stood up and went into the bedroom. Seconds later they heard water running and several minutes later she emerged having washed her face and changed into another outfit.

"My father will be coming to take me to the light show. I have thought about all that has been said. I have decided that Morg-Anan is my father and has only shown me love and kindness. I am now Cardassian. I would not fit in with your world. I have a life here and you have your own lives. Without me, Morg-Anan would die - not by his own hand, but he would find a way. I owe him much, I cannot - I *will not* - desert him - because I love him."

Before either Commander or Lt Riker could respond, they heard footsteps outside and a knock on the door. Raya looked at the door and then at the Humans. Walking towards the door she turned and smiled, saying, "Thank you for coming to try to rescue me, but I cannot leave him. Please stay in the shadows and you will be safe. Goodbye, gentlemen, I will remember you. Goodbye. Lights, bedroom only."

With that she turned and opened the door. From the shadows in her room they saw the General smile at her and circle her waist with his arm, pulling her

towards him speaking softly to her. Suddenly both laughed at the shared joke and then continued down the hallway. Her words saddened both men, although they knew she spoke the truth; General Morg-Anan truly loved Raya and she felt just as deeply for him.

Donning their second set of protective suits, they made for the balcony and the deadly ivy once more. They had to wait for the RDs to complete their security circuits and leave. Securing their ropes they abseiled to the ground floor. Hurriedly they removed their suits and made for the prearranged diversion position in a small adjoining room behind the Presidential great hall's main light show viewing balcony.

Meanwhile, back in the cave system below the palace Tsingtau instructed the groups to follow their guides to the Faction's segregated holding bays. The Klingon and Federation children were being held in the top security wing of the holding bays. They had been acquired for some very special buyers and were not to be auctioned. Lt Worf, his brother Kurn and three of his personal guard went towards the location of the Faction's Federation and Klingon abductees, while the other groups and the second Khuk-Khi group were taken to their specific rescue targets.

Before the Enterprise's arrival at Koralen-C, Captain Picard had received an encrypted personal message from the Klingon homeworld. Gowron's young twin sons and two small cousins had been abducted by the Faction and as Gowron's leadership of the High Council still required much consolidation, he decided that it would be perceived as weakness to leave the homeworld or send a task force to find his heirs. Gowron informed

Captain Picard that he was despatching a Bird of Prey ship and one of his most trusted allies to rescue the children and destroy their captors. Klingon intelligence knew that the Enterprise had been selected to observe the anniversary celebrations with, as a secondary agenda, to rescue the abducted Federation children from the attacked transport vessels in Delta quadrant. The message was simple; Gowron wanted Captain Picard's discretion regarding the rescue of his sons and their cousins. No information regarding their abduction and rescue must be logged or transmitted. In return the Commander of the Bird of Prey and three of his men would join the Enterprise's efforts to rescue the other captured Federation children, justifying the presence of the Klingon vessel as a joint effort in combating the Faction. Picard agreed with Gowron that he would not identify the children and that Lt Worf would be sent to the planet to facilitate the Federation children's rescue. Hearing that Lt Worf was being assigned, Gowron was satisfied that his secret would be safe with Picard and the Sons of the House of Mogh.

Prior to leaving for the holding bays, Worf issued his brother and his men with Geordi's protective clothing. Worf had expected that his brother and his men would protest that warriors didn't need to wear such outfits. Surprisingly, there were no such protests - they had seen the Klingon intelligence file on the effects of the ivy and its insects. Getting into the suits was not an easy matter, as their individual sizes had not been known. When Geordi replicated five protective suits basing the sizes on Lt Worf he had added extra elasticity to the material. Unfortunately, Kurn and his men were significantly bigger than Lt Worf and the material's inbuilt elasticity was stretched to its limits. Having heaved, pulled and tugged the suits on, they were even more eager to be off towards their targets.

After leaving the main area they descended into a dark dank tunnel, leaving behind the sweet smelling air. Their guide carried a small but very powerful torch, which illuminated the tunnel for many metres ahead of the group. On either side of the tunnel were deep scars running parallel to the floor, where in times past floodwater flowed through on its way to an underground water system. Periodically, they saw pictures of the planets' ancient past, animals, plants and peoples, drawn by the cave system's early inhabitants. Seeing the pictures, Worf remembered his adopted father showing him some similar pictures found in cave systems on Earth. He remembered the preserved mammoths found in Siberia, and then reading something about similar findings, drawings of ancient inhabitants, environments, animals and plant life, on the old Klingon homeworld.

Before Worf could ponder on the meaning of his thoughts or draw any conclusions, the guide dowsed his torch and pointed towards a faint, intermittent light in the distance. Slowly and carefully the group edged towards the mouth of the tunnel. Close to it they were able to detect the faint sounds of circling RDs and they could see the barrier of ivy. At the mouth of the tunnel, the guide squatted and cleared away some of the debris from the floor then drew an outline of the holding bay. It was a rectangle with a building on the far right; a stairway led off from the left of the ground floor doorway, leading to patrol tower. On all sides the ivy grew up and over the walls, with the exception of the building, the stairway leading to the observation tower and a one metre high inner wall constructed a metre away from the ivy. Inside the building was another door, the only other way out of the holding bay area. Beyond the door was a corridor leading off to the Faction guards' central area. Directly opposite the guards'

building was another smaller building where the children were housed. In the centre of the holding bay was the feeding area. Meanwhile one of the Klingon guards had been taking readings of lifeforms and timing the RDs' security circuits. After completing the outline the guide wished them luck and the continuing health of their captured children, then turned and disappeared back into the tunnel system.

Some minutes later the guard had collected readings of the locations of the children and their Faction guards, as well as the RDs' security circuits. Worf noticed an odd reading in between the far side wall and inner wall next to the ivy. Examining the readings closely he found there was insufficient DNA trace material to positively identify who it had been; only that it had been a Klingon child. Assessing the guards' positions and weapons, the readings also showed that there were charges of explosives all around the holding bay area.

The plan of rescue required that all of the guards would have to be neutralised before they could detonate the explosives or summon the RDs. To achieve this the guard in the observation tower would have to be eliminated first. Given that the cave and holding bay wall were positioned so that during nightfall they were in deep shadow, it was possible to make two holes in the ivy curtain. Using his phaser on its lowest setting, Worf carved out the required sections. To prolong the use of their protective suits, they used two large sheets of the protective material as tunnels so they could roll through. Separating into two groups, they headed off towards the observation tower and the children's building, leaving one guard to provide covering fire.

While two teams crawled towards their objectives the remaining guard kept watch. Hearing a faint hissing noise he turned to look at the tunnels they had used. The protective material had all but disintegrated and the ivy had very nearly regenerated sufficiently to cover the holes. As a Klingon warrior, he had seen and done many things, but nothing had ever affected him as the sight of this plant and its insects. He wanted this assignment to be over.

As they crawled alongside the inner wall, tendrils of the ivy crossed the path. Avoiding the plant was impossible without betraying their positions. Their forearms and chests and legs soon were covered with the venom, the sight of which urged them all on to their objectives. Minutes later Worf and his guard had positioned themselves behind the children's building and had started to peel off the protective clothing very carefully. Both Klingons shuddered involuntarily at the sight of the suits shining with venom; both very were pleased to be away from the wall. Carefully they made their way to the corner of building, awaiting Kurn and the other Klingons' move on the observation tower and Faction building. On reaching the far corner of the building, Kurn and his guard climbed over the inner wall and quietly peeled off their protective suits, leaving them by the wall of the building. Slowly, stealthily, Kurn began to climb the stairway, while his guard made for the door of the building with a stun device set to maximum in one hand and his laser rifle in the other. Reaching the top of the stairs, Kurn, dagger in hand, cannoned into the Faction guard and pushed the dagger deep into the guard's throat. The only noise was that of the guards blood gushing from the wound and the air vacating his body. Ensuring that there was no other Faction guard in the tower, he signalled to Worf to enter the children's building.

Inside the children's building were three Klingon male children and four Human female children from the transport vessels in Delta quadrant. Besides the children two Faction guards were located at either end of the building, which was set out like a dormitory; on the rear wall was an open doorway leading to the washing facilities. Scans of the building showed that the children were sleeping, as was one of the Faction guards, while the other was dozing. Moving towards the door, they positioned themselves so that the Klingon guard would break the door in, and Worf could throw in the lighting device, which would confuse the guards sufficiently to allow the Klingons time to enter and subdue the guards before they could detonate the explosives underneath the building. As the Klingon guard crashed through the door, the dozing Faction member started to cry out as the lighting device blinded him; Worf fired his phaser on its highest stun setting towards him, while the other Klingon crossed the room and finished off the other Faction guard. The building became very still, as though everyone in there had suddenly stopped breathing. A faint moan became a joint sob; the children's pent-up emotions were beginning to erupt. Worf commanded them to be silent, while he explained that they were here to rescue them, and that they should follow and obey any instructions given by him or the other Klingons. Leading the children out of the building and carrying the stunned Faction guard, they crossed to the Factions guards' building.

Kurn was standing outside the building talking to the guard who had been left by the cave entrance. This guard then went up to the observation tower and picked up the body of the dead Faction guard and placed him upright in the tower's seat, placing an altered

medical scan device in the breast pocket of the dead man. The device had been programmed to emulate the life signs of a Faction guard from within the captured building. By using this device and those that had been left in the children's building, it was hoped the RDs would be deceived into 'thinking' that the Faction guards still controlled the area.

While Worf and the guard were getting the children out, Kurn and his guard had broken into and secured the other building. The decision to exit through the main corridor and not to go through the wall of ivy was made because of the plants' regenerative prowess. It would take far too long to cut a large clean pathway for the children to go through. In addition, the RDs would register the heat and phaser signatures required for such an action and would initiate a hunt and destroy cycle, following them into the cave system - therefore the only way out was through the door and into the main corridor, the heart of the Faction guards' central area.

All the other groups rescuing their abductees also had to use the corridor, so a diversionary plan had been formulated and was to be launched when the light show commenced, because the RDs' CPUs had been updated to expect explosions and light blasts and to ignore them. For now the Klingons and the Federation children had to stay inside the building and await the prearranged diversion. Overhead they heard the RDs slowly circling the holding bay. Eventually, the RDs completed their circuits and headed away from the holding bay.

Inside the building, the children had been herded over towards the far wall and their identities verified by Worf and Kurn. Two Klingon guards watched over the two stunned Faction guards, the other Klingon guard stayed close to the door,

scanning the corridor. After Worf and Kurn had finished identifying the children, Kurn asked Jurukhi, one of Gowron's twin sons, what had happened to the other Klingon child.

Pointing towards one of the unconscious Faction guards, he answered, "When we were brought to this place, he warned us not to go near the walls. He told us that we would die if we did. Kolyma said he lied, because no plant could kill a Klingon warrior. Kolyma said we could escape if we climbed up the wall. The Humans said no. They said they had heard of venomous plants that could kill Humans or Klingons and that we should not touch the plant directly. Maybe, we should test the plant with something. Kolyma shouted at them, told them they were just foolish Humans and that Klingon warriors did not need to listen to weak Human females... The tall one called Recifa walked over to him and pushed him to the ground and told him to behave like a Klingon warrior not a stupid little boy who knew nothing about survival. She said, as children of diplomats, they had been taught to watch and wait for an opportunity to escape or find a way to contact the Federation and most important of all, *not* to cause their captors problems. Kolyma was infuriated and would not listen. He said he would climb the ivy and bring help, and that he would show the Federation female that he was a Klingon warrior. Later that night he crept out of bed, out of the building and made for the darkest wall. We watched from the windows and we were very happy when we saw he had reached the wall. We saw him climb over the inner wall. After that we couldn't see him - but we heard him screaming out. It seemed to echo forever. The guards came running out of the building towards the wall. One of them fired his weapon at him and stopped his terrible screams... After that two of them always stayed with us in our building at night. Recifa

was right and Kolyma... My brother was wrong."

While Jurkhi had been recounting the death of his brother, one of the Faction guards had regained consciousness. Lying on the floor of the building, belly-down and facing the door leading to the holding bay, he was aware of another Faction guard. Listening intently he recognised the breathing pattern as being one of unconsciousness. He could hear two or more Klingons talking, and occasionally he heard the movement of at least two others shifting weight from one foot to the other. The children, he decided, were behind and to the right of him, and the nearest detonators were by the door leading to the corridor or in the observation tower. Somehow he had to get to the detonators. Given the location of his captors, the door nearest to the corridor would be virtually impossible to reach. Reaching the observation tower would be difficult but had more chance of success. he needed a diversion. Until one was forthcoming, he carefully began to tense and relax various muscles in his legs, feet and arms, slowly priming them for instant action.

Recifa walked over towards Worf and Kurn, having heard Jurkhi relate their time in the holding bay. Looking at Worf, she asked, "How long until we have to run through the corridor?"

Worf looked into the eyes of the tall young female. He expected to see fear and was surprised to see calm and concentration in her eyes. Before he could answer her the Faction guard had jumped up and was making for the door and the observation tower. The closest of the Klingon guards threw himself towards the fleeing Faction guard, falling short and not able to grasp his target's legs. One of the remaining Klingon guards gave chase and pounded up the stairway. Kurn, followed by Worf, rushed through

the doorway and up the stairs, just in time to see the Klingon guard charge into the Faction guard, grabbing and pulling him away from the detonators.

As they fought they rolled around the balcony of the tower, hands at each other's throat. They fought ferociously, the Klingon's extra weight and height gradually wearing his opponent down. Realising that he would eventually be too weak to continue, the Faction guard knew he must not be captured again alive; a last plan took shape. Using all his remaining energy he impelled them both towards the far corner balcony and with one final burst of energy, propelled them both over the edge and into the wall of deadly ivy. Watching from the observation tower Worf and Kurn saw the two become wrapped in the plant. Unable to turn away they saw first one, then the other, fighting to get out of the vines. The two men were now impossible to distinguish; only basic shapes showed in the tangled ivy. What seemed to be a silent film running before them suddenly resonated with sound, sound so deeply disturbing it belonged only to the darkest nightmares. Picking up the dead Faction guard's weapon, Worf set it to maximum and fired at the two tortured forms.

Turning to Worf, Kurn said as they descended from the observation tower, "These Faction dogs have honour. They would rather die than be captured. While we wait for the diversion to begin, we must question the remaining one before he too can find away to die."

As they entered the room, however, an overpowering smell of burned flesh assaulted their nostrils. Looking around, they saw the Faction guard lying face upwards, a deep phaser wound gaping in the middle of his chest. One of the remaining Klingon guards had blood gushing from a wound on his right shoulder and arm, where the Faction

guard had attacked him with a dagger.

Kurn rushed towards the injured Klingon and demanded, "What happened here? Where did he get that dagger? Why did you kill him? I wanted him *alive!*"

Before the injured Klingon could reply, Worf fished out of his pack some medical supplies and passed them to him. Attending to his injuries the Klingon guard explained to the infuriated Kurn, "I swear he did not have the weapon on him. They must have weapons hidden in this room. He suddenly started to roll around, claiming to be sick. I went over to see him; as I got there, he suddenly sat up and the dagger was in his hand. Stabbing me, he reached for my phaser; we fought and it went off, killing him. He held it in his hand and turned it on himself. I did not kill him Commander, he killed himself."

A deep throated growl of frustration emanated from Kurn, but before his brother could say anything more to the injured Klingon, Worf began scanning the remains of the Faction guard, saying, "It is regrettable that we do not have a live prisoner, but we can use his body to provide some information about the Faction. We may yet get another opportunity to take another, when we make for the beam-out position. It will be time soon for the diversion to begin."

All the guests gathered in the Presidential great hall, a magnificent circular room. Looking down from the main entrance hall the Enterprise away team could see that the design of the building was similar to an Ancient Earth Greek amphitheatre - stairs led down to the stage area, while off from the stairs were terraces which had both couches and individual chairs placed on them. Like the Ancient Greek temples of Earth,

the floors of each terrace were made up of exquisitely colourful mosaics depicting the planet's inhabitant's recorded evolution. Directly behind and above the central stage area was the Presidential terrace. Unlike the ancient amphitheatres, above this room was the dome of the biosphere. From the entrance halls the guests were lead down stairs to their assigned terraces.

When all the guests were seated on their assigned terrace, the President indicated to an aide that the light show should begin. The background hum of the dignitaries chatting to each other gave way to another noise, a hissing and grinding sound; it was not loud but it was noticeable. All the guests stopped chatting and tried to locate the noise; finally some of the guests looked upwards and saw that the dome of the biosphere was opening to the atmosphere and the planet's very clear night sky. Flashes of brilliantly coloured light streaked the sky, while huge shapes of pin-pricks of light danced across it. It was now clear why there were couches and chairs; the best, indeed the only way to watch this wonderfully colourful light show was by lying flat and looking skywards. Animals, flowers and people danced across the sky as light was manipulated into amazing shapes and forms. Accompanying the light show were a number of explosions and a selection of musical styles, each bringing life and intensity to the show. For the duration of the show the RDs were routed away from the great hall and its corridors and antichambers; these chambers were the beam-out destinations of the rescue teams and their targets. However, the routes being used by the teams to get to the safe area were still within the security circuits and were being patrolled by the RDs and were potentially extremely dangerous.

While watching the light show the

President pondered over his plan to aid the rescue teams. He had invited some of the leaders of the Faction to the light show and ensured that free passes for the holosuites in the traders' areas were readily available. Many of the Faction's crew members had been ferried to the trader's buildings, but there still remained a significant number on duty. Short of gassing them there was nothing else to be done - anything too obvious and the President knew that he and all of his family would be targeted for execution by the Faction. Thinking about the plan, he knew it was a gamble, but his people needed to be back in the Federation. Trading with the Cardassians was no longer sufficient, for they were cutting back on importing military goods and using the space dock facilities. Cardassia was becoming bankrupt; continuing expansion was draining the whole Empire. Crossing the Faction was a risk but the people of Koralen-C needed work and they needed the Federation's help to ensure prosperity for all. No, he could safely do no more for the rescue teams. So far he had done what he had always done on the Faction's arrival, he'd greeted them and sent them some holosuite passes. The rescue teams incursions should hopefully be seen as a successful surprise attack/rescue mission!

On the far side of the great hall in the holding bays, Kurn paced the length of the building as the light show began, growling. Patience had never been a Klingon's virtue, especially this Klingon. His two remaining guards recognised the building fury and sincerely wished to be far away when he erupted. Judging from Kurn's body language, it would not be very long in coming.

Hearing explosions, they all knew that the show had begun. At last it was time for action. All of the children had been schooled in their roles for the escape to the beam-out location; all of them had

communicator devices fastened to their tunics, they also had the anti-RD arm bands firmly attached to their tunic sleeves and they all knew what to do if they should be separated from the others.

Instructing the lights off, Kurn and one of his guards stood poised by the corridor door, scanning the outside for movements and the relative positions of any patrolling Faction guard. Surprisingly, there was no indication of any movements or patrol, so carefully they opened the door and slowly emerged. The corridor travelled forwards for some twenty-five meters and then formed a 'T' junction; there were no other doors, but running along the corridor on the left side were ventilation ducts. The ceiling of the corridor and the central areas were all covered so that any life-forms would be ignored by the circling RDs. Silently the two Klingons crept towards the end of the corridor, constantly scanning as they positioned themselves back to back at the 'T' junction wall. Kurn indicated that Worf, the guard and the children should make their way to them.

To the right the corridor led directly to the main holding bay sleeping area, to the left was the central operations area. In order to reach the beam-out area, they had to go through operations. Their scans had shown the area was manned by several guards and there were others in the feeding room beyond that. The scans also showed numbers of rescue teams in the corridors leading to the operations area. According to plan, in two minutes the second Khuk-Khi group would assault the main area, while another group would be attacking the feeding area. The joint Klingon and Federation team was assigned to stop any of the sleeping Faction guards reaching the holding bay detonators or aiding their comrades in the main area.

Kurn, Worf and one of the Klingon guards made off for the sleeping area, leaving the remaining Klingon guard watching over the children. Scanning the sleeping quarters, Worf located the detonators and weapons; creeping towards them he quickly disarmed them and then rejoined Kurn and his guard, who had been placing gas shells around the room. Exiting the room they carried a drugged Faction guard with them and after they closed the door they detonated the gas shells; the Faction guards drifted into an everlasting deep sleep. Rejoining the rest of their party, they moved closer to the central area. Exactly, as planned the other groups attacked their Faction targets, the air becoming charged as phasers and disrupters fired. What seemed like minutes only lasted seconds; the attack had been completely successful, with only minor injuries to the rescue teams.

Keeping the children behind them Kurn and Worf made their way into the central area, while following the children were the two Klingon guards. Behind and to the left of the central area was the main corridor leading to the Presidential palace and the great hall. All of the rescue teams and their charges were in the palace corridor. Worf led the children into the corridor followed by one of the Klingon guards. Kurn and the other Klingon guard stayed in the operations centre; they were busily downloading the Faction data banks when the turbolift from the traders' area opened silently, behind and to the right of them. Seeing Klingons standing at the operations station, the lifts' occupants aimed and fired their disrupters.

A volley of four shots found their targets. Kurn was propelled forwards onto the computer terminal, having been hit once in the right upper shoulder. Hearing the disrupter fire, Kurn's guard placed himself between Kurn and the

turbolift, and he took the brunt of the first volley. Barely able to stand, the Klingon turned and fired into the lift; during the exchange that followed, Kurn was able to position himself behind the computer terminal and also began firing into the lift.

With the last vestiges of his Klingon strength Kurn's guard staggered towards the lift and fell into it; as he did he detonated an explosive shell. The explosion that followed completely destroyed the lift and its occupants. Slowly and painfully Kurn struggled to stand. Looking at the ruins of the lift, he threw his head back. His tribute to his guard echoed around the room, warning all who heard it that a Klingon warrior had died in battle.

Moments later Worf reappeared at the entrance to the great hall corridor. Seeing his injured brother, he hurried to him. Assessing the injuries Worf put Kurn's left arm over his own right shoulder to support his brother's weight, half carrying him to the beam-out position. As the security barrier for the immediate area had been deactivated for the light show, Worf was able to contact the Enterprise and Kurn's cloaked ship. The Enterprise transported the Faction prisoner directly to the brig and the Federation children to the waiting emissary. All the Klingons were transported to the cloaked Bird of Prey; Kurn and Worf re-materialised in the Bird of Prey's medical room.

While the rescue teams were making their escape, Commander and Lt Riker emerged from their anteroom and as they were making for their prearranged beam-out position, they caught sight of JuCara and her team. They appeared to be making their way into the great hall, positioning themselves so that they could

triangulate a line of fire at the Cardassian terrace. Both men recognised the formation, a memory stirring of Alaska and going on 'duck hunts'. The danger to Raya was painfully obvious. Looking at each other it scarcely needed saying that they had to do something to help her and very quickly.

Commander Riker looked at his other self and said, "JuCara said she wanted the man who introduced the ivy to her planet. She swore that she was after a trader. The Cardassians annexed the planet some years ago... Morg-Anan was assigned there! My God - she must be after him! One of us has to try and get to Raya, the other needs to be above them to provide covering fire. As I am the better shot, you will have to go to Raya!"

With a quick nod in agreement, they went their separate ways to try to protect their daughter.

Since the gathered dignitaries' eyes were fixed upwards into the night sky, they were completely unaware of the two groups creeping ever closer to their quarry. Lt Riker quickly descended the stairs, reaching the vacant terrace located below the Cardassians'. Besides the Cardassian contingent on the terrace, there were three of the quadrant's most infamous traders and the President's oldest son, Juqk. All were old acquaintances of the General. The traders regularly visited the Empire. Juqk had been educated in one the Empire's most famous military academies, and had spent some time assigned to the General as an aide.

Gradually making his way along the vacant terrace, Lt Riker positioned himself a few meters away from the couch where the General and Raya sat.

Commander Riker had followed one of JuCara's team, knocked him unconscious and taken his disrupter rifle. Having located the position of another member of JuCara's team, he crept towards him. Raising the rifle, Commander Riker struck the Khuk-Khi soldier between his shoulder blades and the base of his skull. The odds were improving - he had taken out one part of the triangulation. He needed to be higher and in front of the terraces. He calculated that the best possible position would be behind and above the Presidential terrace. Moving quickly, he ascended the stairs onto the terrace and his favoured firing position. Surveying the room from his vantage point, he instantly spotted Lt Riker and the Khuk-Khi positions. JuCara had reached the vacant terrace above the Cardassians' and was very close to the couch.

Edging closer to that couch, Lt Riker saw JuCara taking aim. Shouting a warning to the General he fired at JuCara. He hit the arm of the chair she was crouched beside, causing her to recoil slightly so that her shot hit one of the General's guards. Enraged, shouting and cursing, she began to fire continuously onto the Cardassian terrace. Almost immediately her remaining teams began firing at the terrace and Lt Riker. Commander Riker aimed and fired at the team pinning Lt Riker down, giving Thomas the opportunity to jump up to the General's terrace.

JuCara continued to strafe the terrace and Lt Riker narrowly missed being hit as he dived and rolled towards the General's couch. While rolling he impacted into two of the traders; both had been caught in the Khuk-Khi cross fire. Crawling around the traders, Lt Riker saw two of the General's guards making their way to the far end of the terrace in an effort to outflank JuCara and her remaining team. The General's remaining guards were

periodically firing towards their adversaries. Carefully, Lt Riker picked his way to the General and Raya, but as he closed in he realised something was very wrong.

Meanwhile, on the other terraces, most of the gathered guests were panicking and rushing towards the exits away from the firing. The President was quickly surrounded by his guards and ushered out of the hall. Captain Picard ordered Data and one of his security team to try to subdue JuCara. Keeping their heads down, Captain Picard, Counselor Troi and the remaining security guard made their way to the beckoning Presidential guard. On reaching the end of the terrace, they were led to an anteroom and the waiting President. Commander Data and the security guard were almost in position, when a stream of heavy Cardassian disrupter rifles discharges filled the air.

JuCara's team had been neutralised, leaving her alone, still shouting and cursing. "Death to the one who brought the ivy! You were responsible for the agonising torture and death of my people..."

Standing directly behind JuCara, Data raised his phaser and placed it at the nape of her neck, saying, "Please stop firing and lay your weapon down on the chair."

Her body already tense, she jumped. She had not been aware of him, and his instructions filled her head. Options flew into her mind to join her hatred of the being responsible for her family's, her precious babies', deaths. She could not, would not be stopped - her goal was still achievable. She remembered her training in the camps; when in a corner go with

the flow, then react explosively. Standing up, swaying as though injured, she started to place her weapon on the chair but instead fell into the chair. Kicking out violently she caught the security guard's lower midriff. Doubling up in pain, he fell against Data, who almost overbalanced. Continuing to roll over the chair and towards the Cardassian terrace, JuCara rolled over the edge before Data could fire at her, landing heavily on the terrace below. A deafening stillness filled the hall; JuCara only heard her heartbeat pounding in her ears. A few metres away she could just make out some shapes moving towards her. During her years in the camps she had spent a long time in the mines and, like many of her people, developed excellent night vision. She knew they couldn't see her yet. Setting her weapon to its widest angle she fired into the shapes and then rolled towards them and to the right of them. Carefully she lifted her head over the prostrate guard's hips; about six metres away she could see two shapes sitting up and one lying flat. Focusing hard on the shapes, she recognised her target. Resetting her weapon to its narrowest kill setting, she took aim and fired. At the same instant Lt Riker saw her, aimed and fired at her. Both weapons found their targets and within milliseconds, their victims were looking sightlessly into Koralen-C's night sky. Slowly and carefully, Lt Riker stood up, finding Data standing over the General's couch calling for immediate medical help.

During the attack, the other trader who had been on the General's terrace had escaped and headed towards the holding bays. Reaching the operations centre, he contacted his orbiting ships and recalled his crew members to their ships. Checking the databank logs, he found they had been compromised and that all their cargoes had been removed from the

holding bays. Walking over to one of the storage rooms, he broke the seals of several of the boxes. One of the boxes contained a control device, while others contained RDs. He programmed the RDs with the President's family DNA and set them in delayed hunt mode. Carrying them to the beamout position, he placed them randomly along the corridor towards the great hall and outside in several alcoves, giving them the widest search range, both inside the Presidential palace and outside on the planet's surface. On reaching the prearranged beamout position he initiated the RDs' start up procedures, but before he could issue instructions to his ship, a voice behind him said,

"Wait, you must take me with you! There will be hell to pay! They will know it was me that allowed you in and to hold your auctions. I have always helped you - please help me now!"

Turning to look towards the voice, the Faction Leader smiled and said, "Yes, of course I will help you. You are a friend, and friends of the Faction are friends for life. Come, we must leave now."

A disembodied voice came over the Faction Leader's communicator. "Both ships are ready to leave. Commander Daklu has arrived on our sister ship and reports only a two-thirds crew. He asks if you were able to send the President his gifts?"

Smiling, the Faction Leader, grasped the President's brother to him, saying, "Tell Daklu the gifts are on their way and I have our friend Dekwi with me. Now transport both of us to the ship."

As the transport cycle began, one of the Faction's RDs swept over the beamout position tracking the DNA trail of Dekwi. Flying into the transport cycle, it disappeared.

On reaching the ship the Faction Leader and Dekwi stepped off the transporter pads and saw the look of fear on their comrade's face. Turning, they saw the RD hovering and assessing its final move. Before the transporter could be activated the RD exploded. Exploding in the transporter area caused the fuel cells to ignite and the whole ship exploded creating a brilliant white light show in orbit.

Commander Daklu watched his father's ship explode and disintegrate. Turning to his helmsman he instructed, "Initiate Omega tactic and warp immediately. They will pay for my father, they will pay... We will be back, and all who were responsible for this will be repaid in full measure."

Dr Crusher and her team materialised in the great hall beside the General's couch. Lt Riker was supporting the injured Raya who was leaning over the General. Tears streamed down the girl's face as she spoke softly in Cardassian to the General, who in turn was gripping her hand and with great difficulty answering her. Kneeling beside the injured pair, Dr Crusher scanned first the General and then the girl. Looking up at the newly arrived Commander Riker, she shook her head. The General and Raya were seriously injured and she wanted them in sickbay.

Commander Riker caught the eye of the injured General's adjutant watching Dr Crusher, and stated, "They are severely injured and so are you. We can help you. Allow us to transfer all of you to the Enterprise sickbay."

Looking at his General for guidance, he saw only great pain in Morg-Anan's eyes. He answered, "Yes, I agree. You can transport us... I will contact our ship's

doctor to help..."

In the Presidential anteroom Captain Picard and the President were discussing the ramifications of the night's events when the first reports of the Faction's RDs detonations came in. In the short time since they had been activated they had found and destroyed several of the President's extended family. Recognising the RDs programming, the President sent out immediate warnings and escape instructions to his extended family, giving instructions that his immediate family be transported off the planet to their orbiting space dock and on to his private ship. Knowing that the RDs programming must include his family's DNA structures, the only way to avoid the RDs would be to get off, and stay off, Koralen-C. He asked Captain Picard to transport him, the Vice President and their guards to the Enterprise. Captain Picard agreed immediately and contacted the Enterprise, ordering that they should all be beamed directly to the forward observation lounge.

When he materialised the Vice President rushed to greet the President and reported, "One of the Faction ships blew up, it just disintegrated. We are not sure why, but in the confusion, Commander Daklu escaped. In his last transmission, he threatened to return and seek vengeance on all those that betray the Faction. We found your son; he is dead. JuCara killed him before the Federation officer shot her. We have questioned one of her assassination team. We thought she was trying to kill the Cardassian General, but the Cardassians were not her target. She was after your son Juqk. He was assigned to Khuk-Khi after he completed his training in Cardassia. He was heard saying that he

should have been sent to a more important station, not some insignificant backwater. In an effort to impress his station commander, who at the time was encountering resistance from the local population to Cardassian rule, your son apparently suggested that the introduction and trial testing on some of the planet's inhabitants of our ivy would quickly ensure obedience. Records show that after only three months the open revolt had subsided to a minor irritation. In recognition of his help to Cardassia, your son was later transferred to the General's staff. Some of the people they used the ivy on were JuCara's mother, father, husband and her children.... She has waited for years for the opportunity to face the being responsible for so many deaths, a being who put personal gain above the wellbeing of the many."

A stunned silence pervaded the observation lounge, the President of Koralen-C overwhelmed by the revelation that his son had betrayed everything that he and his family for generations stood for. Trying to explain his son's actions, the President realised that by agreeing to send his oldest son to Cardassia, he had effectively agreed to have his son reprogrammed to be a puppet of the Cardassian Empire. In due time they would have been able to annex Koralen-C, supported by his successor, his own son. Explaining his conclusions to Captain Picard, he pleaded for his planet's immediate readmittance to the Federation and the Enterprise's protection. Captain Picard assessed the President and turned to ask whether the Vice President agreed with the President's conclusion and request for help. Agreeing that Koralen-C would need assistance, the Vice President asked Captain Picard to verify that the Federation would be willing to reinstate membership. He reminded the President that the Cardassians had always behaved impeccably and had always paid their

bills, unlike some of their traders.

While Captain Picard was contacting Starfleet for instructions regarding readmittance, Commander and Lt Riker were hovering around Dr Crusher and Raya. General Morg-Anan was lying on a medibed next to her, his personal physician administering pain suppressants. Standing between Raya's and the General's beds was the young adjutant; one of Dr Crusher's assistants was attending to his wounds.

Dr Crusher was increasingly concerned about her young patient's trying to get up, and said, "Please try to keep still. By moving, you will re-open the wound. You have lost a lot of blood, and the transfusion will only take a few moments. Fortunately, we have a ready supply of your particular blood type."

Raya looked into the kindly Doctor's face and said, "I need to be with my father. He's hurt - I must be with him."

Dr Crusher removed the transfusion device from Raya's arm and smiled at her, saying, "All right. All right. You are stubborn, just like..." She stopped before she finished the sentence, gently helping Raya to her feet and to the General's side. Looking up from his bed, the General smiled at his daughter and she carefully picked up his hand, lowering her head to the General's, asking him, pleading with him to get well.

Tears streamed from her eyes as she saw him smile. He whispered, "Raya, I love you more than my life. I want to stay with you, but I cannot. You must be strong for both of us. You must make another life for yourself, you must not go back to Cardassia. I could protect you - but alone... Please promise me that you will not return to Cardassia... Promise me... Promise me... Raya!"

His strength was fading fast and he gripped Raya's hand until she promised that she would not return to Cardassia. Still smiling into 'his' Raya's eyes the General died, releasing his grip on the Human he'd loved from the first time he saw her. Realising that life had slipped away from her beloved father, Raya kissed his forehead and caressed his features and then placing her fingers gently over his sightless eyes, she closed them. Deep within her a sob began and her whole body shook. Commander Riker was immediately by her side and gently surrounded her body with his arms. Falling into them she cried the tears of a small abandoned child. Through fatigue and her weakened state her legs began to buckle as she passed out. Lifting her on to the medibed, he stood aside while Dr Crusher scanned her vital signs.

A few moments later Dr Crusher announced, "She'll be all right. I've given her a sedative and she'll sleep now."

Both Commander and Lt Riker relaxed a little, the tension leaving their faces. Inviting the young Cardassian adjutant to join them in Dr Crusher's office, Commander Riker asked, "Why did the General make Raya promise not to go back to Cardassia?"

A distinctly nervous adjutant replied, "Because she has no rights on Cardassia. She is an alien; she would be classed as his property and as such would be sold with the rest of his property to the highest bidder. To the General, Raya was his daughter; to everyone else she is simply property!"

A barely controlled Lt Riker asked, "And you - how do *you* view Raya?"

Thinking for a moment, the adjutant said, "When I was first assigned to the General, I couldn't understand why he found a Human so interesting. I couldn't

understand why he appeared to care so much for her; but I had only been aboard for a short time, when I - like all the rest of his crew - found her to be completely compelling. She... she is very beautiful and gentle. I will miss her greatly! Please... you must not allow her to return to Cardassia!"

A few hours later, the General's body was transported to his flagship for his last voyage back to Cardassia. Commander and Lt Riker accompanied Raya to the flagship to remove her personal belongings including a message from the General. Before leaving the General's ship, she asked to be allowed to spend a few moments alone with him. Kneeling beside him, she made an oath that she would be strong and she would make him proud of her. Placing a single flower on his chest, for the last time she caressed his face and his image burned into her mind. Choking back her emotions, she smiled at him, turned and left the room. Waiting outside the room was the young adjutant.

"Raya, I thought you might like to keep these. I rescued them from his quarters. I want to tell you, not all Cardassians are the same - there are some of us who will miss you."

Looking up at the young adjutant, she remembered a picnic with him and the General. She knew he cared. Smiling, she said, "I know, Fultak. I know. Take care of yourself."

Strength and inner resolve surged through her body, she stood tall and erect. With grace and poise she led Commander and Lt Riker to the transporter pads. Taking a last long look at the ship that had been her home for most of the last four years, she looked at her belongings packed and stacked ready for transportation to the Enterprise. Standing

on the transportation pad flanked by Commander and Lt Riker, she looked at Fultak as he initiated the transport cycle. On their return from the Cardassian ship Commander and Lt Riker escorted Raya to Sickbay, as she was still recovering from the attack.

Meanwhile Captain Picard had received instructions from Starfleet about Koralen-C's petition to be reinstated in the Federation. As he entered the observation lounge, both the President and the Vice President stood to greet him, eagerly awaiting his news.

Indicating that they should all sit down he said, "The Federation counsel has had an emergency meeting to review your request. I am empowered to inform you that provisionally Koralen-C will be allowed back into the Federation. However, there are some rules that must be strictly adhered to - in return the Federation pledges to give help and resources to enable growth and continuing prosperity. First, all RDs must be deactivated or destroyed. Second, sales of your ivory or its derivatives must be stopped immediately. All slave auctions must cease forthwith. Any abductees remaining on Koralen-C must be handed back to the Federation. Koralen-C must ratify and embrace the Federation's charter for all lifeform's rights. If you are willing to agree to these directives, then Koralen-C will be welcomed back into the Federation fold."

Weighing the Captain's words from the Federation, the President contemplated the options and discussed them with his Vice President. Complying with the Federation's directives could be financially ruinous, but there were rewards in being back in the Federation. Soon it was decided that the Federation led to a more secure financial future for

the inhabitants of Koralen-C. In addition, the requirement that the RDs were to be deactivated held the promise of the President and his family being able to return home. Sending instructions to the main security building on Koralen-C to command all RDs to return to home base and then deactivate them, to be followed by a planetwide search for any stray RDs, the President decided that for the next few months while the search was being carried out, he and his family would remain on one of the spacedocks. From there he would oversee the adherence to the Federation directives and make a start in the rebuilding of Koralen-C's new role within the Federation.

Some months later in Commander Riker's quarters, he and Counselor Troi were going through the crew's performance records, a chore that they both found to be long and tedious. Some two hours into the task, Commander Riker yawned and stretched. Taking his lead, Counselor Troi slumped back into her chair.

"Deanna - how about we take a break? Doing this... it does it to me every time! What would you like? Let me guess. Chocolate?"

"Hmmmmm. Yes, that would be lovely about now. I know what you mean about this job... Hey! you heard anything from Thomas and Raya lately?"

"Oh! Yes, I was meaning to show you... Look at these. Raya's quite an artist. Thomas had some leave, so he took her back to Earth and to our family cabin in Alaska. They went camping, and yes, she drew some pictures there. This one is a picture of Thomas on Kodiak Island with some of the oldest tribal totem poles left

in Alaska. Raya sent me some pictures she's done of us... What do you think?"

Looking through the dozen or more pictures, Deanna looked up at Will and was please to see his look of pride in the pictures. Yes, she decided, fatherhood was something that sat well on his shoulders. Smiling at him, she said, "You are quite rightly proud of these pictures. Raya has talent. How is she coping with her school work, and have her nightmares stopped?"

"Well, she had a heck of a lot to catch up on, but her teachers have been surprised by her progress. She has a natural gift for linguistics and the arts, though her academic studies are not so pronounced. They told Thomas that she is continuing to make steady progress in those areas. Her nightmares have reduced but Thomas tells me she still has some days when she just cries for hours and hours. He says he tries to help her but in the end the only thing he can do is just sit and hold her until it's over. Over the last few weeks these episodes have reduced considerably, so he hopes that with time she will be fine."

Deanna held Will's hand and said, "Raya has been through so much and from what you have said, she is coping very well. I believe her crying days are helpful - in some ways she is still Akira, lost and trying to find her way home. You and Thomas are providing the pathway so she can finally find her way. Both of you have to be there for her and let her take the path as she finds it. But she *will* find it!"

Breaking the solemn mood, he said, "Hey, did I tell you, Raya's coming to visit next week and I thought you might like to help me in deciding how to amuse and entertain a 16 year old young lady."



JUST DESSERTS

by

Liz Aris

Riker's door chime sounded, and he dragged himself from "his viewscreen to answer it.

It was Deanna Troi. "Sorry," she apologised. "Am I disturbing you?"

"Not really. I was just trying to write a letter to my Dad. It's been a while since we were in touch." He paused and ran a hand over his beard. "I'm trying to find the words to tell him about Thomas."

"You haven't told him yet?"

"Well, I always meant to, but something always came up." The excuse sounded lame even to his own ears.

"Why now?"

"Well, I got to thinking. I suppose it was hearing about Geordi's mother." His voice died away.

"And?" prompted Deanna.

"We may not have an ideal relationship, but he's still my father, and if anything happened..." He couldn't verbalise what he felt. Deanna put her arm around his broad shoulders; it felt very comforting. Geordi's loss had brought his feelings about his own mother flooding back. He felt that he had come to terms with his loss, but it still hurt to remember her, even when his memories were mostly secondhand.

"How is Geordi?" he asked.

"He's coping. A little sad, but I think he's coming to terms with it. What about you? How do you feel?"

"Oh, I'm fine," he lied. In fact he felt depressed.

"No, you're not - but you will be. Come on."

"Where are we going?"

"Oh, to this great little place that I know, that serves real chocolate." He raised an eyebrow at her and smiled as he got to his feet. "We're going bowling," she explained.

Laughing despite his mood, he allowed her to drag him from his cabin to the transporter room.

They beamed down to the Starbase they were currently orbiting.

The bowling alley was a hive of activity. Troi and Riker threaded their way through the throng of beings to where Worf and Geordi La Forge were waiting. Soon there was a hilarious game in progress.

Riker mopped the sweat from his face as he watched Worf take careful aim with a bowl - and miss. Again. He laughed as Geordi patiently repeated his explanation of when to let go of the ball, before Worf took his second shot.

And missed.

"The holes are too small. My fingers keep sticking."

"Here," said Deanna. "The holes on this ball look larger."

Worf took the ball she offered; carefully he lined himself up, took aim as Geordi had instructed, swung his arm and released the ball. He remained frozen in place as they all watched the ball's path down the alley.

A strike!

Pleased with himself, Worf walked back to where the others clapped in appreciation.

As he drew level with them, a large Norsican tapped him on the shoulder. "You took my ball, Klingon."

"I did not realise it was in use."

"Hey, it's no problem! Your ball will be back in a minute; no harm done," said Geordi.

"Stay out of this, Human," said a second Norsican as he pushed Geordi out of the way. Worf growled at his friend's mistreatment, and Riker stepped forward ready to intervene.

"It's only a game," began Deanna placatingly as the two groups faced each other.

On reflection, Riker realised he couldn't remember who threw the first punch, didn't even know whose fist connected with his very tender cheek and eye. He dimly remembered trying to call for O'Brien to beam them up, but he'd lost his communicator in the melee.

Now he sat miserably on the bunk of the detention cell and eyed the state of his companions. Worf's face and clothing were no better than his own, while Geordi nursed what looked to be a broken nose.

Deanna was not with them. Riker remembered pushing her away into the crowd as soon as the blows started flying, and when the Base security guards rounded up the participants in the brawl, she had already gone to seek aid from other Enterprise crew.

"Er - Commander," began Geordi. "What's Captain Picard gonna say?"

Riker shuddered. He didn't want to think about it. His imagination conjured up visions of permanent assignment to the bowels of waste disposal and recycling.

"He will be most displeased," intoned Worf.

"I am indeed, Mr Worf," came Picard's clipped tones. He had beamed down earlier to discuss their new orders with the Base commander and had been present when the report had been made to the commander; he was still squirming mentally as he remembered the Commodore's lifted eyebrow, half smile and careful non-comment on the subject.

All three heads snapped up to view their commanding officer and they hastened to stand as the guard lowered the forcefield.

"You will return immediately to the Enterprise and after Dr Crusher has dealt with your injuries you will consider yourselves confined to quarters. I will deal with you on my return."

The trio flinched at the icy chill in Picard's voice and left the cell in silence. Deanna joined them in the transporter room.

Miles O'Brien kept his eyes firmly on the console as he beamed them aboard. As they walked to Sickbay, it was Deanna who broke the silence.

"I did mean to break the news to him gently, but he'd already heard it... but I did tell him that you didn't start the fight."

"Somehow I don't think it's going to help, Deanna."

"We're dead men," said Geordi as they walked through the doors of Sickbay. "Hey, Alyssa, any spare cabins in Ensigns' quarters?"

"You think he'll only bust us as low as ensigns? Nah - it'll be far worse than that."

"Try your worst nightmare multiplied by - oh, at least a dozen," said Dr Crusher from where she leaned against her office doorway. She smacked a hypospray into her hand. "Okay - who's first?" Her voice spelled out her disapproval and as Riker took his place on the bed he knew they wouldn't get Beverly's usual brand of TLC for these injuries.

Riker paced his quarters, waiting for Picard's return. How could he have let them get involved in a brawl? Okay, yes, the Norsicans had provoked them but he should have been able to defuse the situation. Hell, all this over a stupid ball! He reviewed the situation over and over again in his head. Late into the night he paced his quarters, still mentally berating himself over his conduct. He was a Commander, First Officer of Starfleet's Flagship! He wasn't supposed to get involved in bar fights!

Still, it had been kinda satisfying to see that Norsican go flying down the alley. He'd even got a strike! He grinned wryly to himself.

A similar situation existed in Worf's quarters and Alexander, sensing his father's mood, had muttered something about staying with a friend and left quickly. Worf had hardly acknowledged the comment. (Alexander had gone to Keiko O'Brien and she had sympathetically given the boy a bed for the night - Miles had told her what had happened.)

Data had gone to Geordi's quarters as soon as he got off duty and found him contemplating what being an engineer on a garbage freighter would be like. Not knowing what to do to reassure his friend that the punishment for such conduct was not that severe, he simply sat and listened to Geordi's tirade on Norsican manners, interspersed with heart-felt wishes for Picard to return and put them out of their misery.

The object of all their musings sat in the Base Commodore's office.

"So what will you do with them, Jean Luc?" the Commodore grinned when Picard had ceased his pacing and verbalising all sorts of dire and painful punishments and had flopped into a chair.

"I don't know - but if I know them, they're probably punishing themselves right now. I'll let them stew a while longer until I decide on just the right consequences."

"I wouldn't be too hard on them," the Commodore said, serious now. "By all accounts the Norsicans started it, and - well - I seem to remember a few scrapes we had ourselves at their age."

"But my Chief Engineer - Chief of

Security - and First Officer!"

"And you were never young or a First Officer?"

"Hmmm." Picard blushed and fell silent as he remembered a similar situation involving himself, Jack Crusher and Walker Keel. He also vividly remembered the punishment that *their* commanding officer had meted out - once he was out of Sickbay.

On his return to the Enterprise, having received their new orders, he had formulated the ideal response to his officers' situation.

Beverly Crusher met him in the transporter room. "You look very pleased with yourself, Jean Luc," she said as she fell into step alongside him.

"Yes," he said, smiling.

"Well, are you going to let me in on it?"

"You'll hear soon enough."

"Has this got anything to do with a certain three officers presently sweating it out in their quarters?"

"Possibly."

Damn, thought Beverly. *This is like a game of twenty questions!* She realised Picard was going to tell her nothing; he was enjoying this private joke too much, and she changed tactics. "You do realise Deanna has reported feelings of severe anxiety from Will and Geordi's quarters, and Alexander has moved in with the O'Briens."

Picard's smile grew more enigmatic. "Well, let's put them out of their misery.

Would you please inform Commander Riker, Lieutenant Commander La Forge and Lt Worf that I will see them in my ready room in thirty minutes."

Twenty five minutes later, those same three officers were in a turbolift en route to the bridge, nervously checking their uniforms, pulling already straight jackets straighter and picking non-existent dust from sleeves. The turbolift doors opened and they moved very self-consciously across the bridge, aware of every eye on their ultra-straight backs. Riker signalled their presence.

At Picard's abrupt reply they disappeared through the door, to stand at attention in front of the Captain's desk. The door shut off the view from the prying eyes of the bridge crew.

After making them wait a few minutes while he finished what he was (apparently) doing, the Captain looked directly at them.

"Gentlemen, I have heard the Station Security's version of events; I have heard Counselor Troi's version of events. Do you have anything further to add?"

"No, sir," Riker replied for them all, knowing that Picard would have heard a full and accurate story.

"Very well. I have here our new orders. We are to transport several ambassadors to a conference on Babel. One of those ambassadors is Lwaxana Troi. Mr La Forge, Mr Worf - " He looked at their puzzled faces and had to struggle to keep his face straight. "Your job, gentlemen, is to ensure that that woman does not interfere with mine."

As the two officers exchanged horrified looks, Riker tried to hide a

smirk.

"Take that stupid look off your face, Number One. In order to get the Enterprise there in time for the conference, Mrs Troi will need to be ferried from Starbase 19 to the Enterprise by shuttlecraft. That is your job."

Picard watched his Exec's face in satisfaction. The grin had gone and the blue eyes had a shocked and somewhat stunned look at the thought of three days

on a shuttle with just Lwaxana Troi and Mr Homn for company.

Inwardly, Picard laughed. Mentally, he rubbed his hands in glee. Their reactions were all he had hoped for.

"Well, I'm sure you all have preparations to make for your assignments. That will be all, gentlemen. Dismissed!"



AFTERMATH

by

Christine Carr

"Who knows what goes on in that tin-plate noggin of his, anyway?"

Data did not mean to eavesdrop. However, with his sensitive auditory apparatus, sometimes he could not help overhearing things. He knew that Humans considered eavesdropping to be impolite, and so he usually tried to ignore other people's conversations. And yet, there was something about this particular one that made him pause.

'Tin-plate noggin' was an interesting piece of vernacular with which Data was not familiar. He rapidly searched his memory in an attempt to find a possible definition. However, he drew a blank as to what it might mean in this particular context, and, curious to find out, he found himself focusing more tightly onto the ensigns' conversation.

"Who's to say that it won't happen again?" said Miranda Stubbs in insistent tones. She was a thin fair-haired woman with an unusually solemn expression and a habitually agitated manner.

Her companion, Alexei Espen, was also Human. He was a swarthy individual who worked as a technician in one of the cargo bays. "Why should it?"

"Why shouldn't it? That's more to the point, surely?"

Alexei shrugged one shoulder and stared into the depths of his glass, apparently less interested in the conversation than Stubbs was.

"Well?" she prompted.

Espen drew his eyes away from the liquid and turned to face her. "Look," he said, "if there was a problem, don't you think that the Captain would have done something about it? I hardly think that it's any concern of ours."

Stubbs slammed her hands down on the table with a resounding crash. "Alyosha! That's just typical of you! Always making out that someone else is responsible for everything!" By now Stubbs was half standing as she leaned across the table and thrust her face into Espen's.

Alexei threw a furtive look in Data's direction, embarrassed. He grasped her arm and interrupted. "Keep your voice down! Do you WANT him to hear us? Sit down!"

Data's face creased slightly into a frown. Was the conversation about him, then? Something in Alexei's manner seemed to indicate that it was. Curious, he concentrated harder on the ensigns' words.

Miranda sank back into her chair, breathed deeply, and continued more calmly. "Listen. However much we might respect the Captain, he's only Human. He never expected it any more than we did. What if it happens again? That Potts kid almost died because of Data!"

So, they *were* talking about him! Data blinked his yellow eyes, at last understanding the conversation as the words that he had heard shifted into context. 'Tin-plate noggin' was clearly a less than respectful reference to his

mechanical body, and, more specifically, its metallic sub-structure...

let Ten-Forward, deep in thought.

But, Data realised, there was more to it than that. Miranda Stubbs was concerned about him. Not *for* him, but *about* him. She was frightened and that realisation disturbed the android in a way that he could not define empirically. But then, he reflected, if he were capable of the required emotional response, perhaps he would be frightened of himself. Until the recent chain of events, like his crew-mates, he had not been aware that he contained the potential for causing so much trouble.

Geordi La Forge probably understood Data better than anyone else aboard the Enterprise, so it was not surprising that he was first to notice that something was amiss with the android. Data, usually so keen to seek out the company of the Humans with whom he lived and worked, seemed almost reclusive. He had declined a couple of invitations to play poker, the wind quintet had become a quartet and, when on duty, Data's conversation increasingly verged on the monosyllabic.

It was all very well knowing that he had had no control over his actions. The consciousness that his body housed - perhaps the 'real' Data - had played no part in taking over the Enterprise and diverting it to Soong's isolated hideout. It was possible to argue that he was not responsible for his recent behaviour.

The only other time Geordi could remember Data taking himself quite so thoroughly out of circulation had been when the android had been cloistered in his laboratory with his daughter, Lal. But Data had promised Geordi that he would never surprise him quite so thoroughly again. The Engineer knew Data was incapable of forgetting that promise and he had faith that Data would not ignore it. Geordi was, therefore, satisfied that Data was not working on another, similar, project.

But I am responsible, Data decided. If he were not who - what - he was, if it had not been possible for outside forces to control his body, the boy would not have been placed in danger, Data would not have met his 'father', Lore would not have injured Dr Soong...

However, something was definitely amiss, and Geordi finally resolved to find out what it was, and how he might help.

Lore. Another problem for which Data decided he was responsible. If he had destroyed his 'brother' when he had the chance... If he'd checked the transporter setting... But, for some reason he did not fully understand, Data could not find it in himself to regret the missed opportunities. After all, Lore was his brother, and the only family left to him. *Are we really as alike as my father said? I do not find it... satisfying... to believe that might be the case.*

Captain Jean-Luc Picard picked up his mug of Earl Grey tea, and looked across his desk to where his First Officer sat, a look of surprise on his bearded face.

"Captain?" William Riker asked. "What do you mean, you've been subpoenaed?"

Data blinked. His face looked solemn, the closest that the android could come to looking distressed or upset. He stood and

"When I was on shore leave last year I witnessed a fight. I have to appear in court on Starbase 194 as a witness. It's a

blasted nuisance, but there it is."

"The Enterprise can get you there in -"

Picard held up his hands to stop Riker. "No, no. No need, Number One. I'll take a shuttle."

"A shuttle, Captain? Isn't it rather a long way to go by shuttle? Besides which, there've been rumours of Romulan activity along the corridor next to the Neutral Zone."

"*Unsubstantiated* rumours, Number One. Rumours more than a year old. A Type 7 shuttle will be quite adequate." He paused, then continued, "The Enterprise is doing valuable work here. I see no reason to interrupt it."

"Valuable, yes. But hardly essential, Captain. This is a basic survey mission. A scoutship could do it just as well. The Enterprise could -"

"Are you bored, Number One? Is that why you're so keen to come with me?" A hint of humour softened the Captain's irritated words. "A shuttle will be fine."

Ruefully, the First Officer accepted that there was some truth in Picard's accusation. At the same time, though, Will Riker could not help but wonder why Picard was so anxious to prevail in such an unimportant matter, and why he was showing clear signs of digging his heels in until he got his way. Riker shrugged inwardly, deciding that it probably was not important. "You will at least take a pilot with you?"

Picard nodded, accepting the younger man's reluctant acquiescence. "I'll take Data."

Data sat at his post, his mind tracking

several paths at once. His hands hovered over his console, and his eyes moved between the viewscreen and the readouts on the board before him. He did his job, but his mind kept drifting away from his duties. It was as though his memory was locked into an infinite loop from which he was unable to break free.

Data had been troubled by thoughts of his recent actions even before overhearing the ensigns' comments. However, the conversation had given a shape and focus to his thoughts that had previously been lacking. Although, to all intents and purposes, he appeared to be functioning perfectly well - one of the advantages of having a multi-levelled brain - Data became increasingly aware of the persistent patterns hovering on the edges of his consciousness, always telling him that he was responsible for everything that had happened.

For as long as he could remember, Data had wanted to attain some measure of humanity, but, paradoxically, he had never been uncomfortable with his mechanical nature. Yet now, the more the thoughts ran through the back of his mind and the more he tried to break free of them, the more he found himself speculating as to what it would be like to be something other than what he was: something that could not be manipulated; something that 'belonged' in the universe in a way that he knew he never would; something that was not flawed.

Data's attention was dragged away from his introspection by the soft chirrup of his communicator. He tapped at the little emblem and said, "Data here."

"Ah. Mr Data," came Picard's voice. "Could you please come into my ready room?"

"Yes, Captain. I am on my way." Data rose from his post and the usual bridge

dance ensued so his post could be manned by a relief. Scant moments later Data joined Picard and Riker in the Captain's little refuge, a room off to the side of the Enterprise's main bridge.

Picard outlined the situation to his Second Officer and said, "Please organise cover for ops in your absence and make any other arrangements you deem necessary. Then meet me in the main shuttle bay in one hour."

"Aye, sir." Data rose and left to make his preparations. Riker paused for a moment, watching the Captain speculatively, then he, too, turned on his heel and left.

Picard strolled over to the port and stood staring out into the silver-dusted blackness, lost in thought. Riker, he knew, was right to query his decision to take a shuttle: the Enterprise's mission was not really so very urgent. *But I can't tell him my real reasons. Can't tell him that I want - need - to test myself. I don't want to leave the Enterprise. I feel too comfortable here. Protected. Molly-coddled, even. But, after the Borg - and he shivered as he thought of the name - I need to know that I can still function on my own, that I can manage without the Counselor's support. Going home made me realise how much I want to be here. But I need to know that I still deserve to be here. A few days alone - well, with Data - should tell me, one way or the other.*

He sighed, then went to pack.

"Data! Wait up!"

The android stopped in his tracks and patiently waited for Geordi La Forge to draw level.

Slightly winded, Geordi said, "I heard that you and the Captain were taking a

shuttle to Starbase 194."

"That is correct. I am on my way to the shuttle bay now."

"Mind if I join you?"

"No."

They walked a few paces together before Geordi managed to voice his concerns. "Data. Are you all right?"

Data tilted his head slightly. The obvious answer was yes, he was fine: his body was functioning perfectly. But he had come to understand that Geordi's queries were often more complicated than they first appeared. The Engineer often seemed to want to know how his friend *felt*, as though he believed that Data was capable of feeling something akin to emotions. Geordi had also, in the past, proved adept at picking up on Data's confusion, sometimes even before Data became aware of it himself.

These reflections flitted through Data's mind in a fraction of a second but he chose to answer in the most obvious fashion possible. His reply came without any delay that could be perceived by the Human. "I am not aware of any functional anomalies. Why do you ask?"

"You've been rather reclusive lately. I was worried about you."

"Ah." So Geordi had indeed noticed something. Not for the first time the android wondered at Human intuition.

"Well? Why? What's going on?"

A Human might have told Geordi to mind his own business under similar circumstances. However, Data wasn't Human and he had only hazy notions of personal privacy. The android's brow furrowed slightly, and he sought to put

his thoughts into words. "I have recently become aware that there are certain of the crew who are not happy with my continued presence aboard the Enterprise. My actions during our recent encounter with Dr Soong have raised questions which are not easy to resolve."

"And you've been trying to resolve them?"

"Yes." The word was softly spoken, almost sorrowfully. "I have, as yet, been unable to do so."

By now the pair had reached the entrance to the shuttle bay. Data keyed the door open. "Data," Geordi said, suddenly feeling guilty that he had not sought Data out before, "I still don't understand. I should have talked to you sooner. I'm sorry I didn't. I wish we had more time to discuss this now."

"But we do not," said Data in that infuriatingly disinterested tone of his. "The Captain will arrive momentarily."

"I know. Just... take care, won't you? And we'll talk when you come back."

Data nodded curtly, and gave Geordi one of his slight smiles. More concerned than before, Geordi did his best to return it. "You *will* be all right, Data?"

"Yes, Geordi. All my systems are functioning within normal parameters. Why should I be anything other than 'all right'?"

Geordi wondered that, himself.

Any further conversation was prevented by the arrival of Commander Riker and Counselor Troi. "Captain not here yet?" Riker asked.

"No, sir. But he should be here momentarily."

Riker acknowledged Data's words with a nod; and moments later the Captain did, indeed, appear. He looked around at the cluster of senior officers and said, "What is this? A delegation? And if you are all down here, who is manning the bridge?"

Riker looked a little uncomfortable. "I left Worf in charge."

"Captain," said the Counselor, "we just came to say good-bye."

The Captain eyed her impatiently. "I'm not *leaving* or anything. I'm just taking a shuttle for a week. Why all the fuss?"

"Captain," Deanna spoke again. "The Enterprise -"

Jean-Luc Picard cut her off with a sigh. "I've been through all this with Commander Riker. I want to take a shuttle! Now, shall we get on?"

The Betazoid flinched as if she'd been burned. Riker noticed the movement, but refrained from comment.

After exchanging hasty good-byes, Geordi La Forge, William Riker and Deanna Troi stood aside and watched as their two colleagues stepped into their shuttlecraft, then waited as the small vessel left the large bay. Wordlessly, they then turned their backs on the force-field and the stars beyond. Behind them, the bay doors that separated them from the vacuum slid shut.

La Forge left Riker and Troi in the corridor and headed back to engineering. Riker and Troi set off in the direction of the bridge.

"I still don't see why the Captain

thought it necessary to take a shuttle," Riker said, after a few moments of silence.

Troi's shoulders slumped, and she seemed to shrink next to him. "Oh, Will," she said. "You heard what he said. He *wanted* this. He felt he had to do it."

"But why?"

Deanna stopped and turned to face the man whose friendship she valued so much. "I think it was because of me." The last few words came out in a rush, and tears pricked at the corners of her large black eyes.

"Deanna?" Will queried, bemused. He looked about him, and decided that the Enterprise's corridor was not the most sensible place to conduct this particular conversation. "Come on. Let's find somewhere more private to discuss this."

She leaned against him, sniffed and nodded, setting her long black curls bouncing in the process.

They went to Troi's quarters. Riker directed the Counselor to the couch, then walked over to the replicator. Riker ordered hot chocolate and carried the steaming mug that materialised moments afterward over to the distressed Betazoid.

Deanna clasped the mug as though it was a lifeline, and turned dark eyes in Riker's direction. "So," he said, "want to talk about it?"

"I think so." *Who else can I talk to?* she wondered, not for the first time. *Everyone comes to me, but who do I go to, when I have a problem?*

Riker waited patiently while Deanna marshalled her thoughts into words. Finally, she said, "Ever since the Captain came back to us, I have been watching

out for him. Counselling him, and..."

Riker nodded. The Counselor was probably the only person upon the Enterprise who could come close to understanding what the Borg had put Picard through. She alone could sense the anguish in his thoughts and dreams. "But surely that's what the Counselor is supposed to do," Riker said, confused.

"No, Will. Wait. You still don't understand. We have all been so concerned and supportive. I have been able to sense everyone's support for the Captain, Will, and it has been wonderful." Deanna smiled through her misery, warmed by the memories of the crew's emotions. "But, Will - I have been so close to the Captain. So... protective. I think - perhaps I have been too protective."

"Deanna?"

"On the shuttle bay just now, when Captain Picard said he wanted to do this, he was saying it to me. I could feel it. He resented my being there, too. He wants to break free. He wants to stand on his own, without our - my - support." She shook her head, distressed that she, as ship's Counselor, could have miscalculated, could have failed, to such an enormous extent.

Riker put his arm around Troi's shoulders and drew her towards him. She leaned against him and snuffled slightly. "I think you're being too hard on yourself," he said. "You were doing your job. You do it very well. You can't blame yourself for this."

"Can't I?" Her voice held a tinge of hope.

Encouraged, Riker replied, a hint of amusement in his voice. "Well, you *can* blame yourself. But you shouldn't."

Deanna tried to believe him, but the self-doubts still echoed in her mind. Only time would tell whether they had any foundation or not. She leaned closer to her Imzadi, and drew strength from his comforting presence.

They sat like that for a long time.

Captain Jean-Luc Picard stared out of the shuttle's front windows, lost in his own thoughts. Data glanced across at his companion once or twice, but said nothing until the Captain sighed deeply.

The android's head swivelled in Picard's direction as he said, "Are you all right, sir?"

"Yes, Data. Fine. I was just thinking."

Data nodded briefly, dismissing the Human from his uppermost levels of thought, and concentrated on the shuttle's controls.

Picard relished the silence. The android's (unusually) quiet and undemanding companionship was a balm on his nerves after the last few weeks of unbearable moral support from his colleagues. He felt a weight lift from his shoulders. Everyone else's concerns and expectations gradually dropped away, and Picard could feel weeks of tension drain from his muscles.

The Human couldn't help it. He smiled.

"Captain. Please could you take a look at these readings?"

The Human peered over Data's shoulder and took a good look at the screens that had attracted the android's

attention. Data's calm request had not prepared Picard for the sight before him.

"Merde!" he swore fervently. "An ion storm! Where did that come from?"

"Unknown, sir. There was no warning."

Picard's lips tightened and worry lines etched themselves deeply around his eyes. "Those readings *are* accurate. Mr Data?"

"Aye, sir. I have checked them. Twice."

Picard raised his eyebrows at Data's admission. Data, usually so accurate in everything he did had *checked* the readings? Not once, but twice? *Why did he feel he needed to do that?* Picard wondered fleetingly, then dismissed the thoughts from his mind. There were more important things to think about just now. Like the ion storm.

"Can we avoid it, Data? Go around it?"

"I do not believe that we can avoid it, sir. It appears to be spreading towards us; we cannot wait it out, either. I have, however, plotted a course that should keep us away from its worst effects."

Picard nodded. "Good. Can you contact the Enterprise and let them know what's happening?"

"I can try, sir. However, the storm is disrupting communications. I am unsure as to whether such an attempt would be successful."

"Try anyway."

So, William Riker, thought Picard ruefully, as he watched Data carry out his orders, your worst fears have come to pass. Not Romulans along the Neutral Zone; merely an

ion storm of a magnitude that this shuttle was not designed to withstand.

Data's voice interrupted the Captain's reverie. "I am not receiving any acknowledgement from the Enterprise, sir."

Picard held in a sigh, unsurprised by Data's announcement. "Can't be helped. You'll just have to send out a general distress signal, and hope someone picks it up."

"Aye, sir." Data set to work, his fingers flying across the console, both men knowing all the while that the task was almost certainly a futile one. This sector of space was far from the usual trading routes. If the Enterprise was unable to pick up their transmission, it was highly improbable that anyone else would.

The two Starfleet officers turned their attention towards the shuttle's windows. Already they could see distortions in the star field with their naked eyes. Picard nodded his head towards the disruptions and said, "We'd better batten down hatches. And anything else that's movable. It's going to be a bumpy ride."

When all hard objects had been carefully locked away and tables and chairs had been anchored as securely as possible, Data and Picard went back to the cockpit, fastened themselves into their seats, and waited for the storm to hit.

Which it did, some thirty five minutes later.

With a vengeance.

The tiny craft shook violently. The walls audibly vibrated, and Picard found himself praying to a God in whom he'd never had any fixed belief, asking to be protected from the ravages of the vacuum outside. The two men fought the controls,

trying to keep the shuttle on some kind of level course.

"Helm control is failing," Data announced calmly, his voice raised just enough to be heard above the sounds of the shuttle. It screamed like a wounded beast as the storm twisted at its metal and tore into it.

"Warp is off-line! Fuel leak from the right nacelle! DAMN!"

The last word was lost as a particularly large energy blast caught at the underside of the shuttle and threw it spinning in a steep arc away from its original trajectory. Picard bit back a very natural scream.

The tossing gradually lessened, and somehow the two officers managed to coax the crippled craft onto a more even keel.

Finally, three hours after it had begun, the buffeting stopped. Picard and Data were able to take stock of the condition of their craft.

Data, with his usual talent for understatement, said, "The situation is not good, Captain. We have lost all warp capability. Helm control is compromised. Our fuel reserves are almost drained, and the hull has been severely stressed."

"Communications?"

"Apparently still operative, sir."

"Mayday the Enterprise, or any other ship in the vicinity."

"Aye, sir. However... " Data seemed almost reluctant to continue.

"Go on."

"Even assuming the local conditions

have cleared enough to permit the successful transmission of such a message, the shuttle's reserves are not adequate to last out until a rescue team arrives."

"I see. And what do you suggest?"

"There is a class M planet within range. Omaris 3."

"That's a Prime Directive world."

"Yes, sir."

"That rules it out, then. The non-interference regulation is clear." There was a definite hint of irritation in the Captain's tone. Perhaps he was annoyed with Data for making such an improper suggestion. Perhaps it was a more general frustration. It was of little consequence either way: Data either did not notice the Captain's irritation, or he chose to ignore it.

"Normally, sir, that would be correct. However, the planet was recently the subject of a covert survey team's report. It recorded that one of the main continental land masses was unpopulated. We might head for that."

"Could we be that accurate? The helm is almost useless."

"I believe we can. I could not, however, predict our destination any more accurately than to within a radius of one thousand miles."

The Captain pressed his lips together. He wished he could think of another option. However, nothing readily sprang to mind. He muttered, "We don't appear to have a great deal of choice, do we?"

Data recognised that the question was meant to be rhetorical, and he did not reply. However, he mentally noted that

he, at least, had several choices open to him. Until his recent meeting with Lore, the android had given little thought to the question of how long he might remain viable if exposed to the vacuum of space. It appeared that the answer was *almost indefinitely*. If it were not for the more fragile Human Data would have elected to remain where he was and wait for the Enterprise's eventual rescue. However he had a duty to the Captain, as well as a loyalty that seemed to exceed the limits of his programme.

Data's reflections were disturbed by Picard's voice.

"All right, Data. Send a message informing the Enterprise of our decision, then plot a course for Omaris 3."

"Aye, Captain."

"Commander." Worf's deep voice echoed down towards Commander Riker. The Human twisted round in the command chair and looked up at the big Klingon, wryly noting that he looked even bigger than usual when viewed from below. "I am picking up an automated distress call. From the shuttle, sir!"

"On screen, Lieutenant," said Riker, jumping to his feet.

"We have audio only, sir. The visual part of the transmission has been compromised."

"Very well."

Static echoed round the bridge, rendering Data's usually clear tones almost into white noise. Between hisses and crackles the android's calm request for aid, and summary of their chosen plan of action, sent shivers down the spines of

the Enterprise's crew.

A shocked silence encompassed the bridge after Worf switched off the speakers. Several seconds passed before Commander Riker said, "Set course for Omari 3." His voice sounded too loud in his ears.

The young Ensign at the con tapped some commands into her console, then glanced over her shoulder. "Course laid in, sir."

"Engage. Warp eight, Ensign." Riker stood up, and headed into the Captain's ready room. Deanna Troi glanced worriedly after him, then followed.

Deanna found Will Riker standing stiffly, back to the door, gaze fixed on the stars and his mind trapped in a nightmare sense of *deja vu*.

"Will?"

The voice was soft and concerned. Riker turned to face its owner, and stared wordlessly at the Betazoid.

"Will. Sit down."

Mechanically, Riker sat in the chair he thought of as the Captain's own, and lowered his face into his hands. Deanna sampled the atmosphere, sat opposite him, and gently took his hands into her own, drawing them away from his face. He stared blankly at her and said, "Not again," in tones of profound disbelief. "I can't believe we've lost him again."

"I know. It's a shock." Troi shook his hands gently, determined to get his full attention, then continued. "We'll get him back again. And Data."

Riker nodded. "Perhaps." He did not sound convinced.

"You must try to believe it, Will. Believing that you can do something makes it easier to actually do it."

Riker listened to Troi's words, and tried to accept the truth of them, then suddenly he chuckled.

"Will?" The Counselor was startled by the sudden shift in Riker's emotions.

"Funny, isn't it? Yesterday I was comforting you. Today you're comforting me."

Deanna smiled slightly, acknowledging the irony of the situation.

The humour slid from Riker's face, and the sombre mood settled around him again. Speaking more to himself than to Troi Riker said, "I shouldn't have let him take the shuttle."

"You could not have stopped him."

A few moments of silence hung between the two friends, then Troi said softly, "Will, I know this is difficult for you. Having to rescue the Captain again has triggered many unpleasant memories for you."

"Yeah. I suppose so."

"In me, too. And in the other bridge crew. You have to be strong now, not just for yourself, or for the Captain and Data, but for them, too. They'll take their lead from you."

Riker stared at Troi, absorbing her words. Then he stood up, and headed towards the door. Troi stood, too. Riker suddenly paused, looked at his *Imzadi*, then said, "Any last observations, Counselor?"

"Only this. Whatever has happened to the Captain this time cannot be as bad as

before. You got through that. You'll get through this." Troi reached out and squeezed Riker's arm gently, a gesture of encouragement and support.

"Thank you, Counselor." He smiled and said, thinking back to their previous conversation, "I was right. You *do* do a good job."

"Captain," said Data calmly, "I recommend that you strap yourself in. It is likely that our landing will be rough."

In spite of everything, Picard smiled at the android's understatement. "Noted, Commander." The Human sat down in the co-pilot's seat, and watched as Data's hands flew across the console, fighting for some measure of control over the shuttle's failing systems. He felt useless, but they had agreed that Data should take full control of the ship, trusting that his unhuman reflexes would more than compensate for the vessel's weaknesses.

The shuttle's nose swung slowly around towards the cloud covered globe, and then the craft started to descend. The movement was almost imperceptible at first, but gradually the planet seemed to rush forward to meet them. Picard found himself being pushed back into his seat. The thickening atmosphere outside scratched frantically at the shuttle, and the friction warmed the interior at an alarming rate. Perspiration pricked Picard's skin, and he struggled to breathe.

Data threw a glance at his commanding officer, apparently unaffected by the change in temperature himself. Picard struggled to nod reassuringly, and Data directed his attention back to the shuttle's controls.

The craft plummeted downwards. Once or twice there was an almighty

THUD as the shuttle encountered turbulence. The air tossed it effortlessly aside while Data struggled to keep the nose straight, valiantly trying to keep on his chosen course.

Data threw another glance in the Captain's direction and saw the Human's head lolling off to one side: clearly the atmosphere's pounding had caused the Picard's head to impact with the seat. Data knew there was nothing he could do until he landed the shuttle...

The little vessel screamed angrily as it raced downwards towards a mountain range. If Data had been Human perhaps he would have panicked or sworn bitterly at the sight of the rocks that rushed towards them, ready to rip them apart. But he wasn't, and he didn't. He fought to lift the shuttle's nose enough to get them over the peaks, then, realising that his efforts were in vain, he struggled to shift the craft between the mountains and through one of the passes instead.

Safely beyond the massif, the shuttle sank lower until it was mere metres off the ground. Data tried to control the impact but the shuttle landed roughly, travelling at speed, and gouged out huge tracks of soil in its wake. Small bursts of flame appeared in its path. Eventually, the shuttle ground to a halt, a twisted, shattered wreck, testimony to the excellence and robustness of its design.

The shuttle had landed on its side. Data paused for a moment to adjust himself to the planet's external gravity, then glanced at Picard, still strapped into his seat, which now hung parallel to the ground. Data knew that the position could not be comfortable, yet he was reluctant to touch the Human until he had some idea as to the extent of his injuries.

Carefully the android twisted in his

own chair, then stood up on the shuttle's wall. He scabbled around until he found a medical tricorder - still functional, in spite of the buffeting it had received - and pointed the little machine at the Human.

Data blinked at the readings. The Captain had survived the crash in better condition than the android would have thought possible. It was safe to move him.

Data wondered what to do next. Clearly the Captain could not stay where he was - but where could he be made more comfortable? The android moved towards the now horizontal door to the rear compartment and directed his android strength to the task of opening it.

The main compartment of the shuttle was a mess. Cushions, tables, chairs and sundry other objects lay together in a tangled heap. Data pulled himself through the doorway and set about clearing a gap in the debris and putting together a makeshift bed for his Captain.

Finally Data heaved himself back through the doorway and balanced himself precariously on its frame. He carefully reached towards Picard. Data cautiously unfastened the seat's safety restraints and gently lowered the Human into his arms.

Jean-Luc Picard's eyes flickered open. He tried to sit up, winced, and leaned back on the cushions upon which Data had placed him. When he opened his eyes again, he saw yellow eyes peering into his own. "Data... What happened?"

"We crashed."

"Oh. Yes." His eyes drifted shut. When he opened them for the third time, they looked more alert. Picard looked

more attentively at Data, and again tried to sit up. Data gently helped the Captain into a sitting position and waited for him to speak.

"What's our status?"

"This shuttle is a write-off, sir. The hull has been breached, and all systems are down, including communications."

"Damn."

Picard shifted slightly, and for the first time became aware of a chilly draft weaving around his head and shoulders, and a blanket covering his lower body. "Where are we?"

"We are, as intended, on the uninhabited land mass of Omari 3. We are some one thousand three hundred miles inland, and are in the foothills of a range of mountains. It is currently late autumn at this latitude, and the external temperature is three degrees celsius." As an afterthought, Data said, "It is midday, local time."

"It'll get colder, then."

"Yes, sir."

Picard looked around the wrecked shuttle's interior. "Well, I'd rather not stay here if it can be avoided. This draft is most irritating. How are our survival supplies?"

"Clothing and jackets are intact, as are basic food and medical supplies. Two lanterns survived the crash. The emergency shelter did not."

"I see." Picard paused. "How's the atmosphere outside?" The Captain almost laughed at himself, and before Data could give him an answer he said, "What am I saying? I can feel the outside atmosphere! I've been breathing it for the

last few minutes."

Data nodded once, in agreement.

"Well, we might as well take a look around, now we're here."

"Are you sure that you are all right to move, Captain?"

"Quite sure, Mr Data. But if it would make you feel better, you can always try out your bedside manner on me."

Data blinked at the Human's odd comment, then reached out for the medical tricorder. "You would appear to have a slight concussion, Captain. Other than that, you appear functional."

"Thank you, Data. Shall we go?"

The landscape outside the shuttle was one of rolling hills covered with a poor layer of 'grass' (or whatever the local equivalent was) and stumpy trees. In the distance Picard could make out the mountains Data had mentioned. The Human's breath plumed out in the weak sunlight. He was curious to note that Data's breath did not.

Meanwhile, the object of his curiosity consulted his tricorder's readings and ventured to comment that the predominant rock type was limestone. Picard had surmised as much, his experienced eye having already noted the poor vegetation and lack of surface drainage as far as the eye could see.

"Can you detect any caves, Data?"

Data absorbed the Captain's query and said, "I cannot recognise any caves as such, sir. However, the tricorder shows indications of an underground river in that direction, and - "

"And limestone, underground drainage and caves often go together. Quite. Shall we go?" Without waiting for Data's acknowledgment, Picard set off in the general direction that Data had indicated. The android followed close behind.

They found a cave easily, no more than a mile distant from the crash site. Picard seemed pleased with the discovery, and proclaimed it to be snug. Certainly, the ground was flat and, surprisingly, completely dry. It gave more shelter against the wind than their wrecked vessel, too, so it seemed to make sense to establish camp there.

Data willingly acquiesced to Picard's wishes in this matter. Besides being in the habit of obeying his commanding officer, the android knew that Picard had a more immediate interest in making himself comfortable than he did himself: Picard knew what practical measures he needed to take in order to stay fit and well. The android only had theoretical knowledge. Data had, over the years, learned to put great store in practical experience.

By dusk, which came both rapidly and early, the Starfleet officers found themselves tolerably comfortable in the cave, having shifted a range of necessary supplies from the shuttle. All they had to do now was wait for the Enterprise to find them.

It did not cross their minds that anyone else might find them first.

The following morning Picard decided to go for a walk in an attempt to dispel the stiffness that sleeping on rock had engendered in his limbs. He returned barely half an hour later at a run, and breathing hard.

"Data!" he called from outside the cave's entrance, distracting the android from his task of tending to their fire.

"Captain?" queried Data, apparently unmoved by the excited tones of the Captain's voice.

"Data, how old was that survey team's report?"

"Six months, sir. May I enquire as to the cause of your sudden interest?"

"You may." Picard's breathing had almost returned to its normal rate. "I saw footprints. *Footprints!* About a kilometre in that direction." Picard pointed towards the horizon, in the opposite direction to the one in which the shuttlecraft lay.

Picard's words elicited no response from Data, other than a slight tilt of his head. The Captain said, "Come on. Come with me. And bring your tricorder."

Just as Picard had promised, several sets of prints were impressed upon a damp patch of ground in a valley where the water table lay almost at the surface. The Starfleet officers exchanged glances, then Data consulted his tricorder. "I believe, sir, that these footprints are approximately seventy-two hours old. The softening of the outline, and the recovery of the vegetation within the impressions would indicate that to be the case."

Picard nodded. "We cannot risk being discovered."

"No, sir. To reveal our presence would be in violation of the Prime Directive."

"The shuttlecraft. We can't risk that being discovered either."

"It is in no state to be moved," Data observed. "We cannot hide it."

"No. I can only see one possible option, and that is to physically destroy it."

"Captain?" queried Data.

"We can't leave it there. At least if we blow it up, there is no way that it will be discovered by the locals. With luck, any crater that is left will be put down to a meteorite. Or something."

Data acknowledged the soundness of the Human's reasoning, and they made a quick retreat back towards the shuttle where they spent a little time hastily removing from it the remaining supplies that they thought might be useful.

Picard gave the task of blowing up the shuttle to Data because of the android's relative speed and durability. Data set a phaser to overload and dropped the weapon into the craft's interior. Then the android sprinted faster than even Picard would have believed possible to where the Human waited, a safe distance away.

The two men lay down in a little hollow, placed their arms protectively over their heads, and waited for the explosion. Brief seconds stretched out, and when it came the powerful, thunderous force took Picard off-guard. Finally, as the last of the rock fragments settled on the ground, the two Starfleet officers scrambled to their feet.

Together they stared at the results of their handiwork. Where, minutes before, a twisted hulk of metal had lain in full view, now there was a gaping hole where the shuttle's already compromised remains had been vaporised.

After a few moments, Picard turned to Data. "Well. That's that, then," said the

Captain, fastidiously dusting off his clothing. He retreated to their cave without a backward glance.

"Captain," said Data, some time after their return, "the loss of the shuttle will hinder any attempts at locating us. The shuttle is no longer available to act as a landmark to our presence, and as long as we are in this cave the rock will shield us."

"And we daren't go out too often, in case we are seen. I am aware of that. However we might try adjusting one of the tricorders to emit some kind of beacon, and hide that close to the cave's entrance."

"Indeed, sir. I shall do so."

"Good."

That evening the temperature plummeted dramatically. The heat from the fire that the two officers had built upon their arrival had to be augmented by warming rocks with phaser fire. Picard retreated to the warmth of his thermal blankets early, and abandoned Data to the chill of the cave's entrance, a discomfort of which the android was completely oblivious.

Deanna Troi carried her chocolate dessert over to the table where Geordi La Forge sat alone, staring morosely into his glass. She sat down opposite the Engineer and said, "They will be all right, Geordi."

Startled, his head jerked up, and he said, "Wha?... Oh. Yeah. That obvious, huh?"

Troi forced her mouth to curve into a slight smile. "We are all concerned about

them, Geordi. It is only natural that current events should stir up bad memories about the Captain. And the Borg. Those memories are making it hard for everyone to accept the current situation."

Geordi nodded, recognising the truth of Troi's words. He was just as concerned about the Captain as anyone else, but he was also concerned about Data. And it was Data about whom he'd been brooding.

"Yeah, I know. But it's not just that the shuttle's missing..." He trailed off.

"Go on," Troi invited, wondering what else could be bothering the Engineer.

"I wanted to talk to Data before they left, but I didn't really have time. I was worried about him. I guess I still am."

"Oh? How so?"

Geordi paused thoughtfully, then said, "It's hard to explain. He's been withdrawn for the last couple of weeks. Surely you noticed."

The Counselor drew back at Geordi's words. Were they an accusation? Did he think she should have noticed? Done something? But she found Data hard to read, and unless he came to her she could never be entirely sure about his state of mind. In any case, his world view was often as alien to her as the Humans' was to him. And she had been preoccupied by her concerns for the Captain. "I... Not really. I noticed that he'd taken himself out of circulation, but I assumed he was working on some project or other."

Geordi shook his head. "No. I know it's got something to do with Soong."

Troi frowned. "But we talked about that." Data had spent several hours in the

Counselor's office talking about Soong and Lore. "He said he didn't blame himself for what he'd done. He wasn't - " she struggled to find a word without emotional undertones but gave up the attempt - "*happy*" with events. But he knew that they weren't his fault."

The Engineer sighed. "I don't know what the problem was exactly, but something was definitely bothering him. "Damn Soong, anyway!"

Troi sensed Geordi's anger as his thoughts turned towards the cyberneticist. "Geordi?" she prompted.

"Well!" Geordi shrugged, and waved his arms in disgust. There was a frustrated pause while the Engineer tried to marshal his thoughts into some kind of coherent order. "Look at it this way. Dr Soong creates Data, then abandons him before he was 'born'. For twenty-six years Data didn't even have any idea that Soong was involved in his creation. Then, when *Soong* thinks it's convenient, whammo, Data gets dragged off on some wild goose chase half-way across the galaxy! A simple invitation would have sufficed!"

Deanna couldn't help but smile at Geordi's words. Even through his filtered vision, Geordi correctly interpreted the Counselor's expression and said, "It's not funny."

"No. I know. I'm sorry."

"Data's a sentient being. But Soong, his *father*, is the one who treats him most like a thing."

"I see. But why does it upset you so much? Data does not hold a grudge against Soong."

"Of course he doesn't. Data doesn't hold grudges, period. He's not equipped for it, and he's too nice a guy, anyway."

"So you're indignant on his behalf?" Troi suggested.

"Yeah. I guess I am," replied La Forge, the heat draining out of his voice. "It just doesn't seem fair."

"No," Deanna said thoughtfully. "It doesn't."

The two officers sat in silence, lost in their own thoughts, each hoping that all was well with their missing colleagues, that soon all their questions would be answered, and their concerns would be laid to rest.

Data turned his yellow eyes towards the sky. Omaris 3 had no moon, and the only light came from the tiny distant suns and the dying embers of the fire. The wind whispered outside, gentle and frigid. The ground hardened as the frost set in.

The cold did not bother the android, but it would, he thought, inconvenience the Captain. It was most fortunate that some emergency clothing had survived the shuttle's crash.

Data turned his attention away from outside to inside, and tuned in to listen to the Human's breathing.

The android remembered the first time he had seen a sleeping Human. It had been an alarming experience. Of course, Data had known that Humans slept. However, it was another example of theoretical knowledge failing to prepare him for the fact. He'd found Professor Macklesby in his office chair, head tipped back, mouth open, and snoring. Data had thought that the elderly man was having some kind of seizure and he had summoned help.

Data had learned a lot since then.

Humans usually relaxed in sleep, and snoring was an unfortunate side effect of the process. The Captain's breath should, Data reasoned, be slow and even.

It was not.

Data focused his attention more closely upon his commanding officer.

The Human tossed and turned on his makeshift bed, and he muttered anguished nonsense in his sleep. The strange sounds and movement disturbed Data, and he walked over to kneel next to the Captain, concern etched on his placid yellow face.

He wondered what to do.

Humans dreamed. Data knew that. But Picard seemed distressed in his dreams: sweat speckled his face, and his limbs twitched oddly. Data decided to wake the Human from his slumber, and reached towards the Captain.

However, Picard's eyes popped open before Data could touch him, and his mouth gave shape to an anguished, "No!" With an effort, the Human jerked himself fully awake, and he found himself staring into the face of his Second Officer.

"Captain. Are you all right?"

Picard deliberately slowed his breathing as Deanna had taught him, then nodded curtly. "Quite all right, thank you, Mr Data. It was a nightmare. That's all." He pushed thoughts of his dream away from him, and sighed. The Counselor had warned him that it could be months, even years, until he stopped dreaming about the Borg. It didn't please him that so far she was right.

Data nodded, accepting the Human's

words at face value, then retreated back towards the cave's entrance. Picard lay down once more, but he was too wound up to sleep again; he was scared of losing himself to that tangle of subconscious memories. Finally, he stood up, drew the blanket around his shoulders, and walked over to join Data.

They sat in silence for a while, then Picard said, "I never did thank you properly, did I?"

"Sir?" queried Data.

"For separating me from the Borg collective."

"You are welcome, sir," Data answered. Then, after a moment, he asked, "Is that what you were dreaming of?"

"Mmm. The prosthetics. The..." He stopped.

"Hmm." Data made a distinctive noise in the back of his throat. Picard recognised the sound: Data had received unexpected input. "I had not realised that you were still affected by memories of the Borg."

Picard lowered his eyes, then slowly shook his head. "Still affected." What did Data expect? "The memories will be with me for a long time, Data."

Data peered curiously at the Human, unused to hearing the vulnerability that had crept into Picard's voice.

Picard spoke again, apparently more to himself than to his companion. "The worst thing was losing control." Picard stopped, barriers coming up as though he suddenly remembered the android's presence and was afraid of displaying any weakness in front of him. Anyway, how could Data possibly -

"I believe I understand, Captain."

Picard shot the android a disbelieving glance. How could anyone, least of all an android, comprehend what he'd been through?

Data continued. "When my father summoned me home, I had no control over my actions. I placed lives in danger. I am sorry for that."

"Pardon me for saying so, but I hardly think our experiences are comparable."

"I am aware of that, Captain. Recent events have forcibly reminded me that I am just a machine."

"That's not what I meant, Data. I wasn't questioning your... status." *No. Rather I was remembering the sight of the Borg's destruction at Wolf 359. The countless deaths that my knowledge made possible, that I made possible. The scale of our sins is so very different. Mine is a heavy burden that I must carry for the rest of my life. But you, Data? "Your actions didn't cause any harm. No permanent damage."*

Data did not reply, and the silence hung heavy between them. Picard eyed the android speculatively, somehow relieved to have his attention diverted towards Data's problems and away from his own. Surely Data was not capable of feeling guilt? But if he were not, why was he concerned about his recent actions? Finally the Human asked, "Why does it bother you so much?"

Data tilted his head to one side as he ordered his thoughts, then he said, "Although my status as a sentient being has been established in a court of law, there are many people who disagree with the ruling. I have been reminded of that by recent events, and by comments made by certain members of the Enterprise's crew."

"The Enterprise's crew? Who exactly? They should know better! I will not tolerate -"

Data shook his head emphatically. Picard frowned at the android's unusually vehement reaction. "It is not important who said these things, Captain."

The Human's frown deepened. "You aren't questioning the ruling, are you, Data?"

The android's silence spoke eloquently of his self-doubt.

"Oh, Data."

"Recent events have reminded me that I am merely a mechanism. A complicated mechanism, certainly, but still an entity defined by a set of pre-determined commands."

"And are you happy with that conclusion?"

Data raised his eyebrows slightly. "I can be neither happy nor unhappy, sir," he reminded his commanding officer. "Nonetheless, I am... reluctant to accept my conclusions in this respect."

"As am I. I fought hard for you in that court. I believed that the judgement was correct at the time. I still do."

Data turned his odd eyes towards the Human and said, "Thank you, sir. Your opinion and faith mean a great deal to me. However, it is only your belief, sir."

"Of course." Picard stared out at the stars for a few moments. The atmosphere blunted their images and softened them. Picard found himself missing the harsher, more familiar lights of his home in space. "No-one can prove what you are, one way or the other. Not you. Not me. Not Captain Louvois. You have to make a

choice: accept your sentience, or deny it. I chose to believe, a long time ago, that you are a sentient being. What I think, though, is unimportant. The question is, what do *you* think? What do you choose to believe?"

"I think I understand you, sir. But I do not know what I believe."

Picard smiled at his Second Officer. "I'll leave you to think about it. Meanwhile, it's cold out here, and I feel ready to try to sleep again. "By the way, I thought you said it was autumn here."

"Yes, sir. It is late autumn."

"It feels more like winter."

"No, sir. Mid-winter temperatures in this latitude seldom rise above minus twenty three degrees celsius."

"Oh. Well... goodnight, Data."

"Goodnight, sir."

Picard stood and stumbled through the darkness back to the almost faded embers of the evening's fire and the sheltered alcove where he'd made his bed. As he lay down he threw one last look towards the cave's mouth.

Data sat silhouetted against the dark sky, head tilted towards the stars.

Towards dawn clouds began to gather overhead, the temperature rose (though it still hovered at several degrees below freezing) and soft white powder began to fall. Picard awoke to that muffled silence that comes with snow, and to a landscape shrouded in white. The Frenchman stared at it, a slight smile lightening his face.

He remembered playing in Alpine

snow on occasional winter holidays as a boy, and he recalled how he had wished it might snow in La Barre. Then he thought of Commander Riker, who had been brought up amongst the ice and glaciers of Alaska. Thoughts of his Number One naturally brought the Enterprise to mind, and then carried his thoughts back to his present predicament.

His smile faded, only to be rekindled when he noticed the look of childlike wonder on Data's face. The android sat at the cave entrance, holding out his hand, catching snowflakes in his palm. Picard watched him for a few moments, then said, "Anyone would think that you've never seen snow before, Mr Data."

Data's head spun round, and his gaze focused on Picard. The Captain realised, astonished, that he had startled the android. Data replied, "Outside of a holodeck programme, I have not, Captain - at least, not to touch it."

The admission surprised the Captain. "And what do you think of it?"

"It is remarkable how nature can create an infinite diversity of shapes in something as simple as water crystals. I find it... intriguing."

Picard squatted down next to the android, and, feeling self conscious as he did so, held out his hand too. However the flakes melted faster on his palm than they did on Data's, and his hand was soon speckled with water droplets. He wiped it dry on his trousers and retreated back into the cave, resolving to make some breakfast.

Data followed him.

Data's fascination with the snow appeared to be inexhaustible. Picard's,

however, was not. He soon tired of watching the white flakes, and he began to pace around the shelter. The Human felt trapped, as indeed he was. If it had been inadvisable for them to leave the cave before, the snow now made it positively dangerous. Any movements they made would be permanently imprinted on the landscape, and would automatically lead any Omaris natives straight to them.

Picard's behaviour gave Data a second target for his voracious curiosity, and the Human gradually became aware of the android's careful scrutiny.

"Why are you staring at me, Data?" he finally asked.

Data tilted his head and said, "You are behaving in a manner which I associate more strongly with Commander Riker than with you."

Picard stopped and merely said, "Oh?"

"You were pacing."

"Ah."

"Are you frustrated, sir?"

"I suppose, a little. Yes." Picard noted that the android assumed a pleased expression on hearing his reply. "Why do you ask?"

"My previous observations have suggested that Commander Riker paces when he is frustrated or when he is impatient. I wished to ascertain whether or not his behaviour was unique to himself, or whether it was a type of Human behaviour that was more widely experienced."

Picard gave the question a moment's thought, then finally he said, "I don't believe it's so clear-cut as that. I was

pacing because I was bored."

Data tilted his head to one side. Boredom was something he was not designed to experience. Even if he had been given the emotional equipment required to experience the sensation, Data doubted that he ever would, or could, feel bored. His insatiable curiosity precluded it: there was always something new to examine.

Meanwhile Picard had resumed his pacing again. Data turned back towards the outside view. When next he looked around again, Picard was lost in the gloom at the rear of the cave.

"Data. Come here a moment, will you?" Picard's voice echoed slightly in the darkness.

Data stood and made his way towards the voice's source, picking up a lantern on the way. He found Picard crouching down, tentatively feeling into a dark orifice at the base of the cave's wall. "What do you make of this?"

Data unholstered his tricorder, and waved it at the opening. After a few moments of careful scrutiny he announced, "It appears to lead into another chamber. However, from here it is hard to obtain definitive readings." He crouched onto his hands and knees and took a good look at the opening. "I believe that I can crawl through."

"All right."

At this encouragement Data lay down, squirmed, and wriggled through the narrow gap, thrusting the lantern before him. From Picard's point of view, it looked almost as though a circular mouth was sucking his companion through like a piece of spaghetti, and he could almost imagine hearing a satisfied slurp as the android's feet suddenly slipped from

view. Picard shook the frivolous thoughts from his mind.

Apart from the feeble illumination coming through the hole, the cavern in which Data found himself was completely dark. Even his extraordinary eyes could do little to pierce the gloom and so he switched on the lantern. He stood silently for a moment and focused his attention on trying to listen past the silence. Drops of water spat on the floor far in the distance, and there was something else.

"Data?"

The Captain's voice sounded loud to Data, who had turned up his auditory sensitivity.

"It is a large cavern, oval in shape, measuring approximately thirty metres at its maximum length and five metres in height. I can hear water somewhere, but I do not believe it is nearby. Also there is a noise in the distance which is somewhat reminiscent of the sound of drilling."

"Drilling? Are you sure?"

"No, sir. However, the sound does appear to be mechanical in origin."

"What?! On a deserted continent of a Prime Directive world?! Hang on a minute. I'm coming through."

There was a frantic scrabbling sound as Captain Picard's head appeared, immediately followed by the rest of his body. He stood up, and brushed the worst of the dust away from his uniform top.

After a few moments pause, Picard said, "I can't hear anything."

"That is not surprising. I believe that the sound does not emanate from within this cavern, but from somewhere further

along the cave system."

Picard stared at Data and wondered, not for the first time, about the limits of the Lieutenant-Commander's abilities. "You said that the noise sounded mechanical."

"Yes, sir. I realise that this seems improbable given the circumstances in which we presently find ourselves. However, the noise to which I referred displayed rhythmic characteristics seldom found in nature."

"Hmmm."

Picard stared at the rock surfaces that surrounded them on all sides. They were poorly lit, as Data's lantern could only illuminate a small section at a time. Curiosity mated with boredom, and Picard found himself saying, "Data, how do you fancy doing a spot of caving?"

The two Starfleet officers gathered some equipment together, then set off on their expedition.

Each cave they entered was lower than the last, and the air had grown rapidly damper with their descent. Beyond the reach of the outside atmosphere, though, the temperature rose to several degrees above freezing. Far above their heads stalactites hung like teeth. Several appeared to have been broken recently, as though shaken at their roots. Picard wondered what might have caused this until he remembered the forces unleashed by the shuttle's destruction. Around the two men stalagmites crept up, futilely trying to touch their lofty relatives.

They stopped for lunch in the third cavern in the system. Rather, Picard stopped for lunch. Data spent the time

with his tricorder while Picard snacked on some emergency rations and watched the android.

"The minerals in the rocks are jamming all communication frequencies and are limiting the tricorder's range. However, I believe that I can detect a power source approximately half a kilometre in that direction." Data pointed in the direction that their travels were taking them.

"A power source?"

"Yes, sir."

"Natural?"

"I do not think so."

"First drilling. Now this. What is going on here?"

"I do not know, sir."

"And what happened to your drilling, anyway? Where is it?"

"I do not know. Apparently it stopped."

Picard huffed slightly. "Shall we continue?"

"Certainly."

The ground was slimy now, covered by a thin sheen of water, and the two men had to tread increasingly carefully. Occasional drops landed on their heads, an occurrence that Picard found increasingly irksome.

Finally they came to another opening, this one partially blocked by a pool of water. Beyond, they could hear the distant roar of water: apparently it was the underground river that Data's tricorder had detected two days before.

Suddenly the ground began to shake slightly under their feet, and the air vibrated with noise. Picard and Data exchanged glances. The android said, "That is the drilling noise to which I previously referred."

"I guessed as much."

Picard managed to dodge around the pool, and he safely navigated his way through to the next chamber. He paused, and gazed around him in awe. Data joined him.

They found themselves perched high on a ledge. Far, far below them, cut deep into an underground gorge, a turbulent river flowed. The cavern's roof arched over them, high above.

"It's breathtaking," said Picard, raising his voice above the noise. They stood for a few minutes longer, then continued on their trek.

The only obvious point of entry into the next cavern should have been where the water disappeared from view. However, the gorge's steep sides and the swirling tumult of water discouraged Picard and Data from trying to reach it. Fortunately, however, Data spotted a gap in the cave wall - probably more explosion damage - and they made for that. Together they peered through the hole, and stared in silent disbelief at the sight below them.

The source of Data's drilling noise was a big machine scooping large amounts of rubble away from structures that looked suspiciously like buildings.

"That's not a drill."

"No, sir. It appears to be an earth mover."

"And that's your power source."

"Yes, sir. And that is a Romulan, sir."

"Where?!"

"Next to the structure with the shattered roof, Captain."

"Oh, yes. So it is."

"There is another one on the bridge." Data glanced at his tricorder, then said, "Actually, the tricorder is registering twelve Romulans in this area."

Picard shrank back away from the opening, stunned by the news. After a moment, he suggested, "Shall we get the hell out of here before they find us, Data?"

"Yes, sir."

"Commander."

Riker twisted around to look at the Enterprise's Security Chief. "Yes, Worf?"

"I have intercepted a transmission. It is faint, but I believe it is Romulan."

"Source?" asked Riker.

"It is hard to be precise, Commander, but I believe the source to be on this side of the Neutral Zone."

"What?" Riker had assumed that the transmission had simply drifted across from Romulan space. As such, he found it of little immediate interest. Worf's bombshell that the signals originated on the wrong side of the Zone put a completely different complexion on matters, however.

A frustrated growl preceded Worf's next comment. "We are heading in the general direction of the transmission's

source. However, I can be no more precise than that." Worf continued to fiddle with his control board. A few moments later he paused, frowned and said, "This is odd."

"Worf?"

"The message is improperly coded."

"Can you explain that?"

"I can decode the transmission. It is as though the message has not been properly encrypted at source."

Riker thoughtfully stroked his beard. "Can you translate the message?"

"Yes. But it is incomplete."

"Put it on speakers."

The computer spoke the fragment of the Romulan transmission in a male voice. Riker thought that the computer generated tone was nervous. It was not a trait that he normally associated with Romulans, and yet the computer was usually faithful with respect to context when it translated a speaker's intonation. He raised his eyebrows, listened, and heard:

"...severely damaged. We have multiple casualties, and three fatalities. Commander Toralok is in critical condition. Please advise us..."

"That's it?" Riker asked.

"Yes, sir."

Speaking to the bridge crew generally, Riker said, "Well, it's not very informative, is it? Still, we'd better go to yellow alert. Keep your eyes peeled, people. We don't want to bump into any Romulans without warning. And, Worf, monitor those frequencies in case there

are any more messages."

"Aye, sir."

"Why would the Romulans want a base on Omaris 3?"

Picard looked up at Data. The steady upward slope of their path was telling on Picard's legs, and he gently massaged his calves as he sat on a particularly large and comfortable boulder. Data, of course, was unaffected by the physical activity. The Human found himself envying the android's resilience.

Data's head swivelled, and he turned his yellow eyes upon his commanding officer. "I do not know, sir."

"Hmm." There was a pause then Picard observed, "The buildings seemed to be somewhat damaged."

"Yes, sir. There are widespread indications of quake damage throughout this cave system. I would hypothesise that our destruction of the shuttle was the root cause of the damage."

"Well, it's nice to know that something good came out of that."

"Sir?"

"Never mind, Data."

Romulans.

On Omaris 3.

That meant that the footprints had not been left by native inhabitants of the planet as the two officers had supposed. In turn, that meant... "Data! The Romulans must know that we are here! They'll surely have investigated the source of the quake damage, and they'll

know that it wasn't a natural phenomenon."

Data blinked as he considered the Captain's words. "It would appear likely that they have been trying to find us on their sensors."

"What are the odds of their having succeeded?"

"Unknown, although I believe it is doubtful that they could detect us. Indications are that Romulan sensors are as efficient as our own, and the Enterprise's sensors would be unable to detect us in these caves. It therefore seems likely that the Romulans would be unable to find us here, either. However, they would be quite capable of finding our tricorder beacon."

Picard and Data exchanged glances. If the Romulans found the tricorder and destroyed it, the Enterprise would have no way to pinpoint their location unless they moved into the open - in which case they would be in full view of the Romulan sensors, too. But then, the tricorder was positioned so close to 'their' cave's mouth that the Romulans would have no problem in finding them if they did not hide both themselves and their possessions more thoroughly, in any case.

"Damn," said Picard.

"Yes, sir."

Picard and Data crept up to the narrow gap that separated them from the outermost cave. As quietly as he could, Data knelt down, and pointed his tricorder into the opening. He could detect no life signs, and he shook his head slightly.

"Have to risk it then, won't we?"

The two Starfleet officers wanted to stay as close to their tricorder beacon as possible, so they decided to move their equipment into the rear cave. If the Romulans found them there, at least they would be in a good position to defend themselves.

Data squirmed through the hole first, and headed for the cave's entrance. He reached out, and examined their makeshift transmitter and said, "It is still operational, sir."

"Good."

They piled their equipment into a heap near the crawlway into the second, hidden, cave, and Data slipped back into the gloom beyond. The Captain proceeded to pass the various items through to him.

Suddenly the Human tensed.

He heard the soft scrunch of footfalls in the snow. He froze, and strained to hear better.

"Captain?" Data's voice came through the hole, a response to the sudden cessation of activity.

"Keep back, Data," he hissed. "Romulans!"

The android obliged, assuming that Picard would join him in their sanctuary. However, the Captain did not appear. The android's brow puckered slightly with confusion and concern.

Picard glanced around at the few remaining supplies in the cave. The Romulans' timing could not have been worse. A few minutes earlier, and Picard and Data could have stayed in the inner cave. A few minutes later, and all traces of their belongings would have been safely hidden from view. As it was there

was no time to shift the remaining things now. If he and Data left them there, in full view, the Romulans would know exactly where to look next. If, however, he stayed with them, maybe there would still be a chance. Maybe...

The footsteps were coming closer, and the voices of two men echoed in the stillness.

Romulans don't take prisoners.

Picard knew that. He also knew that if they were both caught, the chances of even one of them escaping from Omaris 3 would be about zero.

Perhaps there was a chance, though...

He hurriedly unfurled his blankets, strewed the remaining provisions around in a haphazard manner, and sat down.

Moments later, two armed Romulans appeared at the entrance of the cave. The tallest leered into the gloom and said, "Come on out, Human. We know you're in there."

Picard stood, raised his arms, and stepped into the twilight.

Data sat alone in the dark cave and listened to the silence beyond. The Romulans had taken Picard away with them moments before, and Data wondered what he was supposed to do now.

That Picard had a good reason for abandoning him, the android did not doubt for a moment. All he needed to do was find it, and act upon it.

Picard had gone with the Romulans and left Data so that the Romulans would not find him. But the Romulans were

unlikely to have been able to detect him anyway...

That was it!

The Romulans had found the tricorder, and they would be on the lookout for another, similar signal.

Perhaps, by letting himself be so easily captured, Picard would encourage the Romulans to think that he was alone. Certainly there was little reason for them to suppose otherwise. There had only been one set of bedding in the cave, Data having no need for any. Even if the Romulans did suspect that the Human had company, Data doubted that they would think to search for anything other than organic life-signs. Data did not think it was likely that the Romulans would know enough about his construction to be able to scan for him, even if they did find out his presence on the planet's surface.

The crew of the Enterprise knew what to look for, though.

Data would be their beacon. All he needed to do was to wait outdoors for rescue to come.

Data stood in the freezing air, and found himself wondering where the Enterprise was. Had the ship even received their distress call? It probably did not matter if they had not. Data knew that Starbase 194 would have sent word of the shuttle's non-arrival by now. Rescue would come eventually; it was just a question of when.

Then his thoughts turned towards the Captain. The Human's actions had been eminently logical. However, Data found that he was not satisfied with the present situation. Data knew, because Picard had

said as much on several occasions, that the Captain did not believe that he, as a machine, was more expendable than any other crew member on board the Enterprise. However, the android had served under other commanders previously who had not shared Picard's views. Years of indoctrination coupled with his basic programming prompted Data to consider the notion that he was being negligent towards the Captain by not going after him and attempting to rescue him from the Romulans.

The android blinked, and fleetingly wondered why his creator had apparently programmed him to believe that all sentient life was precious - more precious than he himself was. But the answer was obvious. Lore did not share that belief; apparently it was one of those minor bits of programming that Soong had said set the brothers apart. It had been a safeguard in Data's creation, a bit of code inserted into his make-up as a result of a lesson learned from Soong's older son.

Both his Starfleet oath and his programming told Data that the safety of the Captain must come ahead of his own. A rescue attempt should be made.

However, the android was not an impulsive being. He gave the matter serious thought before he set off in pursuit.

Data's feet fitted neatly into a larger set of Romulan prints. Using the footprints like stepping stones, Data followed the Captain's trail.

The android was not oblivious to the irony in his bold progress across the snow covered landscape. Originally, Picard and Data had been reluctant to go outside in case they were seen by the natives of Omaris 3. However, they had thought it

perfectly safe to leave a tricorder outdoors.

Now, because they had discovered that they were dealing with Romulans rather than a people with only a primitive knowledge of technology, the option of using a tricorder as a homing beacon was no longer viable. Yet Data, the most advanced technology of all, had been forced into the open.

Nonetheless, Data was careful as to where, precisely, he went. It would not do for the Romulans to see more sets of tracks than they could account for.

Data stepped nimbly from one impression to the next, paying careful attention to the sights and sounds of the chilly night.

Initially he made rapid progress, but he slowed when the tracks increased in number and became hopelessly confused. Data no longer needed to be careful to camouflage his own trail. However, the crazy mixture of patterns indicated that a number of people had passed over this area, and that put Data at greater risk of discovery.

The android ducked behind a boulder and let his body blend into the landscape. He unsheathed his tricorder, and discreetly scanned for life forms.

It was as well that he had paused when he did, because, at that moment, the tricorder indicated the sudden appearance of two Romulans coming out of an opening in the rock face.

They stopped as they reached the open air. Data turned up his auditory gain, and could hear them scuffing their heels in the snow.

Data's eyes adjusted further to the poor illumination, and he took stock of

the two Romulans. They looked young to him, though as vulcanoids aged more slowly than did the Humans with whom Data was more familiar, he could not be precise about their ages.

He listened to their conversation, following the Romulan language with ease.

The taller Romulan spoke first. "The Commander is dead, then."

"Yes. He died while you were out retrieving that Human." The last word sounded more like a curse than anything else.

"I still say that we should have killed him." Data found himself reassured by the words: for the moment, at least, Picard was still alive.

"Telar says not."

"Telar knows nothing." Discontent and ill-will filled the words with venom.

"Telar is the most senior officer still alive. We must follow him. And if he says we wait for the ship to come, and for their orders, then we wait."

"Do we know when it is likely to arrive?"

"Within the next three hours."

There was a pause. Then the discontented Romulan spat, "Telar is a spineless fool. A lapdog with no mind of his own."

"And you, my friend, are a discontented idiot if you freely voice opinions like those. Be grateful that you have said them only to me: I shall tell none. Just remember though, Telar has friends in high places. Let *him* hear you, and he will have your hide."

"Is that a threat?"

"No. It's a warning. In any case, if the Human is allowed to live and it proves to be an incorrect decision, it will not be your responsibility. Blame for that little indiscretion -"

"Lies with Telar. You are devious."

"I prefer to think of it as being subtle."

"As you will."

Several minutes of silence passed then the devious one said, "I'm going in. My ears are numb."

The two Romulans stepped back into the cave, completely unaware that they had acquired a shadow.

Picard's limbs cramped, but he decided that he didn't mind. By rights, he should be dead. A little discomfort was certainly a preferable option to experiencing no discomfort at all. He sat, tied up, in a dimly lit room, and thought about his situation.

Something was definitely wrong here. The Romulans were not acting in any predictable manner. In fact, they seemed to be showing no great ability to act at all, almost as though they didn't know, or couldn't decide, what to do. Instead of killing him, or even questioning him, they had simply abandoned him several hours earlier. The Romulans were keeping him prisoner.

But Romulans don't take prisoners.

Why was he still alive?

The Enterprise slid into orbit around

Omaris 3. All attempts at communicating with the shipwrecked officers failed, and Riker ordered a careful scan to be conducted of that part of the uninhabited continent for which Data had chosen to head.

Deanna Troi could feel the thickening pall of depression which hung over the bridge crew as their repeated attempts to find the Captain and Data met with failure and the limits of the search area were expanded again and again. She wondered if the others, without her empathic senses, could feel it, too. She wondered if, had it been Will trapped below, she would have been able to sense his thoughts. There had been a time when she and the First Officer had spoken mind to mind. Although they chose to do so no longer, her sensitivity to his presence remained.

Troi wished she could sense the Captain as accurately.

Geordi La Forge, summoned up from Engineering, shook his head sadly. Better than anyone, he knew how to scan for Data and for the shuttle. But he could find traces of neither.

They searched on and on, nobody having the heart to suggest what they were all thinking. Maybe the shuttle had not made it to Omaris 3. Or maybe it had landed in the sea.

Desperation kept the search going long after hope had faded.

The unlocked door to Picard's room slid open. A cautious pair of yellow eyes peered round it and the Human stifled a startled exclamation. Satisfied that the Captain was alone, Data ducked into the room, and shut the door behind him.

"Data! What are you doing here?"

"I am endeavouring to rescue you."

Not for the first time, Picard wished that Data wasn't quite so literal minded. "Yes, I can see that, but..."

"It is not safe for you to remain here, sir. It is apparent that you are still alive only because the senior officer here is unwilling to take the responsibility for killing you. However, his views are not shared by other Romulans in this facility, and a ship is due to arrive within the next two and a half hours. It seems probable that your execution would be demanded upon the arrival of a superior officer."

"What happened to the old one?"

"Apparently he was killed in the explosion. The remaining Romulans seem unclear as to how to proceed without a leader."

"Ah. That explains a lot."

Data considered the Captain's bonds and said, "I believe that I can cut through these ropes, sir." He lifted his phaser to aim.

Picard stopped him. "No, Data. Untie them if you can. Let's make it look as though I escaped on my own. No reason to draw their attention to your presence." A thought crossed his mind. "No-one saw you come in, did they?"

"I do not believe so, Captain. It is night; I think that most of the Romulans are sleeping at this time."

"Good."

Data's nimble fingers struggled to unravel some very efficient knots. Finally, however, his efforts were rewarded, and Picard gratefully flexed his arms and legs.

"What now, Data?"

"I would recommend re-entering the cave system, sir. We should be able to gain entry via the gap through which we looked earlier. It will be a steep climb to reach it, and we will be in full view as we do so. However -"

"It's a safer option than my going outdoors where the Romulan sensors will be able to pick up my life form readings. Yes, I agree with you." Picard looked at Data and thought about the caves. "Did you bring a lantern with you?"

"No, sir."

"Never mind. This looks quite serviceable." Picard picked up a useful looking torch from a bench. "Could you get out the same way you came in?"

"It is possible, sir. However, I would not recommend making the attempt. Gaining access to the base's external entrance requires crossing much of the occupied space. We are very close to the rear edge of the development."

"Pity," said Picard. "I would have preferred for you to spend as little time as possible out of sensor range. You're our best shot at getting out of here."

Cautiously, the two Starfleet officers exited the little room where Picard had been imprisoned, and headed for the rear wall of the cave.

Trying to be as quiet as possible, they ascended the rocky slope, all the while listening for the alarm to be given as their escape was discovered. However, the cries never came, and it was with no small amount of relief that Picard crawled into the next chamber. Data followed through after him.

By the light of the stolen torch, they

retraced their earlier path, and finally stopped when they were about half way back to their original cave.

"Data," said Picard, as he sat down, "I should be safe enough here. And you'll be safer, and quicker, on your own. Get out of here. See if the Enterprise can find you."

"There are no provisions here, sir. If you returned to the start of this system - "

"I'll be fine here, at least for a little while. If it is safe up there, and if there is no sign of rescue in the next few hours, I'll join you."

"I will need to take the torch, Captain. It will be quite dark here."

"That's all right, Data. The dark never hurt anyone. You'll have to come back to find me, though."

"Very well, sir. However, perhaps you should take this." Data held out his phaser. "If nothing else, you may use it to warm the rocks. The temperature, while above freezing, is too cold for you to be exposed to for prolonged periods of time."

Picard nodded, and gratefully took the phaser, hoping fervently that Data wouldn't need one before he reached their little cache in the first hidden chamber.

"Commander Riker!" Ensign Col's tone exuded disbelief and jolted the first officer from his private thoughts.

"What is it, Ensign?"

"I'm detecting life signs, sir. From the planet's surface. They are within the original search area."

"Why didn't we detect them before?"

"Unknown, sir. Apparently something down there was blocking our scans."

"Is it the Captain and Data?"

Col consulted the readouts and said, disappointment clear in her voice, "No, sir." Then, confusion and more disbelief in her voice, she said, "The readings are Romulan."

Well, thought Riker, after Worf's transmission, that was always a possibility. However, it's a surprise nonetheless. Out loud, he said, "What the hell are Romulans doing on Omaris 3?"

Col wondered whether or not she should reply. The question appeared to be rhetorical, and she had no answer to give. Worf saved her from having to make a decision by saying, "I do not know, sir - but they have no right to be there!"

"No. They don't, do they? Ensign, any idea how many Romulans are down there?"

"No, sir. I am detecting four on the scanners, but there are likely to be others out of sensor range."

Riker gave that a few moments' thought, weighed up his options, and then asked, "Worf, how would you like to take a security team down there and find out just what is going on?"

Worf's lips curled in a ghastly smile, and he replied, "I would like it very much indeed."

Somehow Riker doubted that the Romulans would share the Klingon's enthusiasm.

No longer having to make concessions for Human frailties, Data made good progress through the caves. His movements required little thought, and the android found his mind drifting onto other subjects.

The nagging questions about his sentience and autonomy crowded back. Only now, since his conversation with the Captain, Data found the questions subtly altered. Picard had given him a new perspective on the problem. Unfortunately, Data found himself no better able to deal with the new questions than he had with the old.

The Human had told Data that he had to decide whether or not he believed in his own sentience: that it was a matter of faith.

Data thought about the definition of faith - a strong belief in something, especially without proof or evidence - and wondered whether an android could accept something as true, without having a concrete foundation of facts to back it up.

Data thought about the Humans amongst whom he worked. He knew that they had faith in a wide variety of things: gods; the fates; astrology; science and technology; themselves; each other. Data had often wondered about Human beliefs and religions, and had always found them to be hard to comprehend. Yet the android had never really stopped to wonder what he, himself, believed in before. He had apparently assumed that the inability to have faith in anything was just one more thing which set him apart from humanity. His insatiable curiosity always demanded facts. Abstract ideas were hard for the android to handle.

Now, though, Data looked deep inside himself. He contemplated his programming in a way he seldom

thought to do.

For example, he had an ethical programme - a conscience - which informed him that killing was wrong. So was stealing. So was adultery - but where had these ideas come from? Acceptance of these ideas was an ingrained part of his personality. Yet they were not notions which had their origins rooted in concrete fact. Rather, he realised, they were elements of a moral framework bequeathed to him by his creator and, as such, were part of a wider belief system that was accepted by the majority of Humans.

Data had never questioned his values before. Was not the acceptance of a principle as true, without having proof, a definition of belief?

He had, without realising it, believed in and shared the Humans' moral code.

If he could believe that, shouldn't it be possible for him to believe in something else?

The evidence available to him indicated that he lacked the autonomy and self-determination of organic life-forms. Instead, it suggested that all his actions, to a greater or lesser degree, were subject to the whims of his creator, as programmed within him.

Yet Data, who valued facts so highly, did not find these conclusions acceptable.

The android turned his thoughts towards his Captain. He wondered why the Human found it so much easier to believe in Data's sentience than the android himself did. *Is it because of intuition? I do not understand it, but intuition is apparently a valid Human decision-making process.*

Data wanted to share the Captain's belief.

The android clearly saw his options, and he made his choice.

He chose to believe in himself.

Apart from the dim glow of phasered rocks, the darkness was absolute. The only sounds were the echoing plip, plip, plip of water droplets, the scuffing of material against rock every time Picard shifted position, and the sound of his own breath. There was nothing for the Captain to do but think.

He thought about Data: how the android had found him, apparently showing a concern no machine should be able to feel.

He thought about Data's self-doubt, and he wished he could see some way to help.

Then he thought about his own recent behaviour, and his own self-doubts.

Picard had wanted to take this trip in order to test himself. The test had turned out to be far more rigorous than he had anticipated. When he thought about his actions, though, he decided that he had passed it to his own satisfaction. He had had that nightmare, true enough - but everyone had nightmares, and that particular weakness could have manifested itself at any time. During his waking hours, though, his behaviour had been perfectly acceptable. He had not panicked or frozen or done any of the things he had feared he might do when faced with inescapable danger.

He was Captain Jean-Luc Picard, and his rightful place was as commanding officer of the USS Enterprise.

He sat back to wait for rescue.

Geordi La Forge didn't believe it when it finally happened. He checked and rechecked his readings, then let out a joyful whoop, and said, "Commander, I've found Data!"

Spontaneous applause broke out across the bridge before Riker said, "Relay co-ordinates to the transporter room and have him beamed up immediately."

"Aye, sir!"

Data slipped through the tunnel into the outer cave, stood up, and dusted himself off. Snow was falling again as he stepped into the open air, and the sky was lightening as the sun vainly tried to pierce the snow laden clouds. Visibility was reduced, and Data focused his attention on the snow, unsure what else he should do until rescue came.

He did not have long to wait. Several minutes later the transporter stole him from the planet's surface.

Data materialised aboard the Enterprise, and the snow on his head and body promptly started to melt and drip onto the transporter pad. O'Brien stared at the white speckled android, but did not comment. Instead, he tapped his communicator and sent word to the bridge that Data was safely aboard.

Riker's disembodied voice floated back. "Good. Send him up here. Now."

Data went.

The bridge crew stared at the slightly soggy android. Riker abruptly demanded, "Where's the Captain?"

"Captain Picard is in the caves near

the point from which I was transported. He deemed it prudent to stay there until you arrived because his location is shielded from the Romulans' scans. "There is a Romulan base - "

"Yes," Riker interrupted. "We know all about that. Worf has already been down there, and we now have eleven Romulans in the brig."

"Ah. If you are aware of the base, Commander, does this mean that you have also found the Romulan ship?"

"What Romulan ship?"

"The one that was expected to arrive here several hours ago."

"Great. Just when I thought things were looking up." Riker turned round to the science station. "Ensign?"

"Yes, sir?" said Col.

"Can you detect anything that might possibly be a cloaked ship?"

"No, sir, but I will try." The young woman felt her palms go damp with tension. Cloaked ships were notoriously difficult to detect; that, after all, was the whole point of having the cloak in the first place.

"Ask Commander La Forge or Lieutenant Worf for help, if you need it."

"Yes, sir. Thank you."

"Data."

"Yes, Commander."

"Now that the immediate Romulan threat has been dealt with, I suggest that you return to the planet, and retrieve the Captain."

"Yes, sir." Data turned on his heel and headed towards the turbolift.

"Oh. And Data - "

Commander Riker's voice stopped Data, and the android turned back to face the human. "Sir?"

"Welcome back."

"Thank you, sir."

Picard heard the footsteps a long time before he heard the voices. The semi-regular beat of the footfalls echoed around the dark cavern, defying all his attempts to pinpoint their origin. His pulse speeded up as he feared for a moment that, in spite of his and Data's best efforts, the Romulans had found him after all.

The Captain did not move. It was too dark for him to find himself a good hiding place. Instead, he took a good grip on his phaser, and waited for whatever might happen.

Finally he heard cries. "Captain? Captain Picard?" *Deanna's voice*, he thought. *And Data's.*

"I'm over here!"

The light of bobbing lanterns came closer... closer.

Picard couldn't remember when he had last been so glad to see anyone.

The Enterprise's senior officers sat around the conference table and swapped information. Gradually, they managed to piece together a coherent version of recent events. Worf described the base

which neither Data nor Picard had had a chance to examine in detail.

"It appears to have been intended for use as an advanced listening outpost, for monitoring and decoding transmissions on the Federation side of the Neutral Zone. However, although construction had been completed just before your arrival, your destruction of the shuttle caused a great deal of damage, effectively disabling the facility. It also killed several Romulans, including the base's commander and second in command."

"No wonder the remaining Romulans didn't seem to know what to do."

"What are we going to do with them?" Riker asked, referring to their guests, currently languishing in the brig.

"We can leave them at Starbase 194. The staff there will see about sending them home," Picard replied. "At maximum warp, we should just about make it in time for my day in court."

At that moment the voice of Ensign Col, once again manning the science station, came over the speakers. "Captain. I have detected a spacial anomaly. I think it might be a cloaked ship, sir."

"Very well, Ensign. We're on our way."

The anomaly hung steady, giving no hint of its origin. Picard thought that Col's supposition that the spacial distortion was a ship was probably correct. However, there was no firm proof, and he wanted that. "Can we do anything to confirm whether or not that actually is a ship?" he asked.

Data tilted his head. "Such a vessel can only be detected easily when it passes

through something which causes it to leave a distortion in its wake. However, this region of space is clear. It is unlikely that such traces of movement could be easily detected."

Picard's lips compressed as he thought about what Data had said. Finally he said, "Could we *create* conditions that would allow for such detection, do you think?"

Geordi La Forge thoughtfully stroked his chin. "We might generate a tachyon stream near the vessel. If it disrupts the beam, we'd know that the ship was moving."

"Very good. How long will it take you to set that up?"

"I'm not sure, but... Half an hour, maybe."

"Do it."

The Enterprise hung in orbit. Her crew waited for something to happen. Geordi's hook was baited and Starbase 194 had been informed of the Enterprise's indefinite delay (though not the reason for it).

There was nothing to do but wait for the Romulans to make the first move.

A tense silence hung over the bridge.

They waited. And waited.

On the alien vessel the Romulans apparently were also waiting. Picard could imagine their confusion at finding the large starship in orbit around Omaris 3, and their uncertainty as to whether to proceed or withdraw.

The two ships were playing a game of patience, and Picard was determined that

he would not be the first to give way.

Finally, "Captain." Data's calm voice jolted the others alert. "The anomaly is moving towards us."

"Confirmed, sir," said La Forge from the engineering console. "It is a Romulan scout ship."

"We outgun it, sir." There was little satisfaction in the Klingon's voice as Worf made the announcement. It presented no real challenge to the Enterprise or to the Klingon warrior.

"Hail them," said Picard.

"No response, sir."

"But they are receiving our signal?"

"I believe so, sir."

"Very well." Picard moved leisurely towards the Enterprise's viewscreen, and unnecessarily raised his voice. "This is Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the USS Enterprise. You have crossed the Neutral Zone and are in violation of the Treaty between the United Federation of Planets and the Romulan Empire.

"We have encountered a Romulan base on Omaris 3, again in direct violation of the Treaty, and have taken eleven citizens of the Empire into custody. These individuals will be taken to Starbase 194 where they will be processed.

"These acts of yours clearly demonstrate your hostile intent, and may be interpreted as an act of war. If you have any other explanation for your presence here, we would be delighted to hear it." The Captain made a throat cutting gesture with his thumb, then said, "Let's see what they do now."

The Romulan ship drew to a stop. Then Data said, "The ship appears to be withdrawing, Captain."

Again La Forge confirmed the android's readings.

Picard harrumphed and said, "So. Our guests would appear to be expendable." He sat down, pulling at his uniform top as he did so, then continued, "Well. We'd better make sure that base is fully out of business before we leave here - just in case the Romulans have any thoughts of salvaging anything or coming back once we leave."

The Starfleet crew spent the rest of the day looting Romulan technology, a very rewarding experience. Early next morning the ship slipped away from Omaris 3, heading for Starbase 194 at a high warp speed.

Picard had a number of visitors during that morning's shift, and for the first time in weeks found himself welcoming their presence.

Data came first. At the Captain's invitation, he sat down on the ready room couch.

"Well, Data. Glad to be home?"

The android ignored the emotional overtones of the question and merely replied, "Yes, sir." He did indeed detect a sense of satisfaction at once more being surrounded by familiar input. "I came to tell you that I decided to have faith in myself. I thought you would like to know."

Picard nodded sharply, a smile lightening his face. "Good." He glanced at Data and said, "What made you finally decide?"

Data looked at the Captain. Several years of experience told the android that the Human would not appreciate a blow by blow account of his soul searching, so he said, "A variety of factors, sir, not the least of which was your input."

Picard's mouth opened, but Data anticipated the Captain's protestations. The Human could not remember Data ever having done so before.

"It is not because you chose to have faith in me, sir, though that is not unimportant to me. Rather, you gave me a new perspective on my problem which enabled me to approach it in an alternative manner. It proved most useful."

"I'm glad I was of some help."

"Also," said Data, and Picard could have sworn that Data looked tentative as he continued, "I have been observing your performance over the past few days. This, too, has been most informative."

"Data?"

"After our conversation in the cave, I was prompted to consider whether or not I had been remiss in not detecting any change in your behaviour following our encounter with the Borg. I chose to watch you more carefully from then on. However, I could still detect no significant alteration in the way in which you performed your duties."

Picard listened to Data's words and found a weight lifting from his mind. His decision to stay with the Enterprise was vindicated by the impartial judgement of his Second Officer.

Data continued, "Although you denied the similarities, I think that in some ways our recent experiences paralleled one another's. Both of us were manipulated

by forces over which we had no control. However, you continued with your life as normal, tried to put your experiences behind you, and looked to the future.

"I did not.

"Although I endeavoured to carry out my duties as normal, I allowed my introspection to disrupt all my other activities. However, I now realise that there was no rational answer to my dilemma, and I choose to believe in my sentence. I wish to follow your example, and I... hope... that nothing similar happens again."

Picard looked at Data. "So do I, Data. For all our sakes." He smiled slightly. "It's unlikely it'll happen to you again, at any rate. Soong is dead, and who else has the knowledge to affect you so profoundly?"

Riker and Troi sat opposite the Captain, and smiled at him. There was something different about them, but without the Counselor's empathic sense, it took him a while to figure out just what it was.

Finally he realised that they were relaxed in his presence; their recent watchful concern was gone. Their words confirmed the truth of his observations.

"We wanted to welcome you home, sir - and we also wanted to apologise." Troi glanced over at Riker, and he nodded his agreement.

"We've learned a lot, these past few days, Captain," he said.

"Oh?"

"We learned that our recent encounter with the Borg had affected us far more

profoundly than we realised. We had been looking for weaknesses in you, not realising that might be a weakness in ourselves." Troi flushed a little. "A Counselor should know better.

"When you went missing, we had to face the memories of the last time. In doing so, I hope we've started to come to terms with them."

Riker continued. "I shouldn't have tried to stop you taking the shuttle, Captain."

"On the contrary, Number One. I rather wish you had. I cannot claim to have entirely enjoyed my recent trip."

Riker smiled, amused. "That's not quite what I meant, sir. I didn't want to have to go through rescuing you again, and I tried to stop myself getting into that position. I suppose, the last few days have reminded me that our business is risk."

Picard nodded.

"Like it or not, you're going to be in danger sometimes. We've all had to face up to that."

Troi said, "We're all here, if you need us. That hasn't changed. But we won't smother you with our good intentions. Not any more."

Picard looked at the two friends. "Thank you," he said finally. "I learned something, too."

Riker and Troi waited expectantly.

"I learned that being here feels right. So right." Picard shook his head, mocking himself. Mocking the universe. Feeling happy, and at ease.

"Data! Hello!"

"Hello, Geordi." The android matched his pace to the Engineer's.

"I'm going to Ten Forward. Want to come?"

"Yes."

La Forge shot a glance at Data. Mindful of his concerns for his friend, he had been prepared to fight Data's refusal of his invitation. He had not expected an unconditional acceptance.

As they headed towards the bar, Data chatted amiably, and Geordi found himself wondering what had happened on Omaris 3. The android seemed much more like his old self, and Geordi felt his worries begin to evaporate.

As the two friends walked into Ten Forward, Data's gaze focused on a pair of familiar faces seated at a window table. He turned to La Forge and said, "Please excuse me for a moment."

"Data?"

"I will not be long."

Geordi watched as Data walked over to talk to Ensigns Stubbs and Espen, then he shrugged his shoulders, and turned his attention towards the bar.

Any Human would have picked up on the Ensigns' embarrassment as they said, "Can we help you, sir?" Their discomfort was lost on the android.

"I do not believe so. However, perhaps I can help you."

"Sir?" said Stubbs, confused.

"It has come to my attention that you do not fully trust me, and that you are

concerned I might become subject to control by outside forces again."

"Well... it did cross my mind. Yes, sir," Stubbs admitted, cheeks glowing red as she spoke.

Data continued, "In light of recent events, your concern is understandable. However, I do not believe that a repetition of these occurrences is likely." Data paused, and the two Ensigns stared at him. "You will have to trust me."

"Aye, sir," they chorused flatly.

As Data walked back to the bar, Espen said, "Did I miss something? Was that a reprimand or not?"

"I'm not sure," Stubbs said in reply.

Geordi handed Data a glass. "Everything okay, buddy?"

The android nodded once. "Yes, Geordi. Everything is fine."

And somehow, Geordi knew that everything was.



